

UKRAINE'S GEOPOLITICAL IDENTITY AS A DIACHRONIC  
FUNDAMENTAL ELEMENT IN THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN RELATIONS  
AND THE HERITAGE OF THE NEW COLD WAR\*

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*"Cheerly to sea; the signs of war advance: No king of England, if not king of  
France."*

**Ending words of Scene II, "Southampton. A council-chamber"  
"Henry V", William Shakespeare**

## **Introduction**

The current Russo-Ukrainian crisis brought unprecedented, historic, nodal milestones for the international community, in international relations and global geopolitics, which significantly influence the course of the 21<sup>st</sup> century political history, by irrevocably altering the international equilibrium and becoming the landmark of a new era in international relations and global politics. Indeed, the recent cataclysmic developments in Ukraine, generated a new geopolitical framework, both in the active supra-system as well as in the regional sub-systems. However, all these have surfaced not due to dysfunctional, or subjective factors in the Russo-Ukrainian relations. The Russo-Ukrainian crisis that triggered the current NATO-Russian crisis can be heavily considered as an outcome of the re-emergence of Ukraine's geopolitical identity *vis-à-vis* Russia, a traditional Continental Power.

## **Geographic terrain and Geopolitical context**

From a purely geographic perspective, and nude from the Cold War ideological beliefs on Marxism-Leninism, the current crisis is placed in the mound ring, the Rimland according to Spykman, adjacent to the Heartland of Eurasia, falling within the geopolitical framework of the antagonism between the Naval-

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\* This article was completed before the Russian invasion in Ukraine.

commercial Powers and the Continental Power. Moreover, one could claim that both the Russo-Ukrainian crisis, as early as in 2013-14 as well as the imminent redistribution of power and re-drafting of the borders in the Greater Middle East (particularly Libya and Syria), are a reasonable (and possibly geostrategic) continuation of the Arab-Muslim uprisings also known as the "Arab Spring". Indeed, considering, *inter alia*, that the latter have also taken place in a geographical region that is also part of the Rimland, the present crisis seem to be the continuation of the ignition in Maghreb, in the context of a domino effect from the east to the west.

### **History of the geopolitical background forms the context of Russo-Ukrainian relations**

The Janus nature of Ukraine society is not something new in world politics as well as the systematic suppression exercised on it by Kremlin. Kiev's efforts to disengage from Moscow constitute a significant part of the traditional context of the Russo-Ukrainian relations. More specifically, in the last century the Ukrainians entered the Great War in 1914 supporting in great numbers both the Russian Empire and the Central Powers in the southeast front. Moreover, during the war Ukraine declared its state autonomy, with many forms and under several names, of socialist nature though, from the Bolshevik Russia, while with the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March of 1918, Kremlin agreed to officially define certain Russo-Ukrainian borders. Nonetheless, in the following year, the Red Army invaded Ukraine, resulting in its final incorporation in the USSR in 1922. Over the next decade, in relation to its systematic harsh treatment by Kremlin, its conviction to famine by Stalin in 1932-33 is a worldwide unique historic phenomenon. Stalin's NKVD demanded confiscation of all grains and food supplies from rural Ukraine and at the same time forbade the movement of Ukrainian citizens from rural areas to towns. During that period of the Holodomor<sup>1</sup> approximately 7 million Ukrainians starved to death, i.e. 1/3 of the country's population. It is worth noting that during WWII, the deliberate Nazi declarations cultivated in the Ukrainian's anti-Soviet/Russian feelings, for a Greater Ukraine, liberated from the Communist yoke of Kremlin, resulted to the creation of Ukrainian battalions under the command of Wehrmacht in the Eastern front. Indeed, the Nazi invaders in the first stage of the occupation regarded them as friendly, almost a 'salvation' army of liberators, before the Red Army prevailed in the eastern front.

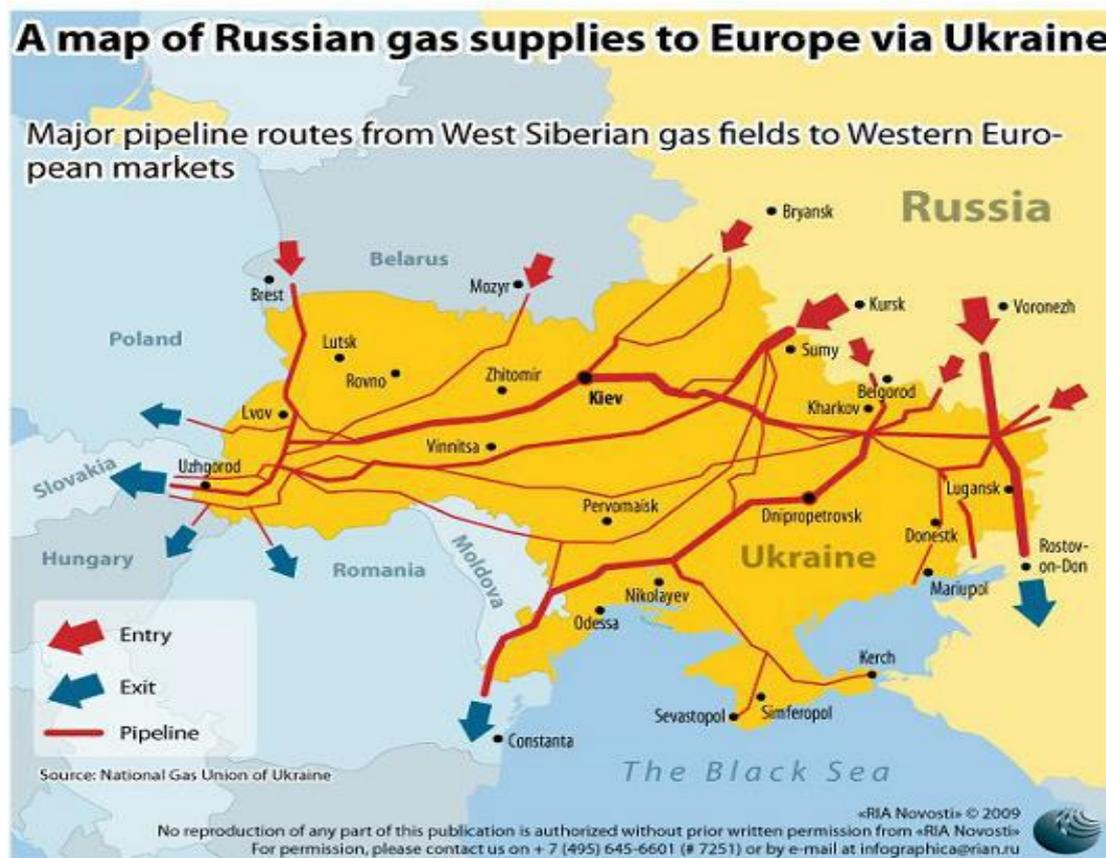
As a consequence of the effect of geopolitics on the Ukrainian society, Ukrainian people are diachronically divided in two main lines of political and cultural thought: the pro-European and the pro-Russian. However, whichever political stance prevails, it is forced by the circumstances to maintain a balance between Russia and Europe, East and West. This usually culminates to the establishment of a special relationship with the EU, without pursuing accession either to the

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<sup>1</sup> The term Holodomor derived from the Ukrainian words for hunger (holod) and extermination (mor).

East Partnership, the Eurasian Economic Union, CSTO or NATO, thus confirming the historical and political patterns of the Ukrainian nation's legacy.

It is made clear that the simple historic retrospect of the past century records the systematic attempt of the European states to penetrate the geographical area of contemporary Ukraine, as well as Moscow's firm intention to maintain its influence at any cost. After the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, in April 1986, the Ukrainian public opinion once more retrieved its anti-Russian feelings. In the current phase, following the National Independence in 1991, the Russo-Ukrainian relations are still of a singular nature. The total Russian population is approximately 17,5% mainly located in the eastern part of the country while the majority of the 77,5% of Ukrainians reside in the central and western part. The great vulnerability of Ukraine was clearly seen in the crisis of 2009, when Moscow shut off the taps of the energy mixture for 21 days, from 1<sup>st</sup> to 21 of January, thus shocking the European economy, and literally freezing Ukraine.<sup>2</sup>



Map no 1: The routes of the Russian natural gas via Ukrainian territory for delivery to European states

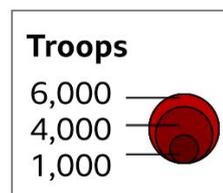
Apart from the Ukrainian dependence on the Russian energy sources and know-how on energy matters, the Ukrainian state has always felt Russia's political influence both in domestic and foreign affairs. During the crisis of 2013-14

<sup>2</sup> See map no 1.

Crimea declared independence. After the referendum of 16 March 2014, in which a vast majority of 90% supported reunification with Russia, on 18 March Russia formally annexed it. Similarly, the regions of Luhansk/Lugansk and Donetsk have declared their autonomous status, in the form of independent states (Lugansk People’s Republic and Donetsk’s People’s Republic) in the same year. Nonetheless, they are both unrecognised and the areas outside the main administrative centres of Lugansk and Donetsk remains still a battlefield (Donbass region) for the Ukrainian army and the pro-russian separatists. In this sense, since the end of 2021, the current crisis found fertile ground to develop in the Donbass region in the field,<sup>3</sup> and to grow between NATO and Russia, both at the levels of diplomacy and propaganda, along with ongoing limited hybrid operations from both sides.

## Where Russia's troops are positioned

- Newly arrived units
- ▲ Russian units in Belarus exercises
- Permanently stationed units



Source: Rochan Consulting, Maxar, 20 February



Map no 2: The situation in Ukraine on 20 February 2022

<sup>3</sup> See maps no 2 and 3.



\*Russia annexed Crimea in 2014

BBC

Map no 3: The situation in the Donbass region in February 2022

### Ukraine's geopolitical identity as a linchpin state

It seems that historically, Ukraine was always of a significant geopolitical value to Moscow. Zbigniew Brzezinski famously argued that *"without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be a Eurasian empire"*.<sup>4</sup> But what did he mean by that? In the midst of the Cold War, back in 1986, Brzezinski had formulated in his book titled *Game Plan, How To Conduct The U.S. Soviet Contest*, the notion of the linchpin state. In the current geopolitical architecture of the Cold War there were three basic theaters of antagonism/war between NATO and Warsaw Pact: the European theater, the Far East theater and the West Asia theater in the soft underbelly of the Soviet Union.<sup>5</sup> And according to him, *"The political outcome of the contests on each of the three central strategic fronts is likely to be determined largely by who gains or retains control over several key countries that have become the geopolitical linchpin in their respective regions. A linchpin state is one that is intrinsically important and in some sense "up for grabs". The importance of a linchpin state might stem from its geopolitical position that generates regional political and/or economic influence that makes it militarily significant. Its vulnerability raises the possibility that it might be susceptible to meddling or take over by another state, thus affecting its foreign affiliations. Other states may be equally or even more important but their firm bandwagoning on one or the other system indicates that they are fixed points,*

<sup>4</sup> Brzezinski, Zbigniew, *The Grand Chessboard*, Basic Books, New York, 1997, p. 46.

<sup>5</sup> See map no 4.

*not catalytic linchpins*".<sup>6</sup> According to Brzezinski, during the Cold War these states are the following: "These linchpin states are Poland and Germany on the far western front; South Korea and the Philippines on the far eastern front; and either Iran or the combination of Afghanistan and Pakistan on the southwestern front [the soft underbelly]".<sup>7</sup>

It is remarkable, that in post-Cold War era, the state that meets all the geopolitical criteria of a linchpin state is by far Ukraine. Indeed, in a projection of Brzezinski's logic about linchpin states, the current crisis reminds and confirms their importance in the modern world. Maybe for this launches a new Cold War between the Naval Powers and the Continental Power.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, to Poland's role during the Cold War, the control of Ukraine, would help the Continental Power to reinforce its position in Europe, exerting pressure on Poland, but also influencing the states of Eastern and Central Europe, while a political linkage with Germany would result to the transformation of the European political balance in favor of Moscow. Moreover, the control over Ukraine would increase the dynamics and the geostrategic alternatives for Kremlin, by ensuring sufficient space for the Russian Fleet in the Black Sea and by supporting catalytically in the ultimate projection of the Russian power *via* the Ukrainian territory in the Warm Waters of the Mediterranean Sea. Indeed, the annexation of Crimea by Russia in March of 2014 has, by all odds, retrieved the international attention on the issue of the geopolitical importance of the Straits of Bosphorus and Dardanelles, exit points of the Black Sea to the Mediterranean Sea and the 'outside world'. Even though they are governed by special agreements of the international law, they consist sovereign part of the Turkish state, a NATO member. More specifically, in the first place, the Lausanne Treaty legally entrenched Turkish authority to the Straits, at the same time clearly granting permanent permission for all foreign battle ships to pass through undisturbed. Nevertheless, in 1936, with the Treaty of Montreux, Turkey was given the right to limit the time of passage through and stay within the Straits to vessels from non-coastal to the Black Sea states, such as for example, the US, Greece or the United Kingdom. Now, in the New Cold War

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<sup>6</sup> Brzezinski, Zbigniew, *Game Plan, How To Conduct The U.S. Soviet Contest*, Atlantic Monthly Press, Boston, 1986, p. 52.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52-3.

<sup>8</sup> For many geopolitical analysts and scholars in international relations, the New Cold War has begun as early as in 2014, during the previous Russo-Ukrainian crisis of 2013-14, when despite the upcoming agreement for the de-escalation of the crisis in the four-party in Geneva on 17 April 2014, NATO's warnings towards Moscow was firmly stand. NATO's General Secretary Anders Fogh Rasmussen stated on the 8 April 2014, in a press conference in Paris that "If Russia were to intervene further in Ukraine, it would be a historical mistake. It would have grave consequences for our relationship with Russia and would further isolate Russia internationally. And in a Cold War aroma, General Secretary with the security of the NATO members in mind he concluded that "It is obvious that the developments in the situation of security in Ukraine and along the borders makes the revision of our plans for our defense imperative, as well as how to reinforce our collective defense." and called Moscow to withdraw the military units that have been deployed alongside the Russo-Ukrainian borderline. [NATO - Opinion: Press conference by NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen at the NATO Transformation Seminar, 08-Apr.-2014.](#)

sense of things, amidst the crisis, a potential misunderstanding, or even worse an intentional artful instigation by the Western Community and NATO, (i.e. Turkey), aiming at the revision of the existing legal regime or common practice naval conditions concerning the passage and stay of Russian trade, but predominantly warships, could escalate the crisis, where Turkey would be the main political and natural 'terrain' of dispute and/or actual confrontation.



Map no 4: The three theatres of the Cold War

### **From trans-Siberian to inter-Oceanic? Western Community fears as heritage to the New Cold War**

It is not a secret that the Americans and some of their Western allies escalate their propaganda, concerning an imminent Russian invasion in Ukraine, even that Moscow's strategic plan include the siege of Kiev, itself. This tactic is not something new, to the Ukrainian issue. As early as in 2014, the envoy of *Time Magazine* in the area, Simon Shuster, has criticized President Putin on all matters, saying that he is advancing in an effort to further break up Europe, destroy the NATO umbrella and impose the Russian influence in the entire world.<sup>9</sup> In addition, he comments that Putin has a great talent for creating problems that only he can resolve and for this reason he pursues crises that the westerns are trying to avoid, giving the Syrian crisis as an example. As the

<sup>9</sup> "Putin has once again shown that he can harness the language of humanitarianism in excusing interventionism.". "Russia Lashes Out at U.S. 'Monopoly' on Humanitarianism With Aid Convoy to Ukraine", *Time Magazine*, August, 2014, New York. [Russia Attacks U.S. 'Monopoly on Humanism' With Ukraine Aid Convoy | Time](#)

voice of American great fear, Shuster concludes that Putin aims to shrink the American influence and wants a Europe from Portugal to the Russian coasts of the Pacific with Moscow as its epicenter, in a real subtle reference to the Eurasian dreams<sup>10</sup> of leaders such as Napoleon or Adolf Hitler. However, the Moscow's ambitions for a Eurasian prevalence with spearhead the geopolitical factor of energy, has been repeatedly stated by certain poles of western analysts and think-tanks, in an attempt to project the future of Eurasia.



*Time Magazine, August 2014.*

### **The Russo-Ukrainian crisis and the trends of the New Cold War**

The background of the Russo-Ukrainian crisis is more or less known to all. At the present stage, the conflict between governmental military forces and the pro-Russian, Ukrainian autonomists of Lugansk and Donetsk, focuses exclusively on parts of east Ukraine, where Kiev's government, since the crisis of 2013-14, had gradually recaptured parts of the under autonomisation east pro-Russian administrative units (область), (*oblasts*), of Luhansk, and Donetsk. Moscow supports the latter morally, politically, diplomatically and with humanitarian aid as well as financially and with weaponry systems covertly, mainly of limited capacity. Nonetheless it does not intervene with direct provision of military aid, for reasons of national strategy. It is more that certain that the autonomisation of the east Ukrainian regions, aiming at the future administrative linkage to Russia would be equal to a direct confrontation with

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<sup>10</sup> For Eurasianism, see Dugin, Alexander, *The Fourth Political Theory*, Translated by Mark Sleboda and Michael Millerman, Arktos Media Ltd, London, 2012.

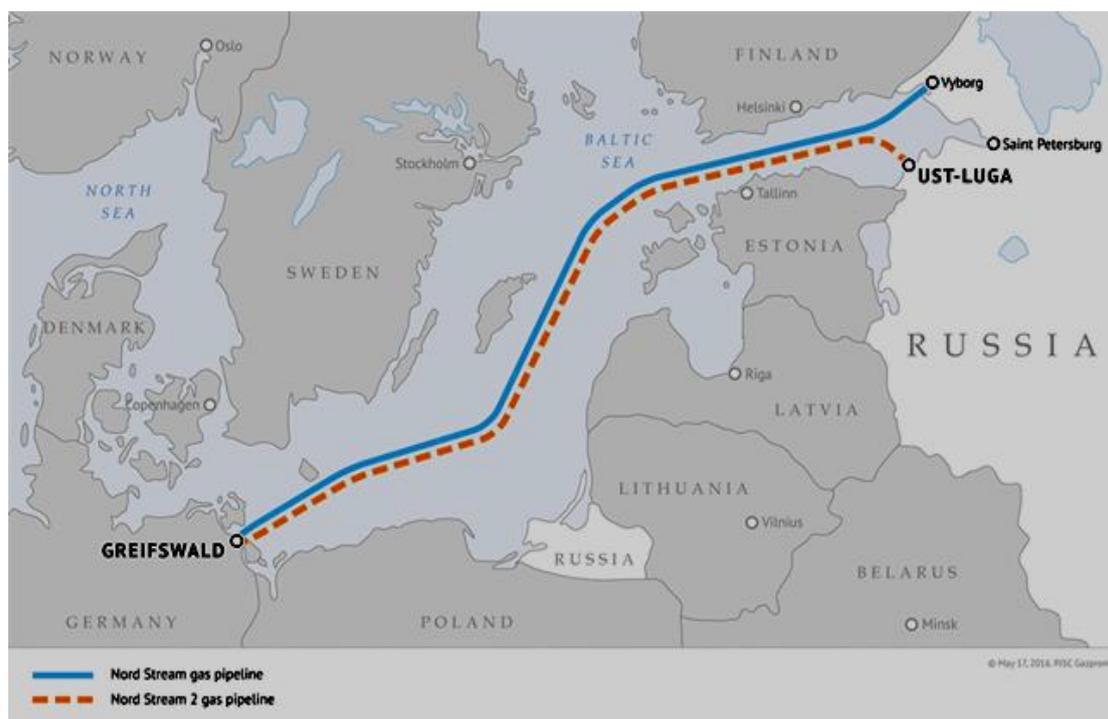
the Western Community, the US, NATO, EU and Germany, something that Kremlin cannot cope with. However, this is not a foreign policy goal for Moscow. On the contrary, in geopolitical terms, an 'unbroken' Ukraine with the industrially developed, as well as rich in energy reserves eastern part remaining in the country, enables Kremlin to control Kiev's economic prosperity, at least for the next few decades. In addition, it empowers it, to co-shape the variables of the triangular geopolitical sub-system that is created from the interaction of the Zone of Visegrad, (*Visegrádská or Visegrádi or Vyšehradská or Wyszehradzka*), the northern Balkans and the pro-west Kiev, at any time. Indeed, by exploiting the long arm of the eastern, pro-Russian regions, Kremlin exerts political influence throughout the country, to its western end in the Carpathian Ruthenia Mountains and Bessarabia, achieving to a large extent the alignment of Kiev with its foreign policy callings. Furthermore, the precedent of the annexation of Crimea in 2014, has opened new political and diplomatic 'fronts' for Moscow, (i.e. see the autonomous region of Transnistria), which expect similar actions and with which Moscow cannot cope on a political level and will be 'a headache' in the future. It becomes apparent that Kremlin is not primarily annoyed by Kiev's low-medium level relations with the western community, but is strongly interested for the adherence to the fundamental principles of the Russian Policy of "near abroad" (*ближнее зарубежье*), (*blizhneye zarubezhiye*), according to which it perceives the geographical area surrounding Russia, which coincides with the former Soviet Republics, as its privileged geostrategic terrain and rightful sphere of post-Soviet influence.<sup>11</sup> For this reason, any discussion of Ukraine's accession to NATO is perceived by Moscow, as a severe aggression against its red lines.

It becomes apparent that the current dispute between the Western Community, and particularly the US, with Russia, which is expressed with political suspiciousness and distrust, statements of recrimination, a war of propaganda and a programme of extraordinary military and aero-nautical exercises on both sides of the Russian-Eastern Europe-Baltic Sea, Black Sea and Russia-Ukraine borders, as well as the threat of an extra series of escalating sanctions on Moscow if invades, including the normal operation of the Nord Stream II, creates a political-military framework within which the rest of Europe, and much more its eastern part, does not have much room for maneuver. Indeed, no state of the said area is in a position to act autonomously, pursuing its own national interests amidst the crisis. The majority of the states, being either members of the EU or NATO, or both, owe to promote their national interests *via* the mechanisms of the institution they belong to, committing to follow a clear foreign policy that stems from very specific international conventions and binding agreements they have signed with Brussels (EU, NATO). The same

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<sup>11</sup> Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Moscow has done everything in its power in order to restore relations with the 14 new Republics that were created and in time to obtain the lion's share in the influence of their domestic affairs and foreign policy, by systematically promoting its own agenda. For more on Russian "near abroad", see Sotiropoulos, Ioannis, P., "Afghanistan: The Geopolitics of the Russian Déjà vu". Eastern Mediterranean Policy Note (EMPN), Cyprus Center for European and International Affairs (CCEIA), The University of Nicosia, No 67, October 2021.

applies even to those states that do not belong to the aforementioned supra-national political-economic union and collective defence organisation, since they are either candidate members or aspiring ones. Accordingly, they need to weigh carefully their proposed and implemented foreign policy on a daily basis, given that any move they make could be perceived by the power centers, (international poles of influence), of NATO and the EU as erroneous, creating problems in their accession course. For example, on a bilateral level, many of the South-east Europe states are heavily dependent on international poles of power, such as the EU, US, Russia and Germany and inevitably opt to follow the safe route of political and economic alignment with their patrons. This 'releases and diffuses' the tendency for reorientation of the international security system into a form of a New Cold War, where phenomena similar to those in the period of the classic Cold War occurred, namely, the alignment of the liberal states behind and by the Naval Power of the USA vs the Continental Power of Russia. However, in this new form of war, the ideological confrontation is not in the first rank of the *agendas* of the opponents, since, instead of socio-economic development model, is focused primarily on the individual, and matters such as tolerance and diversity, LGBT issues, but also the establishment of the democratic ideas, the freedom of speech and the ways of political confrontation, with Moscow retaining the conservative position for itself.



Map no 5: The new card in Moscow's hands: The Nord Stream II

## Conclusion

The Russo-Ukrainian crisis is not created by a subjective opportunistic political feeling or by a dysfunctional process in the foreign policy of the actors' states. President Putin has not been driven by a great deal of nostalgia, but of great

deal of geopolitical realism. The historical course of the Russo-Ukrainian relations, amidst upsides and depression reveals crisis' geopolitical nature. The historical triangular pattern of the Imperial Berlin-Tsarist Saint Petersburg-Kiev is repeated as Washington/Brussels/Berlin-Moscow-Kiev with the added value of the European effort for energy security, which elevates the significance of options to the zenith. Nonetheless, the current crisis is not an energy crisis. It is the flourish of the history of the geopolitical truth that was buried for quite some 30 years. Ukraine is the modern linchpin state for the Continental Power of Russia, in its geostrategic dispute with the Western Community, the Naval Powers. It becomes apparent that the Russo-Ukrainian crisis generated a NATO-Russia crisis that is to affect the world also in the long-run. In the emerging geopolitical framework, the so-called New Cold War, the Western Community maintains and uses at their discretion their technological supremacy as well as their financial institutions global network advantage, when Russia attempts to maximize the advantage of every cubic centimeter of natural gas that it produces for export to Europe, *inter alia* by the new energy card of Nord Stream II. The new confrontation has a series of vital and tangible causes for the Western Community, that is the containment of an expanding Russia, *via* the establishment of democratic values, the ideas of tolerance and diversity in society, freedom of speech and political pluralism, worldwide. On the other hand, Moscow, has its own *agenda* in this antagonistic process, namely to secure the 'near abroad' Russian policy, by controlling the linchpin state of Ukraine and protecting the nearly 8,5 million of Russians, Ukrainian citizens, in the country.