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## European Union in the Face of Russian Aggression against Ukraine (2014–2023)

Unia Europejska wobec agresji Rosji na Ukrainę (2014–2023)

• Abstract •

In 2014, Russia – despite denying it – began the first stage of the conflict in Ukraine by military occupation of a part of Ukraine’s territory. The European Union as an entity that wants to be considered one of the key participants in international relations could not leave this without reaction, especially since the events took place in its immediate neighbourhood and constituted an obvious violation of international law. Therefore, sanctions and restrictions were imposed on Russia hoping that they would trigger some reflection in the Kremlin. Nothing of the sort happened, so in 2022, Russia started the second stage of the conflict intended to seize further Ukrainian territories and place a government in Kiev that would be obedient to Moscow. This time the EU’s reaction was slightly different. This article is an attempt to familiarize the reader with EU activities regarding the Ukrainian conflict.

**Keywords:** European Union; Ukraine; Russia; conflict; sanctions

• Abstrakt •

W roku 2014 Rosja, choć się tego wypiera, rozpoczęła pierwszy etap konfliktu na Ukrainie, zbrojnie zajmując część terytorium Ukrainy. Unia Europejska, jako podmiot, który chce uchodzić za jednego z kluczowych uczestników stosunków międzynarodowych, nie mogła pozostawić tego bez reakcji, tym bardziej że wydarzenia miały miejsce w jej bezpośrednim sąsiedztwie i stanowiły oczywiste naruszenie prawa międzynarodowego. Nałożono więc sankcje i ograniczenia na stronę rosyjską, licząc, że wywołają one pewną refleksję na Kremlu. Nic takiego nie nastąpiło, co więcej, Rosja w 2022 roku rozpoczęła drugi etap konfliktu, obliczony na zagarnięcie kolejnych ukraińskich terytoriów i zamontowanie w Kijowie rządu posłusznego Moskwie. Tym razem reakcja Unii była nieco inna. Niniejszy artykuł jest próbą przybliżenia Czytelnikowi unijnych działań w kwestii konfliktu ukraińskiego.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Unia Europejska; Ukraina; Rosja; konflikt; sankcje

As early as 2003, the European Council pointed out in the European Security Strategy adopted at that time that “Europe has never been so prosperous, so secure, nor so free. The violence of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has given way to a period of peace and stability unprecedented in European history” (Council of the European Union, 2009, p. 27). However, a number of events that took place in the following years clearly rendered this claim outdated. The conflict in Ukraine, which began in 2014, is one such event undermining the earlier international order and necessitating a revision of commonly accepted political concepts. What is more, this conflict has brought a vivid recollection of the Cold War rivalry between the East and the West (Thiele, 2015, p. 2).

## 1. The year 2014

### 1.1. Introductory notes

From the perspective of the European Union (EU), contemporary Ukraine is an exceptional state: it is located in a unique region of the world which is strategically important due to the trade and energy routes connecting it with Central Asia and, second only to Russia, it has the largest territory among European states. It remains one of the key countries in the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and a pillar of the Eastern Partnership (EP). Furthermore, Ukraine’s role as a trading partner of considerable importance to the EU has cemented its standing in Brussels. This recognition, in large part attributable to the advocacy of Central and Eastern European member states, has established Ukraine as an important element within the broader security architecture of the European Union. Meanwhile, Russia views Ukraine, particularly its eastern region together with Belarus and the European part of the Federation, as the core of ethnopolitical Russian-ness (Kamusella, 2018, p. 4), its ally in the ‘near abroad’, and an element of Russia’s exclusive sphere of influence (Barata, 2014, p. 32). Ukraine’s significance to Russia is further underscored within the context of the latter’s integration projects – without Kyiv all such initiatives lose significance and credibility. What is more, Brussels’ efforts to foster closer ties with post-Soviet states are considered by the Kremlin as a potential multi-aspect threat and an attempt to push the Russian influence out of these areas (Huseynov, 2017, p. 586).

The above factors provide a compelling basis for positing a thesis that Ukraine is an area of interest for neighbouring powers and geopolitical blocs, and the fight for influence in its territory has never ceased despite some quieter periods. According to

Ryszard Zięba, the conflict platforms include a) the struggle for political influence, b) the fight for Ukraine's military and strategic alignment, and c) economic rivalry (2014, pp. 24–27; see also: Lakomy, 2016, p. 306; Olzacka, 2017, p. 24). The policies of the West and Russia towards Ukraine are shaped by their respective interests and geopolitical imperatives, although the West emphasises liberal ideas in its narrative (Huseynov, 2017, p. 590).

## 1.2. Actions taken by the European Union

The activities undertaken by Russia (or, according to the official Russian narrative, by separatist forces) towards Ukraine and within Ukraine's borders demanded a response from the European Union. These developments transpired just beyond the EU's eastern border, directly neighbouring EU member states. While this response was initially limited in scope, it appeared in answer to a number of violations of international agreements, including the UN Charter, the Helsinki Final Act (1975), the Charter of Paris for a New Europe (1990), the Budapest Memorandum (1994), and the Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership (1997) (Kruk, 2019). Given these compelling circumstances, the EU found itself unable to sustain its customary policy of non-reaction or mere expression of concern.

The first example of such a reaction was the launching of the European Union Advisory Mission (EUAM) in 2014 (a civilian advisory mission regarding the reform of the justice system and law enforcement agencies in accordance with EU standards). Besides, the decision of the President of the European Commission initiated the activity of the Support Group for Ukraine (SGUA) whose objective was to provide support for Ukrainian authorities in implementing the Association Agreement with the EU, which came into force on September 1, 2017, and included also the agreement on Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), provisionally applied since January 1, 2016. At the same time, a decision was made to bolster the ongoing European Union Border Advisory Mission (EUBAM) on the Ukrainian-Moldovan border by allocating additional staff, equipment, and funding (Ivashchenko-Stadnik et al., 2018, p. 23).

Since 2014, the EU has employed an array of economic instruments and incentives in order to pull Ukraine to its side. Following the Revolution of Dignity, the EU introduced measures such as macroeconomic assistance (e.g., loans) and loosened the fiscal criteria for Ukraine to facilitate local authorities' efforts to introduce costly internal reforms. What is more, since the onset of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, the EU has been the primary contributor of developmental and economic aid to Ukraine. Since 2004, financial resources allocated to Ukraine within the

framework of European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) have nearly doubled; they were also maintained at a similar level in the 2014–2020 financial framework. All indications suggest that in the current financial perspective of 2021–2027, barring any unexpected events, expenditure on help for Ukraine will not be decreased despite Brexit and the resulting reduction in the common budget (Wolczuk & Žeruolis, 2018, p. 30). Moreover, neither the implementation of the Association Agreement nor the financial support provided to Ukraine is contingent upon the resolution of the conflict with Russia (Douhan, 2015, p. 207).

Initially, the peace talks between the parties to the conflict adhered to the Geneva format (Ukraine, Russia, the US, and the EU). In the long run, however, this was impossible to maintain due to organisational reasons. Soon the talks adopted the Normandy Format (Ukraine, Russia, France, and Germany), which has remained the four-party negotiating body with the greatest political importance. Nonetheless, the representatives of France and Germany possessed a relatively modest mandate, exerting limited influence over the leaders of Ukraine and Russia. Also, they did not maintain direct diplomatic channels with representatives of the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk republics.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, the United States, with its interest increasingly drawn to Asia in recent years, had little time and willingness to engage in the events discussed here (Fischer, 2019, p. 6).

However, the crucial reactions of the EU to Russian aggression were of a different nature. Firstly, the EU and its member states have never accepted the violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty. The breach of international law by Russia has been repeatedly emphasised, with accompanying appeals to cease further actions and return to the pre-conflict situation. Secondly, the consequences arising from the actions of Russia and its allies in Ukraine have met with a number of restrictions and sanctions which include: a) diplomatic sanctions, b) targeted sanctions against individual persons and entities, c) restrictions on economic relations with Crimea and Sevastopol, d) economic sanctions, and e) restrictions on economic cooperation.

Regarding the first point, EU-Russia summits have been cancelled indefinitely, and representatives of the EU and member states did not attend the G8 meeting in Sochi (it was replaced by a G7 summit in Brussels, marking a permanent return to this format). Furthermore, the EU blocked Russia's accession negotiations with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and with the

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<sup>1</sup> It was decided then that the leaders of the two largest EU states would be more effective in their actions than EU representatives, particularly as it was also a time of personnel changes in the EU (Litra, Medynskyi, & Zarembo, 2017, p. 62).

International Energy Agency (IEA); the talks on bilateral visa programs were also put on hold. The results of elections in the so-called Luhansk and Donetsk republics were not recognised; nor were the decisions of the new authorities thus elected. Sanctions were also imposed on over 170 individuals and ca. 45 entities, both Russian and Ukrainian, who were suspected of supporting pro-Russian separatist tendencies in Ukraine, contributing to destabilisation or threatening the territorial integrity of Ukraine. Their assets were frozen, and the individuals were forbidden to enter EU territory.<sup>2</sup> With regard to economic cooperation with entities located in Crimea, there was a ban on imports to the EU; foreign or structural investments were significantly restricted; tourist trips were prohibited while a ban was placed on the export of specific goods (weaponry and armaments as well as dual-use goods<sup>3</sup>) and technologies (particularly those related to energy production, raw material sourcing and telecommunication) (Siviş, 2019, p. 65; Challet, 2020, pp. 2–3; Bilban & Jaeger, 2020). As to economic sanctions and restrictions on economic cooperation, in addition to the solutions regarding Crimea and Sevastopol, the access of Russian financial entities to European capital markets was limited; a decision was made to stop the future financing of projects in Russia by the European Investment Bank (EIB), with member states being ordered to coordinate their stance within the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) over applications from Russia; a number of bilateral and multilateral programs of cooperation with Russian entities were revised as well.

As to sanctions previously agreed with the US administration, it has been publicly asserted multiple times that implementation of the Minsk Agreements would result in relaxing restrictions or even lifting them entirely. It is noteworthy that while these sanctions posed initial challenges for the Kremlin, businesses and the Russian populace, their overall impact has remained limited (International Center for Policy Studies, 2019, p. 22). There were even voices in the media claiming that Russia was hurt more at that time by the plummeting global prices of gas and oil. Russia's approach to advancing its interests in the international arena did not change and no reflections on this matter were heard. Paradoxically, the EU sanctions imposed economic burdens on member states, which traditionally relied on exporting goods and services to Russia. This economic strain was further exacerbated by Russian retaliatory sanctions. Consequently, a lingering question has arisen as to whether this

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<sup>2</sup> Surprisingly, each time these sanctions were imposed by the EU for a specific period, and then were renewed. In comparison, the US adopted a different approach, making a decision to impose sanctions without a time limit so that they will be lifted only after a relevant decision is issued.

<sup>3</sup> Goods that can be used both for civilian and military purposes (Regulation (EU) 2021/821 of the European Parliament and the Council, 2021).

situation might inadvertently strengthen the Russian conviction on EU weakness and potentially serve as an incentive for subsequent acts of aggression.

### 1.3. Other steps taken by the EU due to the Russian aggression in Ukraine

The situation in Ukraine led decision-makers in EU member states to realise the gravity of the potential security threats posed by hybrid activities and wars. This concept of hybrid warfare is not new; neither was it created by Russians, nor does it refer solely to their international actions. However, since the 2014 Russo-Ukrainian conflict, this emergent form of threat, termed 'hybrid', and the new type of conflict ('new generation war', 'non-armed conflict') have become a central element of academic discourse, media communications and public debate in the EU (Schmid, 2019, p. 6). Considering the audacity and effectiveness of Russian actions, as well as fearing their effects (and possible spreading of such activities to other parts of Europe), the EU was forced to reassess this matter and undertake preventative measures (Hajduk & Stępniewski, 2016, p. 49; Orzechowski & Jartyś, 2020, p. 76; Rącz, 2015, p. 87; Tyushka, 2019, p. 7; Aleksandrowicz, 2017, p. 170).

As a soft power entity, the EU bears primary responsibility for the political and economic response to Russian aggression in Ukraine. This response has involved the implementation of several strategic initiatives, including the adoption of various sector-specific strategies, the establishment of expert and advisory bodies such as the EU's Hybrid Fusion Cell and the Center of Excellence for Hybrid Threats, as well as the development of mechanisms for information sharing among special services; exercises and simulations conducted in cooperation with NATO, and increased expenditure on cybersecurity (e.g., PESCO projects) (Jonsson, 2020, p. 42). In 2015, the EU took a very important step and introduced the East StratCom Task Force's project entitled *EU versus Disinfo* (Zaliznyak, 2016, p. 35). The goal of the project has been to predict and identify disinformation campaigns run by Russia against the EU, its members and partners, along with crafting responsive measures. Additionally, an *Action Plan against Disinformation* was adopted in 2018.

Other measures taken by EU institutions and member states included the decision to halt the launch of the Nord Stream II pipeline. While the official justifications cited legal and environmental concerns, it is difficult to disregard the impression that political and security considerations also had a significant impact in this matter. Russian activities in Ukraine also indirectly caused an increase in member states' expenditure on defence. A look at the data published by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI, 2021) makes it clear that while the situation remains far from ideal, progress (increased financing) is noticeable. An increasing

number of states have achieved compliance with NATO's stipulation to allocate a minimum 2% of their GDP to defence, while others attempt to expedite their efforts to meet this benchmark, albeit at varying speeds.

#### **1.4. Observations**

Several years after the events of 2014, it is justifiable to conclude that the EU's policy of imposing sanctions on individuals and entities involved in Russia's aggression in Ukraine has not brought the expected outcomes. The sanctions by no means contributed to stopping Russia's imperial aspirations. As demonstrated by the annexation of Crimea, the creation of the Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics and by activities in the Azov Sea, those sanctions had a negligible impact on Russian foreign policy. Russia seemed to ignore them entirely, even responding with retaliatory sanctions against EU states; it also undertook provocative actions (such as flights of military planes and submarine manoeuvres) and attempted to destabilise the EU's economic situation with other tools and operations (such as limiting deliveries of gas to Europe through existing pipelines which elevated market prices, and transporting migrants to the external border of the EU) (Popescu, 2015). These actions were accompanied by excellently planned Russian propaganda, aiming to win hearts and minds (Rogosińska, 2019, p. 180), resulting in quite a significant array of voices arguing for the necessity of accepting the current state of affairs in Ukraine. Still, the very fact of the EU imposing sanctions, enforcing them and sometimes extending them to further individuals and entities emphasised the political will of the European community to not accept violations of international law by Russia.

## **2. The years 2022–2023**

### **2.1. Background**

The preparations for the invasion of Ukraine, in Russian nomenclature referred to as a 'special military operation', were orchestrated by the Russian Federation long before the first assault. Over the course of several months, the aggressor country had mobilised its troops along the Ukrainian border, establishing numerous encampments as part of its strategic deployment. Additionally, a contingent of the Russian army was positioned at the Belarusian-Ukrainian border, with the explicit objective of expeditiously reaching and seizing the Ukrainian capital, Kiev. It is estimated that at the zenith of these preparations, immediately preceding the assault, the

cumulative troop presence at the borders exceeded 120,000 soldiers (Zygiel, 2022). Three days prior to the initiation of hostilities, on February 21, 2022, the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, delivered his inaugural address, in which he declared the official recognition of the independence of the so-called Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR). Concurrently, Russia formalised a military assistance agreement with these entities. The very next day, the leaders of the self-proclaimed republics petitioned the Kremlin for military intervention, alleging Ukrainian crimes (Menkiszak, 2022).

During the night of February 24, 2022, President Vladimir Putin delivered his second address to the Russian people. The focal point of his speech resided in the declaration to commence a 'special military operation' on Ukrainian soil. This operation was framed as a response to perceived threats to the population of the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic, with the objectives to protect them against 'genocide' perpetrated by Ukrainian armed forces and the 'demilitarisation and denazification of Ukraine'. Concurrently with President Putin's address, Russian forces initiated an extensive rocket barrage, targeting military facilities on the Ukrainian side. As dawn broke, armoured units commenced their advance, crossing the Ukrainian border from three distinct directions: southward from the Belarusian border, westward from the separatist-held part of Donbas, and northward from Russian-occupied Crimea (Wilk & Domańska, 2022).

## 2.2. European Union sanctions against the Russian Federation

After the initial impact of the armed incursion had subsided, many Western countries and international organisations, including the European Union, embarked upon initiatives to provide humanitarian and military support to the invaded side, recognising the resilience of the Ukrainian population in the face of adversity. A contrasting strategy was applied towards Russia, wherein a sequence of sanctions was enacted with the explicit objective of eroding the Kremlin's capacity to fund the ongoing conflict.

The first set of sanctions targeting the Russian Federation was officially ratified by the Council of the European Union (hereinafter the Council) on February 23, 2022. These sanctions were promptly implemented in response to Russia's formal recognition of the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic. The scope of restrictive measures was extended to all members of the Russian State Duma,<sup>4</sup> totalling 351 individuals, who had cast their votes in favour of

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<sup>4</sup> The restrictive measures encompass the freezing of assets belonging to sanctioned individuals,



acknowledging the sovereignty of the self-proclaimed republics. These measures encompassed a prohibition on the importation of goods originating from these regions and a ban on the funding of any activities undertaken by the Russian Federation, its government, and its central bank. The objective of these sanctions was to curtail the financial resources at the disposal of President Vladimir Putin's regime, thereby mitigating the risk of an escalation of the conflict and forestalling Russia's pursuit of further aggressive policies (Council of the EU Press Release 151, 2022).

On February 25, 2022, the day after the Russian invasion began, the Council endorsed a second set of sanctions against the Russian Federation, extending in this way the already imposed financial restrictions in order to curtail the transfer of funds from Russia to the European Union. Additionally, the sanctions encompassed a prohibition on the sale of technology essential for the process of oil refining in Russia. The export ban was expanded to include aerospace goods crucial for the modernisation of Russia's strategic weaponry. Moreover, the Council introduced an embargo on exports of semiconductors and other high-tech commodities to Russia. Concomitantly, Russian diplomats were deprived of their privileged status during the application process for entry into the European Union (Council of the EU Press Release 176, 2022).

A third round of sanctions was introduced on February 28, 2022, and was subsequently expanded on March 2 of the same year. The key measure imposed by the European Union was the exclusion of major Russian banks (including Bank Rossiya, VEB and VTB Bank) from the SWIFT financial data exchange system, with the explicit aim of curtailing the financial transactions conducted by these institutions. Simultaneously, the process of freezing Russian financial assets and foreign exchange reserves held within EU member states was initiated. As subsequent sets of sanctions were progressively introduced, the freezing process was extended to encompass further entities. In addition, investment in projects financed by the Russian Direct Investment Fund was prohibited, along with any activity aimed at providing euro-denominated currencies to the Russian side. An embargo was also imposed on the state-owned RT/Russia Today television channel and the Sputnik broadcasting agency (Council of the EU Press Release 209, 2022).

On March 9, 2022, a compliance package mainly directed at Belarus was officially endorsed. Within this package, three Belarusian banks were appended to

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a ban on providing any financial resources to those individuals, and a ban on their entry into the European Union as well as transit through the territories of EU member states (Council Regulation (EU) No 269, 2014).

the roster of financial institutions excluded from the SWIFT system. Furthermore, a comprehensive prohibition was enacted, encompassing all transactions involving the Central Bank of Belarus, in addition to the supply of euro-denominated banknotes within Belarusian territory. With regard to Russia, further restrictive measures focused on exports of commodities related to maritime shipping and radio communications (Council of the EU Press Release 242, 2022).

The fourth set of sanctions, officially ratified on March 15, 2022, banned EU entities from transactions with certain Russian state-owned enterprises and mandated to cease the provision of rating, advisory and auditing services to companies originating from Russia, as well as to individuals of Russian descent. Furthermore, the Council introduced an embargo on trade in iron, steel and luxury goods, while concurrently imposing constraints on investments targeting Russia's energy sector. Targeted sanctions were levied against prominent Kremlin propagandists, lobbyists and Russian oligarchs who had been perpetuating a false narrative about events in Ukraine (Council of the EU Press Release 276, 2022).

The fifth iteration targeting Russia, adopted on April 8, 2022, introduced a range of new economic measures within the European Union's regulatory framework. The Council banned the import of Russian coal and other fossil fuels to the EU, with the embargo taking effect from August 2022. Additionally, access to EU ports by vessels flying the Russian flag was proscribed, as was road transportation within the EU by companies of Russian and Belarusian origin. Exceptions were granted in both instances for products of an agri-food, pharmaceutical, medical, and humanitarian nature. Russian companies were also barred from participating in EU public procurement processes, while existing export restrictions remained in place and new import bans were imposed on items such as wood, fertilisers, and seafood (Council of the EU Press Release 365, 2022).

The sixth set of sanctions was adopted on June 3, 2022, and concerned oil imports from Russia. A transitional period was established, giving EU member states the necessary time to transition towards self-sufficiency in this regard (a six-month timeframe for oil and an eight-month period for petroleum products). An exception was made for pipelines in instances where the energy sector of certain EU member states continued to substantially rely on the supply of the resource. In addition to the oil-related measures, another financial institution, Sberbank, was excluded from the SWIFT system. Simultaneously, the broadcasting of state-owned channels such as Rossiya RTR and Russia 24 within the EU was suspended. Furthermore, the number of targeted sanctions was increased to a total of 1158, encompassing mainly the individuals responsible for Bucha massacre (Council of the EU Press Release 515, 2022).

To ensure the effective functioning of the sanctions, on July 21, 2022, the Council introduced a seventh set of measures aimed at the maintenance and alignment of the previously imposed restrictions. This package imposed an embargo on gold and jewellery imports from Russia. In addition to these measures, the existing ban on the access of Russian vessels to ports was extended to include locks, thus mitigating the possibility of circumventing the sanctions. Furthermore, the sanctions prohibited the acceptance of deposits from legal entities or organisations with a majority stake held by Russians. An important point is that the sanctions did not apply to agricultural, food, medical, and pharmaceutical commodities, a deliberate measure taken to mitigate the risk of a global food crisis (Council of the EU Press Release 710, 2022).

In response to Russia's annexation of four Ukrainian regions, namely Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia, the Council enacted an eighth set of sanctions on October 6, 2022. This package expanded the scope of existing sanctions to encompass all the annexed regions, and introduced bans on the import of steel products and the export of aerospace-related goods. Additionally, a comprehensive prohibition was imposed, preventing EU citizens from holding management positions in Russian-owned companies. The Council also introduced a ban on providing architectural or engineering services to Russia (Council of the EU Press Release 812, 2022).

On December 16, 2022, the Council introduced the ninth set of sanctions, which added to the list of products subjected to an embargo on export from the EU aircraft engines and their components, alongside drone engines since they started to be categorised as dual-use goods. Additionally, a total ban on transactions with the Russian Regional Development Bank was imposed and broadcasting rights were withdrawn from entities such as the propaganda channel Pervyi Kanal. Finally, an investment restriction was imposed on the Russian mining sector (Council of the EU Press Release 1122, 2022).

The first set of sanctions in 2023, the tenth since the start of full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine, was adopted by the EU on February 25, coinciding with the first anniversary of the invasion. These sanctions entailed a further prohibition on exports of advanced technology, which included components used in Russian weapons systems, as well as specialised vehicles and construction products such as cranes. With regard to imports, the EU implemented a ban on asphalt and synthetic rubber from Russia while Russian citizens were precluded from holding managerial positions in EU critical infrastructure entities (Council of the EU Press Release 128, 2023).

On June 23, 2023, the eleventh round of sanctions directed at the Russian regime was formally endorsed. The European Union escalated its efforts to counter

Russia's attempts to circumvent sanctions and implemented measures to reduce the volume of sales of sanctioned goods to third countries. Additionally, the EU extended the prohibition on the transit of goods through Russia, particularly those commodities related to the military, as well as on access to EU ports by vessels engaged in transshipping and in this way circumventing the embargo on oil imports. The exception allowing for oil imports by Germany and Poland through pipelines was also terminated (Council of the EU Press Release 471, 2023).

### **2.2.1. The effects of EU sanctions on Russia**

It would be unrealistic to anticipate that no matter how stringent and resolute European Union sanctions against legal and natural entities in Russia might be, they would yield immediate results. Undoubtedly, these sanctions introduce certain complications for the Kremlin authorities, including impediments such as restricted access to advanced Western electronics, crucial for contemporary armament, and constraints on the lucrative trade of energy resources and agricultural products with Europe. These challenges pose significant obstacles for ongoing operations and the Russian federal budget. However, their full impact on Russia is likely to manifest itself mainly in the long term.

The political consequences for the Kremlin authorities are equally substantial. These include the compelled reduction in the size of Russian diplomatic missions, which disrupts intelligence operations. Diplomatic engagements have been limited to a select group of countries, such as Iran and North Korea. There is also a palpable apprehension of arrest and prosecution at the International Criminal Court. Furthermore, it is evident that Russian allies are increasingly asserting greater autonomy in their actions, as exemplified by Armenia and Kazakhstan. It is pertinent to note China's role in this context. While Beijing has not officially condemned Russian aggression against Ukraine, its actions suggest a strategic approach aimed at fostering continued collaboration, but with a Russia that will be significantly weakened so that China is poised to emerge as the dominant party in the bilateral relationship.

At this point, it appears important for Ukraine and the EU member states to uphold the effective enforcement of sanctions and, when deemed essential, consider the imposition of additional ones. The overarching objective is to tighten the economic stranglehold on the Russian economy, thereby curbing its capacity to sustain the ongoing conflict through financial means. It is also vital to remain vigilant in detecting potential Russian export stratagems that involve the sale of their commodities with the assistance of cooperating third countries and entities

registered within them. An example of such a tactic includes the trade of wood through Kazakhstan.

### **2.3. Energy crisis in the European Union**

One of the challenges confronting the European Union in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine was the energy crisis. As an initial measure, the EU found it necessary to discontinue the utilisation of fossil fuel resources from the Russian Federation. This embargo, as previously noted, was progressively implemented through successive packages of sanctions. The Russian authorities seized upon this situation as an opportunity for propagandistic endeavour. For instance, on September 6, 2022, Gazprom released a video illustrating the purportedly detrimental consequences of the sanctions imposed on Russian energy exports to Europe, portraying ‘severe winter’ conditions within EU member states (Business Insider, 2022).

The European Union implemented a series of measures aimed at minimising the risk of difficulties within the energy market. It reached an agreement to reduce gas consumption by 15 percent during the winter of 2022, concurrently exploring options for diversifying gas sources (Presidency Summary, 2022). This crisis underscored the importance of harmonising energy policy across the EU and establishing effective crisis management mechanisms. In May 2023, the European Commission initiated a process of tendering for international companies to purchase nearly 12 billion cubic meters of natural gas. This procurement was the first collaborative venture within the EU where member states would buy natural gas collectively (Presidency Summary, 2022).

To diminish its reliance on hydrocarbon-based raw material imports, the European Union has significantly increased its investments in renewable energy through projects such as the construction of wind farms and solar power plants, as well as in the advancement of geothermal and biomass technologies (e.g., Council Regulation (EU) 2022/2577 was enacted to facilitate this). The EU has also adopted a range of ad hoc solutions to address energy consumption issues. These measures include an agreed-upon 10% reduction in electricity consumption, achieved through a combination of information campaigns and financial compensation schemes overseen by EU authorities (Łoskot-Strachota, 2022). The emphasis placed on the initiatives undertaken by the European Union underscores the organisation’s proactive response to the challenges posed by the Russian aggression against Ukraine. The EU’s resolute commitment to transitioning towards renewable energy sources aligns with its established objectives. By 2030, the European Union aims to elevate the

contribution of renewable energy sources to 45% of its overall energy mix (European Parliament, 2017).

#### **2.4. The EU's deliveries of arms to Ukraine**

The first decisions regarding the provision of weaponry to Ukraine were initiated by the European Union on February 28, 2022. Concurrent with the enactment of the third package of sanctions targeting Russia, the EU assumed a proactive role in financing the procurement of arms and supplies for the Ukrainian military. This was the first time the EU, operating under the European Peace Facility, decided to cover the expenses of supplying arms and ammunition to Ukraine. The total assistance extended to Ukraine amounted to €500 million (Council of the EU Press Release 189, 2022). This figure was not final and EU representatives reserved the right to increase funding for such support.

In the months following the outbreak of Russian aggression against Ukraine, the European Union took a series of steps aimed at engaging member states in military support for the Ukrainian armed forces. Poland assumed a pivotal role as a hub for the European Union to transfer aid to its neighbour. This assistance encompassed the provision of military equipment, weaponry, and ammunition. Through a series of high-level talks and the formulation of pertinent programmes and stances, EU member states progressively increased their involvement in aiding Ukraine, likewise in terms of material support, e.g., by providing military equipment. A recent example of such support was the decision to transfer F-16 aircraft to Ukraine, a move sanctioned with the consent of the United States and undertaken by the Netherlands and Denmark (Ber & Tarociński, 2023).

Despite the prolonged armed conflict, the European Union maintains its steadfast commitment to addressing the Ukrainian war as a matter of high priority. It is important for the organisation to facilitate a Ukrainian victory and counteract the eastward expansion of Russian influence. The EU's determination to support the Ukrainian cause is evidenced by the decision made on July 20, 2023, to establish a €20 billion fund aimed at bolstering the Ukrainian armed forces. Importantly, this money is contracted for four years, spanning 2024 to 2027, which reflects the EU's long-term commitment to Ukraine and serves as a form of guarantee, ensuring the continued provision of aid to Ukraine (Bielecki, 2023).

### 3. Concluding remarks

Those member states of the European Union that have had the rather dubious experience of grappling with the ‘advantages’ of the Russian sphere of influence for several decades have consistently cautioned, almost since the moment of regaining their full sovereignty, that Russia is a partner whose reliability and trustworthiness is questionable at best. Geographically, the farther from the Russian Federation, the more frequent and pronounced the calls for ‘civilising’ Russia through close economic collaboration had become, even though this primarily revolved around financial gains. The first stage of the conflict in Ukraine in 2014 could have (and indeed should have) served as a wake-up call for the European Union. However, it did not. Apart from some EU-imposed sanctions on Russia, very little changed in practice. Trade continued to flourish, driven by the ease and speed of acquiring Russian raw materials, coupled with their competitive pricing. Consequently, business prospered. Therefore, the surprise experienced by the European elite when Russia escalated the conflict into what it termed a ‘special military operation’ during the second stage was palpable, as was the disbelief that accompanied it. The visits of European leaders to the Kremlin, much to the amusement of the Russian leader, took on an almost symbolic character. It appeared that Western Europe, in some respects, had embraced the Russian narrative about the imminent conclusion of the war and the downfall of the ‘regime in Kiev’. Only a handful of countries, including Poland, the Baltic states, the UK, and the US, believed that this scenario needed to be averted. Their perspective was that failing to do so would allow Russian imperialism to extend its influence. At this point, the words of Peter Neumann on February 16, 2023, resonate profoundly: “[...] if Ukraine depended solely on Europe, it would already be Russian” (2023).

Presently, the situation regarding support for Ukraine has evolved as the European Union and its member states, including France and Germany, are actively extending their assistance in various forms of financial, humanitarian, and military support, including the supply of equipment and ammunition. However, it should be acknowledged that there is room for improvement here. Some countries (such as Hungary) remain opposed to imposing stringent sanctions on Russia, while others (like Switzerland) hinder the provision of equipment and ammunition. Additionally, certain countries delayed NATO expansion through nations such as Sweden (e.g., Turkey and Hungary). Nonetheless, the Kremlin authorities did not anticipate encountering such robust resistance from the Ukrainian nation, nor did they foresee the determination of several states to offer unwavering support, especially during the initial phases of the second stage of the conflict. The unity of the North Atlantic



Alliance has strengthened, with a growing consensus regarding the imperative need for its continued existence and the symbolic identification of Russia as the most immediate and substantial threat to the security, peace and stability of Euro-Atlantic states (NATO, 2022, para. 8). This does not imply, however, a swift or easy relinquishment of Russian energy resources by Europe. The ongoing challenge faced by leaders of countries supporting Ukraine is twofold: first, to maintain the provision of tangible support to the invaded nation, and second, to sustain and reinforce the conviction within their own societies regarding the necessity of continued assistance to Ukraine until its entire territory is liberated from Russian occupation.

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