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*Russia, Eastern Europe and Central European EU Members after  
the Ukrainian Crisis. Alternative Options of International Behaviors*

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ABSTRACT

The Ukrainian crisis provoked controversial behaviors in Eastern Europe. Russia's annexation of Crimea and its support for the rebel republics revealed specific interests, which focus on regaining control over the area rather than economic profits or political stability, whereas Central European actors target at building a buffer zone including Ukraine. The situation is equally intelligible in terms of all major descriptive paradigms and allows one to draw several scenarios of foreseeable behaviors.

**Key words:** Ukraine, Russia, Eastern Europe, Central Europe, foreign policy, international behavior, interests, realism, liberalism, constructivism

INTRODUCTION

The main goal of the present study is to work out a compact though theoretically conditioned set of possible international behaviors among those actors on the international stage, which are directly interested in the solution of the Ukrainian crisis. We take into account Russia, the major player, Ukraine – the actual object of the drama, Belarus – the potential object of geopolitical troubles, Moldova as an example of a “torn country”, as well as the members of the Visegrad Group. The basic assumption of this article is that the behavioral schemes which are supposed to be withdrawn are conditioned by two main sources: by the set of historically well-rooted patterns and by the present perceptions of national interests. That is why the analysis, even while

focusing on selected facts and data, cannot neglect the sphere of political axiology and historical memory.

The conclusions of our analysis formed into a set of possible scenarios concerning international relations in Eastern Europe after the breakout of the Ukrainian crisis are constructed according to three logical sources of prognostic models. The first source consists in the perceived interests (in their axiological and practical/tactic aspects). Another one – in the recent behaviors, which have been presented since the beginning of the crisis. Last but not least – we also consider the potentials of the main actors, believing that they are the ultimate conditions for any international action which is supposed to be taken.

#### THEORETICAL REMARKS

The general impression after a superficial look at the behavioral patterns of today's foreign policies in Eastern Europe is that in fact all major theoretical schools can be satisfied with the empirical stuff provided by the main actors. The structural realists will be encouraged with some paradoxical behaviors where no principle except for the struggle for balance can be detected. Russia has been a reliable partner for Iran, an anti-American but also a strikingly anti-Israeli player, and, at the same time, Moscow accepted several important contracts and agreements with Jerusalem about a broad set of issues including the sphere of security (note the 2010 purchase of 12 Israeli UAVs and the respective training provided to Russian technicians). The EU agreed to open the perspective of the abolition of the visa regime for Turkish citizens – the so far Muslim Cinderella – counting on Ankara's determination to keep the Near East and Maghreb refugees on its territory. Poland has been presenting continuous support for Muslim Chechens and Crimean Tatars (perceived as the victims of Russian imperialism) on the one hand and imposing the rhetoric of fear of the Islamic inflow and rejecting the refugee quota imposed by the EU decision-making organs on the other.

The recent years have been abundant with international behaviors which are congruent with the model strategies described by Mearsheimer [2001: 160 ff]. The examples are not difficult to enumerate:

- a) Russia, obsessed with the anti-Western idea of multipolarity, balancing the US leadership,
- b) Poland jumping on the US bandwagon [comp. Schweller 1994] with the hope to gain some profits from interventions,
- c) the European NATO members buck-passing the United States trying to avoid military expenditures.

The supporters of offensive realism with Mearsheimer at the helm can be satisfied as well since the arsenal of aggressive strategies has been resorted to since 2013 much more often than in the previous decade. One need only think about Russian

blackmail in the matters of natural gas supplies for Ukraine and imports of Belorussian industrial products. What turned out even more indisputable is the strategy of hybrid war, which led to the annexation of Crimea and to a half-frozen conflict in the East of Ukraine.

The liberal approach has been justified by another series of facts:

- the temporary success of Western soft power in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova,
- the evident influence of the disturbances on the fossil fuel market and of the EU sanctions on Russian international behavior, which became more dialog-oriented,
- the importance of collective action as exemplified in the EU’s verbal solidarity with Ukraine after the dramatic moments of the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of the civil war, in which the pro-Russian insurgents were secretly supported by the neighboring power.

Last but not least, the constructivist position can also be justified by several facts such as:

- the impossibility to explain Russia’s behavior without taking into account its international identity (which in fact is a self-construction),
- the changing position of some actors (with regard to their new self-consciousness like in the case of Hungary, which abandoned its previous typical Central European congruence with the EU’s mainstream and went forward with a much more assertive and individual economic program, in which anti-Russian sentiments are put aside giving way to cooperation with Russia, especially in the area of energy).

To sum up, one can say that the international situation in Eastern Europe after 2013 does not provide clear arguments to support only one explanatory paradigm and leaves the researchers at the crossroads. A decent attempt to clarify the picture of international affairs in the region needs to be preceded by an analysis of the core issue which lies in the perception of interests.

#### THE INTERESTS

Accepting the realistic understanding of *raison d’État* one has to consider both types of interests: the permanent and the temporary ones. The examples of paradoxical behaviors among the European actors may be justified by the nature of the latter, which tend to vary even in shorter periods of time. What seems more important is the structure of permanent interests, especially the “existential” ones, which in some cases are under threat. What has to be considered is the question of the survival of the state, its territorial integrity, national security (including the aspects of the military potential, financial and industrial capabilities, access to food and natural resources, etc.) as well as economic productivity.

It is Ukraine, with no doubt, that can be an exemplary case of a state whose existential interests have been violated: after the protests in late Nov 2013 concerning Viktor Yanukovich's withdrawal from the plans of Ukraine's association with the EU the rebellion known as Euromaidan takes quite a permanent shape and leads to a deep geopolitical change. Ukraine after the following election ostentatiously takes a turn to the West and becomes more nationalistic both in the ethnic and cultural as well as in the strictly "statist" sense of the term. This leads the Kremlin to a military action: Russian special forces known as "Little green men" or "Polite people" take over Crimea, which is the beginning of official incorporation of the province after a referendum where the idea of separation from Ukraine is widely supported.

The annexation is then followed by the creation of two rebellious "people's republics" in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. After massive losses on both sides as well as vast destruction of Donetsk industrial potential some hope appeared after signing the Minsk Protocol (Sep 5, 2014) and the Minsk II agreements (Feb 11, 2015), which in fact were only partly respected in the following months. Russia officially rejected its involvement in East Ukrainian affairs but the declarations were not taken seriously by the rest of the international community because of clear evidence for Russia's support for the rebels [see: the Bellingcat Report 2015].

On the other hand, it is not widely common among the Western political elites as well as in the academic circles to acknowledge Russian interests and to realize how much they are specific, especially if compared to the Ukrainian ones and to the interests of the other neighboring countries. The problem is that the Russian understandings of "national" interests and "state" interests mingle leading to unclear solutions in foreign policy. For not only nationalistic circles Russians are one of the most "divided nations" in the contemporary world. They form powerful ethnic minorities in a number of states such as Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Latvia or Estonia. The post-Soviet area is treated as the main element of the Russian World (Russkiy Mir) – the historical and cultural domain of the Russian nation. By the way, Russkiy Mir is also "accidentally" the name of a state-controlled foundation that deals with promotion of the Russian language and culture all over the world.

This belief cannot be treated only as a fictional creation. In fact a significant part of the population in the enumerated countries belongs to the circle of the Russian culture and speaks mostly Russian as the first language. Most citizens of the Republic of Belarus are Russian speakers rather than Belarusian; Russian dominates in Eastern Ukraine and in Kiev, the capital of the Ukrainian state, in some Baltic cities such as Narva or Daugavpils.

Russia, treating the Russian-speaking population as compatriots defines its interests in the framework of the Old Continent tradition, which consists in the idea of national states. The nation is described here as an ethnic and cultural unity. The national-statist camp treating Russia as a national state paradoxically undermines Russia's neo-imperial status, its position as a Eurasian universal power, whereas Moscow's position about Ukraine and Belarus although not expressed directly boils

down to the belief than in fact there exists only one Orthodox East-Slavic Russian tribe divided into a couple of states and using regional vernaculars rather than separate languages [see e.g.: Putin, “Vesti” 2015].

The only exception to the rule in common Russian perception is possibly the native population of Eastern Galicia, which (bordering to Central European nations) was culturally and mentally deconstructed (latinized) by Poles and Austrians. The other territories belong to the Russian World and Russia can tolerate the division of the nation only on the condition that the East Slavic states conduct policies congruent with the interest of the Russian Federation, the defender and the only political representation of the divided nation. Any kind of acceptance of Belarusian or Ukrainian geopolitical turn to the West is absolutely out of the question. Even the existence of the Ukrainian state, especially in the eyes of the national-patriotic camp exemplified e.g. in the Izborsk Club, is either a nonsense or an anti-Russian project [see: Leont’ev 2010].

Russian perception of the Ukrainian people as a “brotherly” nation cannot be neglected if one tries to understand Moscow’s resistance to any kind of drawing Kiev to the Euro-Atlantic structures. Tsygankov [2015: 287–288] additionally points to the fact that Ukraine itself was highly divided as far as its geopolitical vector is concerned. There is no doubt that Ukrainians perceived their interests in various ways mostly according to the geographical and historical factors. The nationalistic West looked forward to association with the EU and possibly with NATO as the best guarantee of inviolability, whereas the Russian speaking East perceived itself as a part of the post-Soviet world. However, Russia’s determination after the outbreak of Euromaidan brought about resentment on both banks of the Dnieper. As a result of his policy Putin gained some territories and strengthened Russia’s strategic positions but lost the most valuable gem: the hearts of the vast majority of Ukrainians who turned their backs on Moscow. Moreover, in Ukraine a new, pragmatic and independent generation is coming up, trying to build a different state, far from destructive ideology and reasonable in its “physiology” [comp. Olszański 2015].

Russia’s painful hardening policies toward Ukraine made Kiev much more cautious about another area of interests, which is the energy security. Before 2014 deep interdependence was taken for granted. Russian exports depended on Ukraine’s pipeline system; however, Ukrainian dependence was much higher because of the growing diversification of buyers as well as Russian infrastructure investments [comp. Balmaceda 2013]. After the Crimean events Kiev became determined to get rid of any economic dependence on Russia as soon as possible [comp. Dragneva, Wolczuk 2016].

A complex situation as far as the structure of interests is concerned characterizes not only Russia and Ukraine but turns up in some other Central and East European states as well. Even a glance at Moldova, where the geopolitical vector is far from being established, provides a good example of several subjects of interest within one country. The predominantly East Slavic and Russian-speaking population with

its controversial business elite in Transnistria seeks hope in the presence of Russian troops and economic partnership with Moscow (any form of reunification with the rest of Moldova seems hardly possible). The ethnic minorities, especially the Gagauz people are afraid of Moldovan nationalism and look back to a kind of post-Soviet universalism, which is also associated with Russian interference. Contrary to that, the nationally-oriented majority – Moldovans who speak a Romance language which is in fact a dialect of Romanian and are proud of the great past of Stephen the Great times – tend to seek common language with the EU. This resulted in signing the Association Agreement on June 27, 2014. However, the pro-Russian forces, represented not only by the Socialist Party, are still ready to exploit any failure or scandal on the pro-European side.

The perceived international interests within Central European states do not seem to be so much diversified. In Poland, both political camps: the liberals (represented by the Civic Platform and the Modernists) as well as the national conservatives (Law and Justice) would not ruin the consensus about the necessity of reliable buffer states between Central Europe and Russia. That is why Polish diplomatic discourse was very much concerned about the European ambitions of Ukraine and potential analogical shifts in Belarus, Moldova and Georgia.

There was, however, a little bit of controversy about that trend between the members of the Visegrad Group. The most striking pessimism about Ukraine's potential progress in building a reliable internal and foreign policy was expressed by Vaclav Klaus, the former President of the Czech Republic in the years 2003–2013 [see: Klaus 2014]. He represented some of the Czech reluctance to EU's and NATO's offensive realist policy in the region; moreover, he did not believe in the ability of Ukraine to form a reliable statehood and conduct policies beneficial to the neighboring countries.

Hungary seems to be a different case because of the political change which took place after the Fidesz party's coming to power. The previously liberal position turned into obsessive assertiveness and understanding national interests in terms of contradiction to the interests of West European powers with their effective means of economic expansion. This led the Prime Minister, Victor Orbán, to the idea of independent energy policy, which could be based on cooperation with Russian firms. In March 2016, only two member states: Italy and Hungary did not support the "automatic" extension of EU's sanctions. In other words, the Hungarian perception of interests does not exclude close cooperation with Russia after the Ukrainian affairs.

In general, the understanding of interests in the whole discussed area and the question about their harmonization became significantly complex at several levels: the internal one, the sub-regional, and the pan-European in the end. The essence of the problem seems to boil down to the atmosphere of geopolitical struggle, to entire lack of trust caused by the prisoner's dilemma. The East European partners are in fact put into the situation of choice to be either with the EU and NATO or with the Eurasian Economic Community and, possibly, with the post-Soviet military bloc – the CSTO [comp. Snyder 2014, Kaplan 2016].

The responsibility for the growth of tension is put on the shoulders of both geopolitical poles. Some researchers tend to blame the recklessness of the West with John Mearsheimer [2014] as one of the most representative examples. According to that kind of reasoning, the West dangerously trespassed the red line of Russia's zone of influence. Similarly, Sakwa [2015] claims that it is American new Atlantism that leads the EU to the collision with Russia. It is no wonder that this sort of argumentation goes hand in hand with the issues put up by Russian commentators such as Karaganov [2016] who treats the zones of influence as the "natural state of the world": the rejection of this factor leads to painful consequences.

This typically realistic scheme of understanding latest affairs in Eastern Europe, ostentatiously prevailing in theoretical approaches, does not take into account some past events that lie behind Russia's assertiveness. First of all, Moscow had good reasons for deep disappointment after 1991. Russian efforts to bring the economy back to free market and to democratize the autocratic political system did not find any substantial support from the West and from international financial institutions. One has to remember that the first IMF credit tranche was transferred to Moscow in Aug 1992, which was only one of many factors that contributed to the feeling of Russia's democratization and liberalization's bankruptcy [comp. Hardt, Bennett 2015]. This led to the creation of a new platform of authoritarianism after Yeltsin's conflict with the Parliament in 1993, which allowed a group of previous KGB officers to take control of the state and lead it to a kind of regulated democracy, new oligarchy, gradual limitation of human rights and, finally, to the fossilization of the ineffective structure of Russia's economy based on oil and gas exports supported by some advances in weapon industry.

After the negotiated transfer of power to Putin at the end of 1999 Russian foreign policy gradually shifted from the ideas of conditioned cooperation with the US and its European partners in the area of security and of long-term economic partnership to the concept of anti-Western multipolarity. Ukraine's crises – the Orange Revolution of 2004–2005 and the Euromaidan (2013–2014) significantly contributed to Russia's reluctance to the West, which was accused of anti-Russian propaganda and indirect attempts to change the state of balance in the contemporary world order. Even the old idea of common economic space stretching from Vancouver to Vladivostok was completely abandoned. The logic of the sequence of events in Russia's engagement with the West lies in Moscow's consistent unwillingness to join the Western structures. A sincere step toward them would lead to certain interdependence (which is obvious in any kind of international commitment). However, what seems to be even more important than a partial deprivation of "uniqueness" is the perspective of transparency which is completely unacceptable for the Kremlin. Although the pursuit of political independence and allegiance to cultural uniqueness, which actually never occurs in a pure form even in the case of the greatest powers, is valued highly all over the world as a basic issue and is an important element of Russian tradition, the attachment to opacity in political actions goes back to the USSR. Putin's regime,

being rooted in the mentality of secret service procedures, is highly unwilling to accept Ukraine's association with the EU because this opens the perspective of broadening the sphere of clear rules in Eastern Europe both in internal political life and in international relations.

#### THE BEHAVIORS

The behaviors of the main players on the East European stage should not be studied in isolation but rather as functions or at least consequences of behaviors presented in different interactions both at the tactical level and at the level of geopolitical strategies.

The most obvious object of interest is Russia's behavior toward Ukraine. It includes at least two elements: military support for the rebellious republics in the East and economic pressure. The first element cannot be described precisely because of the obviously secret character of the actions. However, the latest reports provide clear evidence that Moscow plays a long game and that even the leaders of the DNR and LNR have little impact on Moscow's decisions [comp. Central Asia Briefing N°79 Kyiv/Brussels, 5 February 2016: 7]. Russian economic policy toward Ukraine is generally concentrated not on long-term profit but on weakening the partner by strengthening Moscow's destructive potential. The main device lies in raising the Ukrainian debt, which went up to \$126 billion in April 2015. About \$25 million of it belongs to Russian banks and \$4 billion to the state. This enables Russia to trigger a default in the neighboring state [comp. Sushentsov 2016].

Another aspect of Russia's economic pressure is the nearly entire dependence of the DNR and LNR budgets on Russian support, which reaches 70%. An additional problem lies in the long-term perspective of the possible incorporation of the rebel republics, which would result in extensive drainage of the Federation's funds: only the pensioners of the area would cost Russia \$1.3 billion a year [comp. Central Asia Briefing N°79 Kyiv/Brussels, 5 February 2016: 5, 7]. That is why Russia did not take decisive steps in Ukraine in the situation of deep financial crisis caused by low oil and gas prices.

Only a very naïve attitude to the clash of the geopolitical crustal plates would allow to suppose that Russia's behavior toward Ukraine can be considered in the East European context only. Since it is a function of Moscow's general attitude to the West one can easily realize a strikingly assertive and even hostile position toward the European Union and its American partners [comp. MacFarlane, Menon 2014]. In other words, Russian reluctance toward the West in terms of the perception of interests resulted in weakening interdependence.

After the annexation of Crimea, the EU, a key actor involved in the Ukrainian crisis, despite its perceived interests (which embrace a profitable partnership with Russia and reliable access to Eurasian resources) became a hostage of its declared

values. This led to previously unexpected sanctions: freezing all negotiations about the visa regimes, blacklisting a group of Russian citizens and firms supposed to be involved in the Crimean and East Ukrainian events (146 Russian individuals and 37 companies), banning all commercial operations of European firms in the territory of Crimea (Apr 2014), restrictions on Russian military and banking sectors (Aug 2014, Sep 2014) [for a broader analysis see: Domańska, Kardaś 2016].

Russian decision-makers responded to EU's sanctions with equivalent countermeasures such as banning EU's meat, dairy and fruit products [Prezident Rossiiskoy Federacii 2014] and (being misled by its own hopes about the perspective of partnership with China and, possibly, with the whole Pacific region) took into deep consideration withdrawal from some "European" projects such as Nord Stream II or South Stream, which found its equivalent in the project of the Turkish Stream [UAWire 2016; Russia Today 2016]. Moreover, Russia's response to sanctions induced its economy to search for ways of import substitution. In the spring of 2015, Russian Ministry for Industry and Trade put up a plan of over 2,000 projects that aimed at constructing independence of deliveries from the EU [comp. Yedovina, Shapovalov 2015].

The practical divorce is becoming obvious despite both parties' empty declarations about the intention to build a free trade area [comp. Romanova 2016: 791]. The highly realistic attitude to economy has taken the shape of some "mercantile realism", where economic securitization became the predominant imperative. The tendency is being realized in recent analyses. Some researchers, like Connolly [2016: 770 ff] explain that Western sanctions generally "gave alibi for harder policies" not only in the European-Russian relations.

The tension between both partners led Russian lawmakers to hardening its internal policy in order to constrain Western influence. One of the most striking symptoms of this trend was the implementation of a new anti-terrorist bill popularly called Yarovaya Law (after one of the leading authors, Irina Yarovaya, Head of the Parliamentary Committee for Security and Anti-Corruption). According to the bill, in justified cases even children over 14 can be jailed. The law requires that Internet and telecom providers store recordings of their customers' data and communications for half a year. Moreover, it also provides for criminal liability for "failure to report a crime" [see: Federal'nyi zakon ot 6 iyulya 2016]. Although tough measures are understandable in the time of terrorist threat the implementation of the law is associated mainly with intentional suppression of civil society [comp. Borshchevskaya 2016].

The set of Russian policies against Western domination comprises more directions. In the Kremlin's geopolitics Ukraine is only a part of a global game, where the struggle for the leading position in Eurasia is conducted by promoting multipolarity in the world of American leadership. According to some researchers and commentators, Russia's engagement with Syria is strictly connected with the "Ukrainian front", whose importance may lose a lot of EU's attention if the US and the European powers give priority to extinguishing the Syrian conflict [comp. Kosmyna 2016; Nye 2016].

On the other hand, Polish foreign policy after the elections in 2015 remained traditionally supportive for Ukraine and reluctant or even more hostile toward the Russian Federation. The main devices for building a modified order in Eastern Europe included some provoking acts like dismantling some Red Army memorials or the refusal to accept the Night Wolves motorcycle club transit to Berlin in 2015 and 2016. Polish information policy aimed at preventing foreign capitals from moving toward Russia and to keep them rather within the area of Central Europe. Since Poland's diplomatic events focused on the old idea of constructing a solid bloc of Central European states to prevent any extension of Russian influence in Eastern Europe and resist to EU core states' economic dictatorial, Polish diplomatic offensive turned to the area of the Adriatic, Baltic and Black Sea states. A good example of this tendency was President Andrzej Duda's visit in Sofia in April 2016, where pro-Russian sentiments had still been significant for a couple of years in spite of Bulgaria's accession to the EU. Poland consistently opposed all European projects, which in any way could build bridges between the EU and Russia, especially the Nord Stream II pipeline. This kind of behavior is only a new incarnation of traditional containment policy toward Russia, which has been conducted since the collapse of communism [comp. Bielański 2015: 73 ff].

Ukraine's policy continued to be consistently anti-Russian, visibly open to Baltic and Central European experience, which resulted in a number of transfers of important foreign politicians (such as Mikheil Saakashvili, Aivaras Abromavičius, Leszek Balcerowicz) to the group of officials and advisors. However, what seems more important is the growing level of independence in the area of economy, especially in the energy sector. Whereas before 2014 Kyiv took limited steps to diminish the dependence in trade and energy on Russia, the situation changed in the following years. The contrast between the previous Kremlin's proposal to Yanukovych, which consisted in reducing gas prices from \$ 425 to merely \$ 268 per tcm [see: EDB 2012], and the decision to keep the old price after 2014 forced the Ukrainian leading team to take some steps in order to reach full independence in a foreseeable perspective. The intentions and proceedings of the new policy have been expressed mainly by the Naftohaz leadership [see e.g.: Reuters 2016, Financial Tribune 2016].

Much less consistence characterized Moldova, where the presidency of Nicolae Timofti although officially pro-European actually secured the interests of Russian capital, did not shift the country toward decisive reforms and in the same way toward real implementation of the association with the EU. Another kind of "geopolitics of transition" – the case of Belarus – is conditioned by different motives: the peace initiatives and Lukashenka's positive attitude to the renewal of constructive relationships with the EU is perceived in Minsk as an element of something that could be treated as a specific model of constructing independence in a long run. For the president "It is important to continue the policy aimed at full normalization of relations and at advancing cooperation with the European Union in the context of our national interests. It is necessary to bolster the state sovereignty and independence, security and stability of Belarus" [see: EuroBelarus 2016].

In general, the international behaviors even in Central Europe (actually in the EU in general) and definitely in Eastern Europe although logical from particular perspectives lead to deepening the state of geopolitical instability in the region.

#### POTENTIALS

Contrary to widespread opinions both the Ukrainian and Russian military potentials have been growing steadily since the Crimean events. Ukraine's situation is more complicated because of the significant share of private "armies" and local security structures controlled by oligarchs like in the case of Ihor Kolomoisky's empire in Dnipropetrovsk. An important advantage of the Ukrainian part is the determination to protect the state and the growth of internal solidarity to resist Russian aggression.

Russia presents similar determination consistently building up its potential thanks to extending the military budget in spite of growing financial difficulties. A couple of positions in the 2015 budget were reduced except for the military expenditures, which appeared to be 25.6% higher than in the previous year. The 2016 military budget was only 0.8% higher than in 2015 in the situation of painful reduction of social expenditures [IHS 2015].

The economic and social potential of both countries was under threat after 2013. In Ukraine it was caused by civil war and political chaos, whereas in Russia by the sharp decrease of oil price and the lack of market reforms, which led to the fossilization of state-owned industry and banking. Russian GDP per capita dropped from 24,700 to 23,700 in 2015, the Ukrainian one from 8,800 to 8,000. Contrary to that, Poland was an example of an opposite process: the GDP rose from 24,500 to 25,400 [CIA World Factbook 2016]. This positive tendency was typical of the whole Visegrad Group.

What became another point of interest is the question of Russia's ability to sustain its financial flows in the situation of low oil and gas prices. According to various estimations with William Browder's being not the least possible [see: Ellyatt 2016], even if one estimated Russia's reserves at \$200 billion in the beginning of 2016, there would be little chance to keep the ruble on a reasonable level in the coming years. Moreover, real trouble may start when the reserves are out and the perspective of it does not seem extremely far [comp. Hardt, Bennett 2015]. In such a case Russia will resort either to credits (which make the country dependable) or to unpredictable "extraordinary steps".

The presented outline of perceived interests, behaviors and changing potentials in Eastern and Central Europe helps to understand the essence of the conflict but, on the other hand, it does not provide any solution to the problem of the necessity to harmonize the contradictory perceptions. It may as well be an unsolvable task such as the question of the Temple Hill in Jerusalem. Therefore, we can draw at least four scenarios depending on the unpredictable decisions which could be made by any of the key actors.

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CONCLUSIONS. SCENARIOS OF INTERNATIONAL BEHAVIORAL STRUCTURES IN  
EASTERN EUROPE

Scenario 1, probably the most likely: Some disturbances on the oil and gas market and weapon exports help Russia keep its customary behavior at the same stage. The relatively ineffective but still working economy does not allow to take a conclusive action but helps to sustain the atmosphere of threat within the country. As a consequence Russia sinks even deeper into internal authoritarianism and this paradoxically makes the image of Kiev more acceptable. Ukraine becomes a more important partner of Belarus, which (being more and more afraid of Russian pressure) conducts a distanced policy and plays a game of two partners: Russia (as the “obligatory brother”) and the EU (as the alternative option) [comp. Rettman 2015]. The Kremlin tries to destabilize Ukraine by escalating the conflict in the East and by means of economic pressure [comp. Secrieru 2014]. Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate loses its previous influence in Kiev and other parts of Central Ukraine, whereas the schismatic Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyivan Patriarchate is more and more associated with the role of indigenous religious community.

This scenario finds its justification in Russia’s belief in its own uniqueness and in abandoning the previous belief in unavoidable strategic partnership with the EU [comp. Romanova 2016: 791 ff]. At the behavioral level, Scenario 1 is justified by several factors: on the one hand, by Moscow’s hardening the internal policy by introducing such regulations as the Yarovaya act and on the other – by Belarus-Ukrainian rapprochement. At the level of potentials Russia still remains an important player and in spite of the tendency to lead an ineffective state-controlled line in economy it does not signal any inclination to get back to central planning [comp. Connolly 2016: 770]

Scenario 2: Ukraine’s breakdown. The state is finally forced to decide about the autonomy of the Eastern republics, which causes escalation of demands. A referendum forced by the pro-Russian rebels or by Moscow itself deprives Ukraine of a significant part of its territories. However, Russia’s expansion in the territorial sense makes it unable to embrace the whole Ukraine in the Kremlin’s zone of influence. The rest of Ukraine becomes even more nationalistic and anti-Russian.

This kind of scenario was taken into consideration by various analysts [e.g. Ramicone 2014: 73]. Its possibility is conditioned by Russian belief in the inherent “uselessness” of the Ukrainian state in Eastern Europe at the level of perceived interests, by Moscow’s involvement in East Ukrainian affairs and bolstering the state of unrest in the region at the behavioral level and by the continual growth of Russia’s military potential.

Scenario 3: Russia goes nearly bankrupt, which leads to political disturbances and to a change toward a more democratic, thereby a more nationalistic regime (another variation of such an important political modification boils down to a deep change of elites within the same system). Moscow’s Eurasian ambitions are either abandoned or put off to a later time. A wave of anti-Islamic and anti-Caucasian

sentiments break out, which wakes up separatisms in the Southern borderlands and stimulates terrorist initiatives. The relations with Ukraine become more pragmatic and the tension is weakened. Belarus, lacking Russian support, is induced to seek some democratic solutions and opens its specifically adjusted economy to the requirements of the world market.

Such a scenario, which, frankly speaking, does not seem to be the most likely, finds its justification in the economic interests of the Russian Federation, which are satisfied much better within the Western vector of cooperation. From the behavioral point of view, the scenario sounds likely in the context of the permanent economic crisis, which (because of low oil and gas prices) is signaled in severe reduction of the Reserve Fund. Between Sep 2014 and Aug 2016 the reserves dropped from \$91.72 to \$38.18 billion [Ministry of Finance of the Russian Federation 2016, see also: Ellyatt 2016]. At the level of potentials the data mentioned above seem even more threatening.

Scenario 4: The outbreak of negative reactions. The East of Ukraine bursts into flames. The war turns into slaughter and Moscow decides to engage in the conflict directly “to protect the Russian speaking population and to put an end to genocide”. Because of the obvious difference in potentials, Russian forces take over most of the Ukrainian territory. Moscow becomes completely isolated and most of the UN members refuse to accept Russia as a permanent member of the Security Council. NATO is forced to conduct a policy of radical containment.

The last scenario makes sense if we take into account the fact of Russia’s openly expressed discontent with the geopolitical changes in Eastern Europe and genuine fear of NATO’s enlargement [comp. Karaganov 2016]. Russia’s interests do not allow for any kind of an independent Ukrainian state and Ukraine integrated with the West in any way is generally out of the question. Russia’s behavior since the Crimean events provides evidence that the Kremlin has always preferred *Realpolitik* and is able to take advantage of the partner’s weakness at any moment. However, weakening of a wide range of potentials and strengthening of NATO makes this option slightly less likely than Scenario 1. The real course of events depends mainly on the West’s readiness to accept the challenge and to convince the East European partners as well as other powers to reject the doctrine of spheres of influence as prior to the nation’s right to build its own political future [comp. Snegovaya 2015: 21].

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