

# SECURITY CHALLENGES IN EASTERN EUROPE IN 2021: PLAY OF BIG POWERS

PUBLIC EVENTS' SERIES 2021

EESI ON-LINE INTERNATIONAL  
ROUND TABLE DISCUSSION,  
28TH JANUARY 2021

EVENT CONCLUSIONS  
AND SUMMARY OF  
DISCUSSIONS



## **SECURITY CHALLENGES IN EASTERN EUROPE IN 2021: PLAY OF BIG POWERS**

*EESI On-Line International Round Table Discussion, 28<sup>th</sup> January 2021*

*The Round Table became a first public event in 2021 of the EESI's series on security challenges in Eastern Europe. It has opened the discussions and invited for further more in-depth dialogue on issues raised, which the EESI is planning to conduct in 2021 in formats of narrower subject-specific meetings with proper interactive component. These series of public and classified events aim to stimulate debates on the given issues and to assist decision-makers of respective countries to come up with effective policy solutions. Summaries of each of the meetings are presented to the attention of relevant decision-making authorities in Ukraine, Eastern European countries, the USA and the UK.*

On 28<sup>th</sup> January 2021 15 prominent statesmen and women, politicians and diplomats of Ukraine, the USA, the UK, Poland and the Baltic States discussed the issues of implications from the Russian aggression in Ukraine for the whole region of Eastern Europe, the strategies of the USA and the UK for the Eastern European states, and Ukraine in particular, as well as perspectives of the enforced Trans-Atlantic cooperation in Europe during the Administration of the 46th President of the USA J.Biden.

The impressive distinguished audience of the speakers was represented by ANATOLII PINCHUK, Head of Board, EESI; H.E. BARTOSZ CICHOCKI, Polish Ambassador to Ukraine; VASYL BODNAR, Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of Ukraine; DANIEL FRIED, diplomat, former US Ambassador to Poland, former NSC Senior Director for Presidents Clinton and Bush, Atlantic Council; ŽYGIMANTAS PAVILIONIS, Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, Seimas of Lithuania; MYKHAILO GONCHAR, Member of Board, EESI, Founder and President of the Centre for Global Studies “Strategy XXI”, Editor-in-Chief of “Black Sea Security” Journal; HOOSHANG AMIRAHMADI, PhD, Distinguished Service Professor, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, Senior Associate, Oxford University, President of the American-Iranian Council ; DAVID GEHRENBECK, Political Counselor, US Embassy in Ukraine; HANNA HOPKO, Chair of the Board of National Interests Advocacy Network ANTS, Head of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the Ukrainian Parliament (2014-2019), GENERAL WESLEY CLARK, Supreme Allied Commander Europe of NATO (1997-2000), Member of the Strategic Advisory Board of the EESI; IRYNA VERESHCHUK, Deputy-Chair of the Committee on National Security, Defense and Intelligence; Chair of Sub-Committee on National Security (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine); MARKO MIHKELSON, Deputy Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Riigikogu (Parliament of Estonia); LtCol (Ret) GLEN GRANT, Baltic Security Foundation (Latvia), Institute of Statecraft (UK); Dr. ALAN MENDOZA, Executive Director, the Henry Jackson Society (UK) and TIMOTHY LESS, Director on Disintegration in Europe, Centre for Geopolitics, University of Cambridge.

## EVENT CONCLUSIONS AND SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS

### EASTERN EUROPE IN FOCUS OF RUSSIAN TURF WAR

#### **Perspectives for Russia to change its behavior**

It has been a general consensus among the participants that Russia shall continue its aggressive foreign policy against the countries in its immediate neighborhood and further. Russia becomes ever more dangerous with vast range of tools of influence (Marko Mihkelson). Modern Russia is a hostile actor and we should be aware of that (Deputy Minister Bodnar). The said does not mean that Russia could not be different; it is not an evil by its virtue. However, little optimism remains about possible changes for more constructive behavior under the president Vladimir Putin. Putin calculates his tactics by level of resistance he receives (Ambassador Fried). Yet, calculations on internal driving forces for protests in Russia could be misleading; there is no significant protest potential in Russian society and no justifiable signs that this could change in the near future (Deputy Minister Bodnar).

#### **Russian Strategy in the immediate neighborhood**

Russian strategic approaches to the countries along its perimeter always has been to make them weak and vulnerable and put them in internal chaos in order to influence them with financial means and power (General Clark). Russia will try to destabilize Ukraine from within. Putin would like to see Ukraine failing as a state; a strong, democratic Ukraine would become a “bad example” for Russians to follow and would potentially play against autocratic regime of Putin (Ambassador Fried).

#### **Russian malign activity in Black Sea region**

Mykhailo Gonchar has presented a comprehensive overview of security challenges in the Black Sea region linked to hostile activity of Russia in this strategic part of Europe. Namely, he outlined four general operation lines, which could be detected in this regard: (a) *information line*: continued disinformation campaigns against NATO, Ukraine, Georgia, two new NATO's springboards on the background of traditional portraying NATO, the USA and whole Western world as an enemy; (b) *political and diplomatic line*: active campaigns with the aim to induce distrust among NATO partners, namely, along lines of Ankara with Washington, Paris, Berlin, Bucharest, as well as to stir up the conflict in the Eastern Mediterranean; (c) *economic line*: all-out efforts to complete and put into operation the second line of the Turkish stream on the territory of Europe to Baumgarten hub, combined with preventive measures to block an increase in export of Azerbaijan gas to the South European market and to increase Ukraine's dependence from Russian gas and electricity; (d) *military line*: further militarization of the Black Sea and Caspian Sea basins under the propaganda narrative that “ the Black Sea is a sea dominated by NATO, where Russia is the only state that confronts three NATO members” with consecutive reinforcement of the Caspian

fleet and strengthening forces in the North Caucasus and Armenia (motivated by increased Turkish military presence and necessity to protect Russian peacekeeping contingent in the zone of the Nagorno-Karabakh).

In terms of more concrete actions of Russia Mykhailo Gonchar warned that we should expect in 2021 the following:

- Su-57 likely to be delivered to the Russia Aerospace Forces Squadron and based in Krymsk (Krasnodar krai of the RF) or Belbek (the Ukraine's occupied territory of Crimea);
- continued unscheduled combat readiness check of the Southern Military District Forces and the Black Sea Fleet. It is likely that the sea blockade of Ukraine in the north-west sector of the Black Sea could be one of the 2021 combat trainings dedicated to 325<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Russian fleet;
- hidden blockade of the deep-sea Anaklia port project in Georgia in order to direct perspective freight traffic (including the one within the One Belt One Road Chinese project) to its port in Taman, with deepened seabed and increased capacity up to 60 mln tons;
- political and diplomatic efforts to keep Turkey and Bulgaria as its "Trojan horses" in the Black Sea region;
- actions to destabilize the political situation in Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine with the usage of Russian special forces;
- diplomatic activity to evoke revision of Crimean sanctions and de-blocking investment embargo on peninsula by holding Yalta International Economic Forum.

Iryna Vereshchuk, MP, added that with a view to intensified aggressive activity of Russia in the Black Sea region, Ukraine is ready to upgrade its security cooperation in that area with the US, the UK and NATO as a whole.

### **Internal Dynamics in Russia and China and implications for geopolitical balance**

Internal dynamics in Russia and China will be an important factor in 2021 and onwards, which could define their strategies in the region and globally (Ambassador Cichocki, Timothy Less), as well as respective strategies of the USA and Europe (Prof. Amirahmadi). Expected transit of power in Russia and economic expansion of China creates new challenges in the region (Marko Mihkelson). The 46<sup>th</sup> US President J. Biden will be forced to concentrate on China as major external challenge (Prof. Amirahmadi, Timothy Less). In geopolitical terms, Russia will play a role of a swing state in US-China competition; US policy towards Russia will very much depend on assessments of the risks of a closer Russian-China tandem (Timothy Less).

### **Hybrid threats, posed by Russia, and Western responses**

Russia has been extremely instrumental in different forms of disinformation and propaganda. It effectively seizes new opportunities enshrined from different developments. Covid-10 pandemic has been also in the focus of Russia, as it has started to use it, producing respective fake news in western media (Ambassador Fried), as well as exploiting underperformance of Western

governments to combat epidemic, and challenging an issue of effectiveness of western vaccines. Russian penetration is observed everywhere, even in the USA (General Clark).

Yet, the said should not be considered as invitation for the Western democracies to enter this unethical contest of disinformation, as it is against Western philosophy and “we are not experienced in this” (Ambassador Fried). Instead, the Western democracies should respond with all possible legal means and to take advantage of opportunities arising from close cooperation and exchange of respective classified information, an example of which has been set recently by intelligence agencies of the USA, Germany and France. It is worth considering a joint network to counteract those state agencies and institutions that interfere in internal affairs of other states and to work out efficient legal instruments to penalize such activities.

Hybrid wars are not just limited to media campaigns or disinformation. Our adversaries develop such attacks with the full use of legal and illegal instruments, including organized crime, special services etc. and we need to consider the full spectrum of such tools (Ambassador Cichocki). Main challenges of modern hybrid warfare go far beyond issues of traditional “hard security” and defense. Contemporary risks are more diffused and complex. These include economic and commercial considerations of Western countries, while giving preference to Russian or China projects with promising business benefits, which put economic pragmatism far ahead of strategic thinking of arising security risks (General Clark). This phenomenon is well understood by Russia and China themselves, who try to seize it, while working with Europe. Their strategy seems to work well, and this is worrisome (General Clark).

### **Main weakness in our disunity. Calls for more solidarity**

Quite a number of speakers agreed that the adversaries to the values of liberal democracies would try to play with disunity in the established alliances and among like-minded countries and to benefit from it. Therefore, solidarity and consolidation are of crucial importance these days (Ambassador Cichocki, Deputy Minister Bodnar, Marko Mihkelson). The reality, however, is worrying: there is lack of unity among the European countries in their vision on NATO’s role in security architecture in Europe, as well as on strategies to deal with Russia; with some prefer to ease the tension in relations with Russia via more flexible stance on sanctions and closer relations, while other – like the Baltic States – have no illusions about grave perspectives of such tactics. Security of Ukraine is about security of entire Europe. This is an issue of the European solidarity, which we need to restore (Marko Mihkelson).

### **Measures of counteractions are not sufficient. We should turn from simply being reactive into more pro-active mode**

Many participants agreed that Western reaction to hostile foreign policy of Russia is not proportionate and strong enough. There is an urgent need for pro-active approach, which could transform defensive stance into offensive. While doing so, Western countries should use all legal means possible and attack the very sources of such undermining activities, like those received from money laundering operations and other forms of illegal activities, which Russian authorities undertake in the West with the help of transnational organized crime groups. This focus of pro-



active response will be clearly seen in the initial statements of the new US Administration under J.Biden (Ambassador Fried).

### **Support to liberal democracies is the best tool to counter stance Russia and Belarus**

It has been almost a unanimous consent of all the speakers that the best possible instrument, which played well in Cold war times to beat a hostile autocratic competitor, was the promotion of liberal democracy lifestyle with its strong system of institutions, rule of law and transparency. Therefore, the support to democratic values, human rights and freedoms, including media pluralism and self-expression should be strongly considered while dealing with Russia (Ambassador Fried).

The same approach should be applied to Belarus, where the situation is deteriorating. The democratic West could not rest on an assumption that Lukashenko regime will give up. We have to take a sound consolidated position that there should be a new presidential elections conducted under close monitoring of OSCE and to press with this approach (Žygimantas Pavilionis). He also called on Ukraine to stop import of electricity from Belarus (Astravyets NPP or „Chernobyl No2“ constructed by illegitimate Lukashenko regime, Russia and China), because in this way Ukraine directly supports Lukashenko regime against the interest of Belarussians and other nations in the region and contradicts its own synchronization efforts with the West.

Yet, in order to lead by example the Western countries should demonstrate their best of a matured democracy. “It could be hard to demand from Ukraine, Georgia or Moldova a strict adherence to democratic principles once our own house is not in order, which is the case nowadays. When our democracy is weak, we cannot win over an autocratic regime of Russia” (Marko Mihkelson).

All the participants agreed that the best protection for Western societies is to maintain and strengthen a transparent system of institutions based on rule of law. This will make Western democracies stronger and capable to withstand security threats.

## **US IN THE GAME**

### **US foreign policy under President Biden**

There will be many similarities of Biden’s foreign policy to those under the 44th President Barack Obama with even stronger emphasis on allies and democratic-minded friends (Ambassador Fried). In his inauguration speech, Biden clearly indicated that he would immediately begin to restore American traditional alliances with its partners. He understands US leading role on international arena and related tasks to restore this role. However, he will need a support from US partners and allies in Europe (David Gehrenbeck). TransAtlantic partnership will be quickly restored under Biden (General Clark).

Still, in its foreign policy Joseph Biden will be primarily concentrating on the issue of China (Prof. Amirahmadi, Timothy Less). Russia will play a role of, so to say, a swing state, balancing between the US and China in this global contest (Timothy Less).

Despite declarations on necessity to promote values of liberal democracies in the world and to make this a central issue in its foreign policy, the reality will force the 46<sup>th</sup> US President to concentrate on security and economy, given the deteriorating economic situation in the country caused by COVID-19 (Prof Amirahmadi).

With the view to friendly relations of J.Biden with the Israeli Prime-Minister B.Netanyahu, one should expect an intensification of dialogue on Arab-Israel conflict. At the same time, Biden's ambitious plans to make Iran's regime more cooperative on nuclear programs, once US restores its participation in P5+1 nuclear deal with Iran (2015), will be difficult to perform given tough adversarial approach of the current political leadership of Iran (Prof Amirahmadi)..

### **US foreign policy towards Russia**

The character of the first phone call between the US President Biden and the Russian President Putin does not give us grounds to expect drastic US foreign policy changes towards Russia. Instead, it could be a tougher one (Ambassador Fried). Biden grew up in times of a Cold war; he naturally sees Russia as potentially adversarial state (Prof Amirahmadi).

The perspective US Under Secretary of State Victoria Nuland is not going to make concessions to Russia. The said does not mean that she is hostile towards Russia as a whole, but she has no illusions on Putin's regime. Biden foreign policy team is a monolithic one. Anthony Blinken is famous for his tougher stance on Russia in distant 2014, when the US National Security Council was divided over the issue of how to respond to Russia's aggressive actions in Ukraine. He backed the idea of introducing sanctions against Russia and played a significant role in securing a coordinated Western response (together with the EU) of imposing sanctions on Russia (Ambassador Fried).

The Biden Administration is resolute to raise the price for Russia for its hostile actions on international arena. US is aware of all the challenges, which lie down ahead (David Gehrenbeck).

### **US foreign policy towards Ukraine and Eastern Europe as a whole**

No names that are circulating for candidates in the US State Department will disappoint Ukraine and Eastern European countries. This is a solid start. Joseph Biden was clear in his phone talk with Vladimir Putin that the US was ready to cooperate with Russia on issues where they have common interests, but this was not going to happen at the expense of other countries. Russia should not hope for any "dirty deals" with the USA (Ambassador Fried).

Even if it is difficult, for the time being, to provide with more detailed view on approaches and particular policy initiatives of the newly appointed US State Secretary Blinken, in principal terms the US policy towards Ukraine is unambiguous and straightforward: the US will continue its support to territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine. This position is firm and it has a bi-partisan support in the US Congress. The US will remain committed to Ukraine. US never left the region of Eastern Europe from its focus and will continue to pay focused attention to it in the future (David Gehrenbeck).

Ukraine is lucky to have J.Biden as the US President. He is familiar with the country and has many contacts here. Still, it has been many speculations in the US around possible allegations on corruption in Ukraine, and the involvement of Hunter Biden in it. This will force Biden to be more cautious in everything related to Ukraine, as this might create some problems. Therefore, it could be natural to expect that Ukraine might not receive very much attention in the first year of the Biden's presidency. Ukraine also should not expect that Biden would play a simplistic role of a "bad cop" for Russia (Prof. Amirahmadi).

On security side, Biden is well aware of Russian hybrid war in Ukraine. However, Ukraine should understand that, as an American President, Biden sees nothing dangerous in federalism. Therefore, Ukrainian political leadership should consider proper arguments in order to explain to the US President possible dangers to the territorial integrity of Ukraine if we proceed with federalization under given circumstances of explicit Russian aggression (Prof.Amirahmadi).

As a mature political leader, Biden understands well the strategic importance of Ukraine as a big European country. Nevertheless, in order to establish productive ties with the US Ukraine should definitely avoid arguments to beg assistance as a weak state. Real politics is very tough and pragmatic. Ukraine should come up with emphasis of its strategic importance to the US in Europe (Prof.Amirahmadi).

## **RENAISSANCE OF TRANSATLANTICISM**

### **Biden's policy on TransAtlantic cooperation and calls for more sound leadership**

All the participants were confident that TransAtlantic cooperation will receive a sound impetus under Biden. The US President will act energetically and the cooperation will be restored (General Clark). There are a lot of expectations in Europe that NATO need US to lead and to repair those damages to unity that were made by approaches of the 45<sup>th</sup> US President Donald Trump (General Clark, Žygimantas Pavilionis).

President Biden should take the lead in correcting the mistake, which was made in Bucharest in 2008, when Ukraine and Georgia did not receive a clear membership commitment from NATO in a form of a Membership Action Plan (MAP). Biden should call for that openly, while meeting with European leaders during his first trip in a presidential capacity to the EU capitals. Then, it will be turn of the other NATO members to do their job in Europe, working with Germany and others, who cautiously take further committing rapprochement with Ukraine and Georgia. We must offer MAPs to Ukraine and Georgia. Back in 2008, we left Ukraine and Georgia in a “grey zone” and Russia took advantage of that (Žygimantas Pavilionis).

### **NATO capacity**

Some participants have raised their concerns about actual capacity of modern NATO to accomplish their security and defense tasks in times of hybrid warfare.

We must all be aware that NATO-2021 is not similar to NATO under Obama's presidency. There is no strong unity within NATO and it is not capable to perform with the force it used to have (Prof.Amirahmadi). The most exposed is south-eastern flank and the Black sea region with Romania and Bulgaria have the most ineffective infrastructure and logistics (LtCol Glen Grant). It would be true to say that US and NATO invest a lot in security of Eastern Europe, but efficiency of such assistance is highly doubtful. To make best utilization of this assistance, it is recommended to undertake a comprehensive review with the aim to ensure proper accountability alongside better control over outcomes. Otherwise, it will just be a waste of money (LtCol Glen Grant).

Regretfully, one could say that there is no systemic and coherent approach of the US, NATO and EU to the region of Eastern Europe. We could even talk about a certain dysfunctionality of the EU and NATO in the region. Eastern European countries are not prepared to withstand possible



security threats, excepting the relatively effective Baltic States now bolstered by NATO reinforcements, compared to incapable Bulgaria and Romania who have simply not reformed their defense systems (LtCol Glen Grant).

Nowadays NATO survives through many conflicting forces inside the block: France is willing to see lesser American role in security processes in Europe; Germany would love to stay neutral and not to take side with US in its “cold war” with China; Turkey is pretending for regional leadership. Under given conditions it is hardly imaginable that NATO will have a capacity to enlarge and to welcome Western Balkans, Ukraine and Georgia to the club. Despite that, there is no significant danger for NATO’s dissolution due to its more flexible structure compared to the one in EU (Timothy Less).

### **Revised Strategy on NATO membership**

Discussions over the issue enabled to distinguish two policy approaches as per membership prospective for aspirant countries like Ukraine and Georgia.

The representatives of the Baltic States defend the position that only strong political signal of US and other NATO members that the Baltic States would be invited to join the block were successful in holding Russia back from temptation to grab them. Russia received the message that the West had its strategy towards the Baltic States and would defend them. This worked well (Žygimantas Pavilionis).

The West should reconsider its Bucharest decision of 2008. “We have lost this game to Putin, because trusted his deceitful reassurances that security in the region was to be secured best by neutrality of Ukraine and Georgia. We swallowed attacks on Georgia in 2008. We were mild in reaction to the annexation to Crimea. We must correct these mistakes and invite Ukraine and Georgia to NATO with respective MAPs. We must claim that are seriously considering membership of these countries in NATO. Only then, Russia will withdraw its troops from Ukraine” (Žygimantas Pavilionis).

The other approach supported the case of Poland with strong inner transformations and reforms at the beginning of 1990ies, which forced the opponents of NATO enlargement to shut up and gave huge advantage to the US and political card to Poland to convince the others (Ambassador Fried).

The Ukrainian participants supported both approaches. They called for more explicit political support to Ukraine’s membership in NATO in the form of a MAP (Deputy Minister Bodnar, Hanna Hopko, Iryna Vereshchuk) and reassured in irreversibility of the reform track of Ukraine. The latter was even extended by Hanna Hopko, who called for a necessity to develop a sort of a Marshall Plan for Ukraine in order to strengthen Ukraine’s capacity to withstand economic security threats coming from Russia.

### **Existing Security Structures in Europe**

Some of the participants (Timothy Less) were particularly skeptical about the ability of the existing security structures of NATO and EU to address the new threats arising from contemporarily hybrid warfare. The old-fashioned infrastructure could hardly cope with new security challenges and it struggles with internal tensions within the blocks. Particularly

worrisome is the situation in the EU, where there are a number of conflicting vectors (economic - North-South; ideological – East-West), which were particularly noticeable in egoistic behavior of the EU member-states during the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, despite that, the EU will not dissolve, as the exit price proved to be quite high (as in case with the UK), but its political influence will be fading in next decade. In light of this, the Eastern European countries will become ever more exposed to malign activities of Russia (Timoty Less).

From Ukraine's point of view, expressed by Iryna Vereshchuk, US-EU relations in security are of vital importance for security balance in the region. Only integral triangle of US-EU-Ukraine could provide with proper level of longstanding security, contain Russian aggression and ensure perspective return of Ukraine's occupied territories. Therefore, Ukraine welcomes recent adoption of the New TransAtlantic Agenda for Global Change and is looking forward to the forthcoming US-EU Summit with a view for a coordinated US-EU approach to contain Russia.

### **Mixed sub-regional security alliances of new nature**

The discussion highlighted two approaches to this perspective. Some (Timothy Less) defended the inevitability of the EU to experience certain partition and localization into sub-regional cooperation, where Eastern European countries could intensify security cooperation with like-minded partners outside existing alliances (like Ukraine, Moldova, the Balkans). If the US is going to withstand Russia in geopolitical influence in Europe, it could not count to achieve this goal solely with the help of NATO, especially given relative modern underperformance of the latter. In this regard, possible new sub-regional alliances like neo-Intermarium with potential closer involvement of the UK are worth to be considered (Timothy Less).

The others (Marko Mihkelson) argued that instead of inventing new mechanisms all efforts should be directed to strengthen the existing structures (EU and NATO).

### **UK with focus on Eastern Europe**

In the light of the UK's departure from the EU and respective reformulation of Britain's global and regional foreign policy tasks, Dr Alan Mendoza expressed his confidence that the UK would be paying high attention to security processes in Eastern Europe. Here he mentioned that UK cooperation with Ukraine and its assistance to make Ukraine stronger in counterstanding Russia's aggressive foreign policy had been noticeable and consistent since 2014.

As far as the entire region of Eastern Europe is concerned, the UK is likely to be interested in getting involved into further development of The Three Sees initiative, as there are 12 UK allies among the members of the former. He added that The Three Sees (or neo-Intermarium) could be seen as an important strategic instrument to prevent both Russia and China from their penetration into the region.