

## **GEOPOLITICS OF CONTESTED NEIGHBOURHOOD: A CASE STUDY OF NEW EASTERN EUROPE AND THE NEAR ABROAD OF RUSSIA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The common neighbourhood of the European Union (EU) and Russia has become a source of geopolitical rivalry between the two. During the last twenty or more years, both the European Union (EU) and Russia have attempted to integrate these countries of 'Shared Neighbourhood'. At the same time, these countries have also sought a sheltered alliance with either of the two (EU and Russia). Thus, it has become Contested Neighbourhood.

The recent developments such as the conflict between Russia and Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea and the resulting upheavals in the relations between the European Union (EU) and Russia have transformed this area into an arena of geopolitical conflict. The conflict of interests and competition for influence over this contested neighbourhood reached its zenith with increased nearness between the EU and Ukraine.

The expansion of NATO into the bordering areas of Russia and the geopolitical rivalry in Eastern Europe and the Near Abroad of Russia can be explained from different perspectives. But the changes in the geopolitical map of Eurasia are a replication of the same classical geopolitical rivalry in the geographical space of the Eurasian Heartland. The present research presents an analysis of the geopolitics of contested neighbourhood.

**Keywords:** Contested Neighbourhood, Geopolitics, Geopolitical Rivalry, Russia, European Union

### **Introduction**

The geopolitical rivalry between the European Union (EU) and Russia over their common neighbourhood has increasingly attracted the attention of academicians (Ademmer, Delcour and

Wolczuk, 2016). This common neighbourhood includes the countries of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. During the last twenty or more years, both the European Union (EU) and Russia have attempted to integrate these countries of 'Shared Neighbourhood' or tried to force them to accept (their) subjugation. At the same time, these countries have also sought a sheltered alliance with either of the two (EU and Russia). Thus, these countries have become Contested Neighbourhood.

Geopolitics is perceived as the root of conflict and tension in world politics. The recent developments such as the conflict between Russia and Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea and the resulting upheavals in the relations between the European Union (EU) and Russia have transformed this area into an arena of geopolitical conflict. Thus, the countries located between the EU and Russia have become an object of contention and rivalry between Brussels and Moscow (Haukkala, 2015). The conflict of interests and competition for influence over this contested neighbourhood reached its zenith with increased nearness between the EU and Ukraine. It culminated in a chain of events that led to the annexation of Crimea by Russia (Ademmer, Delcour and Wolczuk, 2016) and the recent invasion of Ukraine.

The 'geopolitical objectives', 'national interests' and 'security concerns' influence international relations. The competing interests and contestation over neighbourhood remain a significant factor in the geopolitics of Eurasia. The diverging or even conflicting interests of all these countries have fuelled the growing rivalry between Brussels and Moscow in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus (Laure Delcour, 2018). Being part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the US has also joined this contest. It has also, directly and indirectly, influenced the geopolitical situation in the region.

The expansion of NATO into the bordering areas of Russia and the geopolitical rivalry in Eastern Europe and the Near Abroad of Russia can be explained from different perspectives. But the changes in the geopolitical map of Eurasia are a replication of the same classical geopolitical rivalry in the geographical space of the Eurasian Heartland.

### **Geopolitics of Contested Neighbourhood**

The disintegration of the Soviet Union transformed the political map of Eurasia. It gave birth to new geopolitical entities in Central Asia and Eastern Europe. Together they constitute the Near Abroad of Russia. The countries in the west of Russia also constituted New Eastern Europe (NEE). They include Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania together with Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova and the three Transcaucasian states of Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia (Plokhy, S. 2011). The

geographical location of these countries enhanced the geopolitics of Eastern Europe or the Western region of Russia.

New Eastern Europe or the Western region of Russia has no distinct identity; it does not exist per se. But it constitutes a strategic geopolitical region. In fact, the New Eastern Europe or the Western region of Russia is what outside powers or players make of it in pursuing their strategic and geopolitical interests. These countries constitute a region not in and of themselves, but as a function of the geopolitical engagement of other nations in their far and near abroad; Russia, EU and the U.S. (Hamilton and Mangott, 2007).

These countries have recently found themselves in a unique geopolitical position. Situated between the extended European Union in the west and Russia in the east (Plokhy, S. 2011) they are free to redefine their belongingness. In the changed geopolitical circumstances, Moscow seeks to retain its influence over former Soviet states. But these countries have got no geopolitical shield from Russia. It has enabled most of its countries to join NATO and the European Union without fear of Russian countermeasures (Hamilton and Mangott, 2007). What has emerged over the past few years, however, is indeed a highly conflicting and competitive integration effort by Russia and the EU. Russia views the initiatives of the EU as an encroachment on the interests of Russia.

Evaluating the geopolitical landscape of the region, some political pundits believe that it would be detrimental to continental security, however, if the countries of the New Eastern Europe or the Western region of Russia were either to become the new eastern frontiers of the Euro Atlantic community or the western border of a renewed area of Russian dominance. The countries of the region should seek neither of these options, as they would either develop artificial western identities or marginalize their post-Soviet identity. Multiple identities rather than an exclusive eastern or western orientation can be an opportunity for building bridges rather than barriers (Hamilton and Mangott, 2007).

### **An Ambiguous Relationship between European Union and Russia**

In the last couple of decades, there have been major changes in Eurasia and the world. The world has witnessed the end of the cold war. There have been many moments of cooperation and conflicts between countries in this part of the world. Russia has cooperated with the U.S. and other Western countries on a range of issues. It included a wider agreement on the issue of German reunification. The nuclear containment of Iran and North Korea has been a similar moment. The counterterrorism operation in Afghanistan was another such moment. On the other hand, there have been many moments of conflict between Russia and the West. The conflict has

emerged over the Yugoslav crisis (1991-99) and the independence of Kosovo. The conflict has also emerged on account of the eastward expansion of NATO. The geopolitical orientation of newly independent countries towards Russia and the West has remained a bone of contention. Russian-Georgian war (2008) and the Russian annexation of Crimea (2014) were similar situations. Over the years, these conflicts have reached the crisis stage. Today almost everything is different from yesterday or the day before. It has challenged the situation of peace in Europe and the world.

This research evaluates the relations between Russia and its neighbours as well as the relation of Russia with the U.S. and other Western countries. This research presents a process tracing to explain how and why did it come to this situation?

### **Geopolitical Landscape of Eastern Europe**

The geopolitical landscape in the neighbourhood of Russia consists of the countries of the Baltic region (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) Western countries (Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova) and the countries of southern Caucasus (Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan). These are former Soviet states, geographically squeezed between the EU and Russia (Gergana Noutcheva, 2018). Nevertheless, it is the common neighbourhood between the European Union and Russia. For European Union, it is an unstable region with political, economic and security-related disturbances. In turn, these states are the so-called 'near abroad' for Russia, which is treated as a buffer zone that separates Russia from international challenges such as the expansion of hostile political and military alliance of NATO. Therefore, the region is a key element of Russian security and a 'zone of privileged interests of Russia'. (Legucka and Wlodkowska, 2021).

- **The Baltics**

The region of Baltics comprises the three countries; Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Geographically and historically the countries of the Baltic region represented a gateway to the West (particularly during the Soviet period). Geopolitically it is the natural western frontier of Russia. Their independence was unnatural for many Russians. Even after their independence, these countries remain an important military and strategic buffer zone between Russia and the rest of Europe. In more recent times, too, it is commonly said that the Baltic area has been a high priority in Russian/Soviet geopolitical thinking (Ari Puheloinen, 1999).

Even today, Russia is unwilling to reconcile the true independence of the Baltic states. It envisions the region as a geopolitical and geoeconomic frontier. Russia imagines this region to provide an economic link to the West but geopolitically remains under its control.

The Baltic states have a sizable presence of ethnic Russians. To these Baltic states, these Russians are an unwanted legacy of the colonial rule of Soviet Russia. Consequently, the countries of the Baltics have been reluctant to grant full citizenship to them. Estonians and Latvians have been engaged in extensive violations of human rights against their Russian (non)citizens. The ethnogeopolitical situation in the Baltics can be equated with the situation in the Balkans.

The status of Russians living within the countries of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania has remained a thorny issue in relations between Baltic countries and Russia, ever since their independence.

- **The Western Republics**

The states of Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova represent another set of countries of the Near Abroad. Of these Ukraine has acquired the greatest geopolitical significance. Geographically it lies at the political and cultural crossroads of Eurasia. Geopolitically also its location is quite significant. Without Ukraine, Russia is situated on the fringes of Europe but reunited with Ukraine, Russia is a great power at the heart of Europe.

Ukraine has had a significant geostrategic location also. It is located at the edge of the Black Sea. Control over the Black Sea was also important for Russia as it was home to the Black Sea Fleet of the Soviet Union. It also gives warm water opening to Europe and the Mediterranean region. Strategic domination of the Black Sea was dependent on the control of Crimea. Besides the Crimean Peninsula (located in southern Ukraine) is dominated by the Russian population.

For long the Ukrainians have maintained their neutrality. But the situation has gradually changed. On the one hand, they have resisted Russian pressure that they join the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) on the other hand they have expressed willingness to cooperate with the NATO and the European Union. It is perceived as a geopolitical challenge to Russia. The Russian annexation of Crimea and the unfinished war in Ukraine represent the true picture of the geopolitics of the region.

- **Trans Caucasus**

Trans Caucasus region of the Near Abroad comprises Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. In the post-Soviet period, the Caucasus region has become one of the most volatile and potentially unstable regions in world politics. It has been a source of chronic instability and conflict; it has unresolved 'frozen conflicts' in Abkhazia, Southern Ossetia and Nagorno Karabakh (Craig Nation, 2007) and also Chechnya. It is also a region of geopolitical competitions. Both the US

and Russia have pursued assertive regional policies in the Caucasus. At present, both Washington and Moscow tend to define their interests in such a way as to ensure that their relationship in the region will be contentious (Craig Nation, 2007).

Politics in the Trans Caucasus region have also remained ethnically charged and unstable. The ethnogeopolitics of the region have compelled Georgia and Armenia to turn to Russia for its help in pursuing their ethnic claims. Georgia is faced with Abkhaz separatists and for Armenia, it is the Nagorno-Karabakh. Ethnically, Nagorno-Karabakh is an Armenian region under the territorial control of Azerbaijan. But the ethnic conflict is not the only reason for Russian engagement in the Trans Caucasus. The geoeconomic significance of the region is a major attraction for the Russians. The Trans Caucasus region covers the oil reserves of the Caspian Sea. What is being contested now is the pipeline for the export of these oil resources. The decision on these pipelines will have deep political and economic effects. It will impact not only the oil-producing and oil-consuming states but also the states whose territory will provide passage to the pipeline. The most frequently discussed routes include passage through Chechnya in Russia and through Azerbaijan and Georgia. Armenia is another possible route for the pipelines.

The changing character of the Trans Caucasian geo-economy serves the geopolitics of Russia and the West. At the same time, world politics has also shaped the course of regional conflicts (EfeGurcan, 2020).

### **Eastward Expansion of NATO and Geopolitics**

Over the past 30 years, the eastward expansion of NATO is regarded as the major cause of conflict between Russia, the US and the West. Since the early years of the 1990s, NATO expanded east of Germany. In 1999 NATO celebrated its 50th anniversary with the inclusion of Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic. Later on, NATO included Bulgaria, Slovenia, Slovakia and Romania. It also included the countries of the former Soviet Union in 2004. These were the republics of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. This trend threatened Russia in international politics.

The conflict between the European Union and Russia over the enlargement of NATO reflects the elements of traditional geopolitics and strategic thinking. The recent expansion of NATO has also been driven by the geopolitical ambitions of the US. While the EU has traditionally denied any geopolitical interest in dealing with other states and shied away from Realpolitik, its foreign policy has been influenced by geopolitical thinking (Nitoiu and Sus, 2019). Even the official documents of the EU argue that the neighbourhood is a geopolitical space (Nitoiu and Sus,

2019). The engagement in the region has also been motivated by the need to promote the interests of the European Union. It provided the Kremlin with increased grounds for criticising the hostile expansion of European Union in the post-Soviet space. Putin called the expansion of NATO a direct threat to the security of Russia. Russia perceives it as an encroachment on its geopolitically defined neighbourhood and a geopolitical threat in its sphere of influence.

Countries in the post-Soviet space (or the Eastern Neighbourhood) are located in the space where the interests of both the European Union and Russia converge and conflict. The enlargement of NATO over the spaces in the neighbourhood, which is both unsettled and contested, will further change the geopolitical landscape of Eurasia. There is all possibility of the rise of traditional forms of geopolitics (including conflict of the spheres of influence) (Nitoiu and Sus, 2019).

The trust between Russia, the US and the West has further deteriorated since 2003-2004. It was the time of the Rose Revolution in Georgia and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine. According to Putin, it got flared up due to the funding and support of the US and EU. A few years later Georgia and Ukraine knocked at the door of NATO. The subsequent developments contributed to the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008. Although Ukraine scrapped its idea to join NATO in 2010, the decision was reversed in 2014 after the Maidan Revolution. It was an anti-Russian revolution. The subsequent geopolitical events culminated in the annexation of Crimea.

### **Space, Spatiality and Geopolitics of the Near Abroad**

After the disintegration of the USSR, there was a complete change in the geopolitical landscape of the region. It left Russia with new geopolitical borders. The rise of Putin in Russia further changed the geopolitical configuration of the region. Since then, Russia asserted its position as a global superpower and demonstrated its willingness to restore its damaged pride.

During the early and mid-1990s, several factors came together that contributed to the change in the geopolitics of the region. During this period, all most every country of the region witnessed ethnic conflicts. These conflicts in the region were the ethnocultural consequences of the disintegration of the USSR. As a consequence of the disintegration, more than 25 million ethnic Russians found themselves cut off from mainland Russia. As a consequence of the change in the ethnogeopolitical landscape of the former Soviet Union, many Russians became a national minority. They were no longer members of the leading nationality as they had been during the Soviet era. These Russians were denied citizenship in Latvia and Estonia. There was language problem in other countries. It led to ethnic conflicts in many parts of the region. Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Tajikistan witnessed armed conflicts between different ethnic communities.

In the wake of subsequent ethnopolitical developments, most of the ethnic Russians from the former Soviet republics moved to Russia. This migration of ethnic Russians came with its own set of socio-economic consequences. In response to the mass migration, the government of Russia pledged to assist the ethnic Russians (in their respective countries). Russia has other national interests in the regions of Near Abroad. It requires stability in the region. As Russia believes that it has a special responsibility in the Near Abroad.

Many of these countries witnessed separatist movements against rising nationalism. Russia supported these separatist movements as a defence of the rights of Russian-speaking minorities. For similar regions, Russia supported separatists in Transnistria in Moldova and Abkhazia and south Ossetia in Georgia. The domestic instability in these countries challenged their territorial integrity. But the western countries saw it as an opportunity for meddling in the internal affairs of the newly independent neighbouring countries. Maintenance of territorial integrity has become a security priority for Georgia since the early 1990s and it has become the top concern of Ukraine after the occupation of Crimea by Russia (Matsaberidze, 2015).

In the intervening years, the North Caucasus region of Chechnia witnessed the first major bloody conflict in Russia. Following the Chechen war (1994–1996), Russia lost control over the Chechen republic. From 1996 to 1999, the region had been a site of gross lawlessness. The Second Chechen War lasted from 1999 to 2009. Subsequently, Russia restored its control over the breakaway Chechen republic. Since then, Russia became more assertive in its foreign policy.

Ever since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the Caucasus region has also been a source of instability. It has been the scene of conflicts, particularly in Abkhazia, Southern Ossetia and Nagorno Karabakh. It has become one of the most volatile and potentially unstable regions in world politics. It also has the potential to reconfigure the geopolitics of the world in the years to come. The unresolved conflicts in the neighbouring regions, provide Russia an ability to exert its influence over these countries and play a key role in the peace negotiations (Alexander Cooley, 2017).

The secessionist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia represent one of the most serious threats to the security and stability of Georgia. This threat is exacerbated by Russian support for the separatists. Thus, the fundamental issues remain unresolved and the threat of renewed hostilities persists (Tracey German, 2006). Georgia has been inclined to seek the engagement of external players such as the US and the EU. It has also demonstrated its desire to integrate with the West. Georgian attempts have upset Russia, which is unhappy due to the European leanings of its



southern neighbour and more particularly with the growing military influence of US in the South Caucasus (Tracey German, 2006).

The separatist conflicts in the region have implications not only for the bilateral relation between Georgia and Russia and the stability of the Caucasus region but also for Europe and the wider international community. As NATO and the EU seek to expand their borders, it is becoming more important to focus on conflict resolution on the periphery, where the presence of unstable states poses a threat to the stability of its own member countries (Tracey German, 2006).

Due to the Russian interference, some break-away regions remain dependent on Russia for their economic development and security. It became the case of Georgia. The Russian incursion into Georgia (in August 2008) is regarded as a response to the Georgian attempt to retake control of the breakaway region of South Ossetia. Such interference by Russians inside Ukraine - particularly its support for the breakaway Donetsk and Luhansk follows this pattern (Alexander Cooley, 2017). Another example comes from Georgia where Russia recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states after the 2008, Russia-Georgia war. The majority of the Abkhazian and South Ossetian population claim Russian citizenship, thus Russia is able to cite concerns for the security of its citizens as a possible motive for the escalation of the conflicts. (Tracey German, 2006).

One popular explanation for the Russian action in Ukraine is the expansion of NATO. A number of experts have asserted that in 2014 the West essentially provoked Russia to take action in Ukraine in order to prevent NATO from reaching there. The revolution in Ukraine is equally blamed for it. Euromaidan uprising in Ukraine and its support by NATO impacted the relationship of Ukraine with Russia. Some scholars believe that the roots of the current crisis in Russia-Ukraine and Russia-West relations goes back to 2004, when a popular uprising took place in Ukraine that became known as the 'Orange Revolution'. Russians perceived the Orange Revolution as a Western conspiracy aimed at installing a pro-Western government in Ukraine. Russia wanted to prevent Ukraine from moving westward. Russia was also afraid that the Orange Revolution of Ukraine would lead to the diffusion of similar revolutions into Russia. Later on, Euromaidan or Euro Square protests erupted in Ukraine. Russian decision to annex Crimea came after the success of Euromaidan.

The Russian annexation of Crimea (aggression against Ukrainian) is regarded as a textbook case of international aggression. Crimea has had a majority of the ethnic Russian population. Thus, it was projected as an attempt to save ethnic Russians of Crimea from the 'fascists' who took power in Kyiv. It was also aimed to prevent the Russian Black Sea Fleet from being evicted from

its base in Sevastopol and prevent Ukraine from joining NATO. Crimea was a part of Russia from the time Catherine II took it from the Ottoman Empire. In 1954 the peninsula was transferred from the Russian republic to the Ukrainian republic within the USSR. The geopolitical history of Crimea is offered as additional justification for Russian actions. Russian objectives were to ensure non-discrimination of Russian speakers in Crimea and Ukraine and prevent Ukrainian membership to NATO and keep its naval base in Crimea. Post-Maidan Ukraine has become a proxy battleground of Russia and the West (Soroka and Stepniewski, 2020) where they clash for their geopolitical dominance. Many political pundits and scholars have noted, that retaining an effective measure of control over Ukraine is a critical component of Russian strategy to regain the status that was lost when the Soviet Union dissolved (Soroka and Stepniewski, 2020).

President Putin has insisted that Moscow will continue its efforts to influence the affairs in former Soviet states. He is aggrieved with the NATO and the EU for interfering in what it considers to be its own 'strategic backyard'. As a result, Moscow is continuously trying to reassert its waning dominance by means of political posturing and attempting to manipulate separatist conflicts as a foreign policy instrument (Tracey German, 2006). Moldova is also divided between different geopolitical preferences. The conflict over Transnistria continues to reinforce the perception of uncertainty about the future of the country (Ernest Vardanean, 2008). Moscow seeks to retain its influence over former Soviet states such as Moldova and Belarus, believing that it has 'lost' Georgia and Ukraine to the West (Tracey German, 2006).

### **Conclusion**

The post-Soviet states have developed as a geopolitical arena. On the one hand, Russia attempts to assert its influence on post-soviet countries, on the other hand, the west tries to extend its influence. West had supported the independence of Kosovo for the expansion of NATO. The colour revolutions of the mid-2000s that swept Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004–2005) and Kyrgyzstan (2005) are seen as western influence. Western geopolitics also revolves around the promotion of territorial integrity or reunification of these divided states as in Moldova and Georgia. On the other hand, the Russian geopolitics is guided towards restricting Western encroachment. Russia always attempts to repel Western influences.

The countries in the New Eastern Europe and the Near Abroad of Russia are divided along the pro-Western and pro-Russian alignment. In this landscape, the overlapping influences compete or engage in conflict. The geopolitics of the region is governed by the attempts to extend the sphere of influence by both Russia and the West.

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