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Ukraine Crisis Between Russia's Expansion, US Promises, and Missing European Agenda

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Abstract

The dissolution of the Soviet Union reshaped the geopolitical order of Eastern Europe and elevated Ukraine as a strategically pivotal state situated between Russia and the Euro-Atlantic sphere. This paper examines the Ukraine crisis as a manifestation of the re-emergence of classical geopolitics and great-power competition in Europe. It argues that while Russia has pursued a coherent strategic agenda aimed at maintaining influence in its near abroad, the European Union has struggled to formulate a consistent and forward-looking policy toward Ukraine. Drawing on geopolitical theory (Mackinder, Brzezinski) and contemporary international security literature, the study analyzes the evolution of Russia's expansionist approach, U.S. security commitments, and the EU's fragmented strategic response. The paper contends that the absence of a unified European agenda has contributed to prolonged instability, culminating in Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and ongoing conflict through 2025. It concludes that a coherent European strategic framework—combining deterrence, long-term security guarantees, and political integration—is essential to shaping a sustainable European security architecture.

Keywords: Ukraine, Russia, US, Germany, Crimea, European agenda, geopolitics

Introduction

Since gaining independence in 1991, Ukraine has occupied a central position in the geopolitical landscape of Eurasia. Its geographic location, demographic composition, agricultural capacity, and control over critical energy transit corridors have placed it at the crossroads of competing political, cultural, and strategic influences. Early scholarship in geopolitics identified Ukraine as essential to the balance of power on the European continent. Brzezinski (1997), for instance, argued that the preservation of Ukrainian sovereignty is a prerequisite for preventing the re-consolidation of Russian imperial influence in Eurasia. Similarly, Freedman (2023) notes that the contest over Ukraine reflects broader structural tensions within the international order, particularly between territorial revisionism and the norms of sovereignty established after 1945.

Despite its strategic importance, Ukraine has faced enduring internal vulnerabilities. Political polarization, regional identity divides, and recurring economic crises have hindered the development of stable state institutions. The 2004 Orange Revolution and the 2013–2014 Euromaidan movement demonstrated societal demands for democratic reform and alignment with European institutions. However, these developments also intensified competition between Russia and the West over Ukraine's strategic orientation. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its support for separatist militias in Donbas constituted a fundamental breach of European security norms. The situation escalated further when Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, resulting in the largest military conflict in Europe since the Second World War.

The European Union's response to the crisis has revealed both institutional evolution and structural limitations. While the EU has increasingly provided macro-financial assistance, military aid, and diplomatic support, scholars such as Siddi (2022) argue that the Union has struggled to act as a coherent geopolitical actor due to divergent national interests among member states, historical dependencies on Russian energy, and the absence of an integrated security architecture. As a result, the EU has often reacted to events rather than shaping them.

This paper argues that the Ukraine crisis illustrates the return of classical geopolitics in Europe and exposes the European Union's inability to formulate a unified strategic agenda. The study contributes to the scholarly debate by (1) situating the Ukraine conflict within a long-term geopolitical framework, (2) critically assessing the tensions between EU normative power and strategic capacity, and (3)

proposing that European stability depends on the development of a coherent and sustained policy toward Ukraine grounded in strategic rationality.

Review of Theoretical and Empirical Literature

The academic debate on the Ukraine crisis has evolved significantly since 2014, moving from analyses of regional conflict to broader questions of international order, great-power rivalry, and European strategic autonomy. Early interpretations emphasized the reassertion of classical geopolitics in Europe, drawing on Mackinder's (1942) *Heartland Theory* and Brzezinski's (1997) argument that Ukraine's sovereignty is essential to preventing the reconstitution of a Russian empire. Subsequent scholarship has sought to contextualize the crisis within competing frameworks of realism, liberal institutionalism, and constructivism.

From a realist perspective, Mearsheimer (2014; 2023) and Charap & Colton (2017) view the war as a predictable consequence of NATO enlargement and Western encroachment into Russia's perceived sphere of influence. According to this view, Russia's actions are defensive responses to the erosion of its strategic buffer zone. However, liberal and constructivist scholars challenge this deterministic approach. Freedman (2023) and Plokhly (2021) argue that Ukraine's crisis stems from the clash between normative and revisionist orders—between the European Union's values-based diplomacy and Russia's coercive geopolitics.

A second stream of literature focuses on European strategic (in)coherence. Analysts such as Siddi (2022) and Meister (2023) highlight the EU's inability to act as a unified geopolitical actor due to internal divisions and dependency on Russian energy. This argument is reinforced by scholars of European security (Forsberg & Haukkala, 2016; Ikenberry & Deudney, 2023), who stress that the Ukraine conflict exposed the limits of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy and underscored NATO's renewed centrality. The German *Zeitenwende* moment, though symbolically transformative, has yet to deliver full strategic coherence across Europe.

More recent studies explore the regional implications of the Ukraine crisis, particularly for the Western Balkans. Authors such as Reka (2015), Ferati (2013), and Pula (2015) emphasize that the conflict has redefined the balance between adaptation and dependency in small states' foreign policies. The war has not only reactivated security dilemmas but also revived the question of Europe's unfinished integration project. This literature underlines that countries like North Macedonia navigate a

dual challenge: maintaining Euro-Atlantic alignment while avoiding renewed geopolitical subordination.

Finally, an emerging body of scholarship addresses the normative dimension of European geopolitics. Ingebritsen (2006) and Thorhallsson (2018) propose that small states derive influence through participation in multilateral institutions and adherence to shared norms rather than through material power. Applying this framework to the Balkans suggests that post-2022 European security will depend on whether smaller states can transform alignment into agency — moving from formal membership toward genuine co-ownership of collective security.

Taken together, the literature reveals a growing convergence around the view that the Ukraine crisis represents a structural turning point in the post-Cold War order. Yet, gaps remain in understanding how peripheral European states reinterpret their strategic identities in this shifting context. This study contributes to filling that gap by situating North Macedonia and the Western Balkans within the broader reconfiguration of Europe's geopolitical and normative landscape after 2022.

The Status Quo's End

The post-Cold War order in Eastern Europe rested on an implicit equilibrium in which Ukraine maintained formal independence while remaining economically and politically linked to Russia. This “status quo” was sustained through energy interdependence, political influence networks, and Moscow's expectation that Ukraine would not pursue rapid integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions. However, this balance began to erode in the early 2000s as public support for closer ties with Europe grew and successive Ukrainian governments signaled their intention to deepen cooperation with the European Union and NATO.

The turning point came in 2013–2014 with the Euromaidan protests, which emerged in response to President Viktor Yanukovych's decision to suspend the signing of the EU–Ukraine Association Agreement. The demonstrations quickly evolved into a broader demand for democratic accountability and alignment with European political norms. The collapse of Yanukovych's government and the formation of a pro-European leadership in Kyiv challenged Russia's strategic assumptions and triggered a decisive shift in Moscow's policy toward Ukraine.

Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014 marked the end of the post-Cold War geopolitical settlement. The operation demonstrated not only Russia's willingness

to use military force but also the effectiveness of hybrid strategies combining information warfare, intelligence operations, and local proxy mobilization. While the European Union, the United States, and NATO condemned the annexation and imposed sanctions, their responses remained largely reactive and incremental. Scholars such as Charap and Colton (2017) argue that Western actors underestimated both the depth of Russia's geopolitical commitment to maintaining influence in Ukraine and the strategic value Moscow placed on Crimea as a military and symbolic asset.

Moreover, the EU's internal fragmentation weakened its ability to formulate a unified crisis response. Member states differed in their assessments of Russia, their energy dependencies, and their threat perceptions. Germany, for example, continued to emphasize diplomatic engagement, while Poland and the Baltic states advocated stronger deterrence measures. These disagreements revealed structural limits to the European Union's capacity to act as a strategic actor in high-stakes geopolitical crises.

The end of the status quo was therefore not merely a consequence of Russia's actions, but also the product of Europe's inability to anticipate or prevent them. The annexation of Crimea signaled that geopolitical competition in Europe had re-emerged and that long-held assumptions regarding the stability of borders, the durability of international law, and the deterrent power of economic interdependence could no longer be taken for granted. The crisis fundamentally altered the strategic landscape in Europe and set the stage for the more expansive conflict that unfolded in 2022.

Ukraine Hostage to Geopolitics

Ukraine's strategic significance is deeply rooted in its geography, economic resources, and civilizational identity, placing it at the center of a geopolitical contest between Russia and the Euro-Atlantic community. Classical geopolitical theorists identified Ukraine as a decisive territorial and political space in the struggle for influence over Eurasia. Mackinder's Heartland theory posited that control over Eastern Europe—particularly the region between the Baltic and Black Seas—was instrumental to shaping the balance of power on the continent. Brzezinski (1997) later reformulated this logic, asserting that without Ukraine, Russia cannot reconstitute an imperial sphere; with it, Russia regains the capacity to project power deep into Europe and Central Asia.

Following independence, Ukraine attempted to navigate this geopolitical tension through a policy of “multi-vector diplomacy,” balancing relationships with Russia, the European Union, and the United States. However, this approach masked underlying structural vulnerabilities, including dependence on Russian energy supplies, entrenched oligarchic economic interests, and inconsistent political reform. These factors made Ukraine susceptible to external pressure and internal contestation over its geopolitical direction.

The period after 2014 exposed the limits of Ukraine’s strategic autonomy. The annexation of Crimea and the subsequent conflict in the Donbas region constrained Kyiv’s ability to assert full territorial sovereignty, while the presence of Russian military and intelligence networks reinforced Moscow’s leverage. Scholars such as Mearsheimer (2014; 2023) argue that the conflict should be interpreted through the lens of the security dilemma: NATO and EU expansion were perceived by Russia as existential threats, leading Moscow to act decisively to prevent Ukraine’s integration into Western institutions. However, this interpretation has been widely debated, with authors such as Kulyk (2020) and Plokhyy (2021) emphasizing Ukrainian agency and the role of domestic political identity in shaping foreign policy preferences.

Ukraine’s geopolitical position became even more precarious after Russia’s full-scale invasion in 2022. The conflict transformed Ukraine into what Jackson (1990) refers to as a “quasi-sovereign state”: internationally recognized, diplomatically supported, yet lacking full control over its territory. Although Ukraine exercises strong political legitimacy and national cohesion, ongoing war conditions and foreign military dependency limit its strategic autonomy.

At the same time, the war reshaped Ukrainian national identity, consolidating support for European integration and deepening alignment with NATO. What had once been a contested orientation between Eastern and Western identity has, since 2022, solidified into a broad societal consensus favoring a Western trajectory. This shift challenges long-standing Russian narratives that positioned Ukraine as culturally and historically inseparable from the Russian sphere.

Yet Ukraine’s future remains contingent on external actors. While the United States plays the central role in military assistance and deterrence, the European Union remains divided in its strategic posture. The persistence of these divisions—rooted in energy interdependencies, historical relations with Russia, and divergent threat perceptions—continues to inhibit the emergence of a unified European strategic

framework. As a result, Ukraine remains not only a battlefield but also a *geopolitical hinge*: its fate will decisively influence the future security architecture of Europe.

The Annexation of the Crimea Completed Act

The annexation of Crimea in March 2014 marked a decisive rupture in the post-Cold War European security order. It represented the first forcible change of internationally recognized borders in Europe since 1945 and signaled the return of territorial revisionism as a tool of statecraft. Russia justified its actions through claims of historical entitlement, the protection of Russian-speaking populations, and the defense of national security against what it framed as NATO's eastward expansion. However, as Kramer (2015) and Allison (2021) demonstrate, the annexation was neither spontaneous nor merely reactive; it was the product of long-term strategic planning and the consolidation of military infrastructure in the Black Sea region.

Crimea holds exceptional geopolitical significance for Russia. Sevastopol provides the Russian Navy with access to the Black Sea and, through the Turkish Straits, to the Mediterranean. Control over Crimea enhances Russia's capacity to project naval power, secure southern flank defense, and influence maritime trade routes. The peninsula also carries symbolic resonance in Russian national mythology, tied to narratives of imperial legacy and wartime sacrifice. These strategic and symbolic dimensions underpin Moscow's refusal to consider any negotiation over the status of Crimea, despite international sanctions and diplomatic pressure.

The Western response to the annexation exposed both the strengths and weaknesses of the European Union's foreign policy system. Economic sanctions imposed by the EU and the United States signaled political resolve and imposed long-term costs on the Russian economy (Smeets, 2020). Yet sanctions alone did not alter Russian behavior, nor did they prevent the escalation of conflict in eastern Ukraine. The Minsk I (2014) and Minsk II (2015) agreements, negotiated under Franco-German leadership, temporarily reduced active hostilities but failed to produce a durable settlement. Analysts such as Forsberg and Haukkala (2016) argue that these diplomatic efforts were constrained by incompatible strategic objectives: Russia sought recognition of its sphere of influence, while Ukraine and its Western partners insisted on sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Germany's role during this period exemplified the European Union's strategic dilemmas. While Berlin sought to balance deterrence and dialogue, internal political pressures, economic interests—including dependence on Russian natural

gas—and historical narratives of reconciliation shaped its approach. As Meister (2023) notes, these tensions limited Germany's capacity to lead a coherent European response, reinforcing the perception of the EU as a fragmented geopolitical actor.

The annexation of Crimea was thus not an isolated event, but a structural turning point. It demonstrated that the normative framework that had underpinned European stability since 1991—based on territorial sovereignty, legal order, and economic interdependence—could be challenged by military force. It also revealed that geopolitical competition in Europe had entered a new phase, in which power projection, deterrence, and strategic alignment would once again define the continent's security architecture.

The New Geopolitical Reality After 2022

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, marked the most significant transformation of the European security landscape since the end of the Cold War. The invasion represented not only an escalation of the protracted conflict that began in 2014, but also a direct challenge to the post-1945 principles of territorial sovereignty and the European norm against interstate war (Freedman, 2023). The scale, speed, and strategic objectives of the invasion revealed Russia's intention to reassert dominance over Ukraine and, by extension, reshape the balance of power in Europe.

The war catalyzed profound geopolitical shifts. NATO, which had faced questions regarding its strategic relevance in the decade prior, regained cohesion and strategic clarity. The alliance significantly expanded its force posture along its eastern flank, while Finland and Sweden's decisions to join NATO overturned decades of military neutrality. According to Smith (2024), the invasion reversed years of strategic ambivalence and reaffirmed the centrality of collective defense in European security politics.

The conflict also triggered a major reorientation of European defense and foreign policy. Germany's announcement of the *Zeitenwende* (historic turning point) signaled a departure from its post-Cold War restraint, including commitments to increase defense spending and reconfigure its energy relationships (Meister, 2023). At the EU level, unprecedented macro-financial assistance, coordinated sanctions packages, and military support through the European Peace Facility demonstrated institutional adaptability and political resolve (Siddi, 2022). Yet, despite these

policy shifts, internal divisions persisted regarding long-term strategic objectives and the future of European security autonomy.

Ukraine's response to the invasion significantly reshaped its state identity and international alignment. The war accelerated national cohesion, strengthened public support for NATO and EU integration, and transformed Ukraine from a security recipient into an active actor shaping European strategic discourse. Zelenskyy's leadership, along with widespread societal mobilization, reinforced Ukraine's image as a frontline defender of the European normative order. However, Ukraine's ability to sustain resistance remains heavily dependent on Western economic, military, and technological support. As Treisman and Greene (2024) note, the long-term outcome of the conflict hinges on external security guarantees and institutional commitments.

Meanwhile, Russia has deepened its strategic alignment with non-Western partners, particularly China and Iran, reshaping global geopolitical networks. China's role has been especially consequential, as Beijing has provided economic and diplomatic support to mitigate the effects of Western sanctions while simultaneously positioning itself as a potential mediator in the conflict. This dynamic illustrates the broader global implications of the Ukraine war, situating it within a reconfigured international order defined by intensifying systemic rivalry between democratic and authoritarian models of governance (Ikenberry & Deudney, 2023).

By 2025, the conflict remains unresolved, characterized by dynamic frontlines, sustained Western assistance, and ongoing Russian efforts to consolidate territory in eastern and southern Ukraine. The war has effectively ended the European post-Cold War settlement and initiated a new era of geopolitical competition. The future security architecture of Europe will depend on whether the European Union can develop the strategic coherence necessary to move beyond reactive crisis management and articulate a long-term framework for Ukraine's security, reconstruction, and institutional integration.

The repercussions of the Ukraine war extend beyond the immediate conflict zone, redefining strategic dynamics across Europe's periphery. In the Western Balkans, these shifts have compelled states to reconsider their alignment within the evolving Euro-Atlantic order.

Geopolitical Repositioning or Retrieval to Quiescent Alliances

The outbreak of the war in Ukraine marked a watershed in the evolution of Europe's geopolitical structure, compelling both major and minor actors to reassess their strategic alignments. For North Macedonia and the broader Western Balkans, this moment revived an enduring dilemma: whether the region's engagement with Euro-Atlantic structures represents a genuine geopolitical repositioning — an adaptive and forward-looking integration within collective security frameworks — or merely a retrieval to quiescent alliances, characterized by passive dependency and inherited loyalties.

This section argues that the post-2022 security landscape reveals a hybrid reality: states are repositioning themselves rhetorically within Western institutions, yet structurally remain constrained by traditional dependencies and regional fragilities. This duality embodies the paradox of small-state geopolitics in a multipolar world.

In theoretical terms, *geopolitical repositioning* denotes a deliberate recalibration of a state's strategic orientation in response to systemic disruptions, implying agency, innovation, and adaptation. Conversely, *retrieval to quiescent alliances* reflects continuity and inertia — the reactivation of historically comfortable alignments shaped by dependency and survival instinct rather than strategic choice.

Drawing on the small-state literature (Thorhallsson, 2018; Ingebritsen, 2006; Keohane, 1969), this analysis situates the Western Balkans within a broader pattern of limited-power diplomacy, where alignment choices are driven less by coercion than by the search for legitimacy, protection, and international recognition. However, as the post-Ukraine order reintroduces hard security competition, these states must navigate between structural dependency and adaptive repositioning — between being protected and being proactive.

Europe's reaction to the Ukraine crisis underscores both unity and divergence within its geopolitical posture. The *Zeitenwende* policy announced by Germany in 2022 symbolized a rhetorical break with post-Cold War complacency, yet its implementation has been uneven, revealing a persistent tension between Atlanticist loyalty and continental pragmatism. This ambiguity has direct implications for smaller states in Europe's periphery. For North Macedonia and its neighbors, the EU's cautious enlargement stance and inconsistent application of conditionality have limited the incentives for genuine reform. Instead, they encourage symbolic alignment — participation in Euro-Atlantic structures without the material transformation of governance and defense capacities. In this sense, what appears as repositioning

often functions as *retrieval*: a return to dependency on external guardianship for legitimacy and security, reminiscent of the stabilocratic bargains that dominated the Balkans in the early 2000s.

The Western Balkans now serve as a microcosm for Europe's evolving geopolitical logic. On one side, NATO's expanding defense perimeter integrates states like North Macedonia into a shared deterrence architecture, reinforcing trans-Atlantic solidarity. On the other, the region remains exposed to hybrid pressures — disinformation, energy dependency, and political polarization — which external actors exploit to maintain influence.

The interplay between these forces has produced what might be termed “adaptive dependency”: the capacity of small states to adopt Western rhetoric and frameworks while relying on external actors for protection and resources. This adaptive dependency is not passive; rather, it reflects a calculated effort by small states to maximize security returns without overextending their limited capacities. Yet, it also constrains their strategic autonomy and deepens the asymmetry between formal alignment and substantive transformation.

Historically, the European continent has oscillated between phases of ideological confrontation and pragmatic accommodation. From the Concert of Europe to the post-Cold War order, the preservation of equilibrium has often outweighed ideological purity. Today's cautious recalibration by states such as Germany and France, particularly regarding energy ties and regional diplomacy, signals a partial return to this logic — a retrieval of quiescent alliances driven by strategic fatigue rather than renewed vision.

In the Balkans, this dynamic manifests through the tolerance of hybrid regimes and the prioritization of “stability over democracy.” Western actors increasingly accept limited reforms in exchange for geopolitical reliability, replicating patterns of selective engagement reminiscent of earlier spheres of influence. North Macedonia's integration thus reflects both progress and paradox: its accession to NATO in 2020 represented a major repositioning, but the stagnation of

The post-Ukraine moment challenges small European states to reconcile agency with dependency. For North Macedonia, the key test is whether Euro-Atlantic integration can evolve from formal membership to functional empowerment — transforming the country from a recipient of stability to a provider of it. This transition requires not only external guarantees but also internal reform resilience and regional leadership.

This paper's original contribution lies in identifying this *liminal condition* — a middle ground where geopolitical repositioning and retrieval coexist. North Macedonia exemplifies a broader regional pattern in which states navigate between normative convergence with the West and pragmatic accommodation with enduring dependencies. Recognizing this hybrid state is essential for understanding the incomplete and contested nature of European transformation after 2022.

Ultimately, Europe's periphery reveals the true tension of the post-Ukraine order: The West's capacity to project values versus its reliance on old patterns of control. The Western Balkans' future — and North Macedonia's within it — will depend on whether geopolitical repositioning can outpace the gravitational pull of quiescent alliances. The challenge, therefore, is not only to secure inclusion within Euro-Atlantic structures but to redefine the meaning of belonging — from dependency to co-ownership of Europe's collective security and political destiny.

Conclusion

The unfolding geopolitical dynamics in Europe since the Ukraine crisis reveal that the continent has entered a new era of strategic ambiguity — one that tests both the endurance of Western values and the resilience of its institutional architecture. The original contribution of this paper lies in identifying the dual trajectory facing Europe's periphery, particularly the Western Balkans: the tension between geopolitical repositioning as adaptive transformation, and retrieval to quiescent alliances as the reactivation of historical dependencies.

For North Macedonia and the wider region, this dilemma is not theoretical but structural. The war in Ukraine has revived old patterns of alliance politics while simultaneously demanding a redefinition of strategic identity. The future of Europe's southeastern periphery will therefore depend less on rhetorical alignment with NATO and the EU, and more on the capacity of these states to transform formal commitments into substantive democratic and institutional change. The sustainability of Euro-Atlantic integration is thus contingent upon internal resilience, reform continuity, and the ability to resist the gravitational pull of external influence — particularly from Russia and other revisionist actors.

Germany and the European Union stand at the center of this strategic recalibration. Their response to the ongoing crises — from Ukraine to the Western Balkans — will determine whether Europe consolidates a coherent geopolitical identity or returns to the cyclical pragmatism of the past. The call for a "revival of rationalism,"

to borrow Joschka Fischer's expression, is not simply an intellectual appeal; it represents a moral and strategic imperative for Europe to reconcile its ideals with its interests.

In conclusion, the current historical moment demands more than containment or diplomacy — it requires a conscious renewal of Europe's founding principles: pluralism, the rule of law, and collective security. North Macedonia's experience serves as a microcosm of this broader transformation. Its trajectory demonstrates that the West's strength lies not merely in deterrence, but in its capacity to inspire reform, build trust, and sustain a community of shared values. Whether Europe achieves true geopolitical repositioning or retreats into quiescent alliances will depend on its ability to translate solidarity into strategy — turning crisis into coherence.

Future research should further explore how peripheral states operationalize this balance between dependency and agency within emerging European defense frameworks.

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