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RUSSIA'S PRESSURE ON NATO AND ITS RESPONSE DURING THE FULL-SCALE WAR IN UKRAINE**

ABSTRACT

The article concerns the pressure exerted by Russia on NATO during the full-scale war in Ukraine and the Alliance's response to this pressure. This issue is considered in the theoretical perspective of neoclassical realism, which is to explain the attitude of Russia and NATO. The article poses the following main questions: Why did Russia decide to implement a confrontational policy towards NATO and put so much pressure on it? Is the West effectively balancing the threat from Russia and what are the conditions for successfully and long-term countering its pressure? As a part of the research, interviews with American scientists and experts were conducted and strategic documents of the parties were analyzed. The article argues that domestic-level variables created an opportunity for the Kremlin to implement a confrontational policy towards NATO, but it misjudged the structural variables. NATO's ability to resist pressure from Russia effectively and over the long term will be determined by domestic-level variables of member states. The first section of the article includes embedding the analyzed issues in a theoretical framework and formulating research hypotheses. The second and third sections of the article cover, respectively, a discussion of Russia's pressure on NATO and of the Alliance's reaction to the pressure.

Keywords: Russia, NATO, war in Ukraine, Euro-Atlantic security, neoclassical realism

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** The article is the result of research internships completed by the author at the Harriman Institute of Columbia University in New York, USA, and at the Faculty of Political Science and International Relations of Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, Slovakia.

1. INTRODUCTION

As Lord Hastings Ismay, NATO's first Secretary General, said: "NATO's purpose is to keep the Americans in, the Russians out, and the Germans down" (Kitchen, 2010, p. 24). However, after the Cold War, there was an opportunity for all the three countries to be components of the Euro-Atlantic security architecture. The establishment of NATO and the inclusion of West Germany, and then the reunited Germany, gave hope for the success of this plan. Building stability and security in the Euro-Atlantic zone would be much easier with Russia on board as a democratic, prosperous, and stable country ready to collectively solve security problems (Kriendler, 2013). While Germany, France and many other Western European countries believed that the Russian threat might eventually disappear, Great Britain and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe did not share this optimism. In fact, Europe's security remains uncertain and only the United States is able to "keep the old demons at bay" (Lagadec, 2012, p. 15). Former oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky has repeatedly argued that President Vladimir Putin's authoritarian turn will plunge Russia into a "blind alley" and push it into economic and political isolation. He saw Russia's chance for development in its integration with the Euro-Atlantic world, and long-term goal was to be its accession to NATO and the European Union (Neumann, 2017). This kind of liberal and pro-Western perspective has been pushed out of the political debate in Russia, which is dominated by thinking in terms of hard political realism. Putin's Russia adopted a policy of confrontation with the West, the result of which is the collapse of their relations and rapidly growing hostility. To some extent, the West also contributed to dismantle the post-Cold War security architecture in Europe, which made it impossible to build a genuine partnership between the West and Russia (Brhliková, 2022). However, Russia's brutal aggression against its independent neighbor Ukraine and threats against NATO countries revealed that the greatest dishonesty of intentions lay on the side of Putin's Russia.

The aim of the article is to analyze and evaluate the pressure exerted by Russia on NATO and its reaction to this during the war in Ukraine. Although the time frame of the article concerns the period of full-scale war in Ukraine, it was necessary to outline the key issues that preceded it. The article is set in the theoretical perspective of neoclassical realism. On the basis of this theory, a research problem was posed consisting of two research questions: Why did Russia decide to implement a confrontational policy towards NATO and put so much pressure on it? Is the West effectively balancing the threat from Russia and what are the conditions for successfully and long-term countering its pressure? The study involved interviews with scientists and experts from research centers in New York and Washington D.C. The interviews were conducted between April and May 2022. They were individual, non-standardized, unstructured and in-depth. The method of analyzing the content of text sources was used to analyze strategic documents of NATO and Russia.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

Alliance dynamics and theory are based on a realistic concept of the balance of power. The fundamental assumption within the realistic paradigm assumes that states experiencing an external threat form an alliance to ensure survival, security and independence (Walt, 1985). Neoclassical realism is a theory through the lens of which NATO's response to the war in

Ukraine can be explained. This theory was developed in the 1990s mainly by researchers such as Thomas Christensen, Randall Schweller, William C. Wohlforth and Fareed Zakaria. The name of this theoretical trend was coined by Gideon Rose (1998) in an article reviewing the works of the researchers who formed its foundation. The subject of their interest is the behavior of states in the international environment, and the goal is to overcome the weaknesses and limitations resulting from neorealism. As Magdalena Kozub-Karkut (2014) points out, the theory of neoclassical realism is a theory of analysis of a foreign policy of states, not a theory of international politics. It tries to answer the following questions: How do state authorities assess the opportunities and threats arising from the international system? What can happen when they do not agree on their assessment and choice of answers? Who decides which of the possible decisions and responses are worth pursuing? How and to what extent internal factors can influence the choice of foreign policy options? How states use their resources in implementing foreign policy?

The basic assumption of neoclassical realism is that structural variables, including the distribution of power in the international system, are most important, but it is the domestic-level variables that affect the efficiency with which states, as elements of the system, respond and react to stimuli coming from it (Kozub-Karkut, 2014). As G. Rose (1998, p. 146) writes: "systemic pressures must be translated through intervening variables at the unit level." As Jennifer Sterling-Folker (1997, p. 9) states: "Domestic-level variables, such as bureaucracies, interest groups, political parties, and elections are essentially multiple processes occurring simultaneously within states. Each of these processes produces identities, interests, and behaviors that are specific to it, and that only have meaning within its particular context. In other words, they are casual variables that reward and punish certain behaviors within states." The political regime and the degree of control over the society that enable the acquisition of resources for the purposes of conducting foreign policy are of great importance. The leadership of a country with greater social control can more easily reach for national resources, which can potentially lead a more effective foreign policy. Security strategies must be backed by an appropriate level of political and social consensus, because without this, their effective implementation is impossible (Christensen, 1996).

Hypothesis I: Domestic-level variables created an opportunity for the Kremlin to reach for national resources for the implementation of a confrontational foreign policy towards NATO.

Russia has an authoritarian political system in which strategic decisions are made by President Putin, who dominates this system. Political competition has a façade character, and its dynamics are subordinated to the Kremlin. There is a high level of social control in Russia, which has increased significantly since 2022, following the introduction of legislation banning criticism of Russia's foreign policy and the Russian military operation in Ukraine. Moreover, since the early years of the 21st century, the Russian authorities have been implementing elements of the concept of the "enemy at the gates," which is allegedly NATO threatening Russia's security (Monaghan, 2008). The Kremlin has been consolidating Russian society around this common threat for years and has been preparing it to sacrifice itself for the fight against this enemy in order to be able to reach deep national resources.

Neoclassical realists emphasize that the operation of a state on the international arena is a consequence of internally shaped preferences that are derived from its power, ambition, leader personality, ideology, strategic culture and the degree of control over the society. Therefore, the perception of the state's power by decision-makers and the possibility of us-

ing it in foreign policy are of key importance (Czaputowicz, 2012). The options for action also depend on the specificity of the international system and the possibility of influencing its change by using one's own power. William C. Wohlforth (2009, p. 30) argues that: "Unipolarity generates far fewer incentives than either bipolarity or multipolarity for direct great power positional competition over status." There are different preferences of countries, so countries with similar potentials can pursue different foreign policies. In general, however, revisionist states use their power to expand their influence, and *status quo* states act defensively. Revisionist countries are more willing to take risks, including starting a war to improve their relative position. Peacekeeping activities, in turn, maintain the *status quo* favorable to the dominant states.

According to neoclassical realists, states are looking not so much for security as for their own way in the face of uncertainty resulting from the international anarchy emphasized within the realistic paradigm. As noted by F. Zakaria (1998, p. 19): "increased resources give rise to greater ambitions. States are not resource-maximizers but influence-maximizers." The main goal of a state is to maximize the impact resulting from territorial expansion, implemented with the use of increased resources. As Jennifer Sterling-Folker (1997) notes, as the power of the state increases, it tries to control and shape its external environment. It uses its power to influence other countries. Revisionist and *status quo* states maximize influence in different ways.

Hypothesis II: The Russian authorities wrongly assessed the structural variables and their relative power in the international system.

In the years leading up to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia was rebuilding its potential and strengthening its position on the international arena. This concerned the reconstruction of the economy, the development of energy cooperation with the West, and hybrid wars in Georgia, Syria, and Ukraine. However, the Russian authorities had an overly optimistic perception of Russian power, which concerned primarily its military potential, but also its political and economic potential. The full-scale aggression of the Russian army against Ukraine has so far proved ineffective, which is due to both weak command and logistics, as well as low quality military equipment. In the political dimension, the Kremlin was convinced of the far-reaching evolution of the international system from unipolar to bipolar. It believed that the West was divided and in crisis, and the focus of power had shifted to Asia, where Russia has numerous partners, including powerful and also revisionist China. Based on erroneous structural assessments, the Kremlin had very high ambitions and wanted to take advantage of this situation to win the strongest possible position for Russia in the emerging international system by resorting to risky warfare. The aggression against Ukraine was intended to give Russia control over its international environment and push NATO away from its borders. In practice, however, the West showed cohesion, politically and economically dissociated itself from cooperation with Russia, and supported Ukraine. On the other hand, Russia has not received unequivocal political and economic support from its Asian partners.

Reflecting on neoclassical realism, James Sperling (2016) believes that after the Cold War, NATO remains the main mechanism for maintaining stability and security in the international environment. According to him: "The greater the alignment of intra-alliance domestic political processes and perception of threat, the more likely will national preferences be successfully aggregated within an alliance and the lower the risk of defection from it." The alliance coherence is positively correlated with convergent assessments of security defined in terms of threats or interests. NATO will be able to implement collective defense and deter-

rence actions more effectively if: there is greater consensus on the perception of the threat by Allied decision-makers; governments have both a high degree of structural autonomy from the domestic political process and a low level of political vulnerability; and the greater the overlap of security cultures, including the roles within the Alliance (Sperling, 2016).

In the face of a threat, states do not always accurately recognize or effectively respond to this threat. R. Schweller (2004) calls such a situation “underbalancing.” In the theory of underbalancing, he indicates four unit-level variables that may hinder balancing behavior and raise obstacles to resource extraction: elite consensus; government or regime vulnerability; social cohesion; and elite cohesion. Elite consensus and cohesion primarily affect the state’s willingness to balance, whereas government/regime vulnerability and social cohesion determines the ability of decision-makers to obtain resources to carry out this task. For the maintenance of peace, it is important to what extent the status *quo states* are willing to pay for maintaining the existing international system and how strong their alliance is in relation to the revisionist states (Czaputowicz, 2012).

Hypothesis III: NATO showed consistency in responding to an external threat, which was achieved thanks to a similar interpretation of structural variables. The readiness to maintain the adopted policy towards Russia, including the scale of aid to Ukraine, will, however, be determined by domestic-level variables.

The NATO states, determined to react decisively to the Russian aggression against Ukraine, managed to convince the other members of the Alliance that this situation poses a serious threat to the security of the whole of Europe. Therefore, NATO countries have adopted a policy of sanctions against Russia and supporting Ukraine, including militarily. However, Western European countries gradually and rather slowly became convinced of the need for more serious military support for Ukraine. This results from domestic-level variables, including the ambiguous attitude of individual interest groups towards this crisis, and their assessment of the risk of conflict escalation. Further attitude towards Russia, including maintaining military support for Ukraine, will also depend on these factors.

3. DISCUSSION ON RUSSIA'S PRESSURE ON NATO

Russia criticizes the post-Cold War unipolarity of the US/NATO, opting for a multipolar world in which it would have an important place. President Putin laid it out in his famous speech at the Munich Conference on Security Policy in February 2007. He criticized the West’s abuse of power in the international environment, its disdain for the basic principles of international law, interference in the internal affairs of states, and the violation of the strategic balance by the US anti-missile system. He presented himself as a peace dove who advocates dialogue, cooperation and understanding between the East and the West, using the phrases “our Ukrainian friends” and “our American friends” among others (Putin, 2007). In the context of today’s situation in Ukraine and global tensions, this appears to be a manifestation of exceptional insincerity and hypocrisy. If a friendly country does not act in accordance with our will, the answer cannot be the murder of innocent civilians and the threat of nuclear annihilation.

Post-Cold War Russia took the position that no state or bloc of states should be hegemonic. Instead of NATO enlargement, Moscow opted for increasing the role of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which was to determine European security.

In the global dimension, this role was to belong to the United Nations (UN) (Donaldson, Noguee & Nadkarni, 2014). While it sounds reasonable in theory, in practice Putin's Russia has repeatedly shown that its main ways of operating are corruption, intimidation, blackmail and aggression. Examples of this were military aggressions in Georgia and Ukraine, cutting off gas supplies to partners from Central and Eastern Europe, or threats to Poland and the Czech Republic that their accession to the US anti-missile program could make them targets of a Russian missile strike (Braun, 2008). Therefore, leaving Russia's neighbors without real security guarantees, which cannot be provided by inefficient organizations such as the OSCE and the UN, could be catastrophic for them.

Russia asserts the zero-sum logic, which primarily concerns its foreign policy towards the West. It tries to curb the growing influence of the United States in Eastern Europe, as it sees that as a threat. First of all, this concerns the development of NATO, which Moscow interprets as the development of American influence at the expense of Russia. Moscow completely rejected the West's argument that the development of NATO constituted the development of a security space in which Russia was also included through various forms of institutionalized cooperation (Behnke, 2013). Moscow's beliefs were cemented by the West's military operations against its partners, including Serbia, Iraq and Syria, which it strongly opposed (Leichtova, 2016). NATO, as the undisputed winner of the Cold War, did not want to accept Russia's demands for equal partnership, including its right to block the Alliance's activities, and Russia did not agree to take orders from its former enemy. There was growing fear on both sides of a conspiracy to destroy the other (Ponsard, 2007).

Paradoxically, under Vladimir Putin, Russia was recovering largely thanks to economic cooperation with the West. From year to year, Putin's regime more and more clearly emphasized the growth of Russia's power, and thus demanded its rightful place in the international system. At the same time, he identified internal forces that were to cooperate with the West in order to weaken his regime. In response, he adopted an aggressive and confrontational conservative-nationalist and anti-Western discourse, which was supposed to bind society around common ideas (Snetkov, 2015). At the heart of this agenda is anti-Americanism, which has deep roots in Russian society. The Russians criticize the US for its post-Cold War triumphalism and hegemonic international policy. Deepening anti-Americanism goes hand in hand with reviving and crystallizing deep-seated cultural, ideological, political and economic differences between Russia and the West, which jeopardize global stability (Rukavishnikov, 2016).

Moscow used tactics of protesting, delaying and obstructing the NATO enlargement. Not being able to stop this process, it forced the institutionalization of the NATO-Russia relationship to be able to interfere in the activities of the Alliance (Behnke, 2013). In order to prevent the development of NATO on its south-eastern border, President Putin, after strengthening the regime and anti-Western sentiments, reached for the military factor, carrying out military interventions in Georgia in 2008 and in Eastern Ukraine in 2014. The smooth takeover of control over the Russian-dominated provinces of these countries was met with an increase in Russian support for Putin's foreign policy (Chenoy & Kumar, 2017). Numerous experts assume that Russia's military actions are a response to NATO enlargement and interference in its spheres of influence. It is equally probable, however, that without the NATO enlargement Russia would feel even stronger, and thus would try to force its will on its neighbors in an equally decisive way. In such a situation, not only Georgia and Ukraine,

but also other countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which would not have a security guarantee from NATO, could become victims of military aggression by Russia.

Russia perceives international relations through the prism of a realistic concept of competition for spheres of influence. According to the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation of July 2021, global and regional centers of power are forming, which leads to an intensification of competition between them for spheres of influence. As in previous years, the main threat to Russia's national defense is to be the expansion of NATO's military infrastructure on its borders, including the US anti-missile system. The goals of national defense are to be achieved through strategic deterrence, prevention of armed conflicts and comprehensive defense readiness (Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii, 2021). Considering the aggression against Ukraine, the provision on the prevention of armed conflicts is a manifestation of particular cynicism. The strategy also places central importance on the West's alleged use of modern information technology to disrupt Russia's information security by spreading false information (Duclos, 2021). This is another hoax, as Russia is one of the main sources of cyberattacks, mass propaganda, falsification of history and fake news regarding current events (Reczkowski, 2020).

In the period before 2022, Russia had reaffirmed its position as a regional power in Eurasia, the main political actor in the region and security provider. Russia's neighbors in the region were either under its security umbrella or neutral, but partly dependent on Russia, including economic dependence. Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine and its consequences, in the form of poor performance of Russian troops and Western sanctions, may, however, change the perception of Russia as a reliable partner in Eurasia. First of all, this may weaken the ties between the Central Asian countries and Russia. For example, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, contrary to Russia's expectations, declared respect for Ukraine's borders and provided humanitarian assistance to its citizens. The Kazakh authorities also announced that they did not want to be "behind a new Iron Curtain" (Locoman, 2022). As Julie George (2022) notes, Russia's weakness is also exploited in the Caucasus. In the face of uncertain security guarantees for Armenia, Azerbaijan and its supporter Turkey put pressure on it to pursue their interests in the region. Due to the deepening sanctions and the West's attempts to isolate Russia, Moscow is looking for partners among countries that pursue a restrained policy towards the West. In Russia, there is implemented a "turn to the East" policy, which is dominated by closer relations and intensified cooperation with China (Troyakova, 2018). President Putin, however, is trying to activate cooperation in various formats, including the BRICS grouping (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Eurasian Economic Union, with the Caspian states, and with other countries around the world, including Iran, North Korea, and even the Philippines (Chenoy & Kumar, 2017). This is to show that Russia has friends and allies elsewhere, and cooperation with these countries is to compensate for the losses resulting from the isolation of Russia by the West (Graham, 2022) and to enable it to continue its confrontation with the West.

Ukraine is of particular importance in the confrontation between Russia and NATO led by the US. The clash of interests of Russia and the US in Ukraine has been obvious since the Orange Revolution in 2004. Russia promotes the choice of authoritarianism and claims that Ukraine is a part of its "near abroad," and the US wants Ukraine to be a "rising democracy" linked to the West (Kudelia & Kasianov, 2021). The risk of Ukraine joining NATO was a red line for Moscow. This was due to Ukraine's importance in Russia's foreign policy and its su-

perpower ambitions. Even before NATO's 2008 Bucharest Summit, President Putin warned the U.S. Undersecretary for Political Affairs William J. Burns, saying: "No Russian leader could stand idly by in the face of steps toward NATO membership for Ukraine. That would be a hostile act toward Russia [...] We would do all in our power to prevent it" (Burns, 2019). Russia is trying to intimidate the West by making it clear that it is ready to go very far in the fight to maintain its spheres of influence and achieve the strongest possible position for itself in the new international order. Since energy blackmail did not bring the expected results, Russia resorted to limited military interventions in countries aspiring to NATO membership. When that proved insufficient, it launched a full-scale aggression against Ukraine.

Russia's unprovoked, unjustified and barbaric invasion of Ukraine has shattered peace in Europe. Structurally, it has broken the entire security architecture built on the continent over many decades. Among other things, it undermined the international commitments made after the Cold War between the former enemies. Kremlin propagandists refer to NATO and the US as Russia's enemy and the war in Ukraine as a proxy war (Pszczel, 2022). However, due to the support given by the West to Ukraine, Russia does not reap the expected benefits. Therefore, President Putin has weaponized its control over gas supplies by cutting off European countries supporting Ukraine (Huang, 2022). Simultaneously, Kremlin and its propagandists use irresponsible rhetoric, arguing for the possibility and even legitimacy of using nuclear weapons against Ukraine and NATO countries that support it militarily. It does not stop at words, because Russia conducts dangerous activities around the nuclear power plant in Zaporizhia and organizes nuclear exercises. This is to convince NATO of Russia's readiness to use a nuclear arsenal and thus intimidate it (Pszczel, 2022).

4. DISCUSSION ON NATO'S REACTIONS TO RUSSIA'S PRESSURE

Some NATO members, including the USA, already in the first decade of the 21st century criticized the energy blackmail used by Russia as an "energy superpower" against its neighbors, including Ukraine and other countries aspiring to accession to Euro-Atlantic structures (Rutland, 2009, p. 194). In turn, the Russian-Georgian war of 2008 confirmed the countries of NATO's eastern flank and some Western allies that the need to strengthen territorial defense against the threat from Russia was not an abstract concept. During this period, however, NATO focused on countering threats such as international terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and armed conflicts outside the mandated area, implementing a variety of Non-article 5 crisis response operations (Kitchen, 2010). After the aggressions in Crimea and Donbass in 2014, at the NATO summits in Newport in September 2014 and in Warsaw in July 2016, NATO made a number of decisions to strengthen the defense and deterrence on the eastern flank. These include a permanent rotational presence of four battalion-size multinational battle groups in the Baltic states and Poland, strengthening the multinational division stationed in Romania, establishing NATO multinational division headquarters in Poland, updating contingency plans, pre-positioning of military equipment to Europe to facilitate rapid reinforcement, and developing a strategy on hybrid threats (Larsen, 2017). This was complemented by bilateral US activities, including the location of an armored brigade in the region on a permanent rotation basis and a permanent US Army division headquarters in Poland. NATO countries also decided to support Ukraine's security sector, including by the supply of non-lethal equipment, which in the following years was

gradually supplemented with lethal systems. These actions were accompanied by limited economic sanctions imposed on Russia by NATO countries.

Another breakthrough in NATO's response came after Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine in February 2022. President Putin has made a strategic blunder by invading Ukraine. He has misjudged the political mood in Ukrainian society, which did not want to be "liberated" by Russian troops. He has also misjudged the United States, NATO, the European Union and other Western countries, not thinking that they would be able to stand in solidarity against his determined war policy (Fix & Kimmage, 2022). The degree of unity, solidarity, and determination on the part of Western governments and societies was a big surprise, including for Moscow. Contrary to Putin's expectations, NATO has shown that apart from rhetoric, it is able to cooperate collectively (Masuhr & Zogg, 2022). It recognized that the stake of this war was not only Ukraine's sovereignty, but also a clash of conflicting value systems. On 26 March 2022, President Joe Biden tweeted: "We are engaged anew in a great battle for freedom. A battle between democracy and autocracy. Between liberty and repression. This battle will not be won in days or months either. We need to steel ourselves for the long fight ahead" (Joe Biden, 2022). Michael Doyle (2022) believes that the brave defense of Ukrainians against authoritarian Russia has given a real boost to the democratic and liberal international security order, some kind of "a breath of life." It manifests itself in the unprecedented unity of the West. Similarly, Kimberly Morgan (2022) notes that the common sense of threat from Russia and solidary support for Ukraine has led to the revitalization of NATO, which in recent years seemed to be in disrepair. As she states: "Now there's a kind of renewed commitment to making NATO of a vibrant organization. So it really backfires on Vladimir Putin."

The key issue is whether the West will remain united and whether Western Europe will strongly support the US and Central and Eastern Europe in their efforts to help Ukraine. Russia's invasion of Ukraine represents a crushing policy failure for the European Union and its member states. The head of EU foreign and security policy, Josep Borrell, has boldly declared "the awakening of geopolitical Europe," which is to lead to its strategic autonomy and increased global role. It should be noted, however, that the war in Ukraine reinforced the American military lead in European security matters. However, the lack of autonomy does not result from any external limitations, but from the EU's limited military capabilities, strategic calculation and absence of political will (Youngs, 2022). As C. Roberts (2022) notes, this is in the interest of the US that Europe is strong and united, because then it can be reliable and equal American partner. According to her, the fear should not be that Europe is doing too much, but that Europe is doing too little. NATO's European members have pledged to significantly increase defense spending and take more responsibility for their own security, but it remains to be seen whether they will deliver on these promises. Stephen Bidle (2022) notes that in European countries, as for example in Germany, the prolonged conflict may reduce the enthusiasm for increasing spending on armaments and aid for Ukraine, which may result in partial withdrawal from the commitment to take greater responsibility for security. In addition, as Pierre Morcos (2022) points out, democratic backsliding is progressing in some European countries, which may weaken democratic institutions such as the EU and NATO. Countries such as Hungary may be more vulnerable to the influence of external actors, namely Russia and China, and by succumbing to them try to block the collective decisions of these organizations.

In the statement ending the extraordinary NATO summit in Brussels on 24 March 2022, Russia's "brutal war of conquest" Ukraine was condemned, and it was called on to withdraw military forces and to stop violating international law. Russia's actions were recognized as an unprecedented threat to NATO allies, which had to be dealt with as a priority (NATO, 2022a). In the NATO Strategic Concept adopted at the NATO summit in Madrid on 29 June 2022, Russia was defined as: "the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area." It was pointed out that Russia used the methods of "coercion, subversion, aggression and annexation" to establish spheres of influence and used "conventional, cyber and hybrid means" against NATO and its partners, undermining the rules-based international order (NATO, 2022b). NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997 had been considered by NATO member states as definitively abrogated in its entirety by Russia. For this reason, it was decided to further strengthen NATO's defense and deterrence system on the eastern flank. First of all, battle groups were sent to the next four countries, i.e. Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria, and if necessary, the size of the groups was to increase from a battalion to a brigade. It was decided to increase the NATO Response Force to 300,000 troops. At the same time, the United States significantly increased the number of soldiers stationed on a rotational basis on NATO's eastern flank, including in Poland, where it located a permanent US Army Corps HQ to command these forces.

NATO countries, individually and within the European Union and the G7, imposed economic and political sanctions on Russia. They also decided to gradually increase the supply of military equipment to the Ukrainian army and to intensify its training. The dominant role in the military assistance to Ukraine is played by the United States, but the countries of NATO's eastern flank, including Poland, play an important role in exerting pressure on the allies to increase this assistance. The successive tranches of military aid include more and more technologically advanced weapon systems. The decision to provide Ukraine with such military equipment as long-range missile systems, tanks or multi-role aircraft was always preceded by discussions within the Allies, as there was a fear that it could provoke an uncontrolled reaction from Russia. With increasing military support for Ukraine, a discussion has begun in the US and other NATO countries about how much they can increase the supply of military equipment without jeopardizing the readiness of their own military. Substantial and long-term aid requires an increase in the production of armaments and military equipment and ammunition. In the case of the USA, this is particularly important considering that its strategic rival is China, whose military capabilities are growing dynamically (Johnson, 2022). In addition, in individual countries there are voices that fit into the concept of a strategic approach to Russia "don't poke the bear." It boils down to the policy of not antagonizing Russia in order to "not to enrage the beast," which may lead to an uncontrolled escalation of the conflict between Russia and NATO (Cohen, 2022). Moreover, as Richard K. Betts (2022) notes, it is unlikely that Russia could be completely defeated. To end the war, it may be necessary to make concessions to Russia, for example on the issue of Crimea and Donbass or the stationing of NATO troops in CEE. On the other hand, only firmness and strength appeal to Russia, so making concessions can only encourage it to continue breaking international law and putting pressure on its neighbors and NATO. As C. Roberts (2022) states: "The most important thing is to be strong and firm, because the Russians, whoever's in the Kremlin, respect strength, so we should never be weak." As James Goldgeier (2022) states: "the message to Russia should be very clear that just as long as Putin is in power and threatens us all the West has no choice, but to continue to keep in place these punishing economic sanctions and

to try to help the Ukrainians defend themselves as much as possible.” This is to make Russia less capable because we cannot afford to have President Putin threatening Europe, the way he had in the past. Experts from the Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) note that: “an era of sustained confrontation with Russia – or indeed a security environment conditioned by the disorderly collapse of the Putin regime – will require NATO to rethink its long-term strategy, posture, and presence” (Polyakova et al., 2022). As C. Roberts (2022) states, the West must help ease Russia through its decline, so it happens relatively peacefully. It must contain Russia and strengthen collective defense, but at the same time it must interact with Russia and not be provocative towards it, so that its actions do not get out of control.

One of the forms of response to Russia's intimidation of European countries was the submission of applications for accession to NATO by Finland and Sweden on 18 May 2022. Despite some delay due to political objections from Turkey and Hungary, the Allies decided to enlarge it. The accession of these two Nordic countries to NATO is a great success for the collective West and a failure for Russia, because it brings a number of political and military consequences. Russia's border with the Alliance is extended by 1,300 kilometers, and the Baltic Sea becomes NATO's internal basin. The defense and deterrence system in the region will be fully integrated, and the aviation of the new members will be an important asset for the air defense of the Baltic states. These Nordic countries have modern and well-trained armed forces, and their strong national defense capability is tailored towards protecting their territory, which is especially true for Finland. The focus on self-sufficiency, resilience, and the mobilization of the entirety society in the event of war is inscribed in the Finnish concept of “comprehensive security,” in many ways resembling the concept of “total defense” used in Sweden (Kleberg & Black, 2023; more about it in Wither, 2020).

Much more controversial is the issue of Ukraine's potential inclusion in NATO. Despite the support for the idea of incorporating this country into the Alliance as soon as possible, including by Poland, the Baltic states and Great Britain, other members are much more restrained on this issue. They realize that the inclusion of Ukraine during the war would automatically make NATO a party to the war with Russia due to the provisions of Article 5 on collective defense. At the NATO summit in Vilnius on 11–12 July 2023, multifaceted support was announced for Ukraine's aspirations for full membership, including by supporting the reconstruction of Ukraine's defence and security system and achieving interoperability with NATO forces, recognizing that Ukraine's final place would be in NATO. The NATO-Ukraine Council was established to support this process and the standard pre-accession procedure under the Membership Action Plan (MAP) was abandoned (NATO, 2023). Even though it was only a partial success, Ukraine moved closer to NATO.

5. CONCLUSIONS

President Putin has prepared the internal conditions in Russia for conducting a decisive foreign policy with the use of warfare. First of all, he strengthened his regime by subordinating other entities in the state, as well as significantly increased control over society. From the perspective of the theory of neoclassical realism, domestic-level variables offered him a chance to implement a confrontational strategy on the international arena. However, the Kremlin misjudged the balance of power in the international system, including the relationship between the power of Russia and NATO. He overestimated Russia's political and, above all, military

potential. At the same time, he mistakenly believed that NATO was in crisis, internally divided and unable to respond effectively. NATO interpreted Russia's aggressive policy as a vital threat to the security of its members. It collectively responded to the pressure exerted by Russia, including increasing the defense and deterrence potential on the Alliance's eastern flank, providing military equipment to Ukraine, and suspending cooperation with Russia. The scale of this reaction, although significant, is to some extent limited by domestic-level variables accentuated in the theory of neoclassical realism, including incomplete consensus in individual NATO countries around the course adopted towards Russia and the perception of the risk of conflict escalation.

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