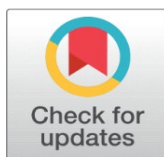
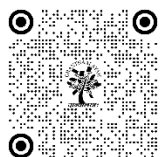


EU-RUSSIA RELATIONS: UKRAINE CONFLICT, STRATEGIC DILEMMA'S AND COMPULSIONS

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ABSTRACT

The European Union (EU) and Russia have had complicated relations not only during the Cold War period (when Russia was part of the Soviet Union), but also from 1991 when the Soviet Union ceased to exist. Russia was the largest of the post-Soviet states and had inherited major aspects of the foreign policies of the Soviet Union. Whereas, the 1990's witnessed Russia tilting towards the West, as Russia focused on rebuilding its economy and establish its influence in its near abroad i.e., Central Asia and the Balkans, its ambitions and claims on Ukraine as the most important region of Russia's near abroad, from where Russia draws its cultural heritage and linkage never seemed to have diminished. While Ukraine evolved into an independent and democratic nation, adopting Western principles that helped to forge its own path towards progress and development, Russia with its pursuit of a regional hegemon has evolved into an authoritarian regime under its longest serving leaders in the modern times, i.e., Vladimir Putin. Russia changed the course of its policies and ambitions in the post-Cold War Phase and this culminated into the present Russia-Ukraine conflict, which has place the European Union an arch supporter of Ukraine against Russia.

This paper tries to understand the complex, dynamic and evolving relations between the EU and Russia, while there is an unprecedented devastation caused by the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The paper also tries to examine the geopolitical compulsions and the strategic dilemmas that have shaped the EU-Russia relations because of the conflict. A special focus will be on issues that strongly affect EU and Russia at present i.e., economy, security and political aspects between the two parties. The conflict has unravelled broader strategic tensions in the region, from the need to maintain security to avoiding conflicts that may destabilize regional economies and from evolving policy changes on Russia by the EU to some EU members having individual relations with Russia. These issues will be analysed to gain insights into the ongoing strategic interplay, outlining the limitations and future pathways for EU-Russia relations amidst the enduring geo-political crisis in the form of Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Keywords: European Union, Russia-Ukraine Conflict, Geopolitical Compulsions, Strategic Dilemmas, Regional Security, Authoritarian Regime

1. INTRODUCTION

Before understanding the complexities of the EU and Russia relations in the present context of Russia-Ukraine conflict, it is imperative to understand the reason why Ukraine is considered as a geopolitical flashpoint. In fact, this conflict between Russia and Ukraine has been called as the bloodiest conflict in Europe since World War II, hence understanding its roots and history is all the more necessary. The crises began in 2014 when Russia annexed the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea, which is internationally recognized as a Russian territory. It is considered to be the result of a number of unresolved matters between Russia and Ukraine, both during the Cold War phase and the post-Cold War period. As mentioned above the crisis began in 2014, however this was escalated in February 2022, when Russia launched full scale attack on the Ukrainian territory.

Ukraine was one of the most important territories of the Soviet Union, an arch rival of the US during the Cold War. It was also one of the largest and highly populated of the fifteen independent states of the Soviet republics, rich in agricultural production, military industry that boasted of the Black Sea Fleet and the majority of the nuclear arsenal of the Soviet Union. The disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, led Ukraine to sever its ties with the union and this vital territory slipped away from Russia in the process. After independence from the Soviet Union, Ukraine forged its own trajectory of development and progress as a sovereign state aligning itself more closely with the Western powers and institutions like the EU and NATO.

The journey though wasn't swift and easy, as Ukraine had to balance its foreign relations and also resolve its domestic crises which was divided on the lines of supporting Ukrainian proximity with the West and supporting Ukraine's continuity of relations with Russia, the largest independent state of erstwhile Soviet Union. Hence, a situation prevailed in Ukraine in the last three decades of post-Cold War period, i.e., tussle between the nationalist Ukrainian-speaking population in the western parts of the country that regarded greater integration with the EU and the Russian-speaking population that wished Ukraine to have closer ties with Russia. This tussle culminated in the Russian-speaking minority seeking secession from Ukraine and thus the crisis of 2014 began with Russia annexing Crimea in the east of Ukraine and beginning a decade long conflict that took a new turn with Russia invading Ukraine in 2022.

2. EU-RUSSIA RELATIONS: COLD WAR RIVALRIES AND POST-SOVIET REALIGNMENTS

The EU and Russia were under two different blocs during the Cold War, EU being with the US bloc or Western bloc and Russia was part of the Soviet Union, hence no formal relations were witnessed during the Cold War period. Part of the reason for this lull in formal relations was of course the opposing blocs to which these two parties belonged, it was also due to the fact that the EU during the Cold War wasn't a formal organization but was called the EC or the European Communities. Europe was also divided between the Western Europe (US bloc) and Eastern Europe (Soviet Bloc) wherein both sides maintained counter strategies to contain each other. Judt (2005) observes in his book *Postwar*, that this clash between the two blocs limited the interaction between Europe and Soviet Union. He writes Western Europe was committed to democratic governance, market economies, and individual freedoms, while the Soviet Union adopted centralized, state-controlled economy and authoritarian governance.

The Cold War rivalries between the EU and Russia in the form of being part of EEC and Soviet Union wasn't just limited to economic and political aspects, but was defined by their security and military tensions against each other. The formation of two security blocs in the form of NATO in 1949 and Warsaw pact in 1955 symbolized their hostility. Thus, every measure was adopted by the Western powers to strengthen the NATO and the EEC to widen their influence and solidarity with the EEC and resist Soviet influence and expansion. Both parties heavily militarized their territories in the west and the east of Europe and reinforced the symbol of 'Iron Curtain' that divided Europe into two parts, especially with the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961. Thus, creating a stark military and ideological boundary that made cooperation between the two parties difficult (Gaddis 2005).

The 1970's reflected some efforts towards cooperation between the two parties. The period brought some thawing in the Cold War tensions, a period of détente that provided space for diplomatic and economic engagement between the two parties. One of the significant events was the signing of the Helsinki accords in 1975 that opened avenues for cooperation in areas like security and economics. There was mutual recognition and respect for sovereignty and borders, thus leading to easing of tensions. Snyder (2011) notes that the Helsinki Accords turned out to be a significant milestone for both parties as these accords allowed opportunities for dialogue and cooperation, though the differences in ideology and strategy remained unchanged. These accords opened the gates for future interactions between both parties, especially in areas like security and human rights.

Finally, it was the 1980's that saw positivity towards reduced tensions between the two parties. Under the leadership of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, the policies of *Perestroika* (restructuring) and *Glasnost* (openness) were initiated and these policies aimed at increased diplomatic engagement and reduced military tensions with the West. Thus, approaching towards a new beginning and ending a prolonged hostility. Analysing Mikhail Gorbachev's contribution in ending the Cold War, Brown (1997) writes, that the Cold War was ended by the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, and this in turn opened door for better relations between Russia and the EU.

3. UKRAINE IN EU-RUSSIA TENSIONS: GEOPOLITICAL AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

As mentioned above, Ukraine was one of the significant territories for the Soviet Union because of its unique geopolitical and cultural significance. This significance of Ukraine, positioned between Europe and Russia, is considered both a bridge and battleground for both parties i.e., EU and Russia, thus shaping and influencing EU and Russia's policies with each other. Some of the additional important factors that amplifies Ukraine's significance in EU-Russia relations are; its strategic location, economic resources and historical and cultural ties with Russia.

Ukraine's geographical position on the edge of Europe and Russia has made it a buffer zone between EU and Russia and has provided them both the opportunity to address their security concerns (Russia's case) and expansion interests (EU's case). While Ukraine has shown interests in siding with the West and becoming member of the NATO, this move by Ukraine and the EU's enticement policy towards Ukraine has not gone down well with Russia. As Russia fears that once Ukraine gains NATO membership, then it will lose its strategic barrier against NATO and this will lead to further EU encroachment, thus placing significant military presence in its border with Ukraine and threaten Russia's national security (Mearsheimer 2014). NATO's eastwards expansion is considered by Russia as a direct encroachment in its sphere of influence, especially when this act is being done with Ukraine at the centre stage, and this prompted Russia to ward off Western military presence by interventions like the annexation of Crimea in 2014. A signal was sent by Russia to the West that, any acts of aggression in Russia's doorsteps will be reciprocated with military operations. Conversely, for the EU, Ukraine is considered as an integral part of its Eastern Partnership policy, a policy that aims at improving political and economic integration with Eastern European countries to promote democracy and stability in the region, thus supporting Ukraine's integration with European institutions and limiting Russia's sphere of influence (Larrabee et al. 2017).

Ukraine is also economically and naturally a rich nation and this adds another reason why its significance has increased. Being one of largest countries in Europe, it is also called the 'Bread Basket of Europe', due to its fertile land and high agricultural production, Ukraine attracts both Europe and Russia to maintain their influence in the region. One of most important factors for Ukraine's significance for both parties is its role and position as a transit country for Russia's energy exports to Europe. Russia has utilized this factor as a tool to exert influence over both Ukraine and the EU countries that are majorly dependent on Russian energy (Goldthau & Sitter 2020).

Russia considers Ukraine as a country that has deep-rooted historical and cultural links, this relationship strongly influences at the same time complicates the ties between EU, Russia and Ukraine. For a long time Russia has viewed Ukraine as a nation that shares its Slavic cultural heritage and Kiev is regarded as the birthplace of the Russian Orthodox Church. This shared cultural and historical unity has been explained by many scholars. For example, Kappeler (2014) decodes certain factors that bound both nations, however, in the present context there has been a war of words and memory between the Russian's and the Ukrainians in terms of whether Russia and Ukraine share each other's history and legacy. Keppeler has used aspects such as the Orthodox Church, the dominance of the Russian language, the common Soviet heritage that links Russia and Ukraine. This historical and cultural unity has been leveraged by the Russian leadership, especially under the present regime of Vladimir Putin, which justifies Russia's involvement in Ukraine (Motyl 2014). The major point of conflict and contention between Russia and Ukraine, however, emerged when Ukraine though accepted the past links with Russia, however, does not accept the subordination of its own language (Ukrainian) and culture. Second, in the immediate post-Cold War phase, Ukraine and Russia tread similar path towards democratic values and alignment with Western Europe, however later on after a decade or so, they undertook divergent paths and this formed the basis of exacerbation of tensions between the two countries.

The Ukraine factor in EU-Russia tensions can also be attributed to Russia's desire to dominate the near abroad region of which Ukraine was the most significant part. As Sakwa (2015) observes, the actions of the Russian regime towards Ukraine are seen as part of broader strategy to maintain its hegemonic rule in what it considers Ukraine as part of its 'near abroad'. It is this 'near abroad' Russia seeks to preserve through its political influence and counter Western encroachment. The most prominent manifestation of this claim by Russia can be seen in its outright support to separatist movements in Eastern Ukraine and the annexation of the Ukrainian autonomous province of Crimea in 2014.

The EU on the other end has considered these acts of aggression and interference in the democratic and sovereign spaces of an independent nation and a direct attack on the European order based on principles of self-determination and international law. Thus, the tensions between the EU and Russia have aggravated to the level where the EU has imposed

sanctions on Russia and has been backing for Ukraine's right to defend itself and its independence which in turn is crucial for European stability (Freedman 2019). Besides its geopolitical and economic significance in the tussle between EU and Russia, Ukraine also acts as a symbolically important player in the ideological clash between the two parties. Ukraine's cautious shift towards the EU and NATO represents adoption of democracy, market economy and integrating with the West — ideas and values that are in direct opposition to Russian authoritarianism. Hence, it can be construed that Ukraine has become a symbol of a broader battleground for opposing values, ideology, governance models and regional security structures. As Beissinger (2018) puts it, the Ukraine conflict has become a stage for proxy war between EU and Russia. It is an ideological competition, where the two powers are trying to win over Ukraine via their values, ideology and governance system.

4. SANCTIONS AND THE COST OF CONFLICT: IMPACTS ON EU AND RUSSIA

The conflict between EU and Russia has also attracted sanctions from both ends against each other. The most visible form of sanctions was after the 2014 annexation of Crimea by Russia; this period also witnessed the dismemberment of Russia from the G8, and this act had a profound impact on Russia's economy and trade. The sanctions have also impacted Russia's political and strategic interests. However, Russia too has implemented countersanctions on the EU, and these sanctions have been aimed by both parties in order to penalize each other or alter the behaviour of each other. Several outcomes have been observed, and the most important ones are the economic impact of these sanctions, especially on Russia. Some of the key sectors that have been affected with these sanctions are, energy, defence and finance. However, the worst affected sectors is the energy sector, as Russia's energy exports have been hit by these sanctions.

As per Connolly (2018), the sanctions have made Western technologies inaccessible for Russian oil exploration and production, especially in harsh and challenging environments like the Arctic region where both the EU and Russia have stakes in energy exploration. This inaccessibility has affected Russia's energy ambitions in the Arctic. Similarly, Russia's banking system has also been severely affected due to the sanctions and has faced significant challenges. The sanctions have restricted Russian banks from accessing global financial markets, and this has affected their potential to raise capital and issue bonds. In addition to this, state-owned banks and financial institutions worsened Russia's capital outflows, and this has led to the depreciation of the Ruble. Crozet and Hinz (2020) in their research indicate that Russian economic slowdown is caused by these constraints and the GDP has dropped annually by 1-1.5 % since 2014.

As mentioned above, if there were sanctions from the EU, then there were counter-sanctions by Russia too. Hence, there were economic costs for the EU too. The most severely affected states in the EU were the ones that had strong economic relations with Russia, e.g., Germany, Italy and the Baltic nations. These countries experienced significant trade losses, as Russia depended on these countries for sectors like manufacturing, luxury goods and agricultural products. According to Felbermayr et al. (2019), there was an estimated € 30 billion annual export loss due to the sanctions on Russia, thus affecting industries that fed the Russian markets. Impact on energy trade is the most visible and talked about impact, due to the sanctions, and this has affected the EU's energy dependency on Russia significantly. Europe's natural gas imports from Russia, before the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, was at least 40%. In 2022, this number has dropped to around 15%, reflecting a reduction in dependency on Russian energy by the EU. The EU has uplifted itself to diversify its energy imports, however, this switch has been at higher costs. This can be seen in the high energy prices and fuelling inflation in Europe (Tagliapietra, Zachmann 2022).

Though economic costs have been contributing to the intermittent crisis due to the sanctions on Russia, these have also intensified EU-Russia geopolitical divide. Russia has diversified and redirected its energies to better relations with Asian countries like China and North Korea, and has created new trade links and reduced its reliance on European markets. As per Götz and Renaud Merlen (2018), these sanctions have also ironically given an impetus to Russia's self-sufficiency and adaptability in some major sectors like agriculture, as Russia has enhanced its domestic production capabilities and markets. The sanctions have also brought the EU member states more closely to each other or unified them around a common foreign policy that lays emphasis on a collective security and independence from Russian energy. These sanctions have also enabled the EU to chart out its own course and catalyse discussions on European strategic autonomy on areas like defence and economy that are independent from the US and Russia.

5. SECURITY AND STRATEGIC DILEMMAS: THE EU'S RESPONSE TO RUSSIAN AGGRESSION

The EU has come of age as far as its security and strategic dilemmas are concerned, especially on the Russian aggression of 2022. A significant shift is visible in the EU's strategy and security position. This change is an amalgamation of internal reforms and strengthening of partnerships, especially with NATO. As the EU traditionally focused on economic integration and diplomacy, it has now taken the responsibility of a much more active and security oriented role by forging better ties with its allies and enhancing its defence preparedness. In 2022, it adopted a framework called the 'Strategic Compass', which aims to unify its security and defence policies by 2030. This helped the EU to enhance its strategic autonomy and capability to act independently during crises. The 'Strategic Compass' consists of four pillars; these are acting, investing, partnering and securing. These are to ward off any security threats and it is with this plan that at present the EU is able to support Ukraine in its war against Russia (EU External Action 2022).

Another important feature of the EU has been the unprecedented nature of its united response, especially during the first four months after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine by Russia. For example the EU imposed far-reaching economic and financial sanctions, provided military support to Ukraine via the European Peace facility (EPF). Second, it also provided the Ukrainian nationals the temporary right to live and work in Ukraine. Considering the divergent nature of earlier policies vis-à-vis Russia among the EU member states, this change in position and policy was unprecedented. It was being seen as the opposite what the EU members stood against each other, like differences on migration, reluctance to expand the union etc. (Scazzieri 2022). Though many scholars have identified the unprecedented nature of EU's response, however, very few have discussed the reason why this change in response emerged on part of the EU against Russia. As per Rabinovych (2022), the major reason why the EU responded swiftly and in such unison was the unprecedented nature of the invasion itself from Russian state. As per him, it was a full scale military invasion that was a threat to the European security structure.

An important observation is the comparison between the EU's response to Russian aggression in 2014 and in 2022. While in 2014, the EU's stance against Russia wasn't aggressive, or was a soft response, and did not carry the broad economic sanctions against Russia, the 2022 response in contrast, was much stronger and it did affect the member states. For example, Sjørusen and Rosén (2017) argue that this harsher response in 2022 was because of the collective commitment to norms associated with international law and the principles of sovereignty and self-determination. Thus, along with the above mentioned principles, it was Ukraine's 'territorial integrity, sovereignty, and independence', that prompted the EU to act swiftly against the Russian aggression (European Council 2022).

6. CONCLUSION

The Russia-Ukraine conflict represents the current strategic issue that has resulted from the long-standing and intricate relationship between the EU and Russia, which has been influenced by historical, cultural, and geopolitical reasons. Both nations have had to strike a careful balance between collaboration and rivalry throughout the Cold War, post-Soviet realignments, and the current conflict over influence in Ukraine. In contrast to Russia's authoritarian model, the EU views Ukraine as a symbol of European ideals and a strategic buffer, grounded in democratic governance and collective security. However, particularly under Putin's rule, Russia views Ukraine as a crucial component of its "near abroad," an area that is critical to its identity, security, and regional supremacy.

The conflict in Ukraine has compelled the EU to face its strategic and security weaknesses, especially in light of Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its full-scale invasion in 2022. The EU has responded by imposing severe sanctions on Russia, demonstrating its commitment to European stability and the international legal order, albeit being limited by economic reliance and the separate foreign agendas of its member states. Russia's economy has been significantly impacted by these sanctions, which are intended to impair its military and economic capabilities and limit its access to vital Western financial markets and technologies. They have, however, also resulted in reciprocal economic costs inside the EU, especially for countries with close economic relations to Russia, and they have increased inflation as a result of the move away from Russian energy sources.

The EU's strategic conundrums, such the difficulty of striking a balance between security requirements and economic interdependence, have also been brought to light by this war. The EU has moved towards energy diversification and ideas of strategic autonomy as Russia has shifted its focus towards Asia, creating new trade links and improving domestic self-sufficiency. This highlights how global alliance dynamics are changing. A more unified European defence

policy is being considered, and closer alignment with NATO has been prompted as a result of the circumstances strengthening EU solidarity in tackling security and defence issues.

Ukraine has emerged as a focal point of ideological confrontation between Russia and the EU in the larger geopolitical context, signifying a conflict between authoritarian hegemony and democratic integration. Beyond simple territorial conflicts, this ideological battlefield reflects a broader conflict over the governance and sovereignty tenets that support Russian identity and European stability. In order to prevent aggression and protect European values and interests, the EU's strategy towards Russia is expected to remain focused on a well-balanced mix of sanctions, security alliances, and energy independence going forward. The ongoing battle highlights the need to build a strong, independent Europe that can withstand pressures from both the inside and the outside as the EU attempts to reinterpret its strategic role in this multipolar world. This EU-Russian recalibration.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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