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Eastern Europe in 2023:

New strategic reality in the making

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The prospects for ending the war in Ukraine are not becoming any more tangible, which contributes to a further increase in military tensions in the Eastern European region and the strengthening of the global chain of proxy confrontation. The structural rupture of Eastern Europe is leading to the consolidation of a new strategic reality, which entails long-term negative consequences for Belarusian statehood.

Dynamics on Russian-Ukrainian battlefield

Since mid-2023, Russia has gained the operational initiative in the war. The battle for Bakhmut, which ended in early summer, resulted in significant losses on both sides. But for Kyiv the losses turned out to be more tangible, especially in the political sense. At the same time, the Bakhmut battle as a whole, as we predicted in last year's paper, became an analogue of Verdun. Having bled the sides in the struggle for a strategically insignificant object, it consolidated the tendency of reducing the mobility of the frontline, a tendency that prevails at the moment. Moscow or Kyiv can overcome this tendency only if the conflict itself is reformatted: either by NATO countries directly entering the war or, conversely, in case of their refusal to provide Ukraine with the same amount of support, expansion of the theatre of operations to third countries, etc.

The defence in-depth tactics adopted by Russia in 2023 made it possible to reduce personnel losses and contain the Ukrainian counter-offensive. The latter failed for other reasons as well. For example, the underestimation of the enemy's potential on the part of Ukraine and its partners, unrealistic expectations regarding Western military supplies and the tactical and technical characteristics of Western weapons. The counteroffensive was also negatively affected by the insufficient diplomatic support of Kyiv due to the latter's mono-vector, exclusively Western-oriented foreign policy and mistakes in interaction with most non-Western countries, especially China.

Against this background, the partial transfer of the Russian economy onto a war-time footing, the strengthening of its grouping of troops in the Ukrainian direction, technical improvements (attack and reconnaissance drones, electronic warfare, counter-battery warfare) and the provision of external support (China, Iran, North Korea) allowed the Russian army to go on the offensive almost along the entire front line by November-December 2023. This, however, does not imply a massive break of the Ukrainian defence, but means increasing pressure and gradually seizing the initiative. This is partly due to the Russian government's refusal to conduct mass mobilization and sharply reorient the resources to the needs of the special military operation, which could cause negative political consequences within Russia in the run-up to the upcoming presidential elections.

In 2023, Russia continued to systematically increase the production of weapons and ammunition. Ukraine, on the contrary, has experienced a clear shortage of shells and weapons since the autumn of 2023. The West has exhausted its reserves of weapons suitable for transfer to Kyiv, and the Western military-industrial complex is not yet able to maintain production rates that would compensate for the amounts of ammunition use on the frontline. During the summer counteroffensive, the Ukrainian Armed Forces spent approximately 7,000 shells per day (Russia – about 5,000), in December – about 2,000, while the Russian army increased its consumption to 10,000.

In 2024, Russia will have a window of opportunity on the battlefield. It implies a time gap of several months (up to a year), when Western countries have not yet had time to increase the production of ammunition to a level of parity with the Russian Federation, to supply modern fighter jets to Kyiv, and the Ukrainian Armed Forces have not had time to build defence lines similar to those built by the Russians before the Ukrainian counter-offensive. Never before in recent decades have European countries (especially Eastern European ones) been as disarmed as they are now due to military supplies to Ukraine. Thus, a favourable external environment for offensive actions is emerging for Russia.

Prospects for ending the war in Ukraine

In 2023, Russia, despite sanctions and the war, maintained the stability of its economy and even achieved its growth. The Kremlin's active diplomacy made it possible to minimize the effects of Russia's isolation by Western countries. In fact, an informal Russia-China bloc has emerged, with Iran getting close to it as well. Evidence of this bloc emerging was the rapid growth of trade between the countries and high-level contacts in the autumn-winter of 2023. In this case we are talking about growing cooperation among neighbouring countries, the interaction of which cannot be blocked by the West (for example, through restrictions on transit or due to the continued military dominance of the United States and Great Britain on the ocean routes of world trade and communications). Beijing's rapprochement with Moscow means a significant decrease in the effectiveness of Western sanctions against Russia (and then other states as well). Mass sanctions of indiscriminate action are actually beginning to turn into their opposite. Such sanctions are forcing the consolidation of countries with enormous technological capabilities and markets, thereby creating unprecedented opportunities to develop alternatives to Western products and Western-controlled legal regimes.

At a December press conference, Putin sent another signal to Ukraine and the West: in the event of refusal to negotiate on Russian terms (demilitarization, denazification, and neutrality), the Kremlin is ready to continue a military campaign, the main priority of which will be the south of Ukraine (Odessa). Thus, there are currently no serious prerequisites for the peace process, since the Russian side:

1) Expects that the West will begin to reduce military and financial support for Ukraine and will lose the ability to pursue a proactive policy towards Russia. These expectations are associated with growing transatlantic contradictions, diverging priorities of Kyiv and Washington, an increasingly dangerous split within many Western countries (falling government ratings even in the most stable countries, the inability of the US Democratic Party to renew its leadership, worsening social problems, etc.), and serious economic challenges in some European states. Also, Moscow still believes that the strategic importance of Ukraine for the West is disproportionately less than for Russia itself.

2) Expects that the hardships and destruction caused by the war will increase contradictions within the Ukrainian state and society and that this will destabilize the internal political situation in Ukraine and undermine the combat effectiveness of its army.

3) Is convinced that time works in Russia's interests and that as time passes, Moscow's negotiating position will strengthen.

4) Believes that right here and right now (that is, without the readiness of Kyiv and the West to accept Russia's basic demands regarding the conflict with Ukraine and the restructuring of the entire European security system), there is no realistic agenda for negotiations. Under these conditions, Moscow believes that starting negotiations would be counterproductive to its long-term interests.

The Ukrainian side is also in no hurry to reach any agreement, because:

- Kyiv is capable of holding the frontline still, and Russia has not yet demonstrated any intentions to significantly expand the scale of hostilities, *i.e.*, in the near future, according to Kyiv, there is no risk of a complete collapse of the Ukrainian defence.

- Despite all the difficulties in obtaining Western funding, Kyiv is mostly confident that resources will be provided in one form or another.

- Kyiv hopes that the issue of support for Ukraine plays a strategic role within NATO, allowing the Alliance to be rebuilt in a new configuration, in which neighbouring and allied Poland becomes the main US partner on the continent. In this case, Warsaw will not only be able, but will be forced to prevent the collapse of the Ukrainian defence.

- The current leadership of Ukraine itself has created a situation in which any negotiations with the Kremlin will mean Zelensky's political defeat and his loss of power.

- The situation of the ongoing war, despite all the dangers associated with it, allows the Ukrainian authorities to maintain foreign relations and domestic policy in a state of emergency. This means special access to Western resources and the retention of power by the current leadership.

Nevertheless, one of the obvious consequences of the Ukrainian Armed Forces' unsuccessful counter-offensive in 2023 was a decrease in interest in the war on the part of the West. In the EU-NATO countries, more and more questions began to arise about the advisability of constant massive assistance if it does not produce results on the battlefield. At the same time, the parties are obviously trying to shift responsibility for failures onto each other. This situation is aggravated by several factors: the intensification of internal political contradictions in Ukraine and most Western countries, the decline in Ukrainian mobilization resources, wars in the Middle East, the approaching elections in the United States, the depletion of weapons reserves in the West, and the inability of the Western military-industrial complex to quickly replenish them.

As a result, continuing support for Kyiv from the West in 2024 at the level of last year is indeed becoming an extremely difficult task, if at all feasible. However, this does not mean that the prospects for ending the war are becoming any more tangible. The extremely difficult situation in which Ukraine finds itself creates additional incentives for attempts to escalate hostilities horizontally and/or vertically in order to overcome the stalemate on the battlefield and in relations with Western partners.

Formation of a global chain of proxy wars

The gradual formation of a global chain of proxy wars as a whole will also increase the likelihood of outbreaks of escalation in Ukraine and throughout the Eastern European region, despite the fact that in 2023 the war in the Middle East clearly diverted attention from the Ukrainian events. The actions of great powers in various regions will increasingly be determined not only by specific calculations regarding a particular conflict, but also by the logic of global confrontation. Regional actors, in turn, will actively take advantage of the newly emerged opportunities, which will lead to an increase in the overall level of conflict globally.

The destabilization of the Middle East is an example of this dynamic. The response to events in the Middle East by China, Russia, Iran and other countries seeking to reduce the role of the United States as a global hegemon contrasts markedly with how these actors would have acted just a few years ago. It is noteworthy that China is gradually establishing its stance in this important region, including through its contribution to the de-escalation of tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia. In March 2023, Beijing secured the signing of an agreement that normalized relations between these countries, which had undermined the entire Middle East with their rivalry since the early 2010s. As time has shown, the agreements had an effect.

The position of the "collective West" in the Middle East was also shaken in another respect: by the end of the year, the Yemeni Houthis, allied with Iran, created a threat to Israeli and Western ships in the Red Sea, mainly traveling through the Suez Canal. Amid problems with shipping in the Panama Canal, the world economy is facing a serious problem in key transport arteries.

The most dangerous potential point of escalation of global tensions is Taiwan. During a meeting between Xi Jinping and Joseph Biden in California in November 2023, no progress was made on the reintegration of the island into the PRC. That attempt by Beijing to come to an agreement with Washington is to some extent reminiscent of the Kremlin's attempts to obtain security guarantees for the Russian Federation from the United States and NATO at the end of 2021. This parallel can be complemented by the analogy with the increase in American military assistance to Taipei, despite the impossibility of its convincing defence. The United States has begun military supplies to Taiwan at its own expense (rather than through loan mechanisms), but their volume is limited. For the first time since the 1970s, the United States invited entire units of Taiwan's armed forces to train on its territory. All this only escalates the situation, but does not guarantee the preservation of the *status quo*. American troops were withdrawn from Taiwan in the 1970s, and the United States is now reluctant to return them there.

New Eastern European reality and Belarus

Using mainly extra-regional forces and resources, neighbouring NATO member countries are creating a new strategic reality in Eastern Europe: in fact, they are deliberately erasing the differences between Belarus and Russia. In other words, influential political forces and even the leadership of a number of NATO-EU countries are *de facto* withdrawing recognition of the independence of Belarus. The mantra about Minsk losing its sovereignty obviously does not correspond to empirical reality, but nevertheless lives its own life as a self-fulfilling prophecy, reflecting the dominant perception of Belarus by Western elites as an insignificant country.

The air blockade of Belarus continues, the blockade of land communications is increasing, and the refusal to provide unhindered access to the sea continues. All these unilateral restrictive measures not only violate the fundamental provisions of international law (for example, the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea), but also undermine the long-term foundations of Belarusian statehood. Thus, they lead to the rooting of a situation in regional security that is directly opposed to the declarations of Western politicians and, we would argue, to the strategic interests of the NATO-EU countries themselves.

In addition, as the events of recent years have predictably shown, these measures of pressure on Minsk not only fail to contribute to resolving the issues raised by the West in the field of democracy and human rights, but, on the contrary, only lead to an aggravation of the situation. Not to mention that the discussion about democratic rights and freedoms is, by definition, meaningless when the long-term foundations of statehood are being undermined.

Finally, logistics and transport restrictions themselves directly violate the rights of Belarusian citizens, carrying out their collective arbitrary punishment. The country's population is being deprived of the opportunity to fully communicate with its neighbours, which undermines the political economic prerequisites for social pluralism and reduces the economic viability of the state in the medium to long term.

Against this background, the neighbouring countries of Belarus, primarily Poland, are carrying out large-scale rearmament of their army. At the end of 2023, Lithuania reached concrete agreements regarding the early introduction of a full-fledged German motorized brigade, which Vilnius has been trying to get since the late 2010s. In December, facilities of the American missile defence system were put into operation in Poland, which, although they do not formally change the balance of power in the region, cause serious concerns in Moscow. In addition, the United States can significantly increase its military presence in the region, including through bases in Finland and Denmark. This will create opportunities to impede the actions of the Russian fleet in the Baltic Sea with subsequent options for putting pressure on the Kremlin through a complete blockade of the Kaliningrad exclave.

All this leads to extremely dangerous military dynamics in the parts of Eastern Europe adjacent to Belarus. Moreover, unlike Russia, Minsk does not have the appropriate military power and strategic depth to absorb such pressures.

Policy of Minsk

Under these conditions, in 2023 Belarus continued its attempts to distance itself as much as possible from the war in Ukraine. Being in a close military alliance with Russia, Minsk at the same time demonstrates a different view of the special military operation than Moscow, constantly declaring the need for an immediate ceasefire and conflict resolution. There were no attacks executed on Ukraine from the territory of Belarus in 2023, there was no militarization of border areas, or a serious increase in the size of the Belarusian army.

The Belarusian government sought to ensure the country's security through asymmetric measures. In particular, through the deployment of Russian tactical nuclear weapons. At the same time, work was underway to create a system of resistance in case of an attack. Territorial defence training was carried out, the people's militia received legal registration, and centres of resistance began to be created in the Western regions within fortified areas.

Russia has not openly pushed for greater Belarusian involvement in its operations in Ukraine because it is not interested in destabilizing its ally. Moreover, Moscow has *de facto* revised its own strategy in such a way that this has led to some reduction in the risk of Belarus being drawn into the war. In planning combat operations, the Russian command in 2023 concentrated attention on the Black Sea and Donbas regions, whereas the north-eastern and northern Ukrainian regions, unlike in 2022, were practically not affected by active combat operations of the Russian ground forces.

At the same time, the role of Belarus as an important partner of Russia in the industrial field grew. For the first time in history, Minsk achieved serious investment from Moscow in high-tech industries – for example, microelectronics and mechanical engineering – as well as Russia's consent to large-scale cooperation with the Belarusian side in areas such as aircraft manufacturing, etc. The Belarusian government achieved the opening of transit routes for its foreign trade through a number of Russian ports (both in the Baltic and on the North, Caspian and other seas and the Pacific Ocean), and gained the opportunity to build its own port infrastructure in Russia. Lukashenko's actions to stop Prigozhin's rebellion resulted in a significant increase in support for the Belarusian president in Russia. In addition, the mediation potential of Belarus was once again demonstrated.

As a result of Western sanctions, there was not a collapse of the Belarusian economy, but its radical reorientation towards Russia and the disruption of the historically established unity of the Baltic-Black Sea region in economic, social and communication relations (following political and cultural relations). In the past year, the regional gap continued to grow through the closure, fortification and partial mining of borders with Belarus by neighbouring EU-NATO countries and Ukraine, as well as the closure of border checkpoints and a reduction in the volume of function of the remaining ones, and the rupture of the unified energy system of the Baltic countries with Belarus.

All this significantly complicates Belarus's task of normalizing relations with the neighbours, despite the increasingly accentuated conciliatory rhetoric of Minsk towards the EU and, in particular, Poland. For now, only the search for a balance in relations with Western neighbours on new terms that would slow down the spiral of the regional escalation of tensions and find mutual understanding on the most basic "red lines" and unspoken rules of coexistence in the conditions of active mutual deterrence looks realistic. Even under favourable scenarios, it will take many years to restore the complexly broken historical unity of the Baltic-Black Sea region, although the process of rupture itself is still far from complete.

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