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THE UNITED KINGDOM AGAINST RUSSIA'S ATTEMPTS TO MAINTAIN THE ZONES OF INFLUENCE ON THE EXAMPLE OF THE UKRAINIAN CRISIS

Keywords: Russian zones of influence, politics of the United Kingdom, Ukrainian crisis, Russia-United Kingdom relations, geopolitics

Abstract: The subject of the paper are the United Kingdom's actions against Russia's attempts to maintain its zones of influence, based on the example of the Ukrainian crisis. The introduction consists of a synthetic outline of the geopolitical rivalry between Russia and Great Britain. The next section discusses the attitude of the United Kingdom towards Russia's attempts to maintain its zones of influence in the 21st century. The main section of the paper focuses on the United Kingdom's actions against Russia's military policy in Ukraine. The main thesis of the paper assumes that during the Ukrainian crisis, the UK has taken the most far-reaching measures so far to oppose Russia's attempts to maintain zones of influence. The consequence of this is a significant deterioration in Russian-British relations due to the Ukrainian crisis. The leading paradigm is structural realism. The method of text source analysis was used in the paper.

1. Introduction

Russian geopolitics is by definition focused on land and is the geopolitics of the Heartland. No natural boundaries for the huge territory necessitated Tsarist and the Soviet rulers to search for constant security and expansion. There were always strong rivals around Russia who threatened her. For centuries, one of them was Great Britain dominating mainly in the seas and ocean. This does not mean, however, that Russia was not interested in sea areas. Peter the Great, in particular, was fascinated by them and wanted to build a fleet as powerful as the British. He dreamed of controlling the waters of the Baltic Sea, the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea to have an advantage over other powers (Chenoy/Kumar 2017, 219-221). In the following centuries, Great Britain tried to stop Russian expansion, both on land and in the seas and oceans (Dobson 1995, 27).

In the 19th and 20th centuries, Russia and Great Britain competed in many regions of Eurasia. First of all, it was the area of Central Asia, Persia, Afghanistan, but also the Far East (Kocho-Williams 2013, 7). Armed conflicts occurred between the two great powers, as exemplified by the Crimean War of the mid-nineteenth century. Even though Russia's main rival was Turkey, one of the main reasons for the war was rivalry with Great Britain for influence. It also happened that these countries entered into military alliances aimed against common enemies, such as during the Napoleonic wars and the First and Second World Wars. The international system evolving in Europe has on many occasions brought Russia closer to Great Britain, making it possible to ease tensions between them in other regions (Neumann 2013, 27).

After World War II, Soviet Russia established the Warsaw Pact, which served it as a counterweight to the North Atlantic Alliance, whose promoter and important member was Great Britain (Donaldson/Nogee/Nadkarni 2015, 4). At that time, fear of the Soviet threat persisted in the West, including in Great Britain (Wall 2013, 320). For this reason, the UK has built its own nuclear arsenal, which was to be the most effective deterrent to the Eastern superpower (Callaghan 2007, 225). During the Cold War, Great Britain, as junior partner of the United States, tried to stabilize relations with the Soviet Union (Simpson 2015, 252) and was seeking détente (White 1992, 39). At the same time, however, London regularly condemned Moscow for the sovietization of Central and Eastern Europe and crimes committed against its inhabitants (Callaghan 2007, 194), including Ukrainians.

Contemporary Russia is modeled on the balancing policy pursued by Great Britain in the period between the 17th and 19th centuries. Basically, the United Kingdom had no friends or enemies, and its role was to balance the international system, which it did effectively. After the Cold War, Russia plays the role of a self-appointed balancer. However, it is unable to counterbalance the West effectively. Russia's impartiality is also questionable. It treats some states, mainly post-Soviet, in a privileged way. However, if they oppose its domination, they have to face dire consequences. Others, in turn, mainly Western countries, are perceived as permanent opponents (Leichtowa 2016, 25).

Liberal values promoted for centuries by Great Britain are strange to Russia and most of its inhabitants. The Russian authorities traditionally perceive them as a threat to Russian pride and an instrument of attack on Russia (Neumann 2017, 170-172). Unromantic British philosophy of 'trade and let trade' is well known in Russia (Northedge 2013, 201), but the current elite in Moscow are distancing themselves from it. Instead, there is nostalgia for monocracy, authoritarianism and absolutism.

The purpose of the paper is to analyze and assess the United Kingdom's actions against Russia's attempts to maintain its zones of influence, based on the example of the Ukrainian crisis. The main research problem is the question, how decisive was the response of the UK to Russia's attempt to maintain its influence

in Ukraine by force? The main thesis of the paper is the statement that during the Ukrainian crisis, the UK has taken the most far-reaching measures so far to oppose Russia's attempts to maintain zones of influence. As a consequence, the Ukrainian crisis is the main factor worsening Russian-British relations. These states have contradictory, mutually exclusive visions of the future of Ukraine, and the international system. Russia wants to keep Ukraine under its domination, and Great Britain is seeking its full sovereignty. The main paradigm is structural realism. Offensive realism seeks power and influence to achieve security through domination and hegemony (Lobell 2017; Kmiecik 2013). This is characteristic of contemporary Russian politics, but to some extent also for the UK politics, aimed at maintaining special relations with the world dominant power, the United States. It is in the interests of the UK and the US to promote liberal values, including national sovereignty. In this way, they can peacefully expand their sphere of influence, at the expense of the influence of authoritarian states such as Russia. The method of text source analysis was used in the paper.

2. The United Kingdom towards Russia's attempts to maintain spheres of influence in the 21st century

After the Cold War, the main area of Russian influence are the post-Soviet states, on the basis of which Moscow is trying to rebuild its superpower status. Some of them, however, adopted a pro-Western vector in foreign and security policy. The Baltic states even managed to free themselves from Russian domination. Thanks to the support of the West, they joined NATO and the European Union, which deepened the distrust between Russia and the West. However, Russia's influence extends beyond the post-Soviet zone. It has close partners in various regions of Eurasia, including the Balkans and the Middle East.

At the turn of the century, Russia fell into a serious conflict with the West over Serbia, which it supported politically and sold arms. However, the Serbs committed crimes against the Kosovo population, including ethnic cleansing. To prevent this, the West set up a Contact Group headed by British Foreign Minister Robin Cook. Russia wanted the group to reach a political agreement, which ultimately failed. Therefore, between March and June 1999, NATO, including Great Britain, bombed Serbia, which was protested by Russia (Hodge 2006, 160-162).

The 1999 Kosovo crisis suspended Russia's cooperation with NATO. The 9/11 attacks in the USA, however, created favorable conditions for the renewal of cooperation, mainly for joint counter-terrorism efforts. British Prime Minister Tony Blair was the first politician to suggest establishing a new cooperation platform with Russia. Despite the initial reluctance of some members of the Alliance, including the United States, in May 2002, the NATO-Russia Council was established.

Within this, Moscow had an equal voice with Alliance member states on many issues of common interest (Ponsard 2007, 82).

The new Russian authorities have taken decisive steps to maintain the territorial integrity of the state. In August 1999, Vladimir Putin was appointed Prime Minister by the ailing president Boris Yeltsin. A month later, a series of bombings were carried out in Bujnaksk, Moscow, Volgodonsk and Ryazan. The new Prime Minister accused Chechen separatists of carrying them out. In October, the Russo-Chechen war broke out, which strengthened the rule of Vladimir Putin (Goode 2011, 2). The British government protested against the brutal actions of the Russian armed forces during the so-called Second Chechen War. A sign of support for Chechen fighters was the granting of political asylum to one of the rebel leaders – Akhmed Zakaev, against whom Moscow demanded extradition (Aalto 2009, 173).

London's criticism of Moscow's actions has been periodically silenced because of seeking of Russia's support for a global war on terror. Despite pressure from the West, Russia has not decided to measurably support the anti-terrorist coalition fighting in Afghanistan, in which Great Britain played an important role (Cawkwell 2016, 110). The second major front of the war on terror, Iraq, deepened the dispute over its legitimacy, especially since Russia had close relations with the regime of Saddam Hussein. At the turn of 2002 and 2003, these countries clashed in the UN Security Council with opposing resolutions. While London was in favor of the war in Iraq, Moscow was seeking further inspections in that country (Strong 2017, 105, 152-160).

Georgia was another area where Russia secured its influence. According to British analyst James Sherr, Russia could win both militarily as well as politically and psychologically in Georgia. It would suffice that after pushing Georgian troops out of South Ossetia, Russian troops would stop the march. However, Russia decided to enter the heart of Georgia and Abkhazia, which exposed it to strong criticism from the West (Sherr 2008, 8, after Fedorov 2010, 122-123). According to the British *Military Balance Reports*, Russia has left 7,000 soldiers in South Ossetia and Abkhazia (Arakelyan 2014, 147). Moscow's threats to use nuclear weapon led London to focus on nuclear deterrence (Smith 2016, 182-183). In the aftermath of the Russo-Georgian war of August 2008, Prime Minister Gordon Brown encouraged EU leaders to support the Nabucco pipeline project excluding Russia. Its implementation was to limit the possibilities of blackmailing countries by Russian Gazprom (Engelbrekt/Vassilev 2010, 200). Earlier, in 2006, Tony Blair's government blocked Gazprom's acquisition of the energy company Centica, which is the main gas supplier in the UK (Closson 2009, 98).

Great Britain and Russia also had different positions on conflicts in other countries where Russia has important interests and traditional influence. In 2011 Libyan Civil War, Britain opted in the Security Council for the protection of civilians. Russia abstained, thus not blocking the resolution. Between March and October

2011, Great Britain and France led the NATO military humanitarian intervention in Libya. The Russian authorities felt deceived by the West and embittered after using force against the politically supported regime of Muammar al-Gaddafi (Lanteigne 2016, 200). In turn, during the civil war in Syria, Great Britain involved in the American-led anti-terrorist coalition, and Russia conducted its own bombings supporting the regime of Bashar al-Assad. The countries accused each other of obstructing the peace process in Syria (Rowe 2016, 29).

3. The United Kingdom's response to Russia's military policy towards Ukraine

The main area of confrontation between Russia and the United Kingdom is Ukraine. The UK bears special responsibility for the unity and stability of the country. This is due to the fact of permanent membership in the UN Security Council, and above all being a party to the *Budapest Memorandum* of 1994, guaranteeing Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity in exchange for the transfer of a nuclear arsenal to Russia (Memorandum…, 1994).

The pro-Western and anti-Russian Orange Revolution that took place between November 2004 and January 2005 has significantly worsened Russian-Ukrainian relations, which concerned both political and economic issues. Russian Gazprom's actions against Ukraine met with a response from Great Britain, which in the second half of 2005 held the Presidency of the Council of the EU. Prime Minister Tony Blair called for European energy security policy. This initiative was enthusiastically received by most European partners and began to be developed despite Russia's concern (Dover 2016, 108). The growing tensions in Russian-British relations were deepened by the spy scandal in 2006-2007.

The pro-Western attitude of a significant part of the population of Ukraine manifesting itself in the desire to sign an association agreement with the European Union has been paid at a very high price (Pietnoczka 2018, 153). At the beginning of the Euromaidan revolution in Kiev, Great Britain adopted a restrained attitude because it wanted to avoid deteriorating relations with Russia. Actions taken by Russia in Ukraine in the aftermath of the revolution, including in particular the annexation of Crimea at the turn of February and March 2014, surprised London. According to the House of Lords report on EU-Russia relations Great Britain and other European countries had lost analytical capacity on Russia (House of Lords 2015, 24-26). Moscow's erratic actions have caused serious tensions in relations between Russia and the West. Domestically in Russia however, it galvanized much of the population to support the regime's notions of patriotism, nationalism and sense of responsibility for compatriots abroad (Snetkov 2015, 149). With the development of the crisis in Ukraine, David Cameron's government openly condemned Russia's

actions. On March 3, he warned the Russian authorities that if they did not withdraw their troops from Ukraine, they would have to reckon with "diplomatic, political and economic sanctions and other forms of pressure." In turn, Secretary of State William Hague described the situation in Ukraine as "the biggest crisis in Europe in the 21st century" (Morris/Usborne 2014).

Great Britain has firmly engaged in stigmatizing at the UN forum Russia's activities. It contributed to the resolution of the General Assembly confirming the territorial integrity of Ukraine and undermining the referendum in Crimea (General Assembly UN 2014). Relations between Moscow and London worsened after the downing of July 17, 2014, Malaysia Airlines passenger aircraft flight MH17 in the Donetsk Oblast, with the use of the Russian Buk missile. Ten British citizens, among others, were killed on board. The British government condemned the attack and called on the Russian authorities to stop the arming of separatists fighting in Donbass (House of Lords 2015, 29).

The United Kingdom was skeptical about the diplomatic activities of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, which resulted in the signing of the *Minsk Protocol* of September 5, 2014 on the ceasefire (Protocol… 2014). Prime Minister David Cameron also did not join the German-French diplomatic mission, including talks in Moscow. One of the British diplomats described the effort of European Union leaders as "vanity diplomacy" (Gowland 2017, 314). However, London approved the agreement reached on February 11, 2015 (Package… 2015). The British government adopted the position that sanctions should be applied to Russia until it fulfills Minsk obligations, including the withdrawal of all troops from Ukraine (Tomaszewski 2015, 26). Most of the British political class, however, believed that the *Minsk Agreement II* was dead from the very start (UK Perspective…). The British suspended a number of channels of cooperation and political consultations with Moscow, including at ministerial level. They also canceled visits and meetings of diplomatic representatives of various levels, including resigning from participation in the G8 meeting in Sochi (House of Lords 2015, 29).

According to the Secretary of State Philip Hammond the UK had played a leading role in designing economic sanctions packages and identifying the individuals, companies and sectors targeted by the sanctions (Perraudin 2015). In fact, London has actively lobbied within the EU and the G7 to imposing sanctions on entities associated with the Russian authorities, and later on individual sectors of the Russian economy. Great Britain was in favor of restrictions going beyond those proposed by European partners. For instance, it wanted to ban of financial institutions from Russia from using the SWIFT inter bank payment system (UK Perspective…). It did so despite negative consequences for investment and trade with Russia, incluging food imports from Great Britain. Parallel the British provided humanitarian aid to Ukraine.

The UK has undertaken a number of actions in the politico-military area. Chief of the General Staff Nick Carter has identified Russia as the greatest state threat to Great Britain since the end of the Cold War. He also warned that Her Majesty's Armed Forces would, if necessary, match Russian troops on the battlefield (Koval 2018, 96-97). His successor Mark Carleton-Smith said in turn that Russia posed a greater threat to Great Britain than the international terrorist network with Al-Qaeda and Islamic State (Coughlin 2018). In March 2014, Great Britain has suspended all military cooperation with Russia and halted all licenses and license applications for exports of defense and dual-use items to Russia (U.S., UK… 2014, 1). The UK also provided support to Ukraine in the reform of the defense system, training of military and other security personnel, as well as the judiciary.

During the NATO summits in Newport in September 2014 and in Warsaw in July 2016, the UK strongly supported the demands of Central and Eastern European countries regarding the strengthening of the Alliance's eastern flank. It backed the suspension of the Pact's military and civilian cooperation with Russia until its troops withdrew from Ukraine. The UK became one of the seven framework countries of the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force, one of the three leading countries of Trans-Atlantic Capability Enhancement and Training Initiative, and was involved in the updating of contingency planning for the countries of the region (Koval 2018, 99-100). The British Armed Forces significantly increased participation in multilateral and bilateral exercises conducted in the region. As part of enhanced Forward Presence, London decided to become a framework state of one of four battalion battle groups directed at NATO's eastern flank. Therefore, at the turn of March and April 2017 it send to Estonia over 800 soldiers equipped with about 300 vehicles, including tanks and armoured fighting vehicles. In addition, the UK send about 150 soldiers to the battalion battle group stationed in Poland (NATO's 2019). During the NATO summit in Brussels in July 2018, Great Britain was in favor of further strengthening NATO's eastern flank.

Theresa May's government continued the main political line of its predecessors towards Russia, even advocating its tightening. It was ready to deepen sanctions in order to force Russia to change its policy towards Ukraine. In November 2017, Prime Minister May accused Russia not only of destabilizing Ukraine, but also threatening the global order, undermining the authority of Western institutions, violating airspace and entering the territorial waters of many European countries, interfering in elections in other countries and conducting misinformation campaigns and online espionage (Koval 2018, 96-97). In response, Russian politicians and state media tried to ridicule and discredit her.

In December 2017, the Secretary of State Boris Johnson visited Moscow. It was the first visit at such a high diplomatic level in five years, but it did not bring a positive breakthrough. In the first half of 2018, Russian-British relations were further destabilized due to the poisoning of former intelligence officer Sergei

Skripal in Salisbury. As a consequence, each country expelled 23 diplomats and suspended contacts at a high political level. Following Great Britain, many other countries, mainly European, expelled Russian diplomats as well (Kramer 2018). Vladimir Putin's call in December 2018 to end the impasse and improve bilateral relations with the United Kingdom has not had any effect so far (Luhn 2018).

4. Conclusion

In geopolitical terms, Russia is primarily a land power and Great Britain is a maritime power. Despite this, the interests of states clashed over the centuries in different areas of Eurasia. At the end of the 20th century, the United Kingdom wanted Russia to be peacefully included in the emerging post-Cold War international security system (Smith 2016, 177). In the 21st century, however, Russia became increasingly determined to maintain influence in the post-Soviet area, as well as in other strategic regions. The West stood on its way, and Great Britain played an important role in that. The tensions that have arisen in relations between Russia and the UK are somewhat reminiscent of those that occurred during the Cold War (Codner 2016, 205). The image of Vladimir Putin in Great Britain is clearly negative, and the narrative is dominated by criticism of his Cold War attitude, authoritarian and centralist practices and imperial aspirations (Black 2015, 140). Russia and the West compete for spheres of influence which is characteristic of structural relism. The United Kingdom does so mainly by promoting liberal values, including national sovereignty.

Currently, the main area of rivalry between Russia and the West is Ukraine, where Russia conducts military operations. The annexation of Crimea with an important port in Sevastopol confirmed that not only land but also sea is important in the strategic thinking of the Russian authorities (Chenoy/Kumar 2017, 221). It could have been foreseen that the West's takeover of influence in Ukraine would cause Russia's decisive reaction (Cichos 2018, 125). In the face of violation of the territorial integrity of Ukraine, the UK, as the guarantor of *the Budapest Memorandum*, should use all available means to restore it (Milczanowski 2014, 26-27). Given Russia's military strength, however, seeking for direct military confrontation is very unlikely, and is not even supported by hardliners (UK Perspective…). Nevertheless, the UK is strongly committed to securing NATO's eastern flank against the Russian threat. At the same time, it provides nonlethal support to the Ukrainian security sector.

Politically, the UK took a "back seat" in negotiations with Russia, giving way to Germany and France. However, it played a key role in imposing economic sanctions on Russia. This happened despite the fact that for years Great Britain remained the main European business and educational destination for the Russian

elite (Stent 2010, 166). The UK was also the main investor in Russia among the EU countries. Trade relations between countries were less important, especially as Great Britain is independent of Russian energy sources (Aalto 2009, 173). According to *the UK Security Strategy*:

> Russia has become more aggressive, authoritarian and nationalist, increasingly defining itself in opposition to the West. The illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and continuing support to separatists in eastern Ukraine through the use of deniable, hybrid tactics and media manipulation have shown Russia's willingness to undermine wider international standards of cooperation in order to secure its perceived interests (Her Majesty Government 2015, 18).

So far, the attitude of the United Kingdom towards Russia's attempt to maintain its influence in Ukraine by force has not changed. As a result, Russian-British relations remain tense. Currently, there is a question of how Russia will behave in the face of the political crisis in Belarus, which is also in its sphere of influence?

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