

The Russian-Ukrainian conflict as a result of the confrontational nature of the international politics of the world powers

Martin Mašľan*¹ ^A

*Corresponding author: ¹ PhD., MSc., e-mail: martin.maslan@vsbm.sk, ORCID: 0000-0003-1913-655X

^A University of Security Management in Košice, Košice, Slovakia

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Abstract

Ukraine is a classic example of the promotion of interests between competing world powers. On the one hand, it is the USA and the countries of the European Union, on the other, Russia. International tension in this space has existed basically since the creation of Ukraine as an independent state. It took place with different intensity and in different forms. The confrontational nature of the policy implemented in this way resulted in the first military conflict in 2014. In this conflict, Russian separatists, i.e. the Russian national minority living on Ukrainian territory, and the Ukrainian army fought against each other. The Russian army was not yet officially active in this conflict, even though Russia openly supported the separatists. Since 2014, international diplomacy had the opportunity to reach agreements that would be acceptable to all parties involved, which unfortunately did not happen. Achieving an acceptable consensus should have been mainly in the interest of the EU countries and Russia, i.e. basically Europe as a continent. Geographically, this continent does not end at the borders of Schengen, even though this border divides it into two opportunistic parts. Instead of reaching a consensus, there was a gradual aggravation of relations and an escalation of tensions, which ultimately resulted in this year's direct Russian military intervention on Ukrainian territory. The local conflict thus acquired an international character, where are directly or indirectly involved more and more countries. The outcome of the conflict is not yet known, but it is already possible to say that it will have significant economic impacts on European countries living both in the Schengen area and outside it. Europe will have to deal with the end of supplies of Russian raw materials, on which its individual countries depended to varying degrees. A lot of European countries was not prepared for such a situation. This degree of dependence is the cause of contradictions between individual EU member countries, which may ultimately result in the disruption of the integrity of this previously functioning community. On the other hand, Russia will thus lose an important customer, which will deepen its dependence on China and subsequent orientation towards Eastern countries, which will increase the already existing global polarization.

Key words: international politics, separatism, consensus, special military operation, escalation of tensions, economic sanctions, energy dependence.

Introduction

Since its inception, Ukraine has not had a clear foreign policy direction. This is caused by the disunity of the Ukrainian population itself and its national composition. Ukrainian disunity is thus manifested in the language but also in the religious area, where the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate under the administration of Moscow has a strong position in the southeast, but in the central and western regions The Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate and partly also the Catholic Church have a more dominant position. Constant conflicts occur in this country both in the political and religious spheres.

A negative factor affecting the events in this country are also the world powers that are

fighting for influence here. The relations between Russia and the European Union (NATO) have been more or less strained for the past twenty years, and are currently characterized by a constant increase in tension [1]. Integrations of some post-Soviet republics, both into the EU and into NATO, have already taken place in the past, on the territory of which military garrisons of the North Atlantic Alliance are currently located. The same Western European efforts in relation to Ukraine were and are unacceptable for Russia, which in 2014 was reflected in the annexation of Crimea and the military conflict in the east of the country. This situation led to a gradual escalation of tension, which resulted in the entry of the Russian army into the territory of Ukraine. The inability to reach an international consensus that would be acceptable to individual actors led to a gradual escalation of tension, which resulted in the direct entry of the Russian army into the territory of Ukraine. The problem of Ukraine is the fact that, basically, since its creation, it has not had its own integrity and direction, whether it is an internal or international direction. Over the past twenty years, anti-Russian and pro-Russian governments have been constantly changing here, and there is no attempt to reach any kind of consensus between the “hostile parties”. The government of the pro-Russian oriented forces regularly ended on the Maidan. In this way, Ukraine is essentially an experimental area in which the participating powers measure their strength [2]. Unfortunately, the consequences of such rivalry are instability, a high level of corruption, a broken economy and an existing military conflict.

Results and Discussion

1. The disintegration of the union of soviet socialist republics, the gradual emergence of independent countries

In 1989, the Soviet Union had approximately 290 million inhabitants (of which about half were Russians), which consisted of about 100 nationalities differing in religion, nationality and culture. It consisted of a total of 15 states. This multinational grouping gradually got into serious political, economic and national problems, which subsequently led to its disintegration. Ukraine declared its independence on August 24, 1991. Subsequently, on November 4, 1991, the Baltic Republics declared their independence. One of the newly formed states after the collapse of the USSR is Russia, which was created in December 1991.

Leonid Kravchuk became the first president of Ukraine, but he was unable to stabilize the situation in the newly formed state, the tension in relations with Russia deepened, which led to early presidential elections in which the pro-Russian candidate Leonid Danylovich Kuchma won in 1994. Thanks to the restoration of economic relations with Russia, Kuchma managed to improve the country's economy and thereby the country's rating, which is necessary for obtaining more favorable foreign loans. As he contributed to the improvement of the situation, the residents re-elected him as president in the elections of 1999. This period of his rule is characterized by the suppression of the principles of democracy, the methods of privatization and the dissolution of the government, whose prime minister was the pro-Western Prime Minister Viktor Andryjovych Yushchenko. Leonid Kuchma's pro-Russian orientation led to the gradual isolation of his person in the West, in addition, internal opposition to him also grew stronger, which subsequently resulted in the first Maidan, which significantly influenced the following presidential elections.

In these, Viktor Fedorovych Yanukovych, as a pro-Russian candidate supported by Leonid Kuchma, and Viktor Andryyovych Yushchenko, as the main opposition candidate, faced each other. Yanukovych wins the presidential election, but since the results were allegedly falsified and manipulated, they resulted in protests and the Maidan (in translation, square). The result was the Orange Revolution. Its leaders were Viktor Yushchenko – Yanukovych's opponent and Júlia Tymoshenko, with whom he signed an agreement that in the event of his victory, he would appoint her as prime minister. The center of the revolution became the Maidan, where until January 2005 there were constant mass protests against Kuchma and the falsified elections. As a result of the pressure of more than 200,000 protesters on Kyiv's Independence Square (Maidan), the General Prosecutor's Office ordered a repeat of the elections.

Yushchenko wins in them, as a pro-Western candidate. In the presidential elections, he was supported mainly by the western and central regions of Ukraine, and candidate Yanukovych mainly by the eastern and southern regions, e.g. in the region of Donbass and Crimea, where the Russian national minority lives, which has a long-term negative attitude towards European integration, and logically supports renewed close cooperation with Russia. In this period, therefore, for the first time, the polarization of Ukrainian society is clearly manifested openly. After the accession of Yushchenko, the orientation in the field of foreign policy changed significantly. Greater friendliness towards the European Union was manifested in the abolition of the visa requirement for its citizens. A positive attitude towards the possible integration of Ukraine into its structures is also characteristic. The period under the rule of President Yushchenko can be characterized by a change in Ukraine's orientation, but also by corruption, the growth of the power of the oligarchs, and a constant economic decline. Ukraine is unstable during this period, the constant contradictions between the president and the prime ministers are typical.

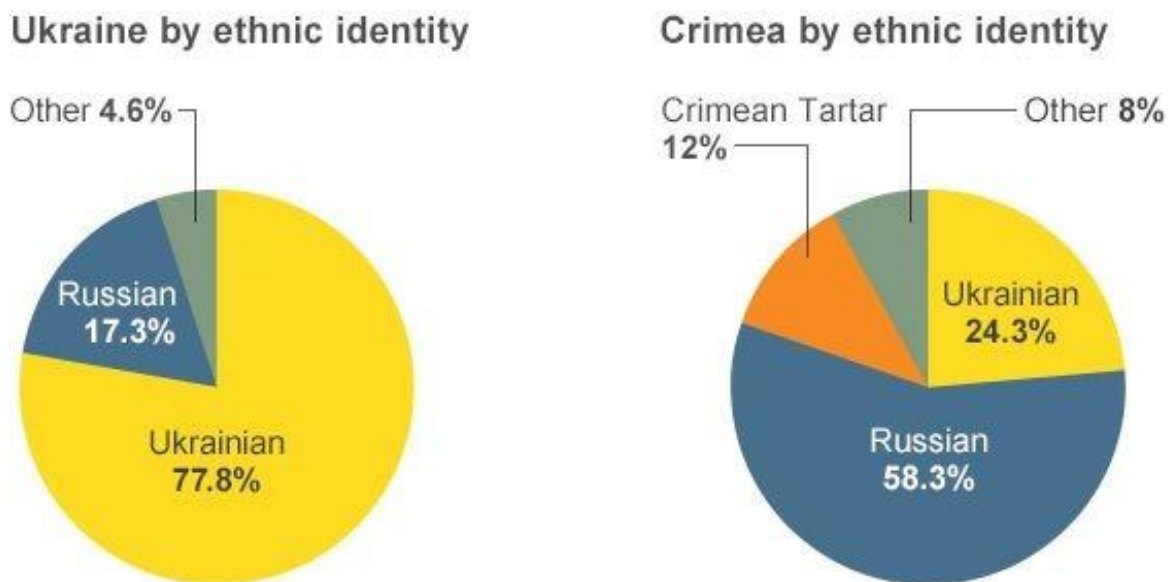
This situation was reflected in the results of the subsequent presidential elections, in which the pro-Russian candidate Yanukovych won again in the second round on February 7, 2010. During the government of this president, the association agreement of Ukraine with the EU was not signed. Failure to sign the association agreement was a key pretext for the outbreak of the crisis in 2014, which was basically identical to the crisis of 2004, i.e. the first Maidan. During this period, the population is radicalized, movements such as the Right Sector and the Maidan Militia are created. As a result, Yanukovych ended his term by fleeing the country. As Russia's influence on political events in Ukraine gradually decreased, the response to Euromaidan was pro-Russian protests in the eastern part of the country, which gradually grew into an open armed conflict that continues to this day. It is important to state that the main cause of the mass riots and the second Maidan was not only the failure to sign the association agreement with the EU, but it was a consequence of the long-lasting bad state of the economy, Yanukovych's system of governance, the level of corruption, the state of the judiciary and the prosecutor's office.

Even the newly elected president Peter Olexyjovič Poroshenko was not able to solve the existing situation. Ukraine is a country of power struggle between Russia and the Western world, therefore, in defense of individual Ukrainian presidents, it is necessary to state that they are just as successful in managing the country and seeking consensus and agreements as the world powers that compete in this territory.

2. Escalation of tension in Ukrainian-Russian relations and the emergence of an armed conflict in the Luhansk and Donetsk regions

Thus, since its creation in 1991, a power struggle between Russia and Western Europe has been taking place in Ukraine. The first sign of a change in Russian policy towards Ukraine and its allies was the annexation of Crimea, during which Russia tested the West's reaction to its more aggressive foreign policy [3]. The escalation of tensions on this peninsula began with the end of the government of the pro-Russian President Yanukovych, who guaranteed the use of the Russian Black Sea military base in the city of Sevastopol until 2042. The fall of this president caused a political crisis in Crimea, in the solution of which Russia was officially asked for help. It granted this request. A referendum was announced in Crimea. On March 11, 2014, the Supreme Council of Crimea and the Sevastopol City Council adopted a declaration of independence, stating their intention to seek full accession to Russia. In this case, it should be noted that this statement directly refers to the precedent of Kosovo independence, in which the Albanians unilaterally declared independence from Serbia in 2008, despite the fact that Serbia and Russia persistently protested against this move [4]. Thus, since March 21, 2014, Crimea has formally become part of the Russian Federation. Although Crimea is still officially Ukrainian territory, the government in Kyiv no longer has any influence on its management. This was the first indication of the increasing aggression of Russian foreign policy in relation to Ukraine. The annexation of Crimea took place without any problems, peacefully, without casualties and in accordance with "democratic" principles.

The situation in Crimea caused a wave of protests in the areas of Ukraine bordering the Russian Federation. Donetsk and Luhansk regions also declared the overthrow of President Yanukovich illegal, and waves of protests broke out in them. There has been extensive fighting between pro-Russian separatist groups and Ukrainian forces. So, these events did not have such a peaceful and trouble-free course as in Crimea. A referendum was also held in these areas, the official results of which are not available, but according to the separatists, more than 80% of the participating voters voted for secession. The only country that accepted the results of this referendum is Russia, similarly to the referendum in Crimea. The fact that the Ukrainian parliament escalated tensions in conflict areas by approving a law that canceled the status of regional languages, including Russian, whose representation in individual regions of Ukraine is shown in the following image, can also be considered a mistake.



Picture 1 – Ukraine and Crimea by ethnic identity

Although there were efforts to conclude a truce within the existing conflict. For example, the fighting stopped in 2015, but it was renewed again, although compared to the current situation, we can only consider these fighting as a local conflict. The countries of the European Union and the USA reacted to this development with various sanctions, which, however, did not have the necessary impact on the Russian economy, thereby indirectly supporting Russian interests in the mentioned areas [5]. The ineffectiveness of these sanctions and dependence on Russian energy sources ultimately led to the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine by Russian military forces. The imposed sanctions overlooked one essential fact that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia is beginning to regain previously lost territories.

3. The official entry of the Russian army into Ukrainian territory

The special military operation, i.e. the direct entry of the Russian armed forces into the territory of Ukraine, began in the early morning hours of February 24, 2022. This direct intervention triggered both the intensification of sanctions against the Russian Federation and a massive increase in the military support of the Ukrainian army by European countries and the USA. While in the initial phase of this operation the Russian army gradually occupied Ukrainian territory, thereby expanding the sphere of activity of Russia and the separatists, currently the Russian military forces are on the permanent defensive and trying to maintain the acquired territories. Problems with their maintenance can be declared by President Putin's announcement of a partial mobilization, which is supposed to concern 300,000 Russian reservists, which would make it possible to supplement the losses and

strengthen the combat capability of the Russian army in Ukraine. This partial mobilization probably means a prolongation of the war, but it in no way guarantees its final outcome. The main directions of the offensive of the Ukrainian army are shown in the figure below. Thus, the extent of the territory controlled by the Russian army is gradually decreasing.

Despite the military failures, referendums were held in the partially occupied territories of Ukraine. These referendums were held in the Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk and Zaporozhye regions of Ukraine (see Figure 2). It is likely that only Russia will recognize the results of these referendums, but based on their results, President Putin announced the annexation of these territories, essentially expanding the territory of the Russian Federation, but part of which is under the control of the Ukrainian army. In addition, this annexation creates the possibility of mobilization on the territories thus annexed. However, the combat ability of the conscripts conscripted in this way is questionable, because we do not know the number of participants in individual referendums or their answers to the questions asked. From the point of view of President Putin, it is currently questionable whether Russia or Ukraine is the aggressor and what means he will use to defend the annexed Russian territory. In the current course of the conflict, the possibility of using tactical nuclear weapons must also be taken into account.

It should be noted here that all referendums that have been held in eastern Ukraine since 2014 are in violation of international law and the Ukrainian Constitution, as they were not held on the entire territory of Ukraine and with the consent of its government. Based on this fact, it has already been officially declared that the results of these referendums will never be accepted by the UN, EU countries, or the USA.



Picture 2 – Annexed Ukrainian territories

4. Russian military intervention and its impact on the economic development of European countries

The European Union unites countries with different historical, economic and cultural foundations, which also differ depending on the supply of Russian raw materials. Another dependence will be in Spain or Great Britain and another in countries such as Hungary, the Czech Republic or Slovakia, which were formerly part of the socialist countries ruled by the USSR. However, countries such as Germany or Italy also show a high dependence on supplies of raw materials from Russia. In general, however, we can summarize the effects of direct Russian military intervention in Ukraine in the following points:

1. The lack of raw materials resources in Europe and the possibility of securing their alternatives.

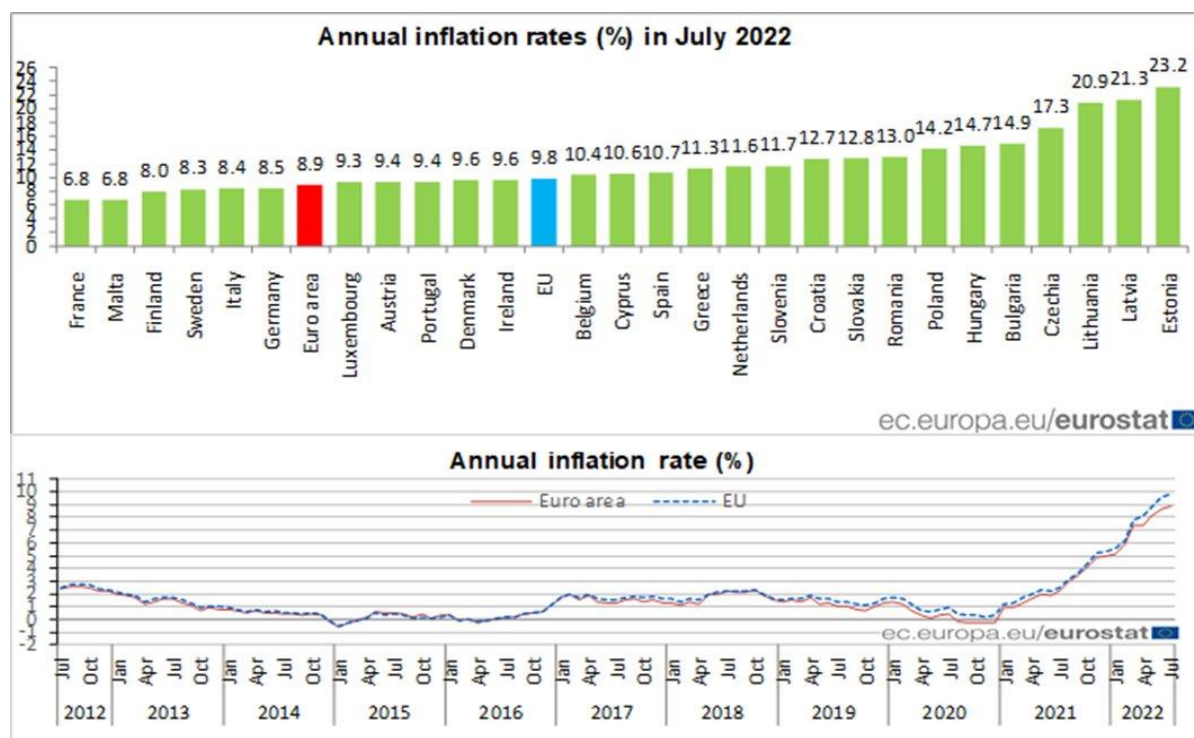
2. Regulation of inflation and measures to minimize its impacts on lowering the living standards of population, possible social unrest.
3. The need for a rapid increase in energy production using renewable sources.
4. Unemployment growth.
5. Updating the existing cooperation methods of EU countries.
6. Growth in arms spending.

➤ ***The lack of raw materials resources in Europe and the possibility of securing their alternatives***

Although the Russian economy is dependent on the export of energy raw materials, their reduction in exports to the West can be partially replaced by exports to the East. China will largely benefit from the Russia-Ukraine conflict, which will purchase Russian raw materials at favorable prices. The European Union will have to look for alternative sources of supply of raw materials that it previously took from Russia. Since 2014, the EU has only marginally addressed this problem, instead of investing in alternatives, we got the Nordstream 3 gas pipeline [6]. The different degree of dependence on the import of raw materials from Russia will be the cause of deepening contradictions when concluding agreements between individual EU countries

➤ ***Regulation of inflation and measures to minimize its impacts on lowering the living standards of population, possible social unrest***

These measures depend on the economic level of individual countries and the available resources to minimize them. Inflationary growth in the EU is shown in the following figure.

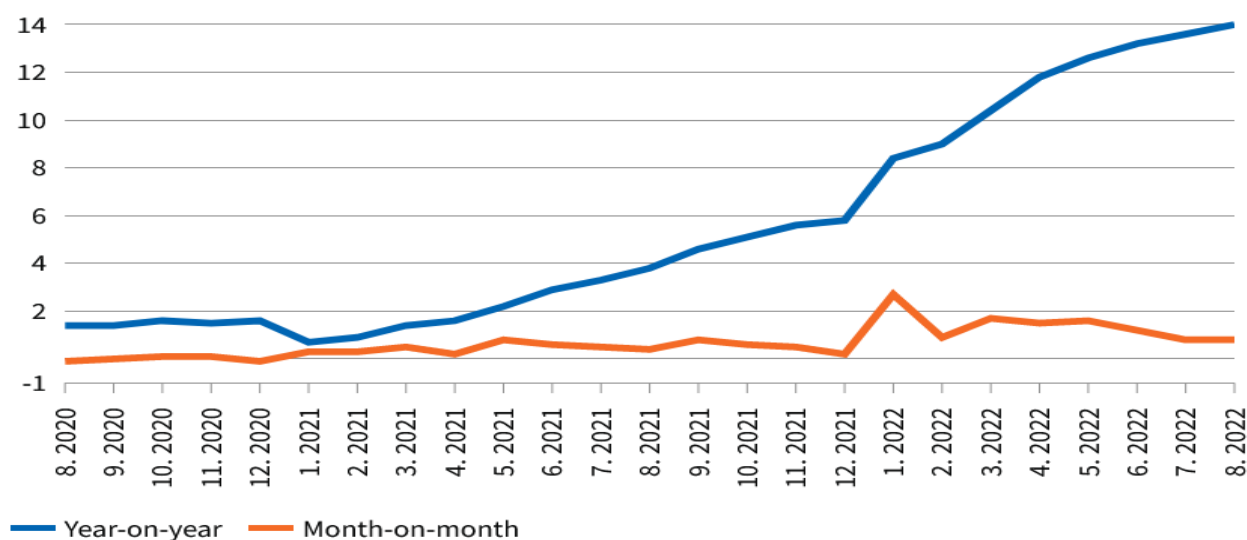


Picture 3 – Annual inflation rates in EU

Since the author comes from the Slovak Republic, this part of the article will focus on inflationary developments in this country. The situation in other EU countries will be different, but here the overall European trend of price increases must be taken into account.

Inflation – consumer price indices in the SR*

(in %)

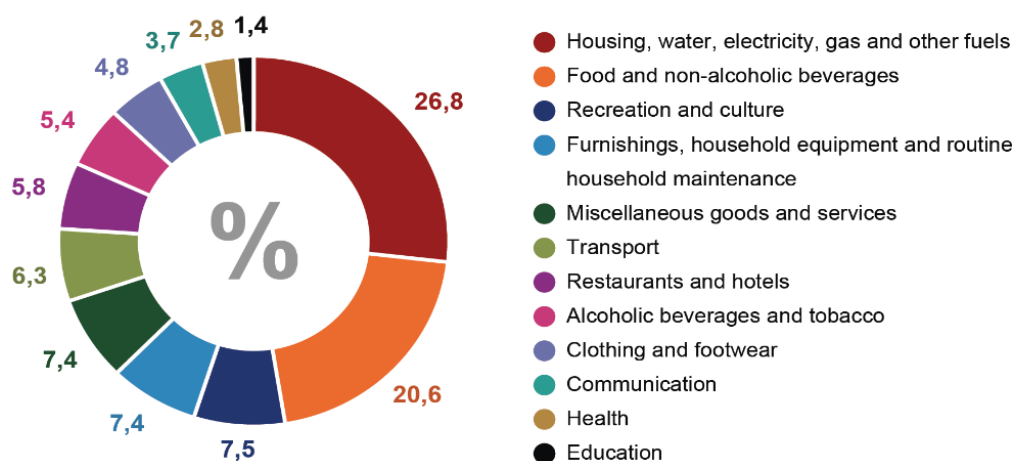


Picture 4 – Inflation-consumer prices indices in SR

The increase in prices in Slovakia was caused mainly by the prices of food (21.6%), energy and housing (16%), transport (18%). As a result, the structure of household expenses is also gradually changing, within which an increasingly large part is represented by expenses on food, energy and housing, which is essentially just the satisfaction of basic human needs with negative impacts on the general standard of living of the population.

The structure of consumption expenditure of households for the year 2022

(in %, 12 divisions from the highest share of the total expenditure)



Picture 5 – The structure of consumption expenditure of households for the year 2022

Already in 2021, 12.3% of the population in Slovakia was at risk of income poverty, with the current rate of inflation this number is constantly increasing, which can lead to the destabilization of

society and the emergence of social unrest. Although Slovakia is not a country that has a fundamental influence on the economic situation and EU policy, these problems will also have to be solved by the states that represent the economic pillars of the functioning of the member states.

➤ ***The need for a rapid increase in energy production using renewable sources***

By terminating contracts for the supply of raw materials from Russia, it is necessary to increase the volume of production from renewable-green and affordable sources that Europe does not need to import [7]. The EU's goal is to continue the green transition, which will help to get rid of dependence on fossil fuel imports from Russia and also to meet the EU's climate goals. The price of the energy obtained in this way is also an important factor. This program is to be carried out no later than 2050. For illustration, the author gives the total output of the currently shut-down Zaporozhye nuclear power plant – 6,000 MW, which has 6 reactors and is the largest nuclear power plant in Europe, and the output of the largest solar power plant Nur Abi Zabi, which is in the United Arab Emirates, has 3.2 million solar panels and its total output is 1180 MW, which is comparable to the output of one nuclear reactor. In addition, the largest producer of solar panels is China, which has an 80 to 90% share in the production of some technological procedures. So, this country will benefit both from an increase in the supply of Russian raw materials at affordable prices and from an increase in demand for the production of components needed for renewable resources.

➤ ***Unemployment growth***

There are more and more manufacturers who, despite increasing the prices of their products, are not able to sell these products even at production costs. Without support or government guarantees, they will be forced to reduce production volumes, which also means a reduction in the number of employees. This mainly concerns productions with high energy consumption. In Slovakia, for example, it is SLOVALCO (aluminum producer), where 300 employees will probably lose their jobs, an extreme variant is the complete cessation of production. Another company at risk is Duslo Šaľa, which is the largest Slovak energy consumer – in this case, there is a risk of not resuming production after the planned shutdown, US Steel Košice is also planning mass layoffs. An increase in unemployment will, on the one hand, increase state expenditures, but it will also reduce the purchasing power and social security of such disabled persons [8]. Failure to solve the problems that arise in this way will probably endanger an ever-larger part of society, which will prefer radical right-wing parties in elections, because such parties always offer simple, forceful, but also discriminatory and undemocratic solutions. The first example can be the results of the elections in Italy, but here we also have to take into consideration the fact that Italy is a country which has been dealing with the problem of illegal migration for a long time.

➤ ***Updating the existing cooperation methods of EU countries***

The existing crisis situation will require updating and more effective cooperation of the EU countries. Differences of opinion on the solution of existing problems between the member countries are already being manifested. The views of individual countries are largely influenced by their degree of dependence on the import of raw materials from Russia. Spain or Greece perceive this problem differently, other opinion has the Baltic states, Italy or Slovakia... Without reaching a mutual consensus, the further future of the EU is at risk.

➤ ***Growth in arms spending***

All the mentioned problems will require increased spending from the state budgets of individual EU countries. The existence of the Ukrainian-Russian conflict also results in the need to

increase the financial resources spent on the defense of European states. However, this increase will also reduce the available resources that could be used to solve existing economic problems.

Conclusions

Europe is a continent with a high standard of living, developed industry, but lacking in raw materials and energy resources. One of the main suppliers of raw materials for the smooth operation of EU industry is Russia. Although we reacted to the annexation of Crimea by introducing mutual sanctions, they did not change anything. By declaring a referendum on this peninsula, its inhabitants unequivocally voted for joining Russia. It is possible to discuss the democratic course of the referendum, but its result was the loss of part of the Ukrainian territory. The situation was different in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, where there were regular fights between the Ukrainian army and pro-Russian separatists. This unrest started already in 2014. Europe, and I mean Russia, had 8 years to try to solve the existing conflict in a peaceful way, which would include economically beneficial cooperation. Although Russia is not a member of the EU, it is part of Europe and has a much more significant influence on its course than Chile or Nigeria [9]. Apparently, no one in this period took into account the fact that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, 15 states were created, in each of them a Russian national minority lives, which is the object of Russia's political and, at present, military interests. As an example, we can cite Estonia and Latvia. 25% of Russians live in each of these states. In 2014, no one expected that the regular Russian army would enter the territory of Ukraine as part of a special operation. The outcome of this conflict is still in doubt, but it was certainly not inevitable. We are currently solving problems with the lack of energy and raw materials, inflation and threats to the living standards of the socially weaker classes. Wars are the result of the pursuit of political and economic interests. Unfortunately, the most significant military conflicts took place on the European continent. In the First World War it was a struggle for the redistribution of the colonies, the Second World War and the bloodiest war in the history of the world would not have happened without the crash of the New York Stock Exchange and the world economic crisis, because before these events the NSDAP was only an insignificant political party.

Currently, there is a decline in the living standards of the population, which is threatened by this and votes for radical right-wing parties. These offer simple, although not always democratic, solutions [10]. The existing situation has already helped the right-wing coalition win the elections in Italy. Individual EU countries depend to varying degrees on supplies of Russian raw materials. This degree of dependence will also have an impact on their decisions when reaching collective agreements, as well as on the results of elections in other member states. Referendums have already been held in eastern Ukraine with a positive result on the annexation of these territories to Russia. The democratic course of these votes is questionable, but when was the last democratic election in, for example, China or Saudi Arabia? It is difficult to predict the outcome of the Ukrainian-Russian conflict, but we already know that most of its consequences will be paid by Europe (including Russia) through a decline in the level of the economy, the standard of living of the population and the growth of inflation. In the end, this conflict can also lead to the violation of the principles of the EU's functioning and the destabilization of Russia. Russia is a nuclear power that has at its disposal a sufficient number of nuclear weapons to cripple or destroy existing life on our planet. Within this conflict, there are already opinions about the possibility of using Russian tactical nuclear weapons, which could reverse its unfavorable course. It would be an extreme possibility, but it was also the one from 2014, when we did not take into account possible entry of the Russian army into the territory of Ukraine. The unfavorable course of the conflict, the possible fall of President Putin, may ultimately not mean its peaceful end, but its escalation. In this case, there is always the possibility of radicalization of Russian society, which will be led by people without any inhibitions.

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