

## THE GEOPOLITICAL AWAKENING OF THE EUROPEAN UNION AGAINST THE BACKDROP OF THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR

**Oleksii Buriachenko**

Ph.D. in Political Science, Associate Professor,  
Professor at the Department of International Relations and Strategic Studies,  
National Aviation University, Ukraine  
e-mail: voua@ukr.net, orcid.org/0000-0001-5308-2570

### Summary

The article analyses the impact of the Russian-Ukrainian war on the geopolitical transformation of the European Union (EU). It examines the key changes in the EU's security, energy and international relations strategy, as well as the development of its strategic autonomy and role in supporting Ukraine. The study is based on the analysis of scientific sources and political articles related to the EU's foreign policy and security mechanisms. A comparative analysis of the EU's decisions on sanctions, energy security and military assistance to Ukraine is used. Expert assessments of the geopolitical situation and economic consequences of the war are also taken into account. The article contributes to understanding the role of the Russian-Ukrainian war as a catalyst for the EU's political and strategic awakening. In particular, it highlights the development of the EU's strategic autonomy in response to its energy dependence on Russia and the growth of defence cooperation between member states. The author also explores how the war has contributed to the consolidation of European identity and the strengthening of the desire for global leadership in the face of current international challenges. The author notes that the Russian-Ukrainian war has accelerated changes in the EU's approach to foreign and security policy. The EU has strengthened its strategic autonomy, increased economic sanctions against Russia and mobilised resources to support Ukraine. At the same time, the war has shown the need to develop energy resources independent of external suppliers and to increase the EU's internal defence capabilities. Ukraine's integration into the European space has become an important strategic direction of the EU's policy. An important aspect has been the strengthening of European defence cooperation, which demonstrates the EU's desire for greater independence in security matters. Ukraine's integration into the European space is becoming one of the key directions of the EU's foreign policy, which may accelerate the process of Ukraine's accession to the Union in the future. The author also draws attention to the fact that the issue of strengthening the EU's defence capabilities affects the problem of the international security system, which today, as a result of the Russian-Ukrainian war, is undergoing the greatest transformations since the Second World War.

**Key words:** European Union, Russian-Ukrainian war, geopolitical awakening, EU strategy, international security.

DOI <https://doi.org/10.23856/6519>

### 1. Introduction

The Russian-Ukrainian war has become a challenge for the European Union, prompting a review of domestic policy approaches and geopolitical orientations. The conflict has raised the question of the effectiveness of the EU's traditional security mechanisms, including its

ability to respond quickly to military threats and strategic challenges. The issue of the EU's political adaptation to new conditions, in particular in the energy and security sectors, and how this will affect its long-term development strategy and strengthening of its geopolitical position, has become urgent.

**Analysis of recent studies and publications.** Recent research in the field of European security and international relations confirms that the Russian-Ukrainian war has dramatically changed the security policy of the European Union. In particular, studies by think tanks such as VoxUkraine (*Rabinovych, 2023*) and the Robert Schuman Foundation (*Pintsch and Rabinovych, 2023*) emphasise the importance of the EU's sanctions policy as one of the main instruments of pressure on Russia. Challenges related to defence cooperation within the EU have been discussed earlier, but the problems of developing European strategic autonomy in the new geopolitical context caused by Russia's aggression remain insufficiently studied. Regarding military assistance to Ukraine, analysts (*Fiott, 2023*) point to the important role of the European Peace Fund, but there is no detailed research on the long-term consequences of military supplies and their impact on the EU's political and economic systems. Given this context, the article aims to fill this gap by analysing the impact of the Russian-Ukrainian war on the transformation of the EU's security policy and considering the development of strategic autonomy, especially in the energy and defence sectors.

**The purpose of the article** is to study and analyse the impact of the Russian-Ukrainian war on the strategic transformation of the European Union. Particular attention is paid to changes in security policy, energy autonomy, defence cooperation and Ukraine's integration into European structures.

## 2. Summary of the main research material

The Russian-Ukrainian war has become a turning point for the European Union, changing its internal political dynamics and geopolitical orientations. Since the occupation of Crimea in 2014, the EU has had to rethink its role in the international arena, but it was Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 that became the catalyst for more decisive action. Instead of a traditional soft power policy, the EU has begun to demonstrate the ability to quickly mobilise diplomatic, economic and military resources, while trying to balance the national interests of its member states with its collective commitment to European security. The war not only raised the issue of European security and brought the problem to a new level, but also contributed to strengthening strategic autonomy and the ability to provide global leadership in the face of modern challenges.

Prior to the outbreak of full-scale war, the EU was criticised for favouring instruments over strategy, and for not using all of its tools for geopolitical influence. The war in Ukraine is now seen by many analysts as a "wake-up call" for Europe, when the history of the union as a peaceful project should not prevent it from acting. So the invasion triggered a political awakening, and within days Brussels showed results: The EU adopted five packages of enhanced sanctions within a week, the effects of which are being felt in member states and are having an impact on the crippling Russian economy. This trend is likely to intensify over the coming years as a number of European gas and oil companies cut off their investments in Russia, dealing a blow to the Kremlin's energy sector. The EU's willingness to use its full economic weight as a tool of coercion against Russia is demonstrated by the discussions between the United States and its European allies about a complete ban on oil and gas imports from Russia. Although a compromise has not yet been reached, the discussion itself is significant, as it indicates that the

EU is ready to "pay the price" in the form of higher energy prices for its geopolitical actions. On the domestic front, the EU has begun to mitigate the challenges facing European societies. Policymakers in Brussels gave a boost to the Temporary Protection Directive, developed in 2001, which granted protection to a large number of Ukrainian refugees, including residence rights, access to the labour market, healthcare and education. To support Ukrainians, the EU has also decided on a major humanitarian and financial aid package, while at the same time applying measures to suspend Russian propaganda outlets such as Russia Today and Sputnik, and the European Commission's East StratCom working group has stepped up its efforts to combat Russian disinformation. Preparing the EU for a long-term "geopolitical game" requires rethinking its geo-economic position. For example, Nord Stream 2. Germany argues that Nord Stream 2, a pipeline that transports Russian gas across the Baltic Sea to Germany, was a purely economic project with no political component. Due to the lack of European sources to meet their energy needs, member states agreed to depend on Russian gas, but the outbreak of a full-scale war in Ukraine put an end to European naivety and forced Europeans to diversify their energy sources. In the short term, politicians need to prepare their populations for higher energy prices and prepare for heated domestic debates as their voters feel the effects of sanctions. And since renewable energy sources are not yet able to produce enough energy to meet the demand of the population, some European countries may be forced to return to coal, which could undermine the EU's climate goals (*Hoop Scheffer and Weber, 2022*).

One of the key areas for Europe has been the development of strategic autonomy, which involves strengthening internal economic and security mechanisms to reduce dependence on external supplies. This means increasing investment in its own defence resources and technologies, developing renewable energy sources, and strengthening the common security policy. According to analysts, the growth of the EU's autonomy has several factors: 1) the aforementioned refusal from Russian energy resources; 2) in response to the war, European countries have come closer together in defence cooperation; while in the past the EU relied on NATO, Russian aggression has shown that this solution is ineffective, and it is necessary to develop its own defence capabilities in order not only to deter potential threats but also to respond to crises independently; investments in joint projects in the defence industry have become an important solution to strengthening European autonomy; 3) strengthening economic cooperation with Ukraine, i.e. opening markets, cancelling duties and introducing economic incentives that will help strengthen Ukraine's economic integration into the European economy. By doing so, the EU aims not only to help Ukraine overcome the economic challenges of the war, but also to integrate it into the European economic space, which may lead to the acceleration of Ukraine's EU membership in the future. The adaptation of Ukrainian legislation to EU legislation on market restrictive instruments (duties, quotas, regulatory measures) was a step towards both economic integration and foreign policy cooperation with the Union. According to economists, the integration of new internal market instruments will provide new opportunities for businesses, including technology start-ups. To develop a common digital infrastructure and support digital transformation, Ukrainian enterprises, researchers, and public institutions can already apply for funding, for example, under the Digital Europe programme (*Rabinovych, 2023*).

It is worth noting that in the wake of the 2004 transformations, the EU created the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), which aimed to stabilise the region through trade, economic integration and cooperation, in particular, it focused on strengthening cooperation between Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and other countries. From the outset, this approach was characterised as "technocratic", as it was based on the knowledge and expertise of the European Commission, with the aim of achieving regulatory harmonisation between the EU and its

neighbours. For example, the ENP developed action plans for Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, which included proposals for deeper political association and trade cooperation aimed at economic integration. The main instruments were financial and technical assistance, as well as strengthening reforms in the areas of anti-corruption and the rule of law. Although the ENP was not initially geopolitical in nature, it was aimed at reducing Russia's influence on post-Soviet countries by strengthening cooperation with the EU. This became the foundation for the conclusion of the Association Agreements, which were aimed at the gradual integration of these countries into the single European market, i.e. a significant incentive for reforms and strengthening of democracy in general. The EU's technocratic approach was seriously challenged by Russia's aggression in 2014. After these events, the EU was forced to take the first steps towards imposing sanctions against Russia and provide Ukraine with large-scale financial and technical assistance, but this was not enough. One of the main lessons, including for Western analysts, was the realisation that a pragmatic approach to Russia did not prevent its aggression, and that the EU's dependence on Russian energy resources significantly weakened its position. A technocratic solution such as the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement brought positive results, but was not enough to prevent the conflict. The Union should have defended its values more firmly and taken tougher measures to ensure stability in the region. After 2015, the EU changed its approach to focus on security and resilience in the Eastern Neighbourhood. This resulted in the revision of the European Neighbourhood Policy of 2015 and the adoption of the EU Global Strategy of 2016, which emphasised the need to strengthen the economic and energy independence of the countries in the region from Russia, as well as the importance of regulatory convergence and governance reforms (*Pintsch and Rabinovych, 2023*).

The evolution of the EU against the backdrop of the Russian-Ukrainian war can also be seen through the prism of gradual growth of competition with Russia. One of the important factors was the realisation that the EU's attempts to avoid direct confrontation with Russia were ineffective. Starting in 2004, the EU tried to introduce a new policy towards the Eastern Partnership countries, such as Ukraine, but this policy remained within the framework of strategic ambiguity. On the one hand, the EU was moving towards closer cooperation with Ukraine through the Association Agreement and the Free Trade Area, while on the other hand, it was careful not to provoke Russia, which saw these steps as a threat to its own interests. In response, Russia stepped up its efforts to restore its influence in the post-Soviet space. In 2013, this resulted in the application of economic and political pressure on Ukraine to disrupt the signing of the Association Agreement with the EU. This caused mass protests in Ukraine, known as Euromaidan, which led to a change of government in Kyiv and further aggressive actions by Russia, including the annexation of Crimea and support for separatist movements in Donbas (*Raik et al, 2023: 4-9*).

Since the outbreak of the full-scale war in Ukraine, the European Union has significantly revised its relations with post-Soviet countries that are not members of the EU. In addition, Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova have come to be seen as important strategic partners. The accelerated granting of EU candidate status to Ukraine became a precedent and a confirmation of the EU's readiness to support democratic transformation in these countries. Particular attention was paid to creating conditions for the political and economic integration of post-Soviet states that could help counter Russia's influence. For example, the macro-financial assistance programmes already being implemented in Ukraine remain a model for other countries in the region seeking closer cooperation with the EU (*Alcaro, 2022: 5-6*).

Until 2022, the European Union's strategy was largely based on avoiding confrontation, but Russia's full-scale invasion forced the EU to reconsider its role in international politics and

take a more active part in the geopolitical competition for the future order in Europe. It should be noted that the decision to grant Ukraine the status of an EU candidate was an important element in the formation of the EU's new borders. It is a clear demonstration that the EU is ready to defend its vision of an international order based on international law. Although the EU has mostly used civilian means to achieve its goals, important steps have been taken to strengthen its military capabilities. One of the first such decisions in the EU's history was the decision to use the European Peace Fund to compensate member states for the costs of military assistance to Ukraine. Unlike Russia, the European Union does not use force to impose its vision, but rather bases its actions on the voluntary accession of countries to the EU's "liberal empire". This model, despite its criticism, is more attractive to the EU's neighbouring countries, such as Ukraine (*Raik, 2024: 40-50*).

The geopolitical development of the European Union against the backdrop of the Russian-Ukrainian war should be viewed from another perspective, in the context of the transformation of the EU itself as a political actor. The war has prompted a review of the fundamental principles of integration and cooperation between member states, which has led to the emergence of new mechanisms for collective crisis management. This underscores the Union's aspiration to become a global actor capable of acting independently and independently of other factors.

It is worth paying attention to how the European Commission has begun to play a new role in implementing foreign policy and defending EU values. Previously, the Commission acted as an implementer of legislative initiatives, but now it is taking on a proactive role in shaping policies that go beyond the internal market. This is especially evident in the area of sanctions policy, where the Commission has taken a leadership role, coordinating between member states and ensuring rapid decision-making amid geopolitical tensions. The war also showed that the EU needs to strengthen its strategic autonomy on a global scale. This was the impetus for seeking new partnerships beyond transatlantic cooperation, such as relations with countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The European Union is trying to move away from its traditional allies, creating a broader geopolitical context to ensure its independence in economic and security matters. Analysts also see important accents in the fact that the war is changing the perception of the Union's role on the global stage as a defender of democratic values. The war in Ukraine has had a significant impact on strengthening integration processes in the areas of human rights, rule of law, minority protection, etc., and this has become one of the central topics of discussion in the European Parliament and the Council of the EU. This new positioning allows the EU not only to respond to external threats, but also to shape the world order based on the values of democracy and the rule of law (*Hakansson, 2023*).

The development of the European Union since the outbreak of full-scale war in Ukraine, in our opinion, should be seen in the broader context of the fragmentation of the liberal international order. Before the war, the EU was developing as a powerful economic player with strong democratic and legal institutions, focusing on soft power and diplomacy. However, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 significantly changed the international situation, forcing the EU to rethink its foreign and security policy strategies. The fragmentation of the liberal international order has become one of the main challenges for the EU in this context. The war in Ukraine has accelerated the disintegration of the former global order based on rules and shared values. Fragmentation has manifested itself in various forms, including the return of spheres of influence, violation of norms of territorial integrity, and a growing negative attitude towards interdependence, which was previously considered the basis for peace and stability.

As noted by European researchers themselves, one of the most obvious forms of this fragmentation was Europe's energy dependence on Russia, which it used as an instrument of



political pressure, prompting the European Union to act quickly to diversify energy supplies and develop internal energy markets. However, despite attempts to expand the EU's competence in the energy sector, this issue remains problematic due to uneven integration of energy policies among member states. The war in Ukraine has also changed the focus of European defence policy. While the EU used to focus more on crisis management and peacekeeping missions outside its borders, now the priority is to defend its. This became especially evident after the Strategic Compass, a document designed to guide European security policy, was revised in the first months of the war, as its provisions proved insufficient in the new reality. The EU has begun to invest more in the development of defence capabilities, but there are still deep divisions among member states over what European defence should look like and how to synchronise these efforts with NATO. We should also emphasise the impact of the war on the political cohesion of the European Union. Although the EU has demonstrated a high level of unity in sanctions against Russia and support for Ukraine, internal divisions among member states continue to influence decision-making. An example of this is Hungary, which has expressed scepticism about tough sanctions and has limited its support for EU policy towards Ukraine. This shows that despite external pressure, some internal conflicts in EU countries can reduce the effectiveness of its actions in the international arena. An additional challenge was the growing rivalry between regional blocs and the expansion of strategic autonomy. The war prompted Europe to reconsider its dependence on external actors such as the United States and China and to think about how to develop its own defence, industrial and political autonomy. However, this task proved to be more difficult than expected, as many member states continue to focus on partnership with the United States in defence, which is an obstacle to the creation of a full-fledged European strategic autonomy (Costa and Barbe, 2023: 432-436).

The war in Ukraine has stimulated the acceleration of arms supplies to Ukraine through the European Peace Facility, which has become an important tool for supporting the Ukrainian army. Under this fund, the EU has provided Ukraine with the bulk of its overall assistance, which shows the growing role of the EU as a military and political actor and its ability to adapt to new challenges posed by the war. Previously, this fund was focused on Africa, but the Russian-Ukrainian war has changed its priorities (Fiott, 2023: 5). One of the long-term responses to the war was the industrial recovery of Europe's defence industry. During the Versailles Summit in March 2022, EU leaders agreed to increase defence spending on joint purchases of arms and ammunition, which is evidence of growing defence cooperation among member states and the European Commission. A new legislative initiative has also been prepared to create a mechanism for joint procurement of defence products. This process is an illustrative example of how the EU is gradually strengthening its autonomy in the military sphere, aiming to reduce dependence on external suppliers (Fiott, 2023: 7).

In general, the Russian-Ukrainian war is a catalyst for strengthening the EU's defence integration. However, this process does not necessarily mean a transition to national integration, as many decisions are taken at the intergovernmental level, reflecting the specifics of the member states' approach to common security policy. At the same time, the European Commission plays the main role of initiator of new policies, such as joint military procurement, but these activities do not always lead to a significant redistribution of sovereignty.

The EU, faced with the challenge of Russian aggression, has made Ukraine the central focus of its foreign policy, stepping up political, economic and military support. This is seen as having several important dimensions of security policy. Some European leaders reacted quickly to the conflict, consolidating their stance against the aggressor and mobilising resources to help Ukraine. In the area of diplomacy, the Union has demonstrated strong support for Ukraine's

sovereignty and territorial integrity, while providing large-scale political assistance. Direct visits of European leaders to Kyiv, active participation in international negotiations, and meetings of the European Council on the Ukrainian issue were evidence of political solidarity and readiness for joint action. The EU has been active on all diplomatic platforms, including the UN, OSCE and other international organisations, to stop the aggression and restore a just peace. An important tool of diplomacy was the development and implementation of numerous sanctions against Russia. The EU's sanctions policy (freezing assets, restricting financial transactions, banning the export of high-tech equipment, reducing access to energy resources, etc.) aimed at weakening the Russian economy has become the most powerful response to the aggression on its part, with the aim of forcing Moscow to stop military actions. The EU played an important role in the international coordination of sanctions together with the UK, the US and other Western bloc partners. A notable step, a historic decision, was the granting of EU candidate status to Ukraine, which demonstrated not only support for Ukraine but also its prospects. This diplomatic gesture is of great symbolic and strategic importance, as it demonstrates the EU's real aspirations. The EU will also contribute to Ukraine's post-war recovery by developing plans for the country's long-term reconstruction and modernisation (Youngs, 2022).

### 3. Conclusions

The Russian-Ukrainian war has revealed new approaches and strategies that the European Union has been forced to apply to ensure its security and maintain its influence in the international arena. The war became a catalyst for revising the EU's established security mechanisms and influenced the development of the Union's strategic autonomy. One of the EU's key achievements was the imposition of strong sanctions against Russia, including energy restrictions and financial measures that had far-reaching consequences for the Russian economy. This demonstrates the EU's ability to use its economic weight as an instrument of political pressure, which is an important step towards shaping its new geopolitical role. In the energy sector, the war triggered a fundamental change in the Union's policy. The EU has realised its critical dependence on Russian energy resources, which has become the basis for revising its energy strategy and accelerating the transition to renewable energy sources. This decision reinforces the EU's desire to reduce its dependence on external energy suppliers and ensure long-term energy security. Prospects for further research in this area are related to the study of the impact of sanctions policy on the economies of the EU and Russia, the effectiveness of measures to ensure energy independence, and the analysis of the long-term consequences of strengthening European strategic autonomy. Further research could also focus on the processes of Ukraine's integration into the EU, including the adaptation of Ukrainian legislation to European standards and the development of joint initiatives in the economic and security sectors. In our opinion, studies of strengthening the EU's defence capabilities and the impact on cooperation with NATO and other international security structures and institutions are particularly relevant. This is because this issue affects the international security system, which today, as a result of the Russian-Ukrainian war, is undergoing the greatest transformations since the Second World War.

### References

1. Alcaro, R. (2022). *The EU and the Ukraine war: making sense of the rise of a "geopolitical" union*. Istituto affari internazionali. Vol. 22, no. 12. URL: <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaicom2212.pdf>

2. Costa, O., & Barbe, E. (2023). *A moving target. EU actorness and the Russian invasion of Ukraine*. *Journal of European Integration*, 45(3), P/ 431–446. URL: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2023.2183394>
3. Fiott, D. (2023). *In every crisis an opportunity? European Union integration in defence and the War on Ukraine*. *Journal of European integration*. Vol. 45, no. 3. URL: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2023.2183395>.
4. Hakansson, C. (2023). *The Ukraine war and the emergence of the European commission as a geopolitical actor*. *Journal of European Integration*, 46(1). P. 25–45. URL: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2023.2239998> (date of access: 23.09.2024).
5. Hoop Scheffer, A., Weber, G. (2022). *Russia's war on Ukraine: the eu's geopolitical awakening*. GMFUS. URL: <https://www.gmfus.org/news/russias-war-ukraine-eus-geopolitical-awakening>.
6. Pintsch, A., Rabinovych, M. (2023). *Geopolitical and technocratic: EU international actorness and Russia's war against Ukraine*. *La Fondation Robert Schuman le centre de recherches et d'études sur l'Europe*. URL: <https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/european-issues/657-geopolitical-and-technocratic-eu-international-actorness-and-russia-s-war-against-ukraine>.
7. Raik, K., Blockmans, S., Osypchuk, A., & Suslov, A. (2024). *EU Policy towards Ukraine: Entering Geopolitical Competition over European Order*. *The International Spectator*, 59(1). P. 39–58. URL: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2023.2296576>.
8. Raik, K. et al. (2023). *Tackling the Constraints on EU Foreign Policy towards Ukraine. From Strategic Denial to Geopolitical Awakening*. URL: [https://cdn.ceps.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/joint\\_rp\\_20.pdf](https://cdn.ceps.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/joint_rp_20.pdf)
9. Rabinovych, M. (2023). *Zusyllia YeS iz pobudovy stratehichnoi avtonomii v ekonomichnii sferi ta yikhonii vplyv na vidnosyny Ukraina-YeS [EU efforts to build strategic autonomy in the economic sphere and their impact on EU-Ukraine relations]*. *VoxUkraine*. URL: <https://vox-ukraine.org/zusylyya-yes-iz-pobudovy-strategichnoyi-avtonomiyi-v-ekonomichnij-sferi-ta-yih-nij-vplyv-na-vidnosyny-ukrayina-yes> [in Ukrainian]
10. Youngs, R. (2022). *The awakening of geopolitical Europe? Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. URL: <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2022/07/the-awakening-of-geopolitical-europe?lang=en&center=europe>.