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Muhamed Jashari[1]

Strengthening transatlantic relations during the Ukrainian war

SUMMARY

The war in Ukraine that began in 2014 and peaked in February 2022 is undoubtedly the largest war on the European continent since World War II. This war brought with it various transformations in Europe in the military, political and economic terms.

Meanwhile, the current Russian-Western relations have aroused the memory of *Cold War* to the citizens of Europe. Transatlantic relations were set in motion in order to show unity in an increasingly challenging period for the West. Indeed, the war in Ukraine from different intellectual circles is also seen as a battle of the previous war between great powers, but this time it has taken place in the post-Soviet area. This war showed that the stability in the European continent was put under question by actors who want to maximize power and who operate under the premise of the *zero-sum game,* where profits of one side are losses for the other.

This paper is intended to provide that despite the occasional differences between the Western partners in the past, the war in Ukraine strengthened the

1 Independent Researcher, North Macedonia.
E-mail: muhamedijashari@gmail.com; ORCID: (0000-0003-4043-8376)

relations and solidarity between the allies. In the shadow of this war North Atlantic Alliance underwent enlargement, while European Union has given the candidate status to some of his partner countries. In this article will be used qualitative method, also secondary sources will be used as data collection, such as government documents or publications.

KEYWORDS: European Union, Eastern Partnership, NATO Enlargement, Eurasian Union, Russia Federation

INTRODUCTION

The future destiny of Europe has drawn an increasing attention from academic and research circles in recent years. Our continent has been affected by a number of ubiquitous phenomena, including terrorist acts, the refugee and migrant crises, the economic crisis, global warming, etc. However, the Russian aggression against Ukraine focused media, political-military, and intellectual attention on intra-European dynamics, not just in Europe but also outside of it. Increased research in the areas of European studies, global security, war and peace studies, etc. resulted from this new development.

The current conflict ushers in a new era in the Russian Federation's relations with the West, which are currently almost at an all-time low. Despite not having the same values as Western countries *(and thus not being regarded as a member of the international society),* Russia is inextricably linked to the West as a member of a *system of states* because one actor's actions have an impact on another actor's behavior and choices (Bull 1977, 9–20).

This paper will deal with the deepening relations between Western countries and institutions (North Atlantic Alliance hereafter NATO; and European Union hereafter EU) in the wake of the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Moreover, this paper aims to prove the hypothesis that the war in Ukraine strengthened transatlantic relations in general. It is an undeniable fact that Western partners have differences on various global issues, but the now months-long war on the eastern fringe of Europe prompted the unification in their relations and attitudes just like it was witnessed during the Cold War. The research on this issue can be contextualized in the framework of regional studies, geopolitics and International Relations.

This paper is focused on three aspects which help us to prove the fundamental hypothesis:

– We consider that, for our research, the course of events in the current conflict is of special interest. In this context, the fact that practically the Ukrainian issue was on the agenda of two different integration visions, the Russian one on one side and the Western one on the other, is addressed;

– The beginning of the aggression set the Western partners in motion, while a deepening of cooperation followed, and even turned the attention and commitment of the US vis-à-vis Europe. The physical threat became a unifying factor of the entire West in general.
– The fighting in Ukraine put the issue of EU enlargement and *EU-isation* of Eastern European countries on the European agenda, while the *strategic autonomy* of the EU – although it emerged on the scene – is considered to contribute to the whole security in a close partnership with NATO.

EASTERN EUROPE BETWEEN TWO INTEGRATION PROJECTS

Unfortunately, throughout human history, conflict has been an unavoidable fate for mankind. Therefore, war has played a central role and is even embodied in the development of humanity, even in the face of constant sermons calling for peace, collaboration, and harmony among individuals, nations, and states.

Although it is believed that the contemporary period, among others, has brought wars of completely new dimension, such as the *cyber* one (Coker 2014, 40), however, the developments of recent years, especially in the European continent, are evidence that conventional war is still on the agendas of state leaders. Only a few years ago it was almost unthinkable that an interstate war would emerge in Europe – in a region dominated by the *security community* (Karl Deutsch 1958); but in 2022 a dangerous step was observed precisely on the soil of the European continent.

According to the *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute* (SIPRI), the number of states that experienced armed conflict in 2022 was 56, while the conflict between the Russian Federation and Ukraine clearly dominated the discourse about war and peace. It is even classified as the largest conflict involving over 10,000 deaths directly related to the fighting. (SIPRI 2023, 2).

This reality transformed Eastern Europe from a region that was offered an EU integration perspective to a geographical space where great powers compete with each other! In fact, what is happening today in Europe is a continuity of the "*great debates*" within the academic framework of international relations.

The Russian aggression against Ukraine[2] not only ruined the relations between two countries with a common historical, cultural and political past, but it also put an end to the Russian confidence and efforts after the 1990s to become an equal partner with the Western countries and institutions in the common challenges affecting the 21st century.

2 This act is referred to a "special military operation" by the political, intellectual, and media circles in Russia.

The Ukrainian crisis reflected in itself the whole range of issues in the relations between Russia and the West since the 1990s, such as the lack of mutual trust, the different views on the integration of the region in the EU, the enlargement of NATO towards East, etc.

When writing about the Ukrainian crisis British scholar Richard Sakwa, mentions, among other things, the two different models of state building that Ukrainian leaders followed after the fall of the Soviet Union; the monist one – which emphasizes Ukraine as a nation-state distinct from other Slavic nations aligned with Europe and the Atlantic community, and the pluralist one which recognizes the ethnic and linguistic diversity of Ukraine, where the Russian element and ties to Russia are important. In this way the crisis and internal cracks were internationalized. (Sakwa 2015).

The continuous Russian opposition to the NATO enlargement towards the countries of the former Soviet bloc is linked with the fact this enlargement has prompted decision-making circles of the Russian Federation to consider NATO as an organization which, through enlargement, penetrates to the sphere of Russian political, economic and military influence. In this context, Russia considered Ukraine's aspiration for membership in the North Atlantic Alliance *(which was finalized with the constitutional changes in 2019)* as a very serious threat that challenged its regional dominance in the post-Soviet space! The Russian National Security Strategy adopted in 2015, as well as the Foreign Policy Concept of 2016, consider the enlargement of NATO in the vicinity of the Russian borders as "...a threat to national security". (Strategii natsional'noy bezopasnosti Rossiyskoy Federatsii 2015).

It has to be noted that the Kremlin's self-perception of Russia's position on the international stage since Vladimir Putin came to power has been to become a real global actor and a driving force of regional integration on the Eurasian stage.

In particular, within the framework of the fourth mandate of President Putin (2018), the Russian Federation prioritized the reorganization of foreign and domestic policy in order to pursue a single objective, namely the creation of a supranational structure to be headed by Russia itself. According to the vision of Russian strategists, the next stage in the development of globalization will have a special regional character. (Lukyanov 2013, 8–10). Therefore, in light of this finding, the consolidation of a sphere of economic gravity in the neighboring territories, *-blizhniy zarubezh-* including the former Soviet republics – and *excluding Baltic countries* – was considered a natural way to achieve this. (Lukyanov 2013).

The considerable political and financial investment in developing the *Eurasian Economic Union* (EEU) and the *Collective Security Treaty Organization* (CSTO) rather than solving regional problems is now considered an instrument for furthering Russian interests. The main aim of the Russian Federation in establishing the Eurasian Union is that it serves as a competing project to the

economic power of the EU, while the CSTO will perform almost the same function *vis-a-vis* NATO. (Bobo 2015, 44).

As such, the launch of the EU initiative in 2009 involving Eastern Europe and called "Eastern Partnership" and covering the geographical space from Belarus to the Caucasus, was considered by Russian diplomacy as interference in its sphere of influence. This is the reason why Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov stated: "We are accused of having spheres of influence. But what is the Eastern Partnership, if not an attempt to expand the EU's sphere of influence?!" (Valentina 2009).

Practically, this statement showed that Moscow no longer saw the EU as a soft actor, but as a force that threatened Russia's ambitions in its neighborhood (Cornell 2014, 184). This narrative shows that important global actors perceive regional organizations in the context of the realist paradigm, which sees the state above organizations and as such serves to maximize the economic, political and military weight of the state.

Institutionalizing Eurasian integration and inviting new members to join are attempts by the Russian Federation to establish its position as a *pole* in the multipolar order. (Svarin, 2016, 132–136). Russian foreign policy considers regional integration and governance as part of the decentralization of the global governance system and the basis for the polycentric model of the world.

Therefore, we can infer that, among other things, this space (*Eastern Europe*) turned in recent years into a battleground between two different integrating visions, with the western integration on one side and the Russian one on the other. Meanwhile, in the Ukrainian case, this took on the painful proportions of a war. The events in Ukraine clearly represent Russian efforts to paralyze or hinder Ukraine's integration in the Western institutions. (Jashari 2023, 123).

The actions of the Ukrainian leadership have to be understood in the framework of preserve his *autonomy* and the *maximization of power* which had to be realized with the integration of the country in NATO. While the actions of the Russian Federation both towards Ukraine and the post-Soviet space can be considered under the light of *offensive realism* which aims to extend its regional hegemony around its borders. (Mearsheimer 2014).

The war caused the relations between the western allies – *regardless of the contradictions and different views on other global dynamics* – to take a different form, to strengthen even more, and, in the context of the Russian Federation, to become unified as a single body!

WESTERN UNITY AS A CRUCIAL FACTOR FOR PEACE IN EUROPE

The US and Europe are known to share common values since the end of the World War II (The White House 2023). Their political, economic, and military partnership – *the Transatlantic Alliance* – has been almost vital in maintaining peace, stability, and security on the European continent. The American presence in Europe made possible European integration and deepened Europe's cooperation with the United States in the context of supranational organizations.

After the 1990s, this US-European complex has responded with a single voice to various challenges related to the integration processes and security in Europe and the Western Balkans, including the approach to Russia, and so on and so forth. Currently, these two actors, the EU and the US, represent the most stable relations in the world, since they produce half of the global GDP, and at the same time constitute 60% of direct investments worldwide. (Federal Foreign Office 2023)

The transatlantic partnership is the basis of what we today in the 21st century consider as "West" and the essence of the Western matrix. Indeed, this is the *political West* that was shaped by the shared memory of the post-WWII period, the Cold War, and the institutional background with the EU and NATO, while their cohesion and well-being is essential for the survival of the West. This structure was originally established with the aim to protect the West from the communist East (Ifversen 2008), and this interaction between the allies has already created the identity of the *our-own-image* by transforming the differences with other actors – outside the Euro-Atlantic area – into *otherness*.

Today, the *other* that directly threatens the transatlantic security, peace and stability is the Russian Federation, as noted in the declaration of the NATO summit held in Vilnius in 2023 (NATO 2023). On the other hand, according to the Russian point of view, *the transatlantic line* is increasingly being perceived as unified, and this is even manifested in the semantic use by referring to it through the phrase *collective West*. (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2023, hereafter MFARF).

This conception of the West emerges in a period when Russian-Western relations are going through a tense phase, therefore the political and media discourses created a new portrayal of the West as Russia's historical *other*.

The Russian threat and the start of the aggression on Ukraine put NATO members on the move, and even deepened EU-NATO cooperation as stated in the joint declaration on cooperation (NATO 2023). This prompted NATO to make a comeback to its original functions, i.e. its defense against the eastern threat.

In practice, this war prompted the US to make a comeback and renew not only its commitment to Europe, but also its usual role as leader of the West and transatlantic relations. It is interesting to note that the rhetoric of the Russian diplomacy perceives the events in Ukraine but also the international stage in such a way that the US is singled out as having the upper hand with-

in the Western camp in order to strengthen its global position. (MFARF 2023). According to this view, Russian foreign policy is *American-centric*, as it continues to consider the US as a point of reference when it comes to the international situation in general. (Bobo 205, 98).

One might conclude that the previous differences that existed between the US (*under the leadership of President Trump*) and the Europeans have been avoided. Arguably, the current war in Europe is evidence that Western unification comes into expression at times when the West feels physically threatened and is on the brink of a war. The NATO commitment to the defense of the Euro-Atlantic territory is seen in the fact that within a relatively short period several meetings were held and those meetings (24 March 2022) emphasized that *... every inch of the Allied territory* will be defended. (NATO 2022).

On this occasion, the allies in the Madrid Summit in June pledged to deploy additional forces on the eastern flank of the NATO alliance, (NATO 2022) while the US Department of Defense since February 2022 has deployed over 20,000 forces in the continent, bringing the total number of US troops throughout Europe to 100,000. (U.S. Department of Defense 2022).

The Western challenge vis-à-vis the war in Ukraine is twofold: on the one hand cooperation between the allies had to be proven in practical terms; and on the other hand solidarity and military, humanitarian and financial aid to Ukraine had to be increased either from NATO countries or the European Union. Therefore, from January 2022 to July 2023, the largest military aid to Ukraine originated from the USA ($42 billion); Germany ($17.1 billion); Great Britain ($6.6 billion); EU institutions ($5.6 billion), etc. (Kiel Institute for the World Economy 2023, hereafter Kiel Institute). However, as far as financial aid is concerned, the EU Institutions are in the lead ($77.1 billion) followed by the USA ($23.8 billion). (Kiel Institute).

Western solidarity with Ukraine can also be understood in the context of maintaining the post-Cold War *status quo* in Eastern Europe, or in the best case, this *status quo* will be in favor of the West.

The Russian-Ukrainian war highlighted a new geopolitical reality in Europe. Under these circumstances, Germany committed to bolstering its military budget with a special fund of $100 billion with the aim of reaching NATO's target of 2% of expenditures for each country's GDP. (Die Bundesregierung 2022). This decision of the German state really represents a turning point (*Zeitenwende*) for the military history of Germany and Europe.

In addition, the security architecture in Europe changed because two EU countries, Finland and Sweden[3] which had traditionally followed the course of neutrality, submitted their application for NATO membership. Their member-

3 Finland joined the Alliance on April 3, 2023, while Sweden, become NATO member on 7 March 2024, will join if the national assemblies of Republic of Türkiye and Hungary have approved the membership protocol.

ship in the alliance undoubtedly increases the weight of the Nordic countries and the Baltic region within the alliance, as well as reinforces the voices for the defense of the eastern flank. Moreover, integration into NATO contributes to a deepening of cooperation between NATO and the EU. (Lokker, Townsend, Heli, Taylor 2023).

EUROPEAN SOLIDARITY OVERCOMED ENERGY DEPENDENCE

Notwithstanding the fact that the EU has long been dependent on Russian hydrocarbons and that the war in Ukraine endangered European welfare, ultimately we witnessed the triumph of the European solidarity. As an illustration, it is worth mentioning that between February 2022 and June 2023, the value of EU imports from Russia fell by 84%, while Russia's share in EU oil imports fell from 29% in the second quarter of 2022 to 2% in the second quarter of 2023. (Eurostat Statistic 2023). Meanwhile, the share of Russian gas in 2023 fell to 8.4% of EU imports, compared to 23.6% in the first 32 weeks of 2022. (Gavin 2023).

The adoption of the eleventh package of sanctions on Russia (June 23, 2023) (Council of the European Union 2023, hereafter Council of EU), literally shows that European unity continues unwavering. The European partnership was not broken and it also functioned like never witnessed before in the recent history of Europe. Unlike the EU's reaction to the events of 2014, this time the economic response of the European bloc almost exceeded the expectations of their allies in Washington. (Bergmann, Toygür, Otto 2023).

The war in Ukraine increased the EU's vigilance when it came to its defense policy and its foreign policy. In this spirit, the EU adopted the *Strategic Compass for Security and Defense* which aims to guide the actions of the EU in order to transform it into a stronger and more capable security provider. Practically, the *Strategic Compass* intends to develop the security and defense agenda of the EU in the next ten years. (European Union External Action 2022, 15, hereafter EUEA).

In the context of this very important vision for the EU, although *strategic autonomy* is mentioned in the protection of its values and interests, this autonomy still contributes positively to global and transatlantic security, and is even complementary to NATO as a foundation of collective defense. (EUEA 2022, 10).

This (*transatlantic cooperation*) is also pointed out in the Versailles Declaration (March 2023), which describes the Russian aggression as ... *a tectonic shift in European History*, and despite the fact that it mentions *the European sovereignty*, and the significant growth of defense expenditures of EU member states, however, it is proven that EU- NATO cooperation measures ... *are key to our overall security*. (Council of EU 2022). In this view, the Joint Declaration of

the Franco-German Council of Ministers made on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Elysee (January 2023) emphasizes the strengthening of the European defense capacities as vital to strengthening the European pillar of NATO as a form of expanding cooperation. (Franco-German Council of Ministers 2023).

It has to be stressed that the question of *collective defense* serves as a very important unifying factor for Europe, while this aspect was also present within the European intellectual circles of the 20th century and their ideas about Europe. (De Rougemont 1961).

In this aspect, the EU's *strategic autonomy* and *European sovereignty* are the opposite of what Russia prefers for Europe: an entity independent from the US and outside the NATO-centric structure.

For the EU, the war in Ukraine was the first case which saw it funding the purchase and delivery of military equipment to a third country, and this assistance was carried out under the framework of the *European Peace Facility*. Although this mechanism was established in 2021 with the aim to increase the ability of the EU as a global security actor, obviously under these conditions in which Europe finds itself now, it is a good test to prove that the EU, beyond *normative power*, is a powerful and active voice for international peace and stability.

The current circumstances brought about a new dynamic in the EU integration processes, therefore placing the EU's enlargement agenda at the forefront. As a result, the European Council decided to grant the status of candidate country to Ukraine and Moldova (June 2022) just a few months following their application.

Meanwhile, in the Western Balkans, the EU has started the negotiation process with North Macedonia[4] and Albania, which is evidence that the fate of this part of Europe is connected to the EU and its values. In fact, on the very day when the EU decided to open the negotiation talks with these countries, the president of the European Commission Ursula Von den Leyen mentioned the *... challenging times of Russia's brutal war...* (Webalkans 2022).

Although these countries have been offered the European perspective, and that their ultimate membership in the EU is a question of time, one can still say that these countries are already part of the European *responsibility area*. I also view the discussions for the rapprochement of Serbia and Kosovo under this light. The EU is in charge of overseeing the discussion process up until the final solution, notwithstanding the fact that it has temporarily stalled.

Additionally, whether or not the war (*in Ukraine)* stops, the synchronization of national legal systems in nations like Moldova and Ukraine with the EU legal framework pulls those countries away from Russian influence and closer

4 Bulgaria demands that North Macedonia include the Bulgarian minority in the state constitution before the talks can move further and new chapters are opened.

to the West. In fact, these countries would have to adhere to various European agendas up until full membership in order to transform from societies that once belonged to the communist system to communities that should uphold common European ideals.

The further enlargement will most likely bring about structural transformations and reforms within the functioning of the EU, which is what Germany is hoping for, especially when it comes to the unanimity of decisions in the sphere of The Common Foreign and Security Policy. (Gehrke 2022). The new geopolitical environment makes necessary a shift from unanimous voting to qualified majority[5] voting in the aforementioned field's current decision-making procedures. (Szép, 2023).

In such situations as the EU finds itself today, should demonstrate its significance as a geopolitical actor that works with the US to address a various challenge in the political, military, economic, energy, etc.

CONCLUSION

This paper dealt with the aspect of strengthened relations between the US and European countries as a result of the Russian Federation's military aggression in Ukraine, with a new geopolitical reality in Europe marked by this aggression. This war witnessed a Western mobilization, both within NATO and the EU, to show solidarity politically and militarily with Ukraine.

Indeed, this paper was intended to prove the hypothesis posed in the introduction which claims that the war or physical threat unified the Western factor vis-à-vis Russia which aimed to keep Ukraine within its orbit of influence. During the fighting in Ukraine, the *political West* had to coordinate and deepen relations among themselves on the one hand, while it had to help Ukraine in every possible way, on the other.

This war caused a profound a change in the security architecture in Europe. This also due to the fact that the number of American forces in the European continent was increased, while the North Atlantic Alliance expanded towards the Baltic area. Meanwhile, in regard to the EU which has long established itself in the international environment as a *normative power*, the war in Ukraine brought to the stage the European intentions to be a real international actor in the field of security and defense, but this in full cooperation with NATO.

The war prompted the Russian Federation to move to a new position in the international arena. In addition to being entangled in the war – *which most*

5 A qualified majority requires 15 of the 27 members to agree, which constitute 55% of member states and representing more than 65% of the EU's population. For more: European Council, Council of EU. *Qualified majority.*

likely it did not foresee at the beginning of the aggression – Russia is now isolated from the Western economy, and one should not forget the fact that in the following period it will become more dependent on the Asian giant – China.

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