

## Geopolitical Issues in the Current Crisis Between Ukraine and Russia

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### Abstract

This article concentrates on the new geopolitical role and place of Ukraine, taking into account consequences of the military conflict with Russia. After the Soviet Union collapsed, a huge transformation occurred because of the critical role and geopolitical importance of Ukraine for both Russia and the EU. The former considers it strategically important not only as a littoral state at the Black Sea that borders on several EU member states but also a transit country for Russian gas. In turn, the European Union occupies a cautious stance towards both Ukraine and Russia weighting positive and negative developments that its decisions may cause. Depending on the results of the future presidential elections, the United States might continue to pursue aims that would further irritate Russia or they will prefer to avoid actions that would risk harming Moscow's ties with Washington.

**Keywords:** EU, "frozen conflicts", geopolitics, military intervention, Russia, sanctions, Ukraine, USA

### Introduction

After the disintegration of the USSR, Russia was maximally trying to preserve its geopolitical influence on the post-Soviet space that Russia still considers as part of the zone of its strategic interests. Due to this, by ignoring the main principles of International law, Moscow was involved in conflicts on the territory of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

During the Russian involvement in the conflicts on the sovereign territory of Georgia in the beginning of the 1990s (when Russia was supplying separatists in Sokhumi and Tskhinvali with weapons) and in August 2008, when Russian regular forces invaded Georgian territory, the result was the occupation of 20% of the territory of Georgia. Despite the fact that the western democratic community condemned this behavior, there were no sanctions adopted against Russia. On the contrary, several months later, Washington offered to the Kremlin to launch the so-called "Reset Policy" with the purpose of decreasing tensions between East and West. But, in spite of this, Russia continued its aggressive policy in post-Soviet areas. Quite surprisingly, Russia's next "victim" became Ukraine. The Russians were not satisfied with the illegitimate overthrow of Viktor Yanukovich's regime, when as a result of demonstrations first in Maidan Nezaleshnosti, Kyiv's central square, pro-Western politicians came to power. The reaction of the Kremlin was the occupation of the Crimea, which is an autonomous republic within Ukraine, and involvement in the military operations in eastern Ukraine, namely Donetsk and Luhansk regions. In comparison with the Georgian case, in this situation the western reaction was stricter. The EU, the United States, Canada and Japan have adopted a series of sanctions against Russia. This situation can be approached by analyzing the impor-

tance of Ukraine's geopolitical role.

### The Geopolitical Significance of Ukraine and the Current Crisis

There are several countries that can influence international relations politics; Georgia and Ukraine are among these. In this regard, as Polette emphasized, those features that make Ukraine's geopolitical location attractive are its large territory and huge population (2010). However, as Adomeit highlighted, its strategically important location as a littoral state on the Black Sea and a border state of several EU member states, and its role as a transit country for Russian oil and gas - before the completion of the Nord Stream pipeline about 80% of the Russian gas destined for Europe was transported via the territory of Ukraine - are also significant factors (2012).

According to Mackinder and Mladineo, the state that rules Eastern Europe commands the Heartland; the state that rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; the state that rules the World-Island controls the world (Mackinder & Mladineo, 1996). In this regard, the position of Ukraine is that of a heartland area between East and West so that any instability on its territory greatly influences the international arena.

The main reasons for the crisis in Ukraine are the political, social and cultural differences between East and West

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so that the crisis could be going on for a long time. During the crisis in Ukraine many people were killed, thousands became refugees (Kuzio, 2015). On the other hand, many international organizations are involved in resolving the crisis in eastern Ukraine. One of the international organizations that is assisting victims of the conflict as well as the government of Ukraine in coping with the current circumstances is the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe which works in close collaboration with the European Union. This cooperation is effective because both organizations support social prosperity, economic growth and political stability objectives, all of which is crucial for Ukraine as it is an economically underdeveloped country.

On the other hand, in terms of foreign policy priorities, Ukraine's society is divided into two different camps with one of them following a European direction and the other one inclined to closer relations with Russia. This is what makes Ukraine's stability fragile, and because of its geopolitical position, both the EU and Russia pay great attention to maintaining a high profile in any event that might radically transform the country's orientation. In terms of destabilizing the inner situation, the media is the most influential actor in influencing public opinion or helping the government to stay in power. In this regard, Russia used the media in the Crimea to bring its inhabitants' opinion to its side. In fact, the Ukrainian crisis started with the annexation of the Crimea and later moved to the cities of Donetsk and Luhansk in the Donbas region.

Looking at the present crisis from a geopolitical perspective, one of the important features Ukraine possesses is that it is still regarded as the key to stable and secure oil and gas supplies from Russia to the EU. Nowadays, Russia suffers from the economic sanctions imposed by the EU, the US and other countries as well and it is gradually losing undisputed control over the whole Ukraine; therefore, it tries to diversify the routes of supplying energy resources via Ukraine to Europe. Taking into account that Ukraine enjoys a strategic location on the European continent, the question is: how will Russia export energy resources and which country can replace Ukraine as the transit one.

## The Geopolitical Importance of Ukraine for Russia

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine became one of the main areas of competition among Russia, the United States and the European countries, especially Germany. Russia considered Ukraine as its backyard for a long time, because it transports gas and oil via Ukraine to Western countries. Due to this fact, Ukraine's loyalty was crucial for the Russian economy to boost without interruptions. The proximity of Ukraine naturally provides for lower oil and gas prices in comparison to other European countries. Nowadays, apart from being under political and economic pressure, Ukraine is suffering from Russian aggression as a result of which large parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions are occupied.

In order not to become "hostage" to the Russia-Ukraine confrontation, for a long time Europe has been seeking to

diversify imports of gas and oil from the Caspian Sea region. TANAP (the Trans Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline Project) pipeline will be supplying gas from Kazakhstan for Europe and Turkey via Azerbaijan, Georgia and Greece. In the event that this project, as it has been observed and named as the project of the century, is successfully launched, it will help consolidate relations and closer cooperation among those countries. On the other hand, Russia is trying to establish closer relations with China in order to export gas and oil there. Russia also has undertaken quite successful cooperation with Turkey, making it the second most strategically important country after Ukraine in terms of energy supplies to Europe. These transformations are in no case good news for Ukraine which may gradually lose its competitiveness and reliable image among the partners.

It is no secret that the Middle East's proven oil reserves are not sufficient to meet the increasing hydrocarbon needs of European and American economies. Finding new supply channels is of the utmost importance. Many countries have therefore begun to focus on the Caspian basin energy resources (Rousseau, 2011). In this regard, the Caspian Sea region has vital importance to Russia in order to export gas and oil to European. However, militarily, Ukraine is also important to Russia as a buffer state, and it is home to Russia's Black Sea fleet, based in the Crimean port city of Sevastopol (Mcmahon, 2014).

On the other hand, annexing the Crimea serves Russia's main purpose, which is reaching the Mediterranean region. When Russia establishes navy power in this area it will be the most important Black Sea country so that the strategic location of Sevastopol will influence Russia's foreign policy in a positive way. Taking into account the new realities, when the territory of Crimea is occupied by Russia, the above-mentioned agreement will have lost its importance. Osborn mentioned that the strategic and geopolitical position of Sevastopol paves way for an operational alternative in the Black Sea region by Russia (Osborn, 2014). For instance, during the Russian-Georgian war, Russia created a naval barrier to prevent a Georgian incursion into Russia,

Schwartz (2014) emphasizes that Crimea's air defense condition is getting better and that it also functions as the control point for Russia's southern borders which enhances its capacity to influence the Black Sea region's politics. Moreover, Russia became the main player for the other Black Sea countries such as Turkey, Georgia, Bulgaria, and Romania. As for the Caucasus region, its recent history is full of the so-called "frozen conflicts" which are Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh. There is also a region of instability created on the borders of the EU which is Transnistria.

According to certain authors, NATO plays a significant role in terms of decreasing Russian Naval power in the Black Sea region (Filipchuk, Zakharova, & Paul, 2014). In this regard, Russia looks forward to preventing a widening of NATO's influence and its strategy of improving the security shield around countries like Georgia and Ukraine, both of which had good chances to become members of the European Union (and members of the NATO) before the Ukraine-Russia crisis erupted. In fact, Georgia is gradually moving toward joining the European family that has already

helped establish deeper political association and economic integration, namely, advances in opening up their particular markets. On the other hand, Ukraine is trying to introduce legislation to transform its economic sphere with a view to opening the door more widely to becoming a member of the EU.

McMahon (2014) highlights the fact that Russia always considered disrupting the association agreement between Ukraine and the EU. According to him, if Eastern bloc countries become united under NATO's auspices, Russia will be stranded. Moreover, the EU's Partnership Program which is providing socio-economic prosperity and political stability is very important for Ukraine and other participating countries. Furthermore, Russia is not included in the Partnership Program because of the issue's sensitivity. The answer to this kind of behavior is the fact that Ukraine is the key to both Russia's power and weakness - without Ukraine in its sphere of influence, Russia will definitely lose prestige in post-Soviet territories. We should not forget that Ukraine is also significant for the European Union and the next section will be focused on this issue.

## The Geopolitical Importance of Ukraine for the European Union

We have already mentioned the importance of Ukraine's location for both Russia and the West in terms of geopolitical calculations. Cultural differences between Ukraine's two parts create a civilizational divide as well. Pro-European and pro-Russian moods in the West and East accordingly were actively discussed after the Orange Revolution of 2004. As Friedman underlines, Western Ukraine is characterized by deeper cultural, linguistic, economic ties with the East European members of the EU; in turn, the Donetsk and Luhansk regions and the Crimea always maintained closer ties with Russia (Friedman, 2014). A comparison can be drawn between Ukraine and Cyprus, in which the Greek part is a member of the EU, and the Turkish part is not.

In this regard, the European Partnership program plays a vital role. The main purpose of the European Union is that it provides for high standards of democratic governance, liberal economy, respect for human rights etc. It is not surprising that some Ukrainians believe that idea of membership in the EU will bring social prosperity, economic development and political stability. On the other hand, from the EU perspective, Ukraine serves as a buffer between the European countries and Russia.

Kraemer & Otarashvili stated that Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and especially Ukraine are stuck between East and West. Ukraine plays a significant geopolitical role in terms of connecting these culturally and economically different countries (Kraemer & Otarashvili, 2014). On the other hand, Russia especially tries to prevent the EU's Eastward enlargement strategy. Moreover, liberalization of trade policies which is the result of economic cooperation among Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and the EU is only one of the initial steps to safeguarding membership in the organization and providing for further democracy and stability. According to McNamara, the EU tries to decrease the

volume of natural resources provided by Russia to Ukraine by means of current and future energy pipeline projects (McNamara, 2014). The TANAP pipeline will supply energy resources and reduce dependence on Russia's resources; in this case the Caspian Sea region plays an important role in the EU energy supplies diversification policies. Furthermore, the US also supports Ukraine's gradual economic development and political stability. Nowadays, EU and US sanctions are still in force. While in the previous sections we have focused predominantly on the EU, the next section will analyze the reasons why geopolitical position of Ukraine is significant for the United States.

## The Geopolitical Importance of Ukraine for the United States

After the ending of the "Cold War", one of the first experts who noted the importance of Ukraine was the famous American thinker Zbigniew Brzezinski. In his book, "The Grand Chessboard", which was published in 1997, he wrote, "Ukraine, a new and important space on the Eurasian chessboard, is a geopolitical pivot because its very existence as an independent country helps to transform Russia. Without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be a Eurasian empire. However, if Moscow regains control over Ukraine, with its 52 million people and major resources as well as access to the Black Sea, Russia automatically again regains the wherewithal to become a powerful imperial state, spanning Europe and Asia" (Brzezinski, 1997).

The 2004 Orange revolution in Ukraine signified establishment of the "truly" democratic regime with the assistance of the US government. Since that time till now, Russia's economy was under strong pressure from the US government that was aimed at protecting Ukraine from falling completely under the shadow of Russia's umbrella. As is known, after the Russian aggression against Georgia, in the beginning of 2009 the US offered a new policy to the Kremlin, which was later referred to as a "Reset Policy". The White House was hoping that the US and Russia would be able to cooperate with each other on issues related to resolving the nuclear program of Iran, military operations in Afghanistan, deployment of US and NATO anti-missile systems in Europe, signing of the new START agreement (about reduction of the nuclear warheads of both countries) etc. But the later events related to the conflict in Syria, the situation in Ukraine etc., clearly showed that Russia could not be a reliable partner of the US and it still remains the geopolitical rival of Washington. Taking into account this fact, for the US it is especially important to strengthen cooperation with Ukraine, which borders Russia.

## Conclusion

Recent events in Ukraine have shown the International community that the majority of the population of Ukraine is expressing its readiness to protect the independence of the country and its European identity. At the same time, one of the main problems is that of the separatist forces, supported

by Russia in Crimea and Eastern provinces of Ukraine. In this regard, Ukraine needs strong support from the Western democratic community.

Taking the strategic location of the Ukraine into account, it is the key country between Russia and the EU. Besides that, it holds a significant position due to its entrance into the Black Sea and border with several EU member states; it is still the major transit country for Russian gas. Moreover, Russia still believes that Ukraine is its backyard, thus without it, Russia is not able to stay influential in the eyes of the international community. Also, Ukraine was important to Russia in terms of security calculations with its military and Black Sea Navy, based in the Crimean port of Sevastopol under a mutual agreement between the two states.

At the same time, Russia is looking forward to increasing the size of its Navy on the Black Sea, which is perceived as a piece of its national security system and a factor of regional predominance in conflict with NATO. Russia also wants to prevent agreements that open the door to the EU. For the Europeans, the real meaning of the invitation does not mean joining the organization but making a decisive and critical civilizational choice. As a result, it could enjoy the democracy, liberalism and welfare that every EU state is supposed to have. The importance of Ukraine's geopolitics for the United States is that many countries have an interest in Ukraine, but none more so than Russia does. However, despite the opinion prevalent in Kyiv, definitive geopolitical change in Ukraine is still under doubt.

The United States recognizes the importance of Ukraine as a counterbalance to Russia's influence but is unenthusiastic about taking serious risks. It has been trying to influence Ukraine but is currently pursuing extremely cautious behavior because it definitely knows that local unrest may bring instability to the whole continent and the world as well, as is the case with Ukraine's East. Moreover, current events in Ukraine prove that nowadays the country represents one of the main centers of international politics. Probably, those factors have forced the Western democratic community to think seriously about adopting sanctions against Russia (in comparison to 2008, when Russia pursued an aggressive policy against Georgia). The current crisis in Ukraine still stays unclear in terms of the prospective challenges it will bring not only for itself but also for the world community as well. On the geopolitical map, while looking at this picture, we can clearly see that the crisis has been continuing between Russia, the EU and the United States because of their clashing interests. It is important to point out that in December of 1991, when Ukraine held a referendum about its independence, the former President of the USSR, Mikhail Gorbachev, mentioned that he could not imagine the USSR without Ukraine. The results of the referendum in favor of independence finally caused the disintegration of USSR. The same scenario (with some different form) can be developed today, if Ukraine manages to be free from Russian influence, it would mean the beginning of Russia losing its geopolitical influence over post-Soviet space.

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