FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 16.08.2021 | Nickolay Kapitonenko

Eastern Europe's déjà vu

30 years after the fall of the Soviet Union, Eastern European countries are again becoming hostages of powerful states

Thirty years have passed since the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The dawn of the post-Soviet period and independent states followed, a period far too long for it to be referred to as 'transitional'. Back then, these countries' foreign policy priorities were straightforward and their agendas similar. All the new states sought widespread recognition as well as friendship with other states; they all wanted access to markets and technology; they all believed that the era of rivalry was a thing of the past — and that the time had come for disarmament.

Global processes contributed to this development. The spread of democracy, Russia's willingness to cooperate in the creation of a new world order, reduced risk of military confrontation between the world's superpowers — all this enabled the countries in the region to focus on addressing domestic problems, conducting reforms, and fostering cordial relations with their neighbours.

A dream of democracy

From the very outset, democratic values and processes were perceived and communicated as the path to economic prosperity, peace, and integration into Western institutions, especially the EU and NATO.

However, it all turned out to be a lot more complicated. Over the last thirty years, only a small number of individual countries managed to cling on to their membership in the group of flawed democracies for a short period of time, according to the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index.

Local successes in Ukraine and Moldova were accompanied by the steady slide into authoritarianism in Azerbaijan and Belarus. There is not a single country in the EU's Eastern Partnership with sustained, irreversible democratic development. As of 2020, Ukraine and Moldova

were in 79th and 80th position of the Economist's global ranking, respectively, while Armenia and Georgia occupied 89th and 91st position. These four countries are classified as hybrid regimes where, because of poverty, it is relatively difficult to uphold democratic institutions. The Democracy Index puts Azerbaijan and Belarus, which are autocracies, even further down the list in 146th and 148th position, respectively. Russia is, incidentally, also classified as an authoritarian regime, a fact which has a significant impact on security in the region as a whole.

Confrontation has always existed, even during the period of Russia's rapprochement with the West in the 1990s.

So what does this chronic democratic deficit mean for foreign policy? First, it is highly likely that it will block access to NATO and EU membership: democratic values are essential for both organisations, and not just as catchwords but as functioning institutions. Second, a weak democracy creates internal instability, as we have seen from multiple revolutions and uprisings in the Eastern Partnership countries. Third, there is no democratic peace (democratic states rarely go to war against each other), and this goes hand in hand with a lack of trust between the different states. This democratic deficit has significantly reduced the potential for constructive diplomacy, especially when it comes to resolving 'frozen' conflicts.

Redefining geopolitics

Thirty years ago, geopolitics seemed like a thing of the past. Even those who did not share the optimism of Francis Fukuyama about the end of history still believed that the future of international politics would be shaped by globalisation, integration, trade, and common solutions to global problems.

For Eastern Europe, these forecasts turned out to be overly optimistic.

Confrontation has always existed, even during the period of Russia's rapprochement with the West in the 1990s. At that time, it was of a limited, local nature and did not bear the signs of a new Cold War. In fact, it was more of an attempt by Moscow to redefine its influence on the territory of the former superpowers and entrench that position. Even then, the first conflicts emerged and became 'frozen', including the Transnistria War, which provided Russia with more opportunities to influence processes in the former Soviet republics.

But the defining moment for geopolitics was in 2007 at the Munich Security Conference, when Russia, having addressed its own internal problems, presented its position on the international security agenda. This was an ambitious challenge and became the moment of truth for international relations in Eastern Europe. Moscow already demonstrated its willingness to back up its words with resources and actions a year later in 2008 during the Russo-Georgian War. On an even larger scale, Russia once again declared its intention to pursue regional hegemony in 2014 when it annexed Crimea.

If one side raises the stakes, this often results in the others taking similar steps. Over the last seven years, Eastern Europe has returned to the familiar framework of geopolitical confrontation between Russia and the West. The risk for the medium-sized and small countries in the region has increased and opportunities declined. Frozen, partially frozen, and simmering conflicts in Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Donbass, but also the annexation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia from Georgia, turned the region's countries into fragile states, living in a constant fear of escalation. Thirty years ago the future looked very different.

In the 'grey zone'

When it comes to foreign policy rhetoric, in Ukraine for example, we hear a lot about allies, strategic partners, and NATO membership. This can be seen as a distinctive form of compensation: Ukraine has no allies, no prospects of joining NATO in the foreseeable future, and no strategic partnerships of the type envisaged by Kyiv. The situation is similar in other countries, too, with the exception of Belarus and Azerbaijan. But neither an alliance with Russia for the former, nor a partnership with Turkey for the latter can resolve the security problems faced by Minsk and Baku. As a result, all the countries in the region remain in the 'grey zone' of security.

While globally the confrontation between the US and China is becoming increasingly ingrained, the foreign policy of the Eastern Partnership countries is becoming less and less independent.

Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine want to join the EU and NATO. But the world around them has changed, leaving them no real chance of success. These countries' foreign policy is reminiscent of a tram track, a rut they are stuck in and from which there is virtually no possibility of escape: containment of Russia, the search for allies in the region, and the rhetoric about joining NATO and the EU. In some ways, this is their own choice, and partially, it is imposed on them by external circumstances. Russian revisionism and aggression has

effectively blocked any other strategic alternatives for an indefinite period of time. In these circumstances, can we even refer to independent foreign policy?

In many respects, the case of Belarus is different. Its rapprochement with Russia was a gradual, long-term process, which ultimately still constricted the room for manoeuvre, just under different circumstances. The ineffectiveness of its autocratic model of governance, accompanied by human rights violations and conflict with the West has essentially made Minsk Moscow's hostage. The crisis in 2020 only made the situation worse.

Armenia and Azerbaijan, too, remain hostages to regional processes and the strategies of powerful states, with the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh having recently escalated again. Yerevan's dependence on Moscow and Baku's on Ankara,were probably exaggerated by observers during the war in Karabakh in 2020; but this reliance nevertheless exists and the partially frozen conflict that has continued for decades certainly does nothing to reduce it.

While globally the confrontation between the US and China is becoming increasingly ingrained, the foreign policy of the Eastern Partnership countries is becoming less and less independent. They remain weak and vulnerable – and that makes it relatively easy to manipulate them. Their key foreign policy challenges will be to minimise risks and strengthen the potential for regional cooperation. Perhaps, in the medium term, it is worth looking at their cooperation with the EU through this very prism.



Nickolay Kapitonenko
Kyiv

Nickolay Kapitonenko is an associate professor at the Institute of International Relations at Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv and director of the Centre for International Relations Studies.