Kateryna Zarembo

The EU as a security actor: when postmodernity fails : the case of Russia-Ukraine war

MUZEUM HISTORII POLSKI

Kateryna Zarembo*

THE EU AS A SECURITY ACTOR: WHEN POSTMODERNITY FAILS (THE CASE OF RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR)

UNIA EUROPEJSKA JAKO AKTOR BEZPIECZEŃSTWA: KIEDY POSTMODERNIZM NIE DZIAŁA (NA PRZYKŁADZIE WOJNY ROSYJSKO-UKRAIŃSKIEJ)

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Polityka bezpieczeństwa jest charakteryzowana jako postmodernistyczna, odrzucająca środki militarne w polityce międzynarodowej. Jednak takie podejście zawodzi w przypadku nowoczesnych i niepewnych państw, które są miejscem zamieszkania dla ich wschodnich sąsiadów i które chcą liczyć na UE jako gwarantację bezpieczeństwa. W artykule przedstawiono, że zasada bezpieczeństwa UE ignoruje charakter jej wschodnich sąsiadów, a tym samym nie może być aktorem bezpieczeństwa w regionie. Przypadek rosyjsko-ukraińskiej wojny służy sprawdzeniu tej hipotezy.

Słowa kluczowe: Unia Europejska, postmodernistyczne państwo, modernistyczne państwa, słabe państwa, rosyjsko-ukraińska wojna

Throughout its foreign and security policy, the European Union has been dubbed «civilian power» (Duchêne 1972), «normative power» (Manners 2002) and «soft power» (Nye 2010), celebrating itself as a peace project which promotes peace, security and stability on the European continent by its own example. It took pride in being a unique entity, «turning away from old fashioned power politics and instead drawing upon the wells of international law, norms, rules, cooperation and integration» (Tonra 2009: 2).

It is exactly this approach that the European Union applied to its neighbours. Making a stake on its attractiveness, the EU tried to Europeanize its neghbours and thus «promote stability and prosperity within and beyond the new border of the Union» on the basis of «shared val-

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* National Institute for Strategic Studies, 7-a Pirogov Street, Kijów 01030 Ukraina, e-mail: kateryna.zarembo@gmail.com

ues» (European Commission 2003). In other words, the EU policy towards its neighbours was a security project based on civilian means.

The developments both in the EU Southern and Eastern neighbourhood have proved the EU's approach wrong. The Arab Spring violent protests shook off the security and stability dreams of the EU. Just several years later a security crisis occurred also in the EU's Eastern neighbourhood. In contrast to the Arab Spring which arguably was about domestic unrest in various states, Ukraine's instability was of inter-state and geopolitical character.

Complementing the available corpus of academic critique of the EU security policy (Christou 2014, Hyde-Price 2008, Smith 2014), this article offers a nuanced explanation of the EU security policy shortcomings. We make a claim that the EU and its Eastern neighbours belong to two completely different security perception paradigms. It argues that lacking hard power is not the EU's unique advantage but a strategic oversight which prevents the EU from being a constructive actor not only in the world but even in its own neighbourhood. The case of the Russia-Ukraine war provides empirical evidence for this argument.

Theoretical premises

The article employs two theoretical perspectives. One is the Third World security theory, and the other is the conceptual view of the world laid out by Robert Cooper, a British and European diplomat and author, in his book *The Breaking of Nations. Order and Chaos in the twenty-first century* (Cooper 2004).

Both perspectives make claims about the nature of the states in the contemporary world order.

The central concept of the Third World security theory is «a weak state». There is no single definition of a weak state, but scholars agree on a number of features which are common to them. Barry Buzan, who was one of the first to introduce the analytical category of weak state into scholarly discourse, characterized weak states with weak institutions and lack of the idea of the state, i.e. various groups living in a state do not necessarily associate themselves with the state (Buzan 1983). In other words, weak states are the entities where the state-building process is not finished yet and where institutions are inefficient to deal with various tasks, including security challenges.

Scholars have paid attention to the fact that weak states throughout the world are prone to instability and conflicts. According to a recent study, «inefficient power institutions, and the weak rule of law are 30–

40% more conducive to the emergence of conflict, rather than providing peaceful and secure situations" (Treiber 2013). Moreover, «numerous studies of intervention demonstrate authoritatively that domestic conflicts in weak states seldom remain isolated. Neighboring countries become involved with a regularity that borders on inevitability» (Holsti 1996: 126). Hence, weak states are prone to conflicts, violence and military instability.

The EU Eastern neighbours, namely Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia can be seriously considered as the European weak states. A number of scholars agree on this (Beissinger and Young 2002, Rotberg 2004, Way 2005, D'Anieri 1999, Holsti 1996, Job 1992, Riabchuk 2009, Darchiash-vili and Nodia 2003, Tsygankov 2007, Lytvynenko 2011). This means that their borders and sovereignty can be threatened by both internal (e.g. weak institutions, public unrest) and external (e.g. threats from the neighbouring states) factors, and that the risk of instability is high.

Likewise, the EU Eastern neighbours are not only weak but also modern. In Cooper's terms this means that their security should be understood primarily in realist terms: «this is … a world in which the ultimate guarantor of security is force, … in which … borders can be changed by force». For modern states sovereignty is of vital importance. The order is preserved only if «there is a balance of power or because of the presence of hegemonic states which see an interest in maintaining the status quo» (Cooper 2004: 22). Importantly, Cooper exmployes the term «modern» because it is linked to the «great engine of modernization, the nation state» (ibid.). Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia all are modern states.

According to this classification, the European Union is strong (in that it consists of institutionally strong states) and post-modern.

According to Robert Cooper, the post-modern world the countries are open to each other, reduce rather than accumulate arms and are democracies. «Within the postmodern world there are no security threats in the traditional sense, because its members do not consider invading each other» (Cooper 2004: 39). Thus, the post-modern states reject the war as an inadequate tool of the modern world. In other words, the basis of the international relations in the post-modern world is trust. Thus, the EU security and defense policy can be characterized as «post-national, i.e. it is both de-territorialized and de-nationalized» (Matlary 2009: 23).

The point is that the European Union formulates its security policy based on its liberal security perceptions as a post-modern state and remains oblivious to the realist security paradigm its neighbours are in.

EU-Eastern neighbours security relations

Cooper observes that in reality, all three groups of states coexist and post-modern states have to deal with modern states on the terms which they understand (i.e. force and power). However, it looks like the EU only fulfilled one part of the Cooper's equation. the EU seems to take its security for granted and treat it as universal truth rather than a regional achievement. «The EU has become immune to disturbing truths, and still prefers lovely daydreams over harsh, realist reality» (van Ham 2008: 13).

The EU simply does not believe in war anymore. The British Army General Sir Rupert Smith puts it bluntly «War no longer exists» (Smith 2005: 1). He further explains, «War as battle in the field between men and machinery, war as a massive deciding event in a dispute in international affairs, such a war no longer exists» (ibid.)

The European Union Security Strategy mentions that «[i]n an era of globalisation, distant threats may be as much a concern as those that are near at hand... The first line of defence will be often abroad» (EU Security Strategy 2003). This means that the EU does not perceive invasion as a threat anymore. And, since wars are not waged on the European territory but somewhere far away, the Europeans feel safe.

This feeling of security could not be undermined even by three powerful crises which rocked the world – the Yugoslav dissolution, the Kosovo war and the 9/11 terrist attack, notwithstanding the fact that two of them took place in the EU's immediate neighbourhood. Peter van Ham observed that the European and American reactions to their security situations in 2000-ies were worlds apart: Whereas US President Bush clearly states in 2006 (introducing the US National Security Strategy) «My Fellow Americans, America is at war», the EU's Security Strategy optimistically suggests that «Europe has never been so prosperous, so secure nor so free» (van Ham 2008: 18).

This feeling of security is common both for the general public and for the EU decision-makers. Nick Witney, senior policy fellow at the European Council for Foreign Relations, believes that absence of any direct military threat, together with the intervention fatigue as a post-war legacy, brought about lack of seriousness about defence among the European governments. He observed that instead of seeing armed forces as tools of power and influence rather than of passive «defence», the EU governments had just been cutting their defence budgets and lacking coherent and up-to-date defence strategies (Witney 2013).

Thus, the EU has created a world within itself, in which «the use of force to solve disputes has been made truly unthinkable» (van Ham 2008: 3). This argument is borne out by the European Security Strategy.

The document does not make explicit reference to the «use of force» or «power», but rather «military activities», «robust intervention» and a «price to be paid» (Toje 2005: 552). The fact that the European Security Strategy, adopted back in 2003, is not being revised, speaks for itself. According to Frédéric Bozo, a political science professor at the Sorbonne, a security strategy means power and «this is an issue that most Europeans, with perhaps the exception of Britain and France, do not want to deal with» (Dempsey 2008). As a result, the EU is content with employing post-conflict «soft power» tools, aimed at reconstruction and councelling. In other words, «the use of force in Europe is likely to remain concentrated on crisis management after the fact of the crisis» (Matlary 2009: 71).

Given the nature of its Eastern neughbours, the EU security policy can be characterized as short-sighted and militarily and psychologically immature. The following arguments support this claim.

Firstly, aspiring to be a global actor, the EU has based its security and defence policy on its own experience alone. As exemplified in Table 1, in 1945–1995 only two regions in the world, former USSR and Western Europe, did not experience an interstate type of intervention. However, this was not taken into account when the EU formed its CFSP/CSDP.

Table 1. Armed conflicts by type and region, 1945–1995

Type	Africa	Middle East	South Asia	Southeast Asia	East Asia	South America	Cent. Am. Carib.	Balkans/ E. Eur	Former USSR	Western Europe
State vs state/ intervention	7	11	4	5	3	1	4	3	-	-

Source: K. Holsti (1996), State, War and the State of War

Secondly, as the history of Western Europe suggests, war was the instument through which nation-states arose. «The centrality of war as a state-builder and identity congealer is not only a political phenomenon with a long history; it remains lurking in the nature of Europe's postmodern society» (van Ham 2008: 24). Mark Berger and Heloise Weber observe that «[t]he modern state, then the modern nation-state as it emerged out of centuries of warfare in Europe was by the early decades of the 20th century «an offspring of the total warfare of the industrial age» (Berger, Weber 2011: 5). Given that the Eastern neighbours belong to modern states, war could be considered as a probable development in this part of the world.

Thirdly, the EU seems to be aware of what is at stake in the European neighbourhood. Summarized by George Christou, the EU concerns regarding its Eastern neighbourhood are as follows:

a) recurring political instability and economic crisis caused by weak governance;
b) transnational criminal activity, terrorism, corruption and illegal immigration towards the EU;
c) frozen and «unfrozen» conflicts which are source of potential violence;
d) Russia claiming its sphere of influence in the EU's Eastern neighbourhood (Christou 2014: 77).

The last point merits special attention here. Russia is a unique and crucial player in the region which perceives the EU Eastern neighbourhood as its unique sphere of influence. According to Volodymyr Yermolenko, «the Kremlin has returned not so much to the Cold War epoch as to the Social Darwinism of the late nineteenth century: people are animals, states are animals too, and states can only survive if they kill or injure other states» (Yermolenko 2015: 73). The Russian security strategy is undoubtedly dominated by force: even after the financial crisis of 2008 Russia continued to keep its defence expenditures at amazingly high level in real terms, making way only to China and the US (World Bank Military Expenditure).

From these perspectives, war in the European neighbourhood must have been an obvious possibility for the EU and military power should have been taken as a necessity, not as an option. This, however, was not the case. The EU security policy towards its neighbours is self-centred in that it concerns security threats *from* and not *to* the neighbours.

Moreover, by de-territorializing and de-nationalizing its security policy, the European Union distanced itself from understanding its neighbours' identities and needs. Its European Neighbourhood Policy adopted a top-down approach, in which Europeanization became a one-way process. «In none of the several hundred [Maastricht] treaty chapters negotiated, was there ever the suggestion that the Union might be socialized into, learn from or otherwise emulate the accession states" (Tonra 2009: 11), let alone neighbours. It is assumed by the EU that the Europeanization will bring security to its neighbours, while their real security needs (and hence, real security threats to the EU) are disregarded by Brussels.

As a result, the EU security policy towards its Eastern neighbours remained distinctly post-modern. It does say «yes» to peaceful and civilian, or «soft», ways of engagement, but it says «no» to the measures which requires military engagement. This strategy does not prove effective when it is about modern states.

The EU's postmodern approach to the Russia-Ukraine war

For over a year of the violent conflict in Ukraine, the European Union has demonstrated itself as a profoundly post-modern actor. In particular, the EU's strategy was a) reactive and b) humanitarian and markedly pacifist. It acknowledges the internal problems Ukraine has (weak institutions) but makes no action regarding the geopolitical threats it faces.

To begin with, the EU has remained loyal to its role of civilian post-conflict manager.

One of the reasons for the Euromaidan, at least initially, was Ukraine's European integration. Ukrainians, as the claim often went, were dying for the European values and hence it seemed natural for the EU to intervene. Ukrainians appealed to the *EU as a hard security actor* in the first place, when their own lives and physical security was at stake.

However, Ukrainians felt that the EU betrayed them. Aptly summarized by Carnegie Europe expert Ulrich Speck, «for many weeks, all the West did was react to events on a day-to-day basis, merely calling on both sides to calm down and talk, and offering to mediate. Neither Brussels nor EU governments came up with a powerful initiative to cut the Gordian knot, and they never sent strong messages to Kiev and Moscow» (Speck 2014). The EU's repeated statement of «deep concern» about the situation in Ukraine has become the object of mockery in the Ukrainian media. During the Euromaidan, despite numerous pleas from the Ukrainian opposition politicians and citizens to put pressure on Ukraine's authorities, the EU also failed to act constructively even after protesters' killings.

Secondly, the EU hardly acknowledges that there is an inter-state war in Ukraine. Its Crisis Management Concept for a civilian CSDP mission in Ukraine, adopted in June 2014 when the war was fully underway, says: «the crisis is in fact unfolding on a number of parallel levels, apart from the continued interference from Russia it is the product of a deeply dysfunctional and corrupt domestic government structure, including the law-enforcement agencies, the country's virtual economic bankruptcy» (Council of the European Union 2014: 3). While it is true that Ukraine's security service is in dire need of reform, institutions alone cannot be to blame for the Russian aggression in Ukraine. The document further uses the term «the Ukraine crisis» rather than the «Russia-Ukraine war», underlining the domestic causes of the situation.

In July 2014 the EU finally established a CSDP mission in Ukraine. It is a European Union Advisory Mission, aimed at assisting Ukraine's security sector reform. The EEAS website quotes Catherine Ashton's words that «The Ukrainian Authorities have embarked on the critical

path of civilian security sector reform and have requested the support of the European Union» (Delegation of the European Union to Ukraine 2014). The EU underlined on many occassions that the mission is civilian only, dealong with civilian security sector reform but not defence sector (Council of the European Union 2014: 15).

From the beginning of the conflict the EU has provided Ukraine with 320 mln Eur of assistance, all aimed at humanitarian means (Delegation of the European Union to Ukraine 2015). Meanwhile, Ukraine's pleas to provide it with lethal arms found strong opposition both in Brussels and in Berlin. The EU decision-makers repeatedly confirm that there is only political solution to the conflict, thus even rhetorically excluding their military engagement.

These actions, or rather inactions, find full support with the European public opinion As mentioned above, distant threats seem to be unimportant for the European public. The Eurobarometer survey, conducted in November 2014, when the Russia-Ukraine war was nine months underway, provides evidence that military conflicts in its neighbourhood are out of the European concern. Terrorism was the least mentioned concern out of thirteen available, and external conflicts were not even included in the list of options to choose from (European Commission 2014).

Defence budgets of various EU states confirm that the European public and decision-makers alike feel quite safe despite a full year of Russia-Ukraine war at their border. While Poland predictably increased its defence budget up to 1.95% of its GDP, Germany, one of the EU "big three", cut it further to 1.09% of its GDP. France's defence budget remained static in nominal terms (data by IHS Jane, defence consultancy).

In spite of over 5000 casualties since April 2014 and several terrorist attacks on civilians in January 2015 , the EU not only failed to impose additional sanctions on Russia but even leaked a paper drafted by Federica Mogherini which called for continued dialogue with Kremlin (Spiegel 2015). The sanctions were later kept in place, however, the leaked paper manifests that the EU Member States did not see this as the only option.

All this has led to strong disillusionment in Ukraine about the European Union (Getmanchuk, Solodkyy 2014). As a result, by lacking both the hard power as such and the will to use it, the EU's soft power was damaged in the neighbourhood. Even more importantly, the EU can exert only limited pressure on Russia, since it does not speak the language Kremlin understands – the language of hard power. Being the important and potentially strong security actor in the region, the EU lacks hard security measures to make the first European war in the XXI century stop.

Conclusion

The EU and its Eastern neighbours belong to different security per-ception paradigms. While the EU is a post-modern actor and perceives its environment as post-modern, the EU's Eastern neighbours exist in the modern security environment, fraught by threats to their territory and sover-eignty. In order to be able to transcend security to its neighbourhood, the EU must comprehend and counter these threats, which are so far beyond its «security mentality». If this does not happen, the EU civilian tools like its soft power and transformative capacity can be seriously damaged by its inability to defend its proclaimed values. As remarked by Cooper, «Foreign policy is about war and peace, and countries that only do peace are missing half of the story (perhaps the most important half)» (Cooper 2004).

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