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THE EUROPEAN UNION AT A HISTORICAL WATERSHED

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Abstract: The paper presents an analysis of the consequences of the war in Ukraine, which began at the end of the winter of 2022, for the European Union as an institutional creation but also for European society as a whole. This war will probably be one that separates historical epochs, and after that we can expect a changed economic and security architecture both in the world and on the Old Continent. One of the main geopolitical and geo-economic consequences of the war in Ukraine for the world and Europe is reflected in the completion of the process of returning to so-called real-politics, namely the policies of so-called *hard power* in international relations. This will probably be followed by the so-called process of "geopolitical lockdown" of different geopolitical areas because the war in Ukraine has accelerated the process of disintegration of a single international diplomatic, security, and economic system. The paper investigates the consequences of this process of returning *hard power* and splitting the single international system in Europe, the Balkans, and especially in the capacity of the European Union for enlargement. Therefore, the analysis offered in this paper can be useful for further conceptualizing Serbia's strategy in its relationship with the European Union and devising an optimal approach to the European integration process given the possible developments in Europe after the war in Ukraine. The analysis undertaken in this paper can be useful for Serbian public policies because it is not one-sided or

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ideological, but includes various scenarios for the European future and takes into account their impact on the region and Serbia.

Keywords: Europe/EU, geopolitics, geo-economics, Balkans, Serbia, war in Ukraine, consequences

INTRODUCTION

This paper is an attempt to offer an objective analysis of the social and political processes that started this conflict on the Old Continent after the first weeks of the war in Ukraine, as well as to put these processes in a broader, currently very hot, global geopolitical context (Cvetićanin, 2017a).[1] One of the theses of our work is that, after the COVID-19 pandemic, which contributed to the return of the so-called real-politics (*realpolitik*) statehood (Cvetićanin, 2016a; 2016b)[2] in world relations through a kind of "vaccine geopolitics", the war in Ukraine definitely marks the complete return of the so-called "hard power", i.e., policies of force and power relations in world relations with weakened multilateral cooperation and global organizations such as the UN and others (Maksimović, 2021, 73, 78-79).[3] This is especially true of the Old Continent, which has long been lulled to sleep by an exclusive focus on *soft power*, whose main illustration is the emergence and development of the European Union. Since the so-called *global lockdown* caused by the COVID-19 pandemic was in fact a kind of geopolitical lockdown that contributed to the rounding off and "closure" of various

[1] At the moment we are writing this paper, it is not certain how long the war in Ukraine will last and what its immediate military-diplomatic outcome will be. Similar analyses of international events that we thought could be useful in designing far-sighted public policies and especially the far-sighted foreign policy of Serbia, we have presented in our previous works, among which the work on the analysis of socio-political processes that determine global events at the beginning of the 21st century.

[2] The term "*realpolitik*" is of German origin and was coined in Bismarck's Germany in the second half of the 19th century to legitimize the pragmatic approach to politics practiced by the "iron" German chancellor, who brought the realistic pattern of politics to the extreme by defining it as the "skill of the possible".

[3] Apart from *realpolitik*, another term from the end of the 19th century, "iron chancellor", is returning to the small door to market economies, and that is social policy. When this term is used, it means the need to increase the activities of the state in social events and the changes that these events cause. The creation of prosperity and the strategy of safety of life and health of workers and the population, aim to reduce diseases and fears caused by the crises of the 21st century.

geopolitical units (large spaces), the war in Ukraine moved things to another level in depth and breadth, causing the mentioned geopolitical "locking" to be no longer just a consequence of health problems (seen through a kind of *vaccine geopolitics*), but due to the latest events in and around Ukraine, it became an economic and security process. This is especially visible through the policy of rigorous economic sanctions, which the so-called Global West imposed on Russia because of its intervention in Ukraine, as well as through the accompanying reduced level of diplomatic communication. This confirms the thesis that we are currently witnessing the process of disintegration of the unified international economic and diplomatic system. The paper will try to investigate the consequences of this process for the European Union as an institutional creation and also for European society as a whole. In this sense, we can keep in mind two scenarios. *The first scenario* (realistic) is based on the view that the European Union will emerge from the "era of prosperity" in which it has been for decades and move into the "e*ra of survival"* due to the return of the policy of force and "hard power". Because of the war in Ukraine, the capacities of autonomous disposition of "hard power" are limited, and in the latest global conflict circumstances, the EU is realistically, security-wise, and economically vulnerable. *The second scenario (*normative), is based on the fact that existing events are an opportunity for the European Union to build its own mechanisms of *hard power* and strategic resources much faster based on a common security and defense policy and to complete itself as a geopolitical force in the system of the "Global West" under the leadership and control of the United States, with the flexible possibility of economic cooperation with other geopolitical forces such as China. In addition, the paper discusses the economic consequences of the war in Ukraine for the European Union and especially the sanctions that EU countries imposed on Russia due to the war. The question is to what extent all this will have drastic consequences for the European Union itself, announcing the end of the era of prosperity and the inauguration of the era of survival. It is less likely that the EU will emerge from the latest unfortunate geopolitical and geo-economic developments without significant consequences for its citizens' living standards. The paper also raises the question of the overall position of the European Union as a pan-European institutional order in this context of the return of the politics of power, i.e., real-politics and hard power in world relations, again bearing in mind different scenarios that we can metaphorically call weak and strong scenarios for Europe. The paper discusses the situation that led to the unfortunate awakening of the European Union from its "dream of soft power", in which it has been for decades, and the development of awareness of the need to develop its own "hard power", i.e., its own strategic resources. The "dark" scenario predicts that the European Union will be significantly affected by the war in Ukraine, primarily economically. Accordingly, from the era of prosperity, the EU enters the era of "living dangerously", i.e., the era of survival, remaining squeezed in a kind of "geopolitical sandwich" between real geopolitical superpowers — the United States, Russia, and China. The opposite, positive scenario predicts that the war in Ukraine will be a kind of positive "wake-up call" for the European Union, and as a result, the European Union will be more focused on strengthening its own strategic capacities and its geopolitical encirclement. In the conclusion of the paper, we will consider the probability of different scenarios previously presented and, accordingly, draw appropriate conclusions about the consequences of the war in Ukraine on the European Union.

AWAKENING OF THE EUROPEAN UNION FROM THE "DREAM OF SOFT POWER" AND THE END OF THE ERA OF PROSPERITY

The explicit return of the so-called real-politics and the so-called policy of power on the European continent were not caused exclusively by the war in Ukraine or the COVID-19 pandemic, but this process could have been noticed earlier. The war in Ukraine and the COVID-19 pandemic undoubtedly accelerated and intensified this process. This process could be noticed a couple of years before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was evident from the statements of the highest officials of European governments, which pointed to a new strategic fact that was unthinkable at the beginning of the previous decade. For example, it is reflected in the statement of the German Minister of Foreign Affairs, Heiko Mass, from 2018, who stated that "it is high time to reconsider the transatlantic partnership in a sober, critical, and even self-critical way". He announced that he would come up with a "plan for Berlin's new foreign policy towards the United States" in order to create a "strong and independent Europe, which should be a counterweight to the United States every time Washington crosses the red line" (Blic, 2018, August 27). The previously quoted statement of the German foreign affairs minister was caused by the change in the foreign policy of the then-US President Donald Trump Administration towards Germany and the European Union as a whole. Since the end of World War II and the famous Marshall Plan of the late 1940s, US administrations have treated Germany and Western Europe as *protégés* to help recover from the devastation of war and to represent the "junior partner" of the transatlantic partnership and a buffer zone towards Soviet Russia. However, the unification of Germany led to its strengthening, especially at the economic level, so that from the "younger" it became not only an equal, but a dominant partner in the EU (especially at the economic level). As a result, the balance of power between the "transatlantic partners" has changed greatly compared to the time of the Marshall Plan, which is especially visible in this "political decade". Germany is no longer a war loser and a peacetime darling who, as a "younger partner", is only suitable to passively follow the United States, but has (again) grown into a continental power whose economic strength determines evolution on the Old Continent, being very ambitious in the global economy, pushing in it step by step its former overseas "partners" who until recently were doing worse in terms of economic parameters and who were doing worse in those real industrial economic sectors in which Germany was getting better. However, the war in Ukraine put aside the economic rivalry between Germany (that is, the entire EU) and the United States and put on the table the thoughts on the future of the transatlantic partnership. In the new circumstances, Germany will most likely apply the logic of reducing or severing (economic) ties with Russia (as illustrated by the suspension of a major Nord Stream II infrastructure project aimed at increasing gas imports from Russia, which has already been completed), which could be quite an economic cost (Danas, 2022, March 31).[4] On the other hand, if the United States wants Germany to be its "key European partner" again, it must balance its European transversal strategy with Britain, Poland, and the Baltic states, which are currently clearly its most eager strategic partners in Europe. The rhetoric used by Donald Trump in his 2016 presidential campaign was prompted by a real change in transatlantic relations in which the economic component of US-European competition began to jeopardize their strategic partnership, as voters all over the world are not thinking about strategic things, but primarily about their economic prospects. The Trump team noticed this fact and pragmatically exploited it during the campaign that ended in November 2016, announcing a set of new policies that the Trump Administration has tried to implement throughout its term, sometimes more, sometimes less successfully. The new administration of Joe Biden obviously thinks much more geostrategically, returning to that pole of American foreign policy that has always been aware

[4] According to some estimates, the interruption of the supply of Russian gas would cost each German 1,000 euros, and the entire German economy would fall by 3.4 percentage points, while the growth of the entire Eurozone would be reduced by 2.2 percentage points. The interruption of Russian gas would cost every German 1,000 euros.

that the status of a strategic superpower costs money, and which was not inclined to equate strategy with economics. The beginning of the world economic crisis at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, which exposed geo-economical relations, causing united economic, strategic, and finally political changes, was the first step in the return of so-called realpolitik and so-called hard power in world relations and on the European continent, after a quarter-century of the liberal paradigm's triumph. Until the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States, there were cases when representatives of policies that were opposed to liberals triumphed in different countries and milieus. However, the fact that this happened with Trump at the very center of the global system, shows that this system is changing at its core, and not just on the periphery, showing that change is in fact structural and that it is a process, not a series of unrelated coincidences.

THE WORLD AND THE EU - THE END OF GLOBALIZATION AND THE RETURN OF GEOPOLITICS

It would be naive to believe that a simple change of administration in the United States can halt this process and return American internal and external relations to the time constants of Barack Obama or George W. Bush. However, the first consequence of the war in Ukraine is obviously the reaction of the consolidation of the "Euro-Atlantic ranks". However, it remains to be seen how much this consolidation of the Euro-Atlantic ranks will cost and who will pay that price. It should be borne in mind that the European Union is crossed in a "geopolitical sandwich" between the United States (which provides it with a security umbrella), Russia (which is its main supplier of energy) and China (which is one of its largest trading partners). In the conditions of the pandemic, the process of "closing" the world into several geopolitical units was more clearly outlined. The Anglo-Saxon (so-called *Five Eyes*), European, Russian, and Chinese geopolitical entities naturally closed before the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. This was especially visible in the self-sustainable way of production and distribution of vaccines against COVID-19, in which Europe was again in the most unpleasant situation because it had to learn to think strategically again, ensuring self-sufficiency in strategic resources such as vaccine production. The process that began with the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and which will undoubtedly continue with the war in Ukraine, caused the European Union to return to the so-called strategic reindustrialization, i.e., the production of strategic resources on its soil (Cvetićanin, 2021, 77-92). This transformation from the process of yesterday's colorful international relations (transformation from a unipolar to a multipolar system at the beginning of the XXI century) into "pure" geopolitics, i.e., real-politics of competition, rivalry, and realization of *hard power,* will be nothing but a specific combination of geopolitics, geo-economics, and geostrategies by which the great powers will try to ensure their own economic, political, and strategic self-sustainability and security in a situation of instability and transformation of the world system (Wallerstein, 1974).[5] In other words, the world system is (once again) transforming from an order dominated by US imperial liberalism to a multilateral and rather chaotic order based on the application of the so-called policies of force and power relations. Since the whole process of the "return of geopolitics" (if it ever disappeared from them at all) is objective and legal in world relations, sooner or later it had to come to Europe. The war in Ukraine confirmed this process and made it clear. In situations of world crises, whether military (wars), economic (recessions and depressions) or health (pandemics and epidemics), strategic issues take precedence over tactical ones. Thus, Europe, willy-nilly, was completely thrown into the "brave new world" of hard power games during the war in Ukraine, which raises the question of its overall strategic capacities and possibilities to maintain its current level of prosperity in such a world. However, it cannot be said that Europe did not recognize the outlines of the "brave new world" into which it was thrown during the COVID-19 pandemic, having in mind official or unofficial strategic documents dedicated to the question of how Europe could survive in such a world (FORST, 2021).[6] Although the Old Continent has not been the center of the world system since the world wars, as it had been for several centuries prior, it still has authority in world relations order since the formation of the modern international Westphalian and modern economic capitalist systems. This is evidenced by the fact that French President Macron and German Chancellor Scholz are the only Western leaders to have, in addition to the war in Ukraine, a direct line with Russian President Vladimir Putin. At the

[5] The phrase "world system", as well as the thesis that this "world system" has its own recognizable economic and political logic that allows for approximate analytical predictions of the future, were taken from Wallerstein.

[6] One of the speakers at the International Conference on Strategic Flows 2021, organized by the Forum for Strategic Studies (FORST) in Belgrade in the early summer of 2021, was Steven Blockmans, Director of CEPS, one of Europe's largest think tanks. He devoted most of his presentation to this process of reindustrializing Europe's strategic resources.

time of the global return of geopolitics, the countries of the European Union kept their old role of promoters of the global balance of power (which was unfortunately disturbed by the war in Ukraine), which was once intended for it by De Gaulle, and which Macron and Scholz continue today. Although the global balance of power has been significantly disturbed by the war in Ukraine, this does not change the fact that the European Union is one of the parties most interested in re-establishing it. This is evidenced by the efforts of Macron and Scholz to prevent the war in Ukraine, that is, to stop and to preserve the so-called project of European strategic autonomy, the form and character of which will be significantly affected by the war in Ukraine (European Parliament, Briefing, 10 March 2022). It should be added that even earlier, with Brexit, Britain started the process of its own kind of "strategic autonomy" in isolation, which confirms our thesis that we are witnessing a kind of *geopolitical lockdown* – that is, the "locking" of various geopolitical spaces.

THE EUROPEAN UNION AS A "JUNIOR STRATEGIC PARTNER" IN NATO WITHIN THE PROCESS OF "GEOPOLITICAL LOCKDOWN"

The question remains in which way the European Union will be geopolitically "locked in", i.e., whether it will definitely remain a younger partner of the US in the transatlantic partnership due to the war in Ukraine, as it seems at first glance. It is difficult to expect that the EU will have enough vision and enough strength to continue the project of its own strategic autonomy, which is, in fact, the old idea of De Gaulle, which was advocated by Macron and Scholz until the outbreak of the war in Ukraine.[7] Whatever the evolution of the idea of European strategic autonomy, in the short term, it will not mean distancing the EU from the United States, which would be unrealistic to expect at a time when transatlantic partnership ties have strengthened as a result of the war in Ukraine (primarily in NATO military

[7] Opinions on this are divided in the quoted briefing of the European Parliament in 2022, but all analytical reports of the briefing show pessimism that the project of European strategic autonomy is sustainable in the new circumstances of the inaugurated war in Ukraine. However, we still do not know the definitive outcome and consequences of the war in Ukraine and the distribution of global forces after it, so it is currently unclear whether the project of European strategic autonomy is currently only on ice or will completely collapse in the new war.

cooperation). The strategic autonomy of the EU will go more in the direction of strengthening geostrategic capacities, but within the framework of systems dictated and controlled by the US (NATO, etc.). In this context, there will continue to be room for a kind of "geopolitical bargaining" of the EU, led by France and Germany, which in practice will mean the possibility of concluding autonomous geo-economics arrangements with other geo-economics powers (Hasselbach, 2022, March 1).[8] This "geopolitical bargaining" between the EU and the United States, but also with China and Russia, will only accelerate due to the war in Ukraine. Its final result will depend on the concrete result of that war and its consequences on how much one of the geopolitical superpowers will gain and how much it will lose. It is obvious that the United States, as a consequence of this war, predicts Russia's economic exhaustion, while Russia is trying to secure a better negotiating position with the United States in a kind of "new Yalta". On the other hand, China is watching all this from the sidelines, being for now the biggest winner of the events caused by the war in Ukraine. At the beginning of the third decade of the 21st century, different political and economic entities – state, international or corporate – must take into account realpolitik and use all the means at their disposal to improve their overall strategic position, with less regard than before in the case of "happy liberal times" towards other entities, especially if they are its competitors. In this situation, the former classical geopolitics is actually mutating into a new form suitable for the 21st century – geo-economics. The basic question is whether, in such circumstances, the European Union can maintain its current level of relative development and prosperity, embodied in its classic Welfare State, or will the Old Continent necessarily, from the era of prosperity, due to war on its soil and sanctions in force between the EU and Russia, enter an era of difficult and dangerous living in which the availability of vital resources will gradually become increasingly limited. In a world in which the most important powers, such as the United States, China, and Russia, entered earlier (in the second decade of the 21st century) from the ideological to the ruthless field of real politics, at the end of the

[8] With the war in Ukraine, the foreign policy of the Bundestag is changing. Namely, the German government approved one hundred billion euros for the armed forces as a one-time expenditure, with the aim of permanently increasing defense expenditures. At the same time, the arrival of refugees from Ukraine is welcomed, so they do not have to go through the asylum procedure and they receive protection on the territory of the EU for three years.

second and beginning of the third decade of the new millennium, so-called "Old Europe" was thrown on the field. The war in Ukraine is only the last episode of the disturbed continental balance. The Old Continent, i.e., the European Union as its current dominant pan-European institutional expression, is an economic giant but still a security and strategic dwarf. This is why the strategists of the European Union came to the conclusion that it is necessary to strengthen the Union's own strategic capacities, primarily at the geo-economics level, and that the war in Ukraine will only accelerate. The stability of the European system itself, including the EU, depends on the constellation of relations between the great geopolitical powers (above all, the United States, China, and Russia) and their agreements, i.e., possible conflicts. This continental stability is currently drastically disrupted. It is in Europe, with the war in Ukraine, that two major geopolitical powers, the United States and Russia, are playing their strategic poker, while the European Union is essentially following the main decisions produced in Washington, and Brussels and other capitals of the Union just follow it. The European Union received the global strategic poker, which we are all witnessing due to the war in Ukraine, divided into various "clubs" in which some of the mentioned global geopolitical forces have greater influence than what is called "Brussels". Thus, some countries of the "new Europe" (especially Poland, Romania, and the Baltic states) are currently closer to Washington than to Brussels as a kind of shield against Russia. On the other hand, Paris and Berlin, which have the greatest influence on the decisions of the EU institutions, are not ready to sever all ties with Moscow for now. Europe is not only in a geopolitical sandwich, but it has also become a scene of struggle between different geopolitical interests, which can undoubtedly destabilize it and, among other things, affect its capacity for enlargement in various ways, which can affect our region, including Serbia (Lopandić, 2017, 2018; Cvetićanin, 2017b).

CONCLUSIONS

After a series of crises, such as the global financial crisis of 2007/8, the migrant crisis, Brexit, the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the war in Ukraine, the European Union became aware of its strategic weaknesses and began the process of restructuring its strategic capabilities in the field of energy resources, as well as in the fields of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP). This process began immediately after Brexit (adoption of the so-called *global strategy of the EU 2016*) and has been strengthened by various initiatives in recent years in the areas of common defense policy (strengthening the European Defense Agency, the PESCO initiative, the special financial instrument for defense, etc.), energy union, industrial and digital policies, as well as environmental policies. Adoption of the so-called "Strategic Compass" by the European Council in April 2022 represents a new step in specifying the strategic goals of the EU in the new geopolitical conditions after the tectonic disruption of the European security system created after February 24, 2022, by the war in Ukraine. However, it is not yet clear how much the various measures taken by the EU against Russia (several rounds of sanctions), i.e., the United States (urgent procurement of weapons, especially by the Federal Republic of Germany, which drastically increased funds to strengthen defense), or various disorders in the economy (especially possible restrictions on energy supply), will cost. According to the projection of the investment bank Goldman Sachs, the complete exclusion of gas inflows from Russia would reduce the growth of the Eurozone by 2.2 percentage points. The biggest damage would be suffered by the economies of Germany, which would fall by 3.4 percentage points; Italy, with a decrease of 2.6 percentage points; and the increase in gas prices would affect the Eurozone GDP by 0.6 percentage points. This would probably mean the emergence of stagflation in Europe, which would be characterized by high inflation and weak economic growth and which would send the Old Continent from the era of prosperity into an era of hard living with no prospect of reviving significant economic growth. This "dark" scenario of the consequences of the war in Ukraine for the European Union implies the end of one and the beginning of another era, where the era of prosperity would be replaced by the era of "survival". Some European leaders are aware of that, so it is no wonder that they are the ones who are most trying to stop the war in Ukraine. This position is certainly not pleasant for the European Union, but it was realistically thrown into it during the war in Ukraine. The consequences of this "dark" realistic scenario, if realized, would be felt by the Balkans, i.e., those countries that are not yet members of the European Union and whose accession to the Union would still be in question. The EU's capacity to expand to our region, and thus the position of the state of Serbia in all the previously described processes, will depend on the way in which the European Union and its dominant national centers will amortize the negative consequences of the war in Ukraine on their own economies. On the other hand, there is a scenario according to which the "geopolitical awakening" of the European Union could lead to a revival and acceleration of the enlargement process to the Western Balkans in the coming years (similar to what happened with the accession of

Romania and Bulgaria to the EU earlier in this millennium, after the bombing of Serbia by NATO). The capacity of the European Union for enlargement will be predominantly influenced by the attitude of the EU elites towards further enlargement as well as the attitude of the EU citizens, in which the events in Ukraine will play an important role. Considerations about the eventual membership of Ukraine in the Union are, for now, just an attempt to open a moral umbrella before the war, without many chances to be realized. However, we will have to wait for the final outcome of the war in Ukraine and possible peace agreements that will affect the final position of the EU. Currently, two solutions can be envisaged with regard to further EU enlargement: *The first scenario* is the continuation of the policy of "enlargement fatigue", both among the elites and the citizens of the European Union. Under the influence of the war in Ukraine, due to the war events and the accompanying consequences of the new wave of refugees from Ukraine, the public in the EU would be less and less inclined to support EU enlargement in the future. *The second scenario* is to proceed with the accelerated enlargement of the European Union to the Western Balkans in order to show that the Union is still, even in new unfortunate geopolitical circumstances, vital and capable of expanding. This would pacify Europe's potential *Balkan Achilles' heel*, which could be particularly embarrassing in a situation of geopolitical turmoil as a potential source of instability, as the Balkans were and remain a border area where different geopolitical interests intersect, causing crises.

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