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## **THE EUROPEAN UNION'S EASTERN PARTNERSHIP INITIATIVE UNDER THE POLYHYBRID AGGRESSION OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION**

**ABSTRACT:** The aim of the article is to reveal the essence and to determine the levels of the polyhybrid aggression of the Russian Federation to the EU's Eastern Partnership initiative and to develop recommendations for its improvement in terms of the geopolitical influences of Russia. To achieve its goals in the Eastern European region, the Russian Federation uses a multidimensional hybrid aggression, namely a polyhybrid aggression, when non-military crises are provoked and maintained in order to weaken the adversary, as a preparatory stage for a direct military invasion. In the case of the Eastern Partnership initiative, it is introduced by attempts to prove its inexpediency and ineffectiveness. The study shows that the Russian polyhybrid aggression has been extended not only to the countries of the Eastern Partnership, but also to the EU – aimed at weakening its transformative power in Eastern Europe, and to the Russian society – aimed at shaping negative stereotypes about the EU and legitimizing the actions of the Russian government. Achieving the Eastern Partnership goals depends on Russia's democratization and its compliance with international law. The following methods were used to solve the research problem: descriptive and historical method, sociological data analysis, forecasting method and structural-functional method.

**KEYWORDS:** EU's Eastern policy, Eastern Partnership, challenges, hybrid warfare, hybrid aggression, levels of Russian polyhybrid aggression

### **Introduction**

The collapse of the Soviet Union launched the concept of a 'unified political Europe', in which the issue of establishing a new format of interaction between European partners and the countries of Eastern Europe became a priority. It concerns the problems related to the socio-economic progress and security of the European region (Ziółkowski 2009, 143). Already in the early stage of the formation of the EU's Eastern policy, the main discussions involved the issue of the role and place of the

Russian Federation in it, as “Russia did not see itself as a part of a broad concept but looked for partnership on the other special principles” (Staszczyk 2011, 23).

In the early 1990s, the countries of Western, Central and Eastern Europe outlined two approaches to shaping the political relations with Russia. The first one assumed intensification of relations with Russia, even by ignoring the interests of the new post-Soviet states. The second one was based on the idea of supporting national self-determination of the Eastern European states (Fedorowicz 2011, 50). At the same time, on the political scene of the Russian Federation two approaches to foreign policy were developed: Atlanticism and Neo-Eurasianism. In fact, within the latter, the concept of a ‘Third Rome’ or a ‘Third Way’ matured, with the Russian Federation not belonging to Europe or Asia, but a very particular state for which the EU is of a rather marginal importance. The priority of the Russian foreign policy was to strengthen its dominant position, including one towards the EU (Legucka 2008, 79).

One of the turning points in the EU-Russia cooperation was the introduction of the Eastern Partnership in 2009, which included six post-Soviet states: Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus. The Russian government has perceived the EU’s initiative as a geopolitical project, a way to invade its traditional sphere of influence. In this context, a Russian political scientist I. Preobrazhensky stressed that “the biggest mistake made by the European Union in shaping its Eastern policy was to ignore Russia’s interests”.<sup>1</sup> After all, the Eastern European region has always been of special interest to the world powers. Thus, a British geopolitician H. Mackinder stated that whoever controls Eastern Europe, will control the world’s islands (Eurasia and Africa) (Mackinder 2004, 421-437). Under such circumstances, an area of international competition for influence between the two centers of power was formed in the post-Soviet Eastern Europe. On the one hand, Russia with its concept of ‘Near Abroad’, and, on the other hand, the EU, represented by the Eastern Partnership as part of the European Neighborhood Policy.

In fact, Russia’s control over the development of the Eastern Partnership countries is a counterbalance to the Europeanizing influence of the EU. Russian policy intends not only to form a new type of relationship with the EU, but also to keep the countries of Eastern Europe in the status of a “buffer zone between the EU and Russia” (Szczerka 2014, 121). To achieve this, Russia uses a combination of ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ influence tools directed against both the sovereign right of Eastern Europe and South Caucasus to determine their own future and the European Union – a model of cooperation with the Eastern Partnership countries (Sidoruk 2010). While it is unacceptable for the EU to divide spheres of influence without taking into account the interests of all the countries, it has failed to develop

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<sup>1</sup> <https://deon.pl/swiat/wiadomosci-ze-swiate/partnerstwo-wschodnie-wymierzone-w-rosje,267825> (accessed 23.01.2020).

clear mechanisms against Russia's tactics of using both military and hybrid forms of pressure in Eastern Europe, including the countries of Eastern Partnership<sup>2</sup>. This highlights the problem of the Russian polyhybrid aggression towards Eastern Partnership and European partners, and the development of effective mechanisms against such a destructive influence.

The urgency of the topic is determined by the fact that Russia's longstanding polyhybrid aggression is a preparatory stage for an open military aggression against those post-Soviet states that have declared a Euro-Atlantic course in their foreign policy and are advancing reforms, democratic standards and European values. Russia's polyhybrid aggression is aimed at "preparing" public opinion of Russian and EU citizens as well as of other countries "to perceive the expediency/necessity" of military means in order to strengthen its hegemony in Eastern Europe and to reduce the influence of the West in international politics. This is evidenced by Russia's military aggression against Ukraine, which began on February 24, 2022. The day before, on February 23, the Russian President Vladimir Putin recognized the occupied territories of Ukraine, the so-called Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic, which have been de facto under official Moscow's control since 2014. Vladimir Putin called such actions a "special operation in the Donbass" aimed at the "demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine".<sup>3</sup> The direct military invasion has led not only to massive casualties among the military, but also among Ukraine's civilian population, significant infrastructure damage, and millions of refugees.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the Russian occupation forces failed to achieve a 'blitzkrieg' because of the resistance of both the Armed Forces of Ukraine and the civilian population, which does not identify itself with Russia and resists the authoritarian occupation regime. This is largely due to the Europeanization of the Ukrainian population, the adoption of democratic standards and legal norms, with numerous Eastern Partnership programs aimed at economic development and democratization of the post-Soviet space included.

Thus, the purpose of the article is to clarify the essence and to determine the levels of the polyhybrid aggression of the Russian Federation to the EU Eastern Partnership initiative and to develop recommendations for its improvement in terms of the Russia's current geopolitical interests. The research hypothesis is an assumption that the Russian polyhybrid aggression extends not only to the Eastern Partnership countries, but also to the EU and the Russian society, in order to form a view of the initiative's uselessness and to weaken the transformative power of the EU in the post-Soviet space. The main focus is put on solving such research problems as: explaining the essence of the Russian Federation's polyhybrid aggression; identifying

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/articles/2015/06/5/7034480/> (accessed 03.11.2019).

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/31719676.html> (accessed 25.02.2022).

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.slovoidilo.ua/2022/03/09/novyna/bezpeka/oon-nazvala-kilkist-zahyblyx-cyvilnyx-ukrayincziv-pochatku-vijny> (accessed 10.03.2022).

the main levels of its implementation; providing recommendations for achieving Eastern Partnership goals in terms of hybrid confrontation. The following methods were used to achieve the aim of the study: the descriptive method (aimed to present political interests of the Russian Federation and the essence of polyhybrid aggression); the historical method (aimed to show the transformation of Russia's foreign policy towards the EU); sociological data analysis (aimed to confirm hypotheses and to make conclusions); the forecasting method (aimed to reveal preconditions for the development of Eastern Partnership); the structural-functional method (aimed to define the elements of polyhybrid aggression and their functions).

## **1. Theoretical and methodological foundations for studying the polyhybrid aggression of the Russian Federation**

Scientific and analytical studies use a wide range of terms to describe the modern types of war, such as 'hybrid warfare,' 'gray zone warfare,' 'unrestricted warfare,' 'asymmetric confrontation,' 'unconventional warfare' or 'nonlinear warfare,' 'new generation warfare,' 'Fourth- and Fifth-Generation Warfare', etc. The term 'hybrid warfare' is of Western origin and is often understood as part of a broader concept, namely 'new generation warfare.' Therefore, there is commonly used an approach of the Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, V. Gerasimov (2013), who uses the term 'new generation warfare' instead of 'hybrid warfare'.

According to Ukrainian researchers, the conceptual foundations of the hybrid warfare were initiated and developed by the Russian President V. Putin, as well as other representatives of the Russian power (V. Surkov, V. Gerasimov, O. Dugin), the head of the Russian Orthodox Church Kirill, and the Russian oligarchs (Honchar | Chubik | Zhuk et al. 2018, 8-9). The aforementioned V. Gerasimov formulated a doctrine according to which military and non-military actions are used simultaneously in interstate conflicts. Moreover, traditional participants in the armed struggle (state armies) are joined by quasi-state formations, gangs, mercenaries, and citizens of states exposed to Russian aggression who pursue an active policy of 'promoting' the idea of the 'Russian peace'. This doctrine was implemented in Crimea, Donbass and Syria. Its essence is polydestruction – the destruction of the enemy (by using military and non-military means) in various dimensions (humanitarian, political, economic, military, etc.) aimed at weakening the enemy internally (Honchar | Chubik | Dyachenko et al. 2017, 37).

In general, the study of hybrid wars distinguishes two main theoretical approaches (Wither 2016, 73-87; Dayspring 2015, 201). The first one is represented by W. Murray and P. R. Mansoor, who understand hybrid warfare as a conflict involving the combination of conventional military forces and irregulars (guerrillas, insurgents, and terrorists) (Mansoor 2012, 1-17). Representatives of the second

approach, T. McCulloh, R. Johnson, J. McCuen, reveal the meaning of hybrid warfare through a combination of conventional military forces and irregulars, but they also point out the important role of subversive activity and modern technologies in restricting the enemy's military power and the possibility of destabilization by using other domains, such as economics and material resources or information networks (McCulloh | Johnson 2013; McCuen 2011, 70-82).

In Western science, the term 'hybrid warfare' has been used since the mid-2000s to describe a combination of traditional and non-traditional threats to Western nations. The works of F. Hoffman (Lieutenant Colonel, U.S. Marine Corps (Ret.), a national security affairs analyst and consultant) "Conflict in the 21st century: The rise of Hybrid Wars" (2007) and "Hybrid Warfare and Challenges" (2009) are considered to be fundamental among studies of the features of hybrid warfare. He argued that a war evolves into a new hybrid form when the adversaries use all the available means of warfare (Hoffman 2009, 34-39).

It should be noted that a number of studies focus on revealing the hybrid tactics of the Russian Federation. They include: Pomerantsev | Weiss 2014, 44; Giles 2018; Hollis 2011; Kříž | Shevchuk | Števkov 2015, 16), in which subversive activity is identified as the main idea of the concept of hybrid warfare.

Considering Ukrainian researchers, we can mention the works of V. Horbulin (2017, 496), Yu. Romanchyshyna (2016), P. Shevchuk (2014, 1-9), Ye. Mahda (2015), M. Honchar (Honchar | Chubik | Dyachenko et al. 2017), which not only reveal the essence and forms of the new generation warfare, but also provide a number of important recommendations for counteracting Russian hybrid influences, including the countries of the Eastern Partnership. The analytical documents edited by V. Martinyuk (Honchar | Chubik | Dyachenko et al. 2017<sup>5</sup>) present the regional features of the Russian hybrid aggression and recommendations for the development of the Ukrainian capacity to guarantee the security of society under hybrid threats. In his monograph, Horbulin (2017) argues that Russia has applied a structurally and functionally unique concept of 'hybrid war' against Ukraine: 'hybrid' in terms of form, and 'asymmetric' from the perspective of content. Moreover, the information factor in some cases becomes an independent component and no less important than the military one (Horbulin 2017, 496).

Meanwhile, in a thorough study (Honchar | Chubik | Dyachenko et al. 2017), Honchar reveals the meaning of the concept 'aggression of a hybrid type' (ukr.: *зібресія*) as a kind of technology of hybrid warfare; "a set of heterogeneous impacts on the enemy of regulated force and combined character, applied according to a variable algorithm, where the military means are not dominant, their use is carefully hidden and denied, while the act of aggression itself generates uncertainty

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<sup>5</sup> See also: [https://www.civic-synergy.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/blok\\_XXI-end\\_0202.pdf](https://www.civic-synergy.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/blok_XXI-end_0202.pdf) (accessed 22.05.2021).

that complicates its identification” (ibidem, 37). Under the polyhybrid aggression, the crises of informational, political, economic, social and of other nature are provoked. Therefore, the term ‘polyhybrid aggression’ should be understood as a multifrontal and multidimensional hybrid aggression. According to Honchar, the very essence of the hybrid warfare is a multidimensional polydestruction aimed at destroying the enemy not in an open military confrontation, but by undermining its vital potential with certain external actions and initiating the process of self-destruction. In fact, it is a kind of country’s ‘fracking’ (cracking) technology when the ‘creation of fracture’ is triggered and carried out both internally and externally to produce a resonant destruction effect. Hybrid war does not begin with an act of open armed invasion, but with the actions of the aggressor from within the adversary, aiming at its internal self-destruction (Honchar | Chubik | Dyachenko et al. 2017, 32-33). In the case of the Eastern Partnership, the Russian Federation uses a multidimensional hybrid aggression to create stereotypes about its inexpediency and ineffectiveness, which, in the long run, may lead to the collapse of initiative and weakening the EU’s presence in Eastern Europe.

## **2. Goals and levels of the Russian polyhybrid aggression on the EU’s Eastern Partnership initiative**

The foreign policy of the Russian Federation towards the states of the Eastern Partnership is based on the principles of a new concept. Z. Brzezinski, an American political scientist, distinguishes several elements, namely: ‘divided people’, ‘protection of compatriots abroad’, ‘Russian world’, importance of recognition, coverage and promotion of the ‘great Russian civilization’.<sup>6</sup> The EU’s Eastern Partnership initiative is perceived by Russia through the prism of the established principles for the implementation of the European foreign policy. Among them, a Russian political scientist D. Trenin points out:

1. Russia and Europe do not have a common future, because the European unity is understood as the EU-US solidarity against Russia, which is forced to oppose the Western hegemony in order to pursue its own national interests. Thus, in the updated doctrine of General V. Gerasimov (2019), the United States and its allies are called ‘aggressors’, who are ready to attack at any time by using the technology of ‘color’ revolutions and soft power.<sup>7</sup> A number of Russian normative documents on defense and security show that defense

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.the-american-interest.com/articles/2014/06/27/confronting-russian-chauvinism/> (accessed 08.05.2021).

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2019/03/9/7208764/> (accessed 08.10.2019).

actions of the U.S., NATO or the EU are interpreted by Russians as expansive and aggressive (Honchar | Chubik | Dyachenko et al. 2017, 35);

2. readiness to withdraw from international agreements and to abandon the obligations in the case of their incompatibility with the national interests of the Russian Federation;
3. to rely solely on its own resources in terms of economic development, strengthening of the political system and military power (Trenin 2014).

Russia's goal is to change the European and the world order, to create a new center of world power with Russia as the heart of the 'Greater Eurasia.' The focus is put on the implementation of the so-called Eurasian mission, which was developed by O. Dugin, aiming at restoring Russia's control over the 'Near Abroad', the countries of Eastern Europe, and weakening the United States and Europe (Honchar | Chubik | Dyachenko et al. 2017, 116-117).

Within this context, Russia perceives the Eastern Partnership as a geopolitical project of the Western countries that directly threatens its national interests and should, therefore, be counteracted. The signing of Association Agreements with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia is also understood as the EU's aggression against Russia, and the West's interference in its traditional (canonical) sphere of influence. Similarly, the sanctions imposed against Russia after the annexation of Crimea are perceived by Russia as a policy of deterrence. In response, it employs an 'active defense strategy' that aims "not only to hold territory, but first and foremost to exhaust and bleed the large enemy's forces".<sup>8</sup> As a result, the Eastern European region suffers from instability and insecurity. It concerns Crimea and Donbass in Ukraine, an open military aggression against Ukraine, Transnistria in Moldova, Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan. In this way, Russia's multifrontal, multidimensional polyhybrid aggression aims to limit the EU's influence and presence in the Eastern European region by, inter alia, disqualifying the Eastern Partnership initiative. This involves the use of tools such as 'soft power' and 'hard power.'

The polyhybrid aggression of the Russian Federation on the EU Eastern Partnership initiative is realized within a multi-level system. The first level is internal, in which the main goal is to form a negative attitude towards the initiative (in general, the European policy in the Eastern region) at the level of Russian society and to prove its ineffectiveness and a direct threat to the existence of the Russian state. In order to achieve this, it actively uses the methods of advocacy. The changes in Russia's foreign policy towards the European Union are shown by public opinion polls. Thus, M. Grela notes that, since the late 1990s, the positive attitudes towards the EU have dominated among Russian citizens. However, only a few years later,

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<sup>8</sup> <http://politconsultant.org/vijskova-strategiya-rf-apgrejd-gibridno-d1-97-vijni-ta-pretenziya-nablizkist-do-tila/> (accessed 12.09.2019).



half of the Russian population perceived the European Union as a direct threat to the state independence. The perception of the EU as a key challenge to the existence of the 'Russian democracy', 'Russian economic power', 'Christian Russian values', and statehood in general has been steadily reinforced in the Russian society. Over the years, the rejection of European partners has only grown, and in 2015 it covered more than 70% of Russian citizens, who were convinced that EU policy towards Russia has marginalized Russian economic interests and gradually weakened its political position in the so-called 'Near Abroad' (Grela 2016, 37). A Russian sociologist L. Gudkov notes that, after 1992, the idea of the negative influence of the European (Western) culture on the development of the Russian Federation has intensified (in 1992 such beliefs were expressed by 37% of the respondents, and in 2000 – by 66%). Also, the stable identification with European values (i.e., law, democracy, freedom of thought) covers only 6-10% of the respondents and this number has not increased over the last 25 years. Russians believed (during 1992-2000) that the West treats Russia as a "raw material appendage of the West" (33-40%), "a place for profitable investments and a market for their goods" (20-24%), "an undeveloped, unpredictable and aggressive state" and "a potential military adversary, a nuclear state" (12-30%). Only 10-15% consider the EU as a "neighbor and partner to strengthen and develop relations with". Gudkov (2015) pointed out an asymmetry in the perceptions of Russians and Europeans, according to which the West is a potential threat to the 'peaceful' Russian Federation, as well as a source of deteriorating relations between Russia and the EU because it "does not accept Russia's interests".

The purpose of the Eastern Partnership has been inaccurately revealed by political myths in the information space. Thus, the Foreign Minister S. Lavrov<sup>9</sup> notes that the Eastern Partnership initiative has become a worrying sign in relations between the EU and Russia, because the initiative aims to 'tear' its closest neighbors from Russia united by century-old ties. In his view, this has led to extremely negative consequences and has forced the member states to make a choice between the EU and Russia. Although, in fact, the participation in the Eastern Partnership does not exclude the possibility of active cooperation with Russia.

Moreover, the Russian expert community focuses not on the added value of the initiative for the development of member states, but on its real or imaginary shortcomings. N. Yaremina (2018) pointed out the following effects of the Eastern Partnership: a slowdown of the integration movement of Eastern European countries in general, which explains the regional disparity in the development of EU countries; the economic crisis in Ukraine after 2014 as a result of the strategy's failure; instability in the region caused by a restricted cooperation with Russia compared to the intensifying cooperation between European partners and the countries of the

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.interfax.ru/world/688394> (accessed 28.12.2019).



Eastern Partnership; financial insufficiency of the Eastern Partnership resulting from the limited capacity of the EU; discussions regarding its usefulness even among the initiators and participants of the initiative.

Although Russian researchers model different scenarios for the development of the Eastern Partnership, each of them concerns limiting the EU's while strengthening Russia's influence, namely:

1. "Eastern Partnership +" based on Brussels' differentiated approach to recipient countries and the recognition of their cooperation with a third party (i.e. Russia). The idea is to intensify the EU relations with Armenia, Belarus and Azerbaijan with active involvement of Russia. Russian analysts describe this scenario as 'rational';
2. Eastern Partnership without adherence to the 'more for more' principle, offering an equal funding, which could significantly reduce the EU's presence in the post-Soviet space;
3. "radical restructuring of the European Neighborhood Policy," involving a change in the strategy of the EU-Russia interaction, as well as the recognition of Russia's role and interests in the post-Soviet space by the European partners. However, Russian political scientists have questioned the possibility of such a scenario in the near future. In fact, it can be argued that even a limited EU presence in the countries of the Eastern Partnership is interpreted by Russian analysts as unpromising.

At the same time, it is believed that the EU's technical approach to the Eastern Partnership program allows for partial control over the development of cooperation with the Eastern neighbors while maintaining a certain number of its requirements. Therefore, Russian analysts recommend the member states to strengthen the policy of selective adaptation of national legislation to the EU standards, which will certainly slow down the dynamics of the pro-European integration of these countries. Moreover, there is a belief that Russia's 'pushing' of comprehensive cooperation with the EU prevents Russia from deepening cooperation, especially with Belarus and Armenia. Emphasis is also placed on the inability to address these issues at Eastern Partnership summits (Yaremina 2018).

The second level of influence of the Russian polyhybrid aggression includes the member states of the Eastern Partnership, i.e., Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus. Russia's main goals here are to counteract the democratization of the post-Soviet space, to 'root' the hybrid 'pseudo-democratic' political regimes, to destabilize the internal situation, to prevent strengthening of integration processes inside the Partnership and with the EU. In order to achieve this, there has been used a range of various techniques of polyhybrid aggression in the member states (i.e., economic pressure, informational and psychological impact) to establish control over their development. For example, in Ukraine, stereotypes about the EU's Eastern European policy are actively spread, such as: the EU and

the West are responsible for the destabilization in Ukraine; the Eastern Partnership is a provocation against Russia; the Eastern Partnership leads to transformation of the political regime; the Eastern Partnership program is imposed on the partners against their will; the EU has lost its money because of corruption; the Eastern Partnership and visa liberalization have led to massive immigration to the EU; the Eastern Partnership and the Association Agreement force Ukraine to choose between the East and the West; the Association Agreement will force Ukraine to introduce same-sex marriages; Ukrainian citizens will not benefit from the Association Agreement; the Agreement will lead to economic problems; products of Ukrainian firms do not meet EU standards, and therefore they will not be able to export their goods to the EU; the former Soviet bloc countries that have strengthened economic ties with the EU in recent decades have not benefited from it, etc.<sup>10</sup> Another element of the Russian polyhybrid aggression is self-subjugation, which is quite effectively applied, for example, in Armenia or Belarus due to their total dependence on Russia in various fields (Honchar | Chubik | Dyachenko et al. 2017, 118). For example, as of 2021, Belarus has completely suspended its participation in the Eastern Partnership. This prevents the states from being independent in determining their foreign policy priorities.

To counteract such tendencies within the framework of the implementation of the EU Eastern Partnership, it seems appropriate to focus on those spheres that will shape the unified interest of the member states and strengthen multilateral ties between them, namely: development of economic cooperation; resolution of existing unresolved conflicts and prevention of potential ones; resolution of problems regarding territorial integrity and border regulation; introduction of common mechanisms for ensuring security for member states (Gazizullin | Honchar | Kolomiets et al. 2009, 68). Meanwhile, considering the fight against the Russian polyhybrid aggression, the member states can use: stability, efficiency and systemic nature of the state institutions; a deliberate policy of countering threats; establishment of an effective mechanism to guarantee the security of society; strengthening of the regulatory framework for combating hybrid threats; information policy and resistance to propaganda; cybersecurity; fighting corruption; national defense and military reforms; improvement of law enforcement agencies; interaction of law enforcement agencies with society in countering threats; development of citizens' responsibility for security; overcoming the Soviet legacy (Honchar | Chubik | Zhuk et al. 2018, 73).

The third level of the Russian polyhybrid aggression covers the EU countries. The Russian Federation seeks to expand its sphere of influence, to destabilize the situation, to use the veto power over political decisions of European institutions concerning the Eastern Partnership through diplomatic pressure, personal and

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<sup>10</sup> [http://www.chernihiv-oblast.gov.ua/media/upload/myths\\_aa3\\_uk.pdf](http://www.chernihiv-oblast.gov.ua/media/upload/myths_aa3_uk.pdf) (accessed 26.01.2020).

professional contacts, economic favors, energy issues, outright blackmail or bribery, propaganda, etc.<sup>11</sup> Besides, one of the techniques used in the polyhybrid aggression towards the EU countries is the intensification of internal contradictions concerning appropriateness of the Eastern Partnership or developing a consolidated position on the actions of the Russian Federation (Sidoruk 2016; Turchyn 2016, 64). A range of states are believed to be 'Russia understanders', for example: Germany, France, Italy, Finland, Greece and Austria. Some nationalist forces in Poland, Hungary, Greece, Lithuania, Great Britain, Bulgaria, France, Germany and other countries in the European region have also accepted the Russian policy because they are funded by Russian sources (Karski | Jagusiak 2018, 47-53).

A policy of divide-and-rule is often used in order to intensify the internal contradictions. Among the sensitive issues, one can mention here the issue of Transylvania between Romania and Hungary, the Polish visions of Vilnius and problems in the Balkans (i.e., the Kosovo and Albanian-Macedonian issue) (Honchar | Chubik | Dyachenko et al. 2017, 120). V. Putin has also modeled his own hybrid version of the Holocaust and the course of World War II that concerns the states actively lobbying for the Eastern Partnership support. The main condemnation of Nazism and the Holocaust concerns Poland, the Baltic States and Ukraine. The National Interest published an article by V. Putin entitled "The real lessons of the 75th anniversary of World War II", in which these countries are portrayed as reactionary, nationalist, and anti-Semitic (Nimetskyi 2020). In this way, the Russian side seeks to deepen the division between Poland, the Baltic States and the countries of Central Europe on the one hand, and the countries of Old Europe on the other. It is obvious that a weakened position of Poland and the Baltic states in the EU will negatively affect the development and prospects of the Eastern Partnership.

In the same context, within the EU, Russia uses the 'do as I do' principle, i.e., other countries should behave similarly to Russia. For example, a deputy of the State Duma of the Russian Federation, V. Zhirinovskiy, has approached Poland, Hungary and Romania with a proposal to annex some parts of Ukraine, which the politician considers illegally joined (Chernivtsi, Volyn, Lviv, Ternopil, Ivano-Frankivsk, Transcarpathian and Rivne regions) (Honchar | Chubik | Dyachenko et al. 2017, 119). As a result, one can notice intensification processes of the protection of national minority rights in the countries of the Eastern Partnership in recent years, such as Hungary in Ukraine, that greatly complicate the Euro-Atlantic movement of Ukrainians. Russia has also promoted a compatriot policy, i.e., protection of compatriots abroad, especially in the EU member states (primarily in the Baltics). In fact, this technique of the polyhybrid aggression was used for the annexation of Crimea. The same approach may be used in Hungary's and Romania's policy towards Ukraine in terms of the protection of the rights of their compatriots.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://tyzhden.ua/World/62629> (accessed 24.11.2019).

Such tendencies significantly reduce the capacity of the EU's soft power in the Eastern European region and provoke new contradictions both within the EU and its Eastern partners.

It is commonly believed that the introduction of the Eastern Partnership has led to the destabilization in the Eastern European region, weakened security of the EU and aggressive actions of Russia in the foreign policy. Considering the situation in Ukraine, it is proposed to ensure a political neutrality (i.e., a region free from NATO and EU influence), thus resolving the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and strengthening the EU security (Cichos 2018, 125-126). In fact, it also concerns the neutrality from the Eastern Partnership, which is the only institutionally established initiative for the Eastern dimension of the EU foreign policy nowadays. Such a position is likely to cause the 'absorption' of the countries of the Eastern Partnership by the Russian Federation and to increase tensions in the European region. Thus, the EU Eastern policy should tend, on the one hand, to change the framework of the Eastern Partnership within the integration perspective and by strengthening the security component, and, on the other hand, to clarify and reset the policy towards the Russian Federation in terms of democratization, compliance with the norms of international law and shaping political, economic and social models of development (Staszczuk 2011, 41). However, many researchers believe that Russia will continue to maintain a dysfunctional regime in relation to European standards for a long time (Staszczuk 2011, 42).

Consequently, some EU countries seek an 'imaginary' bilateral world dominated by interests exclusively between the EU and Russia, and therefore they advocate the resumption of dialogue without preconditions. However, the willingness of these member states to accept the fact that Russia deserves its coveted sphere of influence carries risks (Wilson 2017, 7). They threaten not only the sovereignty of the countries of the Eastern Partnership, but they also limit the EU's ability to make independent decisions on international policy, including in Eastern Europe.

## **Conclusions**

To pursue its interests in the region of Eastern Europe, the Russian Federation uses a whole range of influences, i.e., a multidimensional polyhybrid aggression, aimed at weakening the adversary by causing and maintaining informational, political, economic and social crises. Considering the Eastern Partnership, it attempts to question the very idea of the initiative, its effectiveness and expediency. The Russian polyhybrid aggression within the framework of the EU Eastern Partnership initiative is implemented at several levels, namely: the countries of the Eastern Partnership – aimed at destabilizing it internally and shaping the public opinion about the uselessness of the initiative and the European integration in general,

that may lead to changes in the political vectors; the EU – aimed at increasing internal contradictions, reducing the right to determine the foreign policy in Eastern Europe independently (without a coordination with Russia), as well as a belief in the destabilizing potential of the Eastern Partnership; Russian society – in order to shape negative stereotypes about the EU and its Eastern policy by using information and propaganda tools and legitimization of the current regime.

The strengthening of Russia's global ambitions has led to a 'territorial-spatial confrontation' between integration projects of the EU and the Russian Federation in the Eastern European region. To achieve the objectives of the Eastern Partnership, the European partners should take into account a number of negative trends, e.g., the lack of a common European position on the expediency of the Eastern Partnership and the amount of its funding; the uncertainty of Russia's status in relations with the European Union due to its dependence on Russian energy; the lack of a unified position of the EU countries on the issue of forcing Russia to make peace; the strengthening of the security vacuum and securitization of the Eastern European region; the growing challenges of energy, illegal migration, separatism, and the use of national minorities in hybrid conflicts (Maksimenko 2014, 84-85). All these issues depend on a proper regulation of relations with Russia under the condition that the latter respects the norms of international law, as well as democratic standards in internal development. Today, the Eastern Partnership needs to be updated; namely, it should re-consider its approach to the member states by taking into account their vulnerability to Russia's polyhybrid pressure and to develop effective mechanisms for strengthening the EU's soft power and countering Russia's hard power. After all, the slightest reduction in the intensity of the Eastern Partnership initiative will only weaken the security of Europe as a whole.

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