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## **The Russia-Ukraine War, NATO's Eastern Flank, and Ukrainian Refugees in Central Europe**

### **Abstract**

The countries of NATO's eastern flank representing the so-called Bucharest Nine include Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Hungary. Over recent decades, NATO has adapted to new challenges and threats to the security environment. This article attempts to examine the ongoing armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine from the perspective of NATO's eastern flank countries as well as to answer the following research questions: are NATO member states adequately responding to the threats arising from the armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine, and will NATO be revitalised as a result of Russia's revisionist policy?

**Keywords:** Ukraine, Russia, Central Europe, Ukrainian Refugees, Eastern Neighbourhood, Security, War

### **Introduction**

The countries of NATO's eastern flank form the so-called Bucharest Nine, and include: Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Hungary (Pawłowski, 2020; Jankowski, Stepniewski, 2021). Over the decades, NATO has adapted to new challenges and threats to the security environment (Stepniewski, 2020; Stepniewski, 2011). The Alliance's need to adapt has been very clear since 2014, when Russia, with its neo-imperial policy towards Ukraine, "woke up the dragon" upon which NATO began to adapt to the new security reality in Central and Eastern Europe by increasing spending on

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armaments, along with the modernisation of its armed forces, command structures, and relocation of troops, etc. Since 2014, we have been dealing with an armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine in the Donbas (along with the annexation of Crimea by Russia), which has changed the way in which security in Eastern Europe and, more broadly, throughout Europe is perceived. As of 24 February 2022, i.e., with the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, not only did the way of thinking about international order and security change, but, above all, the perception of Russia as an unpredictable participant in international relations changed also. Russia has become a serious threat and a challenge to the international order. This article attempts to look at the ongoing armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine from the perspective of NATO's eastern flank countries as well as to answer the following research questions: are NATO member states adequately responding to the threats arising from the armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine, and will NATO be revitalised as a result of Russia's revisionist policy?

### **NATO's Interests in Eastern Europe**

It should be emphasised that – especially in the era of Russia's full-scale war with Ukraine – the modern international system consists of a series of regional security complexes. NATO, as a security system, somehow collides in Eastern Europe and the Black Sea region with other regional security systems. Three regional security complexes intersect in these regions: the European regional security complex (*European RSC*), a post-Soviet regional security complex (*Post-Soviet RSC*), and the Middle East Regional Security Complex (*Middle Eastern RSC*). In addition to the indicated regional security complexes, there is also the Balkans complex and the Caucasus mini complex (Celikpala, 2010).

It must also be mentioned that Russian politicians quite often raise the argument that the Russian Federation under Vladimir Putin is pursuing a policy of “gathering Russian lands”, or, more precisely, a neo-imperial policy (Bieleń, Skrzypek, 2010; Marciniak, 2001). A few years ago, the argument of gathering Russian lands might have seemed abstract, but after 2014, and now after the events of February 2022, it appears that Russian politicians, led by Putin, are implementing this idea. The concept of “gathering Russian lands” was confirmed in Putin's speech as early as in 2007 at the Munich Security Conference and then in 2015 at the 70th Session of the UN General Assembly in New York. These statements confirm the thesis that the current international order requires change and that Russia is striving to achieve its goals.

## The War in the Donbas Since 2014 and the “Grey Security Zone” of Eastern Europe

I have emphasised many times in my papers (Polegkyi, Stepniewski, 2020; Fiszer, Stepniewski, Świder, 2019; Fiszer, Stepniewski, 2017; Stepniewski, 2016) that the activities currently undertaken by the Russian Federation on the international arena are aimed at the restoration of *status quo ante*. In the 1990s, we dealt with the weakening of the international position of Russia, the successor to the USSR. At the beginning of the 21st century, its activities began to be characterised by the increasing importance of military and energy factors and the rejection of sentimental rhetoric in favour of a strictly pragmatic approach (Toal, 2017; Reichardt, Stepniewski, 2020; Orenstein, 2019). The terms “economisation of politics” or “petropolitics” are often used to describe Russia’s relationship with its neighbours. 2014’s armed conflict with Ukraine not only changed the perception of Russia as a neighbour, but also challenged all the post-Soviet region integration projects involving Ukraine, and raised questions about the future of this area.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that over the last two decades, Russia has shown enormous determination in reintegrating the post-Soviet region. Guaranteeing itself hegemonic influence in the post-Soviet space and ejecting the West serves – in Russian eyes – to strengthen its status as a regional and global power, and to realise a range of more minor interests of a socio-economic nature. In addition, in order to defend its sphere of influence, Russia has not hesitated to follow a confrontational policy towards the West.

While analysing the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, it must be remembered that Russia, in its foreign policy, in particular towards the post-Soviet states, is guided by an imperial mentality. George Soroka wonders how the United States would behave if, for example, Russian military bases were to be installed in Cuba. Would it not spark a reaction from the US such as an attempt to stop or prevent the implementation of such a plan?<sup>1</sup> This seems to be a rhetorical question. This way of thinking among Russian decision-makers is confirmed by the words of Andrej Krickovic, who noted that the Russians “only respect powers such as the USA, China, and Germany. People often do not understand it. «The Kremlin talks about sovereignty all the time, while it does not obey it itself!». However, for Russians, sovereignty does not apply to small nations. From their perspective, America

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<sup>1</sup> The author participated in the Harvard Summer School 2015 lectures on “Introduction to Comparative Politics”, led by George Soroka, PhD (Lecturer on Government and Assistant Director of Undergraduate Studies, Harvard University).

should not interfere in the affairs of Russia or China, and small states are, well, just potential loot” (Węzyk, 2015).

When analysing a map of Eastern Europe, Russia’s military presence in this area should be kept in mind. We can define Eastern Europe as a “grey zone of security” due to the fact that these countries do not belong to, for example, NATO or other organisations acting effectively for regional cooperation and security. Although the countries of Eastern Europe and the Caucasus have operated in various regional structures, they do not guarantee security. These include structures such as: the Organization for Democracy and Economic Development (GUAM: Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldova), the Community of Democratic Choice (2005), or the Black Sea Synergy (2007), and the Eastern Partnership (comprising: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine), which was established in 2009. None of these multinational structures guaranteed hard security for the countries in this region. These structures are aimed at strengthening cooperation and increasing stability in the region, and in the case of the Eastern Partnership, at bringing the countries of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus closer to the standards of the European Union (Stepniewski, 2021). At the same time, the frozen conflicts occurring in this region may directly or indirectly affect the stability and security of Central European countries and the European Union as a whole. Using the frozen conflicts, Russia may affect the internal politics of countries involved in such conflicts, including Abkhazia, Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia as well as the Donetsk region in Ukraine and Russian-annexed Crimea. It is worth noting here that maintaining control over Donbas, in the event of a failure to conquer the entire territory of Ukraine, is one of the key measures with which the authorities in the Kremlin can destabilise Ukraine, thus hindering its rapprochement with Western structures. There should be no expectation that the Russian Federation will voluntarily give up this region, even if it was a condition for normalising relations with the West.

### **A Turning Point – Russia’s Aggression Against Ukraine (Since February 2022)**

Russia, under the rule of Vladimir Putin, by deciding to attack all of Ukraine, has achieved opposite results to those assumed: (1) it has integrated the West against Russia; (2) it has integrated NATO countries and increased the spending by individual countries on armaments (*inter alia*, Germany declared higher expenses on armaments); (3) the West

has imposed far-reaching sanctions on Russia that will significantly hit the Russian economy; (4) Russia suffered enormous material and human losses during the first three months of the invasion of Ukraine; (5) Russia failed to defeat Ukraine quickly and force the Ukrainian decision-making centre in Kiev to surrender; (6) Russia was unsuccessful in persuading other post-Soviet states to initiate military involvement on the side of Russia against Ukraine; (7) the freezing of the conflict in Ukraine may have far-reaching consequences for Russia and its position in the post-Soviet region.

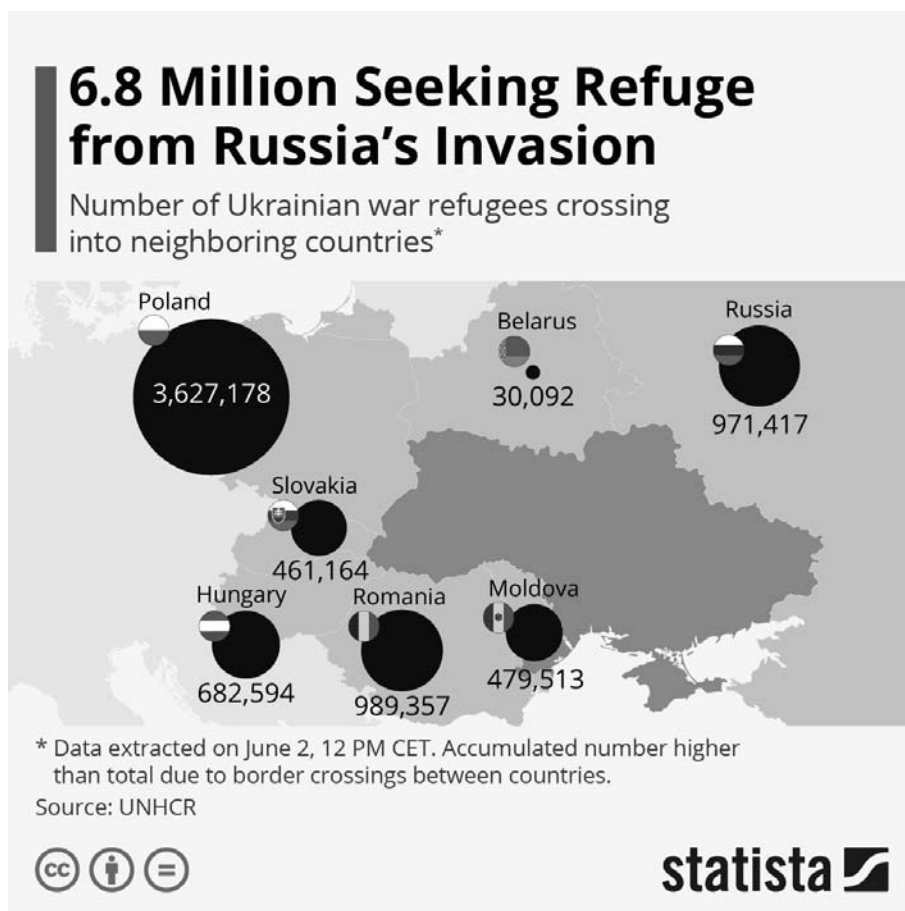
Certainly, Russian intelligence misjudged the condition of the Ukrainian state, the motivation of Ukrainian citizens, and the condition of the Ukrainian army (i.e., the level of training, armament, and morale). The attitude of civil society, which both supports the Ukrainian army and helps people in need who are fleeing from the battlefields, also must not be underestimated. Furthermore, today's modern media, which allows us to analyse the present conflict on an ongoing basis and send images from Ukraine to the whole world, plays a pivotal role. Thus, the local conflict (as the Russian side likes to define this military conflict) is present on TV screens all over the world. In addition, the activities of such analytical centres such as the Conflict Intelligence Team (CIT), which analyses the war in Ukraine and informs the international community on the progress of the fighting, do not serve Russia's goals in Ukraine.

After three months of the full-scale aggression from the Russian Federation against Ukraine, it was already known that it was not possible to quickly capture Kiev and establish a puppet government, and that most of the north-eastern part of the country had not succumbed to Russian attacks and still remains in the hands of the Ukrainians. At this point (May 2022), the Russians are concentrating their attacks on the Donbas and the south-eastern part of Ukraine in order to break up the Ukrainian army and establish both coastal control and a corridor connecting Transnistria with Russian territory. It all depends on the course of military operations, but it can already be said that for both sides the prospect of a quick conclusion of the war is not close. The most important thing is to gain an advantage on the battlefield and turn the tide of victory to one's own side. The West's support for peace negotiations between Russia and Ukraine will also be of essence.

In early June 2022, more than 10 million Ukrainian citizens were forced to leave the country due to the war which was started on 24th February 2022 by Russia. The table below shows which countries have accepted the largest number of refugees from Ukraine. The statistics are not accurate,

because many people who had to leave Ukraine have not registered as refugees in the countries where they are staying. In addition, a large number of people were forcibly displaced to Russia from eastern Ukraine.

**Table 1. 6.8 Million Seeking Refuge From Russian Invasion**



Source: *Statista*. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/chart/26960/number-of-ukrainian-refugees-by-target-country/> (Access 22.06.2022).

## Conclusions

The objective of this paper was to conduct a general review of the security situation of Central and Eastern European countries during the war between Russia and Ukraine. This full-scale war is continuing and its fi-

nal end cannot be predicted at this point. The article attempts to point out that NATO countries have come together to impose sanctions on Russia and help Ukraine, which is in a “grey security zone” and not a NATO member. Until February 2022, NATO’s mistake was to perceive Russia’s actions only through the prism of the Ukrainian conflict (the Ukrainian crisis as something local, internal). The situation of threat and a full-scale war in the vicinity of NATO’s eastern flank countries is the best proof of this. From the point of view of conventional threats, it is Russia and its neo-imperial policy that currently pose the greatest peril on the European continent. Failure to reflect on the change in the security situation in Eastern Europe may have far-reaching consequences for NATO as an organisation and its individual member states. The same opinion is shared by Heinrich Brauss, Lieutenant General (retired), and Joachim Krause, Director of the Institute for Security Policy at the University of Kiel, who, even before the outbreak of full-blown war, argued that “when our attention is drawn to climate change, migration crises, the EU crisis, and several other problems requiring cooperation-based solutions, completely unprovoked, Putin’s Russia has been preparing for regional wars in Europe which may be won by means of nuclear threats” (Jungholt, 2019), and pointed out that “the deployment of Russia’s new middle-range weapons ought not to be viewed in isolation, but should be analysed in the context of Russia’s comprehensive strategy for the times of peace, crisis, and war” (Jungholt, op.cit.).

Heinrich Brauss’ statement offers a perfect conclusion for the paper. Brauss believes that NATO members must improve their “capacity to respond and consolidate the most endangered region of the organisation, i.e., the Baltic Sea region and Poland, by the consistent application of provisions of Warsaw and Brussels NATO summits” (Jungholt, op.cit.). If NATO member states are not aware of the threats posed by their immediate neighbourhood, they may lose the time it takes to catch up. It is to be hoped that Russia’s war with Ukraine will result in decisions being taken quickly and that they will be adequate to the growing threat on NATO’s eastern flank. At a time when Russia is pursuing its geopolitical goals, only a policy of deterrence can be effective.

### **Acknowledgement**

This article is part of a project funded by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Poland, entitled “Regional Initiative of Excellence” in 2019–2022, 028/RID/2018/19. The amount of funding: 11,742,500 PLN.

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