

Turbulent energy transformations in Central Europe: Nord Stream projects in the context of geopolitics

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Abstract: *The sabotage related to the Nord Stream pipelines does not only signify the Russo-Ukrainian War's escalated realities and potential future risks, also tied to the energy security of supply, but in addition to traditional economic and energetic dilemmas, it also has a specific meaning in light of classic geopolitical concepts. Our study aims to highlight that the contradictions between the direct or indirect nation-state stakeholders, even nowadays, fit into the logic of the power plays illustrated in traditional geopolitical theories. And thus, the events related to the Nord Stream 2 project, as guiding principles, underline not only the energy relations of relevant international state actors appearing in the pipeline's environment but also in the context of geopolitical positions and the structure of potential geopolitical transformations.*

Keywords: *geopolitics, Nord Stream 2, natural gas, gas pipeline, LNG*

I. Introduction

For most news consumers, the Nord Stream 2 pipeline has not appeared to be more than the average energy project up until 2022. The endeavour itself consists of two 1230 km long pipelines with an aggregate capacity of 55 billion cubic metres per year (Nord Stream 2 AG 2021a). Construction began in 2018 and was finalised in the autumn of 2021. Nord Stream 2 AG, a project company owned by Gazprom, was in charge of the implementation. Regarding its route, the pipeline runs through the Baltic Sea from Vyborg, Russia to Greifswald, Germany (Nord Stream 2 AG 2021b). Fifty percent of the 9.5 billion euro invest-

ment is financed by Gazprom, while five giant European energy corporations, namely Wintershall, Uniper, Engie, Royal Dutch Shell and OMV provide the remaining 50% of the funds (Gazprom 2017).¹

Being observant, one could recognise Nord Stream 2 as a highly controversial energy project originally supported by Russia and Germany, while most European stakeholders, as well as the United States, were opposing it. All of this seemed to be apparent during the progression of the endeavour, as one did not need to be a policy expert or project manager genius to acknowledge that the implementation of the pipeline did not go without difficulties due to the conflict between the related stakeholders. The laying of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline was halted on several occasions due to certification-related issues and the sanctioning of construction companies, the completion originally planned for 2019 was only realised in 2021 (de Jong – Van de Graaf 2021).

Following this, the licencing procedure was initiated to obtain an operating permit for the pipeline, which falls under the jurisdiction of the German regulatory authorities with energy being one of the policy areas in which the EU and its member states exercise shared competence (European Union 2007). Witnessing as the procedure was prolonged, it became evident that for this energy project balancing on the frontier of politics and economic considerations, along with policy deliberations, it is the great geopolitical powers that steer the proceedings, and the customary bureaucratic sluggishness of regulatory authorities only strengthens this notion.

Just prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, on 22 February, Germany announced suspending the certification process of Nord Stream 2, once again halting the project indefinitely. As a result, the future of a completely operational pipeline became quite uncertain before it even started functioning. Amongst experts, it was apparent that the decades-long Soviet/Russian-European links, particularly the pragmatic Russian-German energy relations, served as a strong basis for realising Nord Stream 2; however, the decision to halt the project was more than a mere falling out in the shadow of war between the two states.

Moreover, on 26 September 2022, tremors of explosions were detected by Danish authorities, after which leaks were discovered on the Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2 pipelines (Rasmussen 2022). Though not operating at the time, both pipelines were filled with natural gas when the blasts occurred. The leaks were discovered in the Exclusive Economic Zones of Denmark and Sweden, investigations were conducted in the following weeks and all evidence indicated sabotage, natural causes behind the leaks were ruled out (Skopljak 2022). Es-

1 Prior to the current Nord Stream 2, inaugurated in 2011, a considerable German-Russian natural gas market collaboration, the Nord Stream 1 pipeline was realised (Wood – Henke 2021). Similarly, along with Gazprom, major European energy companies Wintershall, PEG Infrastruktur AG, Gasunie and Engie participated in this pipeline project (Nord Stream AG 2011).

pecially in light of these progressions and more than anything, the sabotage of the project reflected the transformation of geopolitical balances of power.

The geopolitical theoretical framework and nation-state oriented focus of our study are in need of a brief justification. Globalisation coming into effect at the dawn of the modern era and gaining speed at an unprecedented level after the cold war posed a significant challenge for classical geopolitical thinking. According to a number of experts, technological development leads to the demise of distances or constantly shrinking maps (Bracken 1999), and an ever-denser space-time coordinate system (Nayar 2005). In this setting, the view according to which globalisation undermines the explanatory power of global political theories favouring geopolitical considerations seemed to gain more importance (McGrew 2021).

However, we are of a different opinion. The considerations and facts of geopolitics also prevail in the 21st century, especially when it comes to the energy sector. We believe that geopolitical reasoning remains crucial in understanding and shaping the processes taking place in the international milieu. With globalisation, our world has become remarkably fragile,² which could bring about a certain renaissance of the geopolitical way of thinking as well as the recognition of the fact that states continue to play an indispensable role in the international order.

Considering its public sector and government-controlled nature, the energy sector is highly exposed to political currents, providing further rationale for studying nations as geopolitical actors. Decisions are typically politicised, energy corporations are often owned or supervised by the state, energy prices frequently emerge in political conversations, determining which power source and in what ratio the energy use of a given state or entity is based on (energy mix) is a strategy of a political nature and the management and regulation of market failures requires state intervention (Farkas 2019).

In our view, the Russo-Ukrainian War beginning on 24 February also warrants the need to examine states in a geopolitical context and through this lens, to focus on concepts based on geographical considerations. This event is of particular importance from the point of Nord Stream 2 as well,³ seeing as the Russian aggression, among other things, has the potential to evoke changes in the energy sector that in extreme cases could lead to the dramatic alteration of the current trends of globalisation.

2 This is justified by the fact that the belief in the supremacy of the market appears to be wavering as a result of the 2008/2009 global financial crisis, the recently discovered vulnerability of global supply chains during the pandemics and the risks related to security of supply arising from the planet's increasing energy demand.

3 Of course, it poses a thought-provoking question to what degree the Russian offensive can be explained by the obsolete thinking of the architects of the 'old geopolitics' introduced by Richard Falk (2012) and to what extent the events give validation to this approach, but the fact remains that the war has started, and Hannibal is once again at the gates.

Therefore, it can be stated with great certainty that the current affairs of world politics once again generate the need to blow the dust off traditional geopolitical literature and reinterpret its theories adjusted to contemporary challenges. In our opinion, this also helps in making sense of the approaches and angles behind Nord Stream 2 and, through this lens, understanding the related transformation processes.

To provide a theoretical foundation, geopolitical conceptualisation will take up the first part of our analysis, along with a brief historical overview of the field of study by mentioning the theoretical framework the current study is based on. Subsequently, we will point out the relevance of geopolitics in the energy segment. By doing so, we will arrive at the geopolitical dilemma of Nord Stream 2 and the strategies of the project's paramount stakeholders will be introduced with respect to classical geopolitical considerations. For each state actor individually, we will review their geopolitical attributes most relevant from an energy standpoint, then with regard to the project, the changes prior to and after the outbreak of the war will be examined.

Our study aims to review the geopolitical background behind the energy-related positions and strategic aspects of the stakeholders most affected by the implementation of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. The logic behind selecting the particular state actors to be examined and the structure in which they will be reviewed in the study is explained at length prior to the individual analysis of the stakeholders.

Our hypothesis states that the Nord Stream 2 project, going beyond its conventional policy and project framework, also sheds some light on the interrelationships of relevant international state actors appearing in the pipeline's environment as a real litmus test

II. Theoretical framework

Colloquially, we use the phrase geopolitics in a number of contexts. As a result, the expression can be a part of virtually any discussion related to international political issues, without carrying substantial meaning. In fact, geopolitics is the geographical dimension of politics where the power relations between political units are demonstrated visually, employing geographical terminology.⁴ The expression itself originates from the ancient Greek terms *geos* (Earth) and *politicos* (community), so the concerted actions of communities determined by space and politics, that is to say, the considerations of power and seizing and maintaining it, serve as the basis of the concept. In accordance with this

⁴ At present it is a generally accepted view that geopolitics, along with the realist-non-realist and the idealist-institutionalist paradigm, has become the third classical theoretical approach to study international relations (Szilágyi 2018).

view, geopolitics is none other than the impact geography has on groups of individuals.⁵

According to the Dictionary of Geopolitics, this particular approach to politics on the one hand provides descriptive information and explanations regarding foreign policy decisions by introducing the geographical, demographic and resource-related characteristics, i.e., the specific spatial structure of regions and countries; on the other hand, geopolitics can also alter and transform these elements, thus as a particular ideological construction, it can serve political interests and aspirations (O'Loughin 1994).

Renowned expert of political geography John Agnew's view is that every geopolitical construction, though considering itself objective and based on scientific facts, is eventually human-made, so through a specific worldview it describes political reality from a narrative aligning with the existing power structure and is even able to alter it by explaining momentarily sought-after relations with geographical determination.⁶ In this context, geopolitical considerations can offer a theoretical foundation and support for state administrations by providing (sometimes just seemingly) scientific geographical views.

This is no different in the case of the Nord Stream 2 project, which as a particular spatial construction influences and also sheds some light on the development of geopolitical relations. The idea and, geographically, the implementation of the project alone carries the potential to alter geopolitical reality and to expose the power relations obscured behind it.

III. Geopolitical concepts

Geopolitics began to move to the centre of attention in the late 19th century. The first notable political concepts analysing international relations from a geographical standpoint, which hold significance even today, came into existence around that time. The current study builds on a number of such approaches relevant to Nord Stream 2 as well, putting the individual strategies of nation-states into the right perspective.

This work is in particular based on the Anglo-Saxon geopolitical school's main concepts, at present considered classics, such as the approach of Halford Mack-

5 As Geoffrey Sloan and Colin Gray mention in their work entitled 'Geopolitics, Geography and Strategy', one of the aims of geopolitics is emphasising that political power is not only determined by human and material resources, but also the geographical conditions and circumstances within which said power is exercised (Gray – Sloan 1999).

6 Scholars in the field of so-called critical geopolitics are in fact attempting to unveil the interests related to power, hidden behind certain geopolitical approaches. *The Geopolitics Reader* by authors Gearóid Ó Tuathail, Simon Dalby and Paul Routledge can be mentioned here among other prominent works (Ó Tuathail et al. 1998).

inder⁷ (1861–1947), a pioneer of the discipline, who worked at the turn of the 20th century and who is considered by many the geopolitical founder of the international system in the aftermath of World War II. Several other geopolitical theoreticians also contributed to the theoretical framework of the Heartland-centred American containment policy. Chief amongst them are US naval officer Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840–1914), founder of the so-called sea power geopolitical approach and Nicholas J. Spykman (1893–1943), a Dutch-born American political scientist and strategist. Both played a significant role in establishing the foundations of the geopolitical aspects of the international order after 1945, therefore their views also serve as guiding principles in our study. Considering the geo-strategic views after World War II, during the Cold War and the following period, the works of Henry Kissinger⁸ and Zbigniew Brzezinski⁹ are especially notable and are also of key importance in the current study's theoretical framework.

Undoubtedly, our research cannot be all-encompassing despite being strongly based on the above-mentioned theoretical approaches. The accumulated geopolitical knowledge and the opulence of geography-based political concepts carry the prospect of including so-called critical geopolitics¹⁰ or geo-economic trends in our analysis. However, this would go beyond the framework of the current study. Similarly, the topic at hand could be examined in the context of Central-European and Soviet/Russian concepts, considering that in this region the gradual rehabilitation of geopolitics¹¹ began after the Cold War, though this would also require a separate study to be conducted.

IV. Geopolitics and natural gas

The current relations and structure of world politics has numerous areas that can be examined through geopolitical aspects, chief of which is energy, the field that by providing its engine guarantees the endurance of our globalised world,

7 It is interesting to note that the Scottish-born scholar did not use the expression geopolitics in his works.

8 The geopolitical method of Henry Kissinger (1923–) can be considered a specific aspect of the realist approach to international relations, with realising American preferences regarding balances of power at its focal point.

9 Zbigniew Brzezinski (1928–2017) focused on highlighting the geopolitical aspects of the political power plays aiming to acquire resources and as a result, influence, from the normative perspective that upholding peace, that is to say, the stability of the international order, can only be realised by maintaining the hegemony of the American Empire.

10 Among others, notable studies of this innovative field are the works of Saul Bernard Cohen, Yves Lacoste and John Agnew.

11 Germany's situation is particularly interesting in this respect. Though the current study references the views of German geopolitical theoreticians working between the two World Wars (Friedrich Ratzel (1844–1904), Karl Haushofer (1896–1946), since these outlooks, in part based on Mackinder's work, ultimately led to Germany's failure in World War II – discrediting the geopolitical approach for decades – they are less relevant with respect to German relations in our research.

not to mention establishes its sociocultural dimensions. Fossil fuels paved the way for the dynamic unfolding of the globalisation process and, simultaneously, the rise of energy security of supply dilemmas. All this placed the geography-based political approach to resource-related challenges into the focal point of geopolitical thinking.

Energy has become too important from a security perspective to be treated as a regular economic good. Globalisation would have been inconceivable without satisfying the ever-increasing energy usage. Considering the current global demographic trends, the growing energy consumption, partially due to the rising demand in developing countries and the problem of resources as they are becoming less available at higher costs, we believe that the struggles for energy carriers and natural resources (ensuring the production and storage of the former) is turning into the key factor. So in a nutshell, the issue of energy security is turning into the key factor of geopolitical considerations.

Reviewing the latest tendencies in Europe makes it apparent that the continuously diminishing domestic production of member states, which more than halved between 2010 and 2020, is less and less able to satisfy the growing natural gas consumption of the EU (Eurostat 2022). The European Union is struggling with substantial dependency on imports, the primary source of which in the case of natural gas is Russia; in 2020 the country alone supplied more than 40% of the total import volume of the EU (Liuhto 2022). In spite of frequent, renewed efforts by the European Union to diversify its natural gas supplies, this dependency has only grown more prominent through the course of the last decade. For Europe, the significance of Russian import is well-demonstrated by the extensive pipeline infrastructure on the continent.¹² All of this is of key importance with regard to the pace of the ongoing energy transformation efforts triggered by the war in Ukraine, which will be mentioned in the following chapters.

In the following section of the study, the most significant state actors regarding the Nord Stream 2 project will be examined, namely Germany, Russia and the United States, followed by EU members Denmark, Poland and the Baltic States, and finally, Ukraine. The stakeholders will be reviewed in this specific order, as German-Russian relations serve as a starting point for our analysis. Subsequently, this scope will be widened to first examine American-Russian links, then to include the relevant actors with regard to the project situated between Germany and Russia, starting with the EU's north eastern regions – Denmark, Poland and the Baltics – and then Ukraine. State actors relevant from the Russo-Ukrainian War's perspective, but not having a substantial or direct influence on the future of the Nord Stream 2 project will not be included in

¹² Nord Stream 1 and Yamal-Europe in the north, the Ukrainian gas corridor with the Brotherhood, Soyuz and Progress pipelines also supplying Central Europe; the transport line reaching Turkey (through Ukraine, Moldova, Romania and Bulgaria) in the southeast and the Blue Stream and TurkStream pipelines running across the Black Sea (Gazprom 2021).

the study, therefore the United Kingdom, V4 countries – with the exception of Poland – and China will not be reviewed.

For each stakeholder, geopolitical aspects will be the first point of study in order to provide a framework and establish the logic for further examinations, followed by considerations of the energy sector and the Nord Stream 2 project. In this context, the actors' strategies and motivations will be examined before and after the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian War and the sabotage of the Nord Stream gas pipelines.

V. Germany

As per the views of Halford Mackinder (1861–1947), the merely hundred-and-fifty-year-old nation-state¹³ located in the heart of the continent occupies the exact same strategic central Pivot area of Europe as Russia takes up in the world with its Eurasian location (Mackinder 1904). Due to the unique geographical position of the country, it is no coincidence that in the 1920s and 1930s mainly only the Germans developed the sort of institutionalised geopolitics (*Geopolitik*) that in German terminology referred to the concept of politically and militarily dominated space.¹⁴ This system of views, partially based on Mackinder's work, led to the defeat of Germany in World War II and discredited the geopolitical approach for generations.

Germany is simultaneously a sea and land power connected to both the Western European naval territories and the Eastern European land masses. When it comes to natural gas, the energy dependency is particularly noticeable in the EU's leading economy, as by the end of the past decade Russia supplied approximately 55% of Germany's gas imports, which play a crucial role in its domestic energy production (Bachmann et al. 2022). In a nutshell, the cooperation in the energy sector, based on the interdependency between the European Union and Russia, appeared to be unshakable for a long time.¹⁵ From an import perspective, Germany could be the greatest beneficiary with regard to the natural gas volume that could be transmitted through the Nord Stream 2 pipeline.

13 Before its 1871 unification, the Holy Roman Empire (later named Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation) started losing its influence in the Middle Ages, but due to its authority being rather symbolic and spiritual this did not threaten the European balance of power. This state of affairs, however, changed after the German unification in 1871 (Gyurgyák 2018).

14 The term *Geopolitik* was coined by Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellén (1864–1922), a student of the German Friedrich Ratzel (1844–1904). The works of both Ratzel and Kjellén served as a basis for the concept of Karl Haushofer (1896–1946) that became the geopolitical foundation of the ideology of the Nazi Third Reich.

15 The statement still holds in spite of multiple conflicts perceptible during recent years that could have escalated the estrangement of the parties. Such incidents include the security of supply issues arising from Russian-Ukrainian gas price disputes or the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. The situation, however, changed dramatically in 2022.

Before the Russo-Ukrainian War, the possibility that the infrastructural axis of Russian gas imports would move towards the country by delivering a significant portion of the total European supply volume directly to Germany through an offshore route appeared to be advantageous. The opinion was that the improvement of Germany's transit role, on the one hand, could be profitable for domestic gas suppliers and pipeline operators; on the other hand, thanks to the shorter route of the new offshore pipeline, and as a direct result, a decrease in operating expenses, Nord Stream 2 could have a positive impact on gas prices enclosed in Gazprom's long term supply contracts.

Bypassing transit countries seemed to have the security of supply-related rationale as well as an economic one, as it could have played an integral part in securing natural gas supplies for Germany.¹⁶ However, the fact stands that even before the Russo-Ukrainian War it was not in the best interest of Germany to heighten its exposure to Russia by enhancing its reliance on its gas supplies, nevertheless Germany was not intent on challenging the established status quo either. Prior to the Ukrainian conflict, EU regulations made it possible for the country to enjoy such a favourable position.¹⁷

Before the outbreak of the armed conflict, the post-Merkel German political leadership did not address the issue of sanctioning Nord Stream 2 and did not support the notion of energy being subject to sanctions policy. Eventually, the turnaround occurred just prior to the war, on 22 February, when Germany directed its economy ministry to withdraw a report about the security of supply impact of Nord Stream 2, effectively halting the ongoing certification process. The decision was welcomed by numerous actors on the international scene, chief of which being the United States.

The escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, the outbreak of armed combat, then the eventual war and the sabotage of the Nord Stream pipelines greatly damages the prospects of German energy policies, since halting the Nord Stream 2 project seemingly deprives the country of its potential benefits to domestic gas supplies, not to mention that the geopolitical risks emphasised by those opposed to the project appear to be coming true. In addition, due to the drawn-out war, the diplomatic and political gap between Russia and the West is widening, which could have a long-term adverse effect on the decades-long German-Russian cooperation in the energy sector.

16 It was not too long ago that gas flows to Ukraine were halted for weeks, as a consequence of the 2009 Russo-Ukrainian conflict having an impact on all European supplies (Skalamera 2018). This past incident already clearly demonstrated that bypassing transit countries, from both the Russian and German perspective, can significantly reduce the risk of gas supply disruptions.

17 As energy is one of the areas in which shared competence applies between the EU and member states, the German regulatory authorities hold most of the decision-making power regarding the certification of the project. Consequently, the interdependency of Germany and Russia in the energy sector took up a more symmetrical shape and to a certain extent, the related risks were counterbalanced.

In this respect, sanctioning Russia causes Germany to suffer substantial losses.¹⁸ The current situation exposed major issues related to the energy policy of the country, prompting the need to review whether the current objectives and direction should be reconsidered.¹⁹

In reflection of the war in Ukraine, the main strategic objective of the German energy policy at present is to diversify its natural gas supplies, with the primary aim of increasing the country's independence from Russian imports.²⁰ Moreover, the record-high prices due to the energy crisis emerging in the second half of 2021 could stimulate diversification attempts, since compared to pipeline gas, the relatively expensive LNG could become a more viable and economically rational alternative. However, it is crucial to understand that realistically, an effective diversification strategy can only be realised as a mid- or long-term goal.

Putting a stop to the Nord Stream 2 project could be interpreted as the first step to reducing the German energy sector's exposure to Russia, though making this decision did not necessarily appear to be equivalent to the termination of the project for good. Achieving the objectives of Germany and Europe to detach from the Russian energy trade and find viable replacements requires massive investments and major infrastructure development, while from the side of suppliers, already having some tied-down capacities, boosting production and increasing export propensity is essential. It is also important to mention that despite the sabotage and underwater detonations resulting in a total of four leaks on the Nord Stream pipelines, one string of Nord Stream 2 was undamaged (Linde 2022).²¹

Friedrich Ratzel (1844–1904), founder of the German school of geopolitics, wrote about Europe's, and as part of it, Germany's defensive position against

18 This reasoning was well-displayed throughout the course of events, as in the early stages of the clash, Germany refrained from making firm statements about conflicting Russia. However, it was Germany itself, perhaps somewhat due to the increasing pressure from its allies – mostly the United States – who eventually halted the project.

19 Germany's dependency on Russian natural gas is exceptionally high, over 50% of the country's total gas import needs were supplied by Russia. The issue is further magnified by the fact that Germany strategically shut down many of its nuclear power plants in an effort to phase out nuclear energy, not to mention that for diversification-related purposes, until late 2022, it did not have an infrastructure fit for receiving and storing LNG. This appears to be changing, on 17 December Germany launched its first LNG terminal, while two other terminals were still awaiting final testing and permits to start operating and, additionally, the country plans to inaugurate three more such units by the winter of 2023 (Kurmayer 2022).

20 These strategic aims are not only relevant for Germany, as the conflict created such an extraordinary situation that Europe plays a considerable role in financing Russia's war against Ukraine by paying for its natural gas and oil imports. However, the extent to which all this measures into the conflict was and can further be reduced by EU sanctions policy.

21 Taking all this into consideration, the sabotage of the Nord Stream pipelines can be interpreted in two separate ways. On the one hand, from Russia's perspective, the sabotage is a considerable adversity. On the other hand, the undamaged string of Nord Stream 2 offers the prospect of starting gas deliveries in case Germany was ever in need of supplies.

the two rim powers, the United States and Russia (Ratzel 1999). His work from 1897, in light of the challenges arising as consequences of the Russo-Ukrainian War, poses interesting questions, especially regarding Germany's orientation in the energy sector. The Nord Stream 2 project and its future is not merely the symbol, but also the practical embodiment and the very indicator of this dilemma.

There is much at stake. Overcoming Germany's World War II tragedy was a peculiar process, in which instead of acknowledging the past, searching for scapegoats, punishments and atonements, the cure proved to be economic consolidation, a series of reforms later known as the German economic miracle. The country will be tested by the economic hardships currently awaiting Europe. The question is, how an identity based on economic performance and growth can be preserved, and if it turns out to be preserved, what kind of geopolitical consequences it will result in at a time when Germany's globally renowned competitiveness is threatened by the developments currently unfolding. Hence, it is a fundamental point whether Germany restores its previous pragmatic economic approach or to what extent and in which manner it will readopt (if it will even readopt) a traditional geopolitical perspective with Russian relations as one of its key elements.

VI. Russia

Russia is the largest land power in the world; it was part of both the European and Asian power orders and consequently, due to its geographical attributes, it has always been the focal point of geopolitical studies. Resulting from the country's unique spatial structure, Russians are prone to think and strategise on a more geographical basis (Billington 1966), compared to sea powers such as the British and the Americans. (Kaplan 2019)

From a Russian standpoint, achieving security and stability was never feasible without undertaking major conflicts and oppression. This mentality is not solely determined by excessive Russian geopolitical thinking and paranoia but also rests on historical experiences resulting from the country's geographical characteristics.²² Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840–1914) theorised that the country either expands and conquers (Mahan 1900) or suffers defeat by others, a view that fell in perfect line with the Russian tsarist logic.²³

In Mackinder's terminology, the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union meant that Russia lost its former positions with regard to the Heartland, not to mention that

22 While in 1708 it was Sweden led by Charles XII, and Napoleon in 1812, during the World Wars, in 1914 and 1941 respectively, Russia was attacked by Germany, which brought about the necessity for the country to create a safety zone out of the quailing regimes situated between historical Russia and Central Europe (Kaplan 2019).

23 As Catherine the Great expressed, she had no way to defend her borders, but to extend them (Middelaaar 2011).

parallel to the shrinking of its economic and political influence; moreover, the policy of containment by the United States, a sea power of the outer crescent, was getting ever more prominent in both Europe (EU and NATO expansions) and the post-soviet region (Colour Revolutions), which was interpreted by the Putin regime as the country getting surrounded. On 25 April 2005, Putin famously called the collapse of the Soviet Union the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century, as it radically altered the previously-known global balance of power.²⁴

Present-day Russia is essentially trying to ensure that the Heartland, as defined by Mackinder, falls within its sphere of influence. Prior to the Ukrainian War, the most effective means to achieve this goal was the country's potential regarding its energy carriers. Russian energy and foreign policy are closely bound together, not simply by geopolitical concepts, but also by geographical realities, frequently reflected in its foreign policy approaches.²⁵

The hydrocarbon basins of northern West Siberia, discovered in the 1960s, made Russia an energy superpower by the millennium. The country is in possession of one of the world's largest discovered natural gas reserves, second only to the United States, and up until the start of the aggression against Ukraine, Russia was the world leader in pipeline exports.

The natural gas supplies of the country have crucial importance in Europe, especially in its central and eastern regions. As to certain nations, Russia was not merely a significant actor in the natural gas trade, but the exclusive supplier of the fuel. This is due to historic reasons and related geographical attributes, also reflected in the price of the energy carrier. Russia supplied 44% of the EU's total natural gas imports and provided 25% of its total natural gas demand.

Russia was also the greatest supporter of the Nord Stream 2 project. A project company owned by Gazprom, Nord Stream 2 AG is responsible for the planning, construction and operation of the pipeline. The financing of the endeavour is structured in such a way that Russia is granted the most important decision-making rights and responsibilities.

Gazprom's stance on the issue is that the Nord Stream 2 project, by circumventing the traditional Ukrainian transit route and diminishing its importance, is economically justified, as the expenses necessary to upgrade the outdated Ukrainian gas infrastructure would exceed the estimated costs of the project.²⁶

24 For a detailed discussion of the geopolitical conceptual background, see Gerace (1991).

25 Although the first explorers were drawn into depths of Russia's Asian territories by trapping, eventually the extraction of natural resources became priority. The barren landscape is a mining place of numerous minerals, metals and energy carriers.

26 Although the interests of Russia and Gazprom are not entirely the same, the political logic according to which the company is managed is clearly illustrated by the fact that in spite of the supposed benefits, such as supplying higher gas volumes, lower transit costs and operating expenses, on a strictly economic basis the project is not necessarily warranted.

With regard to German-Russian relations, it can be noted that by building a new transit pipeline and through collaboration with the Western energy giants participating in the project, Russia attempted to intensify its collaboration with Germany in the natural gas trade by delivering an even greater portion of the country's total supplies and thus, by exploiting Germany's heavy reliance on Russian energy carriers, increasing its influence over the largest economy of the European Union. Prior to the war, the dependency with respect to Germany and Russia appeared to be more or less mutual, though the relation's asymmetric nature was apparent since Russia's exports essentially flow to a number of countries, while meeting Germany's energy demands seemed to be inconceivable without Russian supplies.

Before the outbreak of armed conflicts, it seemed that thanks to the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, Russia would manage to, on the one hand, increase the reliance of Europe, particularly Germany on its energy exports, and on the other hand, taking American relations into consideration, prevent carrying out costlier and, in terms of transportation, more problematic LNG-projects towards the Old Continent.

In the years before the war, the Russian geopolitical strategy was mainly built on Europe's energy dependency, its reliance on Russian natural gas imports and regarding the Nord Stream projects, Germany's support and the interests of Europe's large energy enterprises involved in financing the pipelines. By making the decision to attack Ukraine, Russia presumably assessed the potential reactions from the West as an acceptable risk, trusting that the exposure and interests of European actors in relation to Russia would prevent them from retaliating in a highly radical manner.²⁷ In case of a swift military operation, much like the annexation of Crimea, Russia had reason to assume that the West would once again fail to deliver a strong response, not to mention a moderate conflict could bring about a higher price environment on energy markets, which would only benefit Russia.

Halting the Nord Stream 2 project right before the eruption of the war was unequivocally a turning point in German-Russian relations, paving the way for further steps and sanctions, from this point possibly applied to the energy sector as well. In addition to these measures, the physical damage of Nord Stream 2 resulting from the explosions also casts an enormous shadow over the project. The act of sabotage is certainly not something many would have predicted, especially prior to the outbreak of the war.

27 Regarding the supposed motivation behind the Russian attack, aside from the overoptimism in Ukraine's weak opposition, the indecisiveness of European politics in the post-Merkel era and the foreign policy incompetence of the US as a NATO leader exemplified by the 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan, it is also important to mention energy considerations and thus natural gas market-related factors.

With respect to the natural gas industry, Russia's leeway for both geographical and technological reasons is extremely narrow. A number of factors make delivering the resource to markets outside Europe extremely challenging, such as the geographical location of natural gas fields, the gas-specific problems of halting production, the inflexibility of the pipeline infrastructure, realising the country's LNG potential was in its initial stages, business partners abandoning current and already planned future projects and the lack of financing make delivering the resource to markets outside Europe extremely challenging. The question is how the relationship of some major geopolitical actors with Russia will progress in the future, in other words, whether they will identify with and support the strategy of the United States and the European Union aiming for the isolation of the Russian economy.

The sanctions imposed by European governments and corporations from the private sector could generate the greatest economic problems for Russia, considering its significant trade relations with the EU. Drawn-out tensions could result in the transformation of political and economic links with the West, which could bring about new partnerships and the alteration of relationships with regard to other Russian ties.²⁸

In any case, with the progression of the war and especially in light of the sabotage of the pipelines, not merely the prospects of Nord Stream 2, but also the outlook on the future of Russia's European energy exports seems to be deteriorating (Eddy 2022a). Moreover, responses from individual member states are becoming firmer, Germany appears to be reconstructing its entire energy strategy, as indicated by planned LNG infrastructure investments, seeking potential new suppliers and the intended greater focus on renewable energy sources within the energy mix (Eddy 2022b). Taking all this into consideration, the future of the Nord Stream 2 project and Russian natural gas in Europe is becoming ever more questionable, as the import side decisions regarding infrastructure, contracts and trading partners determine the regional energy market for years to come and as it stands, the role intended for Russia in the natural gas trade is substantially smaller compared to what it used to be.

VII. United States

Following the two World Wars, the United States became the supreme global power, partially for a number of geographical reasons.²⁹ However, contrary to

28 The future position of China is questionable (Shahbazov 2022). Although, in the long-term Beijing could become a considerable market for Russian gas exports, time remains a critical factor and shutting down the European pipelines could turn out to be immensely damaging for Russia as well.

29 The United States having a continent-sized landmass on the economically, politically and militarily more significant Northern Hemisphere is bordered by two oceans, making the country well-defensible and due to its central position between the world's two most populated areas (Europe and East-Asia) it has control over the most relevant trade routes (Spykman 1942).

the Germans and Russians, the Americans were much less likely to strategise on a geographical basis during the first part of the 20th century. It was the country's role in World War II that brought about substantial change regarding this approach.

The fundamentals of traditional American geopolitical strategy with regard to Russia originate in the sea power concept of Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840–1914) and the Heartland theory of Halford John Mackinder (1861–1947). In Mahan's view, it was inevitable that the United States became a sea power; his approach states that Eurasia enjoys a unique position, in which Russia as a land power, thanks to its size and location, could also be recognised as a potential sea power, threatening the position of the US. Russia's expansion and acquisition of warm sea ports in addition to its close collaboration with Germany could establish its hegemony not only on a regional level but by dominating Eurasia on a global scale as well (Mahan 1900, 1918). Mackinder defines the Heartland as the territory of Northern and Central Eurasia, geographically the Pivot area of the world and the centre of global politics where historically the best conditions and resources are granted for a state to achieve global hegemony (Mackinder 1904, 1919, 1943). The Heartland is more or less identical to the former Soviet and current Russian sphere of interests, which is one of the focal points of American geopolitics.

Drawing on the concept of Mackinder and Mahan, Nicholas Spykman (1893–1943), a Dutch-born American geopolitical strategist focusing specifically on the unfolding Soviet-American rivalry from the US foreign policy perspective, came up with the Rimland theory. He argues that the dominant power position of the US is not threatened by the Soviet influence over the continental Pivot area – that is to say, the Heartland – alone, but if it is paired with a Russian alliance with a state located in the rimlands of Eurasia, for instance in Western Europe or the Middle East (Spykman 1942, Spykman – Nicholl 1944).

It is apparent, therefore, that these initial geopolitical concepts serve as a basis for the determinant principal in US foreign policy emphasising the crucial importance of preventing a potential German-Russian alliance and underlining the approach that it is not merely the responsibility but the mission of the United States as a global leader to control the Eurasian geopolitical balance of power. According to Henry Kissinger (1923–), Europe drifting into a geopolitical vacuum in the meantime does not serve the interests of the United States. He believes a European-American alliance is crucial to preventing the US from becoming merely an island a long way from Eurasia and crucial for Europe to avoid getting degraded to simply being an extension of the Middle East (Kissinger 2015).

In Kissinger's opinion, the firm belief that its own principals are self-evidently universal always prevailed in the United States, although its zealous participation and interference in global affairs added a considerable conflict factor to

the international system, as this approach leads to the conclusion that the governments not adhering to these principals are not unreservedly legitimate (Kissinger 2015).

Besides Kissinger, it was Zbigniew Brzezinski who most acutely outlined the preferred objectives of US foreign policy in his book *The Grand Chessboard* (1997). He points out that the main geopolitical target for the United States is Eurasia. Brzezinski considers it fundamentally important that a Eurasian power or alliance of powers capable of dominating this pivotal continent never comes into existence (Brzezinski 1999).

From a broader perspective, it is evident that there is a conflict of interest of a geopolitical nature between the United States and Russia, uniquely manifested by certain aspects of the energy sector. It is not surprising, therefore, that the US was opposed to the Nord Stream 2 project from the beginning.

With regard to natural gas, ramping up the extraction of unconventional hydrocarbons in the 2010s, an undertaking that can be considered the greatest innovation in the 21st-century history of energy (Yergin 2019), provided a context to this geopolitical rivalry.³⁰ The process was labelled the Shale Revolution in the media. Extracting the above-mentioned hydrocarbons, known as shale oil and gas requires specific methods.³¹

Boosting production with this technology began in the second half of the 2000s, throughout the two presidencies of Barack Obama, and gaining new momentum during the Trump administration. As a result of the technology advancing extraction and the positive regulatory environment making it even more dynamic, the United States is not only able to meet domestic demand, but from a net importer of natural gas, the country became a net exporter by 2017 (BP 2019). All this necessitated the rethinking of US involvement in the Middle East and the role of LNG in North America,³² as the opportunity to reach Europe, one of the world's leading energy consumers, presented itself. The sea power approached the territory covered entirely by pipelines, constituting the sphere of influence for Russia, the dominant land power of the Heartland by sea. The highly profitable European markets are amongst the chief targets of the US, with Poland and Lithuania showing the greatest interest.

30 Initially, resources that can be brought to the surface cost effectively constituted conventional gas stocks, but as per a more recent, geology-based definition, gases induced by gravitational segregation (buoyant forces), accumulated in tectonic fold traps with geometrically definable dimensions make up this group (Lakatos – Lakatosné 2011).

31 For a more detailed overview of hydraulic fracturing first used in the 1940s and of horizontal drilling beginning to develop in the 1980s, see Yergin (2019: 274–277) for the technical background of the method, see Gandossi – Von Estorff (2013).

32 The growing relevance of shale gas also generates environmental debates with sustainability and security aspects. Questions about the security of drinking water supplies and in close relation to the former, regulatory issues regarding drilling take centre stage in these disputes (Yergin 2019).

On the other hand, due to the significant distance between the continents, the endeavour is a highly capital-intensive investment. Ramping up LNG technology is of key importance to enable sea transport. During the years prior to the pandemic, transportation network projects (gas pipelines and LNG terminals) were already implemented, facilitating the international sales of significant natural gas volumes for American companies.

However, exporting American produced nonconventional natural gas supplies to Europe was limited to a degree by the fact that pipeline gas is significantly cheaper compared to liquefied gas. Before the outbreak of the war, existing LNG terminals and transport capacities were insufficient to substitute Russian pipeline gas supplies in Europe. However, taking competitiveness into consideration, LNG gaining ground seemed to be beneficial as it could strengthen the bargaining positions of European countries when it comes to procurement.

The United States can be considered a stakeholder in the Nord Stream 2 project due to its unique position in natural gas markets. As the world's largest exporter of energy, the US became a competitor of Russia. Nord Stream 2, a project aiming to enhance the partnership of the European Union and Russia, is clearly opposite to the geopolitical pursuits of Washington.

Nord Stream 2 had the potential to be the next significant link in the intensifying Russian-German energy cooperation, which can be interpreted as a crucial geopolitical step that is used to project an image of a prospective Eurasia unified through Europe and Russia. This potential is a major threat to the current world order, in which American hegemony is prevailing. Besides China, another alternative pole of the international order seemed to be on the rise, possibly jeopardising the global status quo dominated by the United States.

Therefore, the US, despite the geographical distance separating it from the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, is considered a key stakeholder of the project. The American significance lies in the fact that the country possesses the means and devices necessary to effectively block the project, which was well-represented by the US sanctions policy from its initial, investment stage.

The American political argument for opposing the project was built on protecting the interests of Ukraine as a transit country and emphasising the risks of Nord Stream 2 on European natural gas security of supply, stating the pipeline evidently enhances the continent's reliance on Russia for electricity (Jacobsen 2021). Moreover, economic considerations, though less frequently pointed out, are also present from the US side, as large volumes of lower-cost pipeline gas could be transmitted to Europe through Nord Stream 2, with an annual capacity of 55 million cubic metres, undermining the prospects of the economically less viable American liquefied gas exports.

Advocating US interests through sanctions policy dates back to the 2014 Russo-Ukrainian conflict. Even then, Gazprom was one of the companies targeted by the American economic restrictive measures, mostly of a financial

nature. At a later point, the scope of sanctions was broadened granting the right to apply them to gas pipelines as well, though for a long time there were no such measures, so the construction works of Nord Stream 2, launched in 2018, were progressing steadily (Nord Stream 2 AG 2021a). Relevant interference from the United States came about in 2019, when sanctioning the corporations involved in the construction of the pipeline halted the project temporarily (European Parliament 2021).

Following this, a certain reorientation occurred in the American strategy that could partially be explained by the election and change of government. The environmental policy approach and the initial measures of the Biden administration with respect to the project seemed to prognosticate a less aggressive pursuit of LNG exports. This is reinforced by the fact that the new political leadership considered mending transatlantic, particularly German-American, ties more important than taking further measures to block the construction works of Nord Stream 2. So in the summer of 2021, the US reached an agreement with Germany, the primary European stakeholder related to the project.³³

As a result of the permanently high energy prices, more flexible US regulations and the sanctions against Russia, the American-liquefied natural gas exports targeting Europe started to get more competitive even prior to the war. The tendencies unfolding on the LNG market significantly impaired the European continental energy interests of Russia. With the gas market being liberalised and becoming more flexible, the potential of American natural gas exports along with sanctions policy created a novel and, in its nature, geopolitical conflict in Europe in relation to the Nord Stream 2 project. The escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian clash and the outbreak of armed combat, from a strategic, geopolitical perspective, generated a uniquely favourable situation for the United States regarding Nord Stream 2 and the geopolitical processes and considerations behind the project.

As stated earlier, one of the pivotal principles of American foreign policy is to completely prevent or at least hinder Russia and the European Union and especially – one of its leading nation-states – Germany, in forming a serious alliance built on mutual interests. The EU's technological and economic potential combined with the military might and natural resource abundance of Russia could make the region a global superpower, posing a significant challenge to the dominant position of the United States. Currently, the main contender for this leading role is China and, accordingly, American foreign policy is primarily focused on the country, while continuously attempting to damage European-Russian relations, undermining the chances of cooperation.

33 As per the agreement, Germany guaranteed that through its regulatory role it would make sure Nord Stream 2 complies with the EU's energy directives and would prevent Russia from using the project as a means to realise its own geopolitical objectives (European Parliament 2021).

The war in Ukraine creates an opportunity for realising such objectives, the West presenting a unified front and issuing sanctions could reinforce the isolation of Russia. On the other hand, American military intervention, due to the risk of creating a wider conflict that might even bring about China's involvement is unlikely. Hence the current situation with the war, from this geopolitical viewpoint focusing on energy, could be advantageous for the United States.

One of the chief targets of American efforts aiming to separate Russia and Europe is the energy sector, particularly diminishing European import dependency by reducing Russian natural gas exports. In view of this, the termination of the Nord Stream 2 project and its subsequent sabotage fits perfectly into the American geopolitical strategy, not to mention its additional economic benefits. Although it is crucial to keep in mind that the undamaged string of the pipeline still offers a chance for the potential rehabilitation of German-Russian ties.

As a result of the conflict, Europe appears to have become more conscious of the risks that stem from being too reliant on Russian natural gas and other fossil fuels, reinforcing diversification efforts and thus the propensity for purchasing American liquefied natural gas. Moreover, the record-high price environment on the global market, in part generated by the war, further enhances the prospects of LNG exports against the generally much cheaper Russian pipeline gas.

To sum it up, the situation in the wake of the Russian attack provides a favourable geopolitical environment for the United States to reach its goals; however, there are also challenges present. These difficulties are primarily related to the nature and severity of the measures taken against Russia, as it is crucial for the US to find the appropriate balance with these actions. Due to the recent Afghan debacle casting the country in a bad light, a foreign policy conveying strength became vital for the government. On the other hand, a serious intervention and putting too much pressure on Russia carries the hazard of escalating the conflict further, let alone the risk that isolating Moscow from Europe could drive it too close to China and the potential unification of Eurasia through eastern relations is also a threat to US interests.

VIII. Closer alliance with the US in the EU

During the 2000s the growing influence and active geopolitical presence of Russia presented an ever-growing security policy risk for Europe. Chief amongst the affected countries are the Baltic states and Poland,³⁴ which thanks to their geographical location and characteristics take the Russian threat very seriously. According to Brzezinski, Germany frequently entertained the Bismarck-like idea of a special relationship to be formed with Russia, which would inevitably

34 Throughout the centuries Poland has seen and experienced that sometimes the tide of Russia floods them, other times it retreats and now they stand assured that following the retreat in the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse the next motion can only happen in the opposite direction.

frighten some Eastern-European countries, motivating them to forge even more intensive security cooperation with the United States (Brzezinski 2013). Spreading from Northeast Germany to the Ural Mountains and including Denmark, there is a flat landmass difficult to defend as per a traditional military strategy perspective, which is a determining factor with respect to Russian and European geopolitical reasoning and historical experiences, foreshadowing certain security policy risks for Russia, as well as for the countries of the Northeast European region.

As the symbol of the German-Russian cooperation and the European positions of Russia, Nord Stream 2 had a significance beyond itself in these countries. A major part of the pipeline runs under the Baltic Sea, across the territorial waters of Finland, Sweden and Denmark; consequently, permits from the regulators of these countries were necessary for pipe laying. From amongst the nations affected by Nord Stream 2 due to its route, Denmark was the one playing a significant role in delaying the project by withholding the permits required to start construction on its territorial waters. By doing so, Denmark effectively obstructed the progression of the pipe laying procedure, which can be interpreted as taking a stand against Russia's advances on the natural gas market and, consequently, in the geopolitical space.³⁵

One of the focal points of Gazprom's European infrastructure development endeavours in the last few years, as demonstrated by the Nord Stream 1 and 2 projects, was the Baltic region, continuously increasing Russian interests in the area. Based on these nations' historically strained political relationship with Russia, their intentions to block the project gain an even greater understanding, although the fact remains that by themselves they do not possess the necessary means to realise these aspirations.

Nord Stream 2 was, without question, an economic drawback for Poland; as the Yamal-Europe pipeline running across the country might assume a less significant role, a possible consequence is Poland receiving lower transit revenues or losing these incomes entirely. Taking these factors into consideration, during the last few years Warsaw has been actively seeking to reduce its reliance on Russian imports and diversify its supplies by exploiting the potential of liquefied natural gas. The primary ally for Poland in this undertaking was the United States, the Polish LNG terminal on the Baltic Sea serves as an ideal entrance to European gas markets (Ruszel 2020).

In the last few years, a tendency based on diversification aiming to disconnect from the Russian-dominated gas supply system is discernible in the case of the Baltic states, with LNG making it possible to achieve such goals. This trend is

35 Thanks to Denmark's actions there was a sufficient time frame to devise and implement the American sanctions, not to mention what might be the most significant result of delaying the project, namely that Gazprom was forced to renew its supply contract with Ukraine, guaranteeing the country's position as a transit state in the European gas trade until 2024 (Wood – Henke 2021).

particularly visible for Lithuania, which already began the construction of a so-called Floating Storage and Regasification Unit (FSRU) in 2014 (Hinchey 2018).

Aside from investing significant resources in realising the potential within LNG, the Baltic states along with Northern-European countries also initiated a new pipeline project, aiming to enhance gas trade amongst themselves. The Baltic Pipe runs from Denmark to Poland, transmitting the fuel originally from Norwegian fields, creating a new gas corridor in the region (Wood – Henke 2021). The pipeline with an annual capacity of 10 billion cubic metres went into operation on 30 November 2022 (Energinet 2022). The attack on Ukraine once again reinforced the concerns previously ingrained in Poland and the Baltic states with respect to Russia. All this reinforced the already close Euro-Atlantic ties and the Polish cooperation with the United States, exceptional in its significance even amongst European countries. These tendencies are brought about by the ambition to stop Russia from gaining ground, while the success of these aspirations is a matter of geostrategic consideration for the US and one of survival for Poland.

Suspending the ongoing certification process of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline as a consequence of the war is unmistakably a favourable outcome for the above-mentioned countries, since they were opposing the project from the beginning.³⁶ Considering the natural gas market, the situation at hand stimulates diversification ventures and serves as a foundation for the argument on the importance of increasing European independence from Russian gas supplies. The Baltic Pipe project, previously halted due to environmental considerations is once again relaunched.³⁷

IX. Ukraine

From the Russian perspective, Ukraine is of key importance thanks to its function as a border state between Central and Eastern Europe.³⁸ In Brzezinski's view, the geopolitical relevance of Ukraine lies in the fact that without Kyiv Russia only has the potential to be, at best, a predominantly Asian empire, that is to say an entity in conflict with mostly Caucasian and Central-Asian states (Brzezinski 2013). Aside from this rationalisation, Ukraine is also relevant due to its large territory, its strategic location and, consequently, its role as a commercial hub

36 In the early stages of the steadily escalating conflict, before the decision about suspending the certification process of Nord Stream 2 was made, Poland already requested, among other things, that Germany halt the project, which was accomplished at a later point, though not necessarily as a result of Poland's demand (Portfolio 2022).

37 The decision to continue construction works was made in March 2022, so it is not implausible that as a consequence of the conflict, the re-evaluated position of Europe in matters of energy is at least partially responsible for the outcome.

38 This is displayed in the country's name itself, meaning 'borderland'.

regarding trade towards Africa, as well as its abundance of natural resources, such as black soil, iron ore and hydrocarbons.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine found itself in a central position from an energy perspective as well, and although Russia repeatedly attempted to use energy as a means to control and influence the politics of proximate countries to serve its own interests, this proved to be counterproductive in the case of Ukraine due to a number of gas price disputes.³⁹

Today, the chances of Russia achieving such objectives are completely diminished thanks to the narrowing room to manoeuvre for Ukrainian foreign policy with its multiple angles and, in parallel, the increased dynamism of Western orientation (the Orange Revolution, then the 2013–2014 elections in Ukraine). Amongst the reasons behind these tendencies is the stance of the EU and especially the US advocating the shift towards the West, once again driven by significant geopolitical considerations.

Though the Nord Stream 2 project is extremely controversial both within Europe and on a global scale, it is beyond question that its greatest casualty is Ukraine with respect to natural gas market, security and geopolitical considerations.

It is indisputable that blocking and, going even further, entirely cancelling the Nord Stream 2 project would serve Ukrainian interests best. The economic rationale behind this originates in the country's function on the gas market, since Ukraine with its extensive pipeline network was the most significant transit state for European gas supplies.⁴⁰ As per its current transit contract effective between 2019 and 2024, Ukraine would be eligible to receive approximately 7 billion dollars in the form of gas transit revenues (Popadiuk 2021). However, the Nord Stream 2 pipeline enabled Gazprom to bypass the Ukrainian transit route, or at least reduce its significance to an extent. Aside from the loss of transit revenues, transmitting lower volumes of natural gas could lead to further financial losses and increased domestic gas prices for Ukraine due to the capacity underutilisation of an infrastructure that operates with comparatively high fixed costs.

The last couple of years have proven that winding down the Ukrainian transit is also a way for Russia to exert geopolitical pressure. The primary objective for Ukraine is to prevent its vulnerability to Russia from increasing even further; however, the Nord Stream 2 project facilitates just that by making it possible for Russian gas supplies to reach Europe without using the traditional Ukrainian transit route, additionally, at lower operating costs. Hence, the greatest hazard of Nord Stream 2 with respect to Ukraine is that the above-mentioned scenario becomes reality following the expiration of the Ukrainian gas transit contract in 2024.

39 This is illustrated by the consequences of the gas price disputes in 2006 and (especially) in 2009, namely that halting energy exports resulted in an increasing loss of trust towards Russia by profitable European markets.

40 After gaining its independence, initially 80% of Russia's natural gas exports to Europe flowed through the country.

In spite of its aims being clearly defined and detectable, Ukraine's opportunities to pursue its interests related to Nord Stream 2 were greatly limited, in effect the country was lacking the resources, legal means and regulatory authority to even create a situation in which blocking the project would be a viable outcome.

The tension perceptibly escalating since 2010 in the two country's bilateral relations reached its zenith when Russia launched a military attack on Ukraine. These proceedings served as proof to other nations opposing the Nord Stream 2 project that their reasoning and concerns were not unfounded. In light of the war's outbreak, it would be wrong to assume that halting the project or Ukraine's role in transmitting natural gas supplies to Europe gives enough of an incentive to Russia to preserve peace and keep its aggressive geopolitical aspirations in check.

Despite the military conflict and the extraordinary social, political and economic challenges Ukraine finds itself facing, the objectives of the country essentially remain the same. It still serves its best interests to maintain its transit position on the gas market, previously enjoyed for decades, and to intensify its orientation towards the European Union and NATO. Germany putting the Nord Stream 2 project on hold and the sabotage of both Nord Stream pipelines are decidedly positive developments for Ukraine, even beyond the potential preservation of its transit role. Suspending the certification process of Nord Stream 2 is one of the symbolic steps representing the fundamental change of attitude and alteration of strategy towards Russia, witnessed from member states of the EU, primarily from Germany, since the escalation of the conflict.

The Ukrainian leadership believes that the sanctions against Russia along with the increasing economic and diplomatic pressure improve the prospects of Ukraine to reinforce and deepen its alliance with the United States and the European Union. On the other hand, it is crucial to note that a possible military intervention or assistance from these allies carries enormous risk, as such actions could easily escalate the conflict to a global level.

Ukraine wants sanctions against the Russian energy sector to have a wider range of targets and for these to be imposed on an EU level, which is essentially equal to the partial or total boycott of Russian energy supplies. Ukraine's aim with these suggested measures is to completely destroy Russia economically and financially, forcing it to stop the war. It is in question, though, whether the entire European Union will be willing to make such an immense sacrifice, since substituting the import volumes of Russian energy carriers, especially natural gas with other alternatives is not feasible in the short term due to capacity issues and financial obstacles. This is not to mention that partially halting or decreasing the volume of gas supplies from Russia would put a considerable financial burden on Europe, the economic and social consequences of which are unforeseeable at the time of writing this study.

X. Conclusion

Considering the increasing Russian-Ukrainian hostility during recent years, and the current war, the evolution of the Nord Stream 2 project can primarily be interpreted within the context of this conflict. The state of the project at any given time serves as a rule of thumb to indicate European geopolitical orientations with respect to the United States and Russia. The results of the actor-specific analysis based on the actions and objectives of the key stakeholders of the pipeline, summarised in Table 1, further accentuate this framework.

Table 1: Results of actor-specific analysis: objectives of key stakeholders.

		Objectives prior to the war in Ukraine and the sabotage of the Nord Stream pipelines	Objectives after the war in Ukraine and the sabotage of the Nord Stream pipelines
Germany	Aim	Improving natural gas security of supply	Improving natural gas security of supply by reforming national energy policy and energy relations
	Energy strategy	Deepening pragmatic energy cooperation with Russia	Diversification: decreasing dependency on Russia, strengthening alternative cooperations
	Tactic	Supporting and advocating the NS2 pipeline project	Halting the certification of the NS2 project, developing LNG infrastructure, finding new gas recourses, imposing sanctions against Russia, including the energy sector
Russia	Aim	Preserving the gas status quo with EU countries and exerting influence over Ukraine	Diversify gas markets and keep up the possibility of mending the relationship with Europe and widening its sphere of influence over post-soviet states
	Energy strategic	Increasing/keeping energy cooperation in the EU with new alternative pipeline projects, reducing/blocking the alternative gas exports in Europe (especially LNG) and Ukraine's transit role	Limiting/blocking energy cooperation in the EU using energy as a tool for intimidation against Ukraine's western supporters and turning towards new markets outside Europe
	Tactic	Using the NS2 project and its narrative	Developing new pipeline projects outside Europe, declaring that abandoning Russian supplies is more harmful to Europe than to Russia, potentially repairing the damaged Nord Stream pipelines to keep up the possibility of mending the relationship with Europe

United States	Aim	Preventing a unified Eurasia's potential rise	Follow previous goals
	Energy strategy	Cooperating with Europe in the gas sector, preventing it from building close ties with Russia, protecting the interests and transit position of Ukraine against Russia	Following previous strategies, utilising the higher price environment to boost LNG sales in Europe
	Tactic	Trying to stop the NS2 project with economic measures, implementing regulatory changes to make their LNG exports more competitive, supporting European LNG initiatives	Imposing sanctions against Russia, including the energy sector, boosting domestic energy production to prepare for catering to European markets trying to detach from Russian supplies
Closer alliance with the US in the EU	Aim	Trying to prevent Russia from its aggressive geopolitical pursuits	Follow previous goals
	Energy strategy	Orienting towards the US, trying to detach from the Russian gas supply system	Strengthening energy cooperation in the region and replacing Russian supplies
	Tactic	Opposing/using administrative barriers to block the NS2 project, initiating alternatives	Realising LNG and pipeline projects (Baltic pipe)
Ukraine	Aim	Orienting towards the West to compensate for its vulnerability to the escalating Russian geopolitical pressure	Preserving sovereignty, cooperating with the West
	Energy strategy	Preserving as much as possible from its advantageous transit role in the European gas market	Cooperating with the West, even though this might interfere with its interests regarding its transit role
	Tactic	Opposing the Nord Stream 2 pipeline	Lobbying for an EU-level, a total boycott of Russian energy supplies

Source: Authors' own tabulation

A number of geopolitical concepts offer an explanation to the particular strategy of the US related to Russia and continental Europe. Our study accentuated that the vast majority of these concepts have defined US strategy during the previous century and they also highlight current tendencies of the American involvement in the context of Nord Stream 2 and the correlations between the project and the war in Ukraine.⁴¹

The economic ties between the European Union and Russia in the 21st century, in particular, the close energy cooperation built on mutual dependence directly contradicts the majority of American geopolitical aspirations aiming to divide Eurasia. From the US perspective it is vital to prevent an outcome in which another alternative pole of the international order, combining Russia's abundance in energy carriers, resources and its military might with Europe's technological

⁴¹ Even Mackinder considered the geographical territory the Nord Stream 2 pipeline runs through an area of key geopolitical significance.

and economic potential, could emerge next to the United States, the current global hegemon.

For this reason, reinforcing transatlantic ties and the American-European alliance, naturally while maintaining the American dominance, and in parallel undermining European-Russian relations, serves the interests of the United States. The situation escalating in 2022 also has a number of interpretations.⁴² Regardless, in one way or another, the antagonism between the US and Russia with respect to the Ukrainian War has reached a level not witnessed since the Cold War.

The halting and then sabotage of Nord Stream 2, a project that reinforces German-Russian collaboration on the natural gas market, the outbreak of the Ukrainian War driving an ever more prominent diplomatic, economic and political wedge between Russia and Europe could all support these above-mentioned American geopolitical objectives.

Natural gas provided an opportunity for Russia to utilise its pipeline system to regain control over its neighbouring territories. European countries served as the primary markets for Russian natural gas, establishing the region's significance through the energy segment. Therefore, it also appeared to be a relevant geopolitical objective to preserve and, if possible, enhance Russia's gas market positions by initiating suitable projects aimed at system capacities – that is to say, investing in infrastructure development – while cooperating with international energy corporations.

Prior to the war, the actual motivation behind the Nord Stream 2 project was more than likely the maintenance of the European natural gas status quo and simultaneously the isolation of Ukraine by marginalising its role related to transmitting Russian gas supplies. From Gazprom's perspective, these goals cannot simply be attributed to financial and gas market considerations, displaying that the geopolitical and strategic rationale of the Russian political leadership was more dominant with respect to the implementation of the pipeline project.

The nations of Europe were divided in their approaches to gas diversification and had different views about realising these ideas. Prime examples of this are the disagreements around the Nord Stream 2 pipeline that usually came along with serious quarrels prior to the outbreak of the war. Before the Russian aggression, the German political elite was less critical of the political manoeuvring of Moscow and were attempting to maintain a pragmatic energy relationship with Russia. The rationale, as well as the result of the German position, was that over half of the country's natural gas consumption was supplied by its eastern partner.

42 Some experts consider the American war on terror a misstep, since while its military was occupied, the US enabled Russia to gain ground and secure a favourable position in Post-Soviet states, including Ukraine (Marshall 2018). Others see a persistent and arrogant series of American operations as the reason behind the changes witnessed in Ukraine's orientation.

As opposed to Germany, the leaders and most prominent experts of Euro-Atlantic nations observed the intensifying relationship between Europe and Russia with concerns prior to the Ukrainian War (Kaplan 2019). The criticism against the Nord Stream 2 project in the Baltic region and Poland is explained by historical experiences, the hostile geopolitical aspirations of Russia towards Post-Soviet successor states and the risks associated with the growing energy dependency of Europe. The United States and the United Kingdom, in close alliance with Poland and the Baltic States, did not view the presence of Russian energy in Europe as a means to supply the region, but considered the country an inescapable and therefore extremely influential stakeholder in energy relations, emphasising the related geopolitical risks (Dempsey 2017).

According to Mackinder, Western Europe needs to oppose any power that would attempt to obtain the resources of Eastern-Europe and the Heartland (Mackinder 1919). At the time of writing, the vast majority of EU member states appear to be in alignment with this view regarding the Russian attack on Ukraine, an Eastern-European country, which at this point seems to have reversed the former German-Russian interest-based energy cooperation, effectively blocking the commissioning of the Nord Stream 2 project.

The current Ukrainian state of war could bring about unanticipated consequences not only about the future of Nord Stream 2, but also in the context of long-term German-Russian relations. Reducing the reliance on Russian natural gas supplies has been a key element of the energy market strategies of Poland and the Baltic States for years and, due to the present conflict, these nations could expect greater, even EU-level endorsements and initiatives in accomplishing this goal; nevertheless, merely the European Union's change of attitude towards Russian gas imports serves their interests.

On the other hand, it is critical to note that in spite of sanctioning the energy industry, the former interdependency between the EU and Russia still prevails in the natural gas sector. The only way to limit the continent's exposure to Russian energy carriers is import diversification; however, developing the necessary infrastructure is a highly time-consuming and cost intensive process.⁴³ The path dependence of energy systems is exceptionally prominent. Consequently, former investments are determining factors in the development of the related sectors, not to mention that expanding or reconstructing the existing infrastructure is a lengthy and expensive process (Farkas 2019).

Although maintaining the continuity of gas supplies is vital for Russia to be able to finance its military expenditures from its export revenues, especially in light of the sanctions issued against the country, due to gas supply disruptions

43 European markets are vitally important for Russian gas exports. This was also reflected in the fact that in the weeks and months following the outbreak of the conflict, gas flows to Europe were not halted, restrictions were only issued gradually and only because of the implementation of sanctions as a response to the fighting, many times cloaked in creative narratives.

inflating prices, Gazprom could generate higher incomes with lower export volumes in the short term. However, it is important to recognise that this behaviour could become counterproductive in the medium and long term.

Taking Ukraine's interests into account and keeping Russia's aggressive geopolitical pursuits in check with respect to the project is primarily the responsibility of Germany as the main regulatory authority, especially in view of its agreement with the United States. The US decidedly aims to prevent any attempt by Russia to gain ground, which in this case is equivalent to supporting Ukraine.

The question is whether Germany will yield somewhat to the Russian influence due to the negative consequences of the war and the related sanctions it must endure or will remain unwavering in its stance against Russia.

A prolonged war along with the allies of the United States, in particular the European Union losing trust in Russia, point towards Europe's detachment from Russian-supplied resources and energy carriers at the time of writing. This trend, on the other hand, necessitates an exceedingly expensive transformation process that carries the risk of absorbing the funds needed for research and investments connected to ensuring the sustainability of energy supplies. Hence reducing security of supply related threats also involves significant risks to competitiveness, not to mention that, from an ecological standpoint, sustainable energy management considerations could take a secondary role to concerns of security of supply, potentially increasing the use of carbon in the short term – that is, during the initial phases of the above mentioned transformation. Therefore, the future of the Nord Stream 2 project, in light of the implied challenges, could outline European geopolitical orientations along with their prospective alterations or realignments.

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