At the beginning of the 21st century, two main geopolitical visions were formed in the European Union.

(Source: flickr.com)
1. Two geopolitical visions

The first was related to the ambitions of Germany and France to build a separate European geopolitical pole, independent of the US, which could use the economic potential of the EU. Distancing itself from American leadership and from the global goals of US policy, which repeatedly involved European allies in wars waged by Washington outside Europe, was related to the deepening economic rivalry between corporations on both sides of the Atlantic. The concept of Western Europe’s strategic autonomy in the face of Washington’s historic domination appeared during the Cold War, but became a more prominent goal after it ended, i.e. after the collapse of the Soviet empire. Thus - as it was believed in Western Europe - the threat posed by the Russian Federation was weakened. The nuclear umbrella stretched across Europe by the US, as well as the US military presence on that continent, therefore seemed less necessary. Especially since Western Europeans did not want to bear the consequences of the military support of the Americans in the form of allied obligations on the global arena or possible economic concessions in the EU internal market.

At the same time, Western European states, which are superior in the EU, aimed at geoeconomic rapprochement with the Russian Federation. The basic assumption of this rapprochement was a conviction that deepening economic interdependence with Russia would bring a relaxation in geopolitical relations, and thus eliminate the rest of the war threat posed by Moscow. This was a reference to the concept of Ostpolitik, i.e. the approach of West Germany to Moscow initiated by Chancellor Willy Brandt at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s. It brought a number of benefits to Germany - first of all, it led to the country’s unification, and earlier it mitigated the risk of the outbreak of World War III, which would probably have taken place mainly on German territory. Both Paris and Berlin largely accepted Russian expectations as regards rebuilding its lost influence in Eastern Europe, including in Belarus and Ukraine, as well as in other former Soviet Union republics, with the exception of the Baltic states. Both Western European capitals did not want to provoke Moscow, which is why they consistently blocked the enlargement of NATO and the EU, especially to Ukraine, but also to other former republics of the Soviet Union. An example of this tendency was the veto of both countries to include Georgia and Ukraine in the Membership Action Plan of the North Atlantic Alliance at the 2008 Bucharest Summit.1

These geostrategic calculations were linked to internal actions in the EU that were supposed to strengthen this organisation and thus enable its geopolitical advancement to a more independent role in international politics. To this end, the centralisation of management in the EU was strengthened, as well as more severe discipline for countries with a geopolitical perspective different from the integration leaders from Western Europe. This was done, among other things, by stronger emphasis on the integrative role of European values and the sanctioning of illegal activities by some governments, consisting in breaking EU law and opposing the integration line promoted in Western Europe.

A second geopolitical vision was represented mainly by the United Kingdom, some Central European countries and the Baltic states. It was based on strong transatlantic ties and continued US military presence on the Old Continent as a guarantee of security against the Russian Federation, but also against the excessive influence of Germany and France on the integration processes. In some of the

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1 Bogusław Winid, „Od Bukaresztu do Chicago – NATO w obliczu wyzwań i nowych możliwości”, „Bezpieczeństwo Narodowe” 2014 / 1, nr 29, s. 77–97.
new Member States that joined the EU after 2004, there was particular concern that Berlin would dominate Central Europe and the EU as a whole. Scientists have pointed to the strong geoeconomic dependence of the region in question on Germany. The prospect of Germany using EU instruments to push for its own economic and geopolitical interests, and at the same time blocking the possibility of pursuing vital interests by smaller states, especially those with greater aspirations in the field of self-determination or a different perception of geopolitical interests from Germany, was also worrying. The aforementioned distrust towards Berlin was deepened as a result of disputes over the adherence to European values and the so-called rule of law. These provided an opportunity for Germany to weaken the image of some Central European governments and to sanction them. Some politicians accused the German authorities of trying to overthrow democratically elected governments in these countries in favour of those more amenable to Berlin's interests. The attempts of these countries to rely on the USA resulted not only from a different perception of the Russian threat than in the western part of the EU, but also from historical concerns about the revival of German domination in Central Europe.

Moreover, the Central European elite was concerned about the possibility of a revival of geopolitical, or rather geoeconomic, cooperation between Berlin and Moscow - "over the heads" of Central European states. The deepening energy cooperation between the two capitals, expressed in the Nord Stream gas pipeline and its consistent expansion, testified to the implementation of this scenario, which was dangerous for Central and Eastern Europe (apart from Central European Member States, Ukraine was also very critical of this project). Regardless of the commitment to strong transatlantic relations, an element of the discussed geopolitical vision was the development of regional cooperation in Central Europe. It was supported by the American administration, as was the case with Donald Trump's support for the Three Seas Initiative.

The second geopolitical vision also had its consequences for the EU system. Its supporters opposed the idea of centralising governance in the EU or making it a federation or superstate, fearing that such a structure would come to be dominated by the largest countries in Western Europe. Instead, they advocated the concept of a Europe of homelands, i.e. decentralised and subsidiary integration. In such a Europe, democracy in smaller member states and their geopolitical choices were to be respected. At the same time, the aim, according to this concept, was to support weaker countries in solidarity in their problems or during crises, but without depriving them of their subjectivity, and thus further sovereign competences belonging to local voters and their states. Particularly disturbing was the interference of EU institutions (with the support of some Western European governments) in the sphere of political values. The point was not only that, according to the treaties, the above-mentioned matters were not regulated in the vast majority of cases by European treaties, but also that the interference of Brussels ignored the will of local democracies and imposed a left-liberal interpretation of these values. This was difficult for right-wing and conservative voters to accept. At the same time, conflicts over these values resulted in attempts at political marginalisation, and even imposing financial sanctions against rebellious governments in Central Europe, as was the case with conservative governments in Poland. In the background of the entire operation was the fight against

2 Tomasz Grzegorz Grosse, „Cztery wymiary integracji”, Wydawnictwo Sejmowe, Warszawa 2021, rozdz. 11.
the alternative geopolitical vision presented by these governments, as well as the concept of the EU's political future, completely different from the one promoted in Western Europe.\(^3\)

2. The European Union’s response to the war

The aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine in 2014 did not destroy the geopolitical vision promoted by France and Germany. On the contrary, it intensified it, both in terms of forcing strategic autonomy towards the US, as well as promoting ideological coherence within the EU and disciplining political opponents from Central Europe. In response to the annexation of Crimea by Moscow (in 2014), Chancellor Angela Merkel, with the support of a number of Western European countries, agreed to build a second line of the Nord Stream gas pipeline (in 2015). It also publicly stated that this was a purely commercial project and therefore would not have geopolitical consequences. A similar position was taken by Chancellor Olaf Scholz on the eve of further Russian aggression against Ukraine in December 2021.\(^4\) It was only under the influence of the scale of this aggression that there was a change. It turned out that the geopolitical concept promoted in Berlin and Paris had failed completely. Not only that, it had brought huge costs not only to Ukrainians, but also to the entire EU. It turned out that the EU was dependent on the supplies of oil, coal and natural gas from the Russian Federation, and so could not impose too far-reaching or quick sanctions in order not to cause an economic shock and inflation in the EU internal market.

Under the influence of the war in Ukraine, there was a reaction from societies and the media in the EU and pressure on political decision-makers in Western Europe. Another element was the intervention by the US and pressure from the so-called NATO eastern flank, whose governments demanded a radical response to the brutal Russian aggression. Under the influence of all these factors, the policy of Western Europe underwent a correction, which was especially visible in Berlin's approach. Germany agreed to supply arms to the defending Ukraine, although the implementation of this promise faced numerous problems.\(^5\) The Germans also suspended the process of legalising Nord Stream 2. They accepted the gradual withdrawal from the import of energy sources from the Russian Federation, as well as the freezing of economic exchange with the aggressor. However, they insisted that the severance of these relations would be selective, and thus leave some gaps that would soften the repercussions of sanctions imposed on Russia for the German economy and, more broadly, for the EU. An example was the leaving of certain exceptions to the exclusion of the Russian financial sector from the SWIFT system, as well as the maintenance of Russian oil and gas supplies to Germany during the transition period (until mid-2024 as far as natural gas imports are concerned). French politicians, known for many decades for their pro-Russian sympathies and dislike of the Americans, were even less eager to revise the previous policy.

Nevertheless, the European Union imposed further packages of sanctions on the Russian Federation in 2022, which concerned a total of several hundred people and institutions associated with the government of Vladimir Putin. Severe financial penalties were introduced, including a ban on

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transactions with the Bank of Russia. In this way, the EU and the US jointly froze about half of Russia's foreign exchange reserves, estimated at a total of nearly $630 billion. This made the ruble exchange rate fall, inflation soared, and Russia faced bankruptcy. Individual member states also began to forbid their citizens from transactions with the Russian central bank. An embargo has been imposed on investments in certain sectors of the Russian economy, mainly the energy and defence sectors, as well as on the provision of modern technologies from the EU. Additionally, many European corporations withdrew from the Russian market.

The EU's response to Putin's aggression was therefore serious, much greater than initially expected by experts. Nevertheless, subsequent packages of EU sanctions were preceded by an internal discussion within the Member States, and in the case of some instruments it was difficult to obtain consent from all EU members. Brussels' response to the repercussions of the war in Ukraine was in some areas too bureaucratic and far from sufficient. This was the case with the refugee crisis. The European Commission has only agreed to redirect relatively small funds from the cohesion policy for 2014–2020 for this purpose. Contrary to the 2015 migration crisis, no new and dedicated funds were introduced, nor any other instruments, such as the mechanism for relocating refugees between Member States, even though the scale of the influx of Ukrainians to the EU was several times greater than the wave of immigrants in 2015. It is hard not to recognise that either Western Europe was exhausted by the topic of immigration, or it was more sensitive to immigration problems in the western and southern parts of the continent than in Central Europe.

3. Opportunities for Poland

The geopolitical strategy presented by the Polish authorities, especially after 2015, turned out to be more rational than the expectations of Germany and France. It was more in line with strategic realities, especially with the Kremlin’s revanchist policy. The postulates of the US presence in Europe and the need to strengthen, not weaken, NATO as the basis of EU security have been positively verified in practice. The war in Ukraine - which was actually initiated in 2014 - proved the rightness of Polish thinking about the security of the Old Continent. Another aggression in 2022 strengthened Warsaw's international position. After years of depreciation of the conservative government on the Vistula River for violating the rule of law, Poland's strategic position during the geopolitical game between the West and Russia has grown immeasurably. This was evidenced by subsequent visits by American dignitaries to Warsaw in early 2022, including President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris.

The escalation of the war in Ukraine in February 2022 is for Poland a historic opportunity to rebuild not only its own prestige in the international arena, but also a long-term strategic vision related to the improvement of security and the development of its geopolitical influence in the region of Central and Eastern Europe. The opportunity is provided primarily by the improvement of strategic relations with Ukraine, and especially by building strong ties between the two nations. Poland has intensified efforts to admit Ukraine to the EU. It should also strive to include this country in the Three Seas Initiative and to deepen cooperation within the Lublin Triangle, including the use of this format for the post-war reconstruction of Ukraine. Ultimately, the aforementioned organisation should be expanded to include Belarus. This is not unrealistic, because as a result of the Ukrainian war, there are prospects for rebuilding Polish-Belarusian relations, especially in the increasingly likely situation of a collapse of Russian influence in this country and the fall of Aleksandr Lukashenka's regime. Another historical opportunity for Poles seems to be the acceleration of the economic and geopolitical weakening...
process of the Russian Federation. Putin's decision to attack Ukraine on a large scale, and thus a confrontation with NATO and the US, made the prospect of another smuta in Russia real, and thus a deep economic and political crisis in that country, including the possibility of the fall of Putin's power and even the collapse of the Russian state.

All these factors constituted optimistic strategic scenarios for Warsaw, despite the fact that in the short term one should take into account the serious costs resulting from the war in Ukraine. This applies in particular to the effects of the influx of millions of refugees, serious economic turbulence, including inflation, instability in the energy market, threats to food security, etc. However, in the economic dimension, the difficult geopolitical situation also offers some opportunity. I am thinking of the gradual internationalisation of the Polish currency, in particular in relations with Ukraine and in the region of Central and Eastern Europe. The research of the International Monetary Fund showed a clear tendency to weaken the international role of the US dollar in the last 20 years, and at the same time the search by investors and central banks for new currencies of stable countries with high growth potential. Poland, with its currency as the most important means of payment in the region, may prospectively benefit from this trend, although an important instrument to accelerate this process would be the digitisation of the zloty.

It is beneficial for Poland to rebuild the credibility and meaning of NATO, as well as the close relations between the USA and the EU - not only in the sphere of geopolitics and security, but also in the area of deepened economic cooperation. Immediately after Russia's aggression, it turned out that the problems in mutual relations that had previously been difficult to solve for many years had been successfully resolved. This was the case with the dispute over the protection of personal data in the framework of transatlantic economic relations, which had an important aspect related to security. Another effect of the war in Ukraine was the strengthening of NATO's eastern flank as well as the American military presence in the Old Continent. The leadership role of the USA in Europe has increased significantly, and the so-called Western allies around America, not only in Europe, but also in Asia.

4. Western Europe's dilemmas

It should also be noted that both the reconstruction of the American leadership in the EU and the improvement of Poland's position in the international arena were not received enthusiastically in some Western European countries. However, the awareness of geopolitical threats from the East prompted us to be reasonable, and thus to submit to American leadership, at least during an open war on the eastern fringes of the EU, which potentially threatened to escalate at any moment. Not everyone in Western Europe, but also in Central Europe (e.g. Hungary), wanted to impose further sanctions on the Russian Federation. They did it mainly out of fear of economic repercussions for their own citizens, and thus not wanting to provoke the dissatisfaction of voters.

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Consequences of the war in Ukraine – the EU perspective. Author: Tomasz Grzegorz Grosse - 4/2022
Western European leaders focused primarily on three problems. First, the dramatic deterioration of the economic situation in the EU’s internal market. Secondly, in view of the geopolitical marginalisation of Western Europe, and especially difficulties in realising the dream of strategic autonomy. Third, it was feared that the protracted conflict could make the EU face the need to sanction the PRC if it decided to provide military support to a weakening Russia. For all these reasons, German and French politicians made efforts to end the war in Ukraine as soon as possible. The aim was to stabilise the geopolitical situation and avert the military threat, thus paving the way for the normalisation of relations with the Russian Federation and China.

There was therefore a clear difference in the perception of this conflict in the so-called NATO eastern flank and in Western Europe. While the Central European states perceived the defence of Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity as directly related to their own security and political independence, in the west of the continent there was a fear of negative sanctions for a prolonged war on the domestic economy and too strong an increase in the geopolitical position of the USA and its allies in European Union. For example, speculation has arisen in the context of delaying the supply of German weapons to Ukraine,8 that the German government does not intend to support the fighting Ukrainians, as it wants to end the war as soon as possible. Military support could extend Ukraine's resistance, and thus increase the negative economic consequences of this conflict for Germany and the rest of the EU. An example of the described tendency was the fact that relatively small Estonia provided Ukraine with weapons worth six times more than military aid from Germany.9 A position similar to the German one, was taken up by Emmanuel Macron, who, after the extraordinary NATO summit in March 2022, said not to hand over any offensive weapons to Ukraine.10 Although this type of weaponry could help the Ukrainian army go on the counter-offensive, it would risk extending the conflict.

Western European leaders were also aware that it would be more difficult to implement their plans to increase the strategic autonomy of the EU or so-called European sovereignty, as well as discipline countries such as Poland, which has once again become one of the main American allies in Europe. The conflict in Ukraine stimulated realistic thinking about geopolitics, and thus the necessity for member states to commit to military spending and to perceive NATO and the USA as indispensable allies. There was a renaissance of national values and traditions in the Member States, a sense of patriotism and national identity. This made it difficult to promote identification with the EU and treating European values as the basis for paving the way to an EU federation or superstate. There were also concerns that Washington would use the conflict in Ukraine to drag the EU into the geoeconomic rivalry between the US and China.

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8 Klaus Geiger, Gregor Schwung, „Die seltsame Untätigkeit des Olaf Scholz“, op. cit.
10 „Guerre en Ukraine: Emmanuel Macron s’exprime après le sommet de l’Otan“, 24 mar 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=js7UeH7B-6M [29.03.2022].
5. The Chinese factor

The war in Ukraine was fought between the Russian Federation and Ukraine, supported by the West, and thus by the members of the EU and NATO. If Moscow benefited from Beijing’s support in this conflict, it is in fact a world war in which the greatest powers were involved, including two rivals on the road to global domination: the US and the PRC. Thus, the Sino-American rivalry was in the shadow of the Ukrainian war. This presented the EU with a difficult choice if Washington’s expectations were to impose sanctions on China or to take any other type of hostile action against the Middle Kingdom.

A brief, surgical operation of Russian troops in Ukraine was beneficial to Beijing for a number of reasons. It meant a distraction for the West from the PRC, as well as from the US-Chinese rivalry for Taiwan and domination in East and Southeast Asia. Moreover, it made Russia even more dependent on China, both economically and geopolitically, making mutual relations asymmetric in Beijing’s favour.

Nevertheless, the protracted conflict over Ukraine carried more and more threats to the Middle Kingdom. First of all, too much exhaustion of Russia could potentially bring about the collapse of the Putin regime and even a turn of Russia towards the West. Moreover, the consolidation of Western states, also in Asia and the Pacific, which was directed against China, was worrying. Washington’s decisive response to the Ukrainian war was also a clear signal sent to the Chinese leadership that the US would not leave its Asian allies without support, and would respond quickly and decisively to any attempted annexation of Taiwan. Finally, Beijing was worried about Washington’s warnings about China’s involvement on the Russian side in the Ukrainian conflict, as well as the possibility of its Western allies imposing sanctions on the PRC in such a case. It was, therefore, the prospect of limiting access to the markets of Western countries, and even the so-called decoupling, i.e. separating Western economies not only from Russian markets, but also from cooperation with China. In the short term, this would have to increase the economic costs for the PRC resulting from the conflict in Ukraine.

Therefore, China was faced with the challenge of how to support the Russian Federation and use the difficult economic situation in Moscow, while not excessively provoking the United States and its allies to impose sanctions. Cooperation with Moscow was indispensable for Beijing both for geopolitical reasons, i.e. for the purpose of balancing the US, as well as for economic reasons. In particular, it concerned food and energy security, or - more broadly - raw materials. However, becoming completely cut-off from the West was dangerous for China because of the need for access to high-tech components that would allow it to maintain the pace of economic development and export competitiveness. In the long run, Beijing had to increase the scale of research and development investments in order to become fully independent of Western technological ideas. It also consistently built its own financial circuit independent of potential sanctions from the US and the EU. The tools in this regard were, inter alia, Chinese payment system CIPS and digitisation of the currency (e-CNY), which also contributed to the increase of the role of the yuan as an international currency.11 The Chinese authorities also had to expand their presence in non-Western markets, notably the Middle East, Central Asia, Africa and Latin America. They also did not intend to give up access to the lucrative internal market in the EU.

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11 Martin Wolf, „A new world of currency disorder looms”, „Financial Times”, 29.03.2022, [https://www-ft.com.eui.idm.oclc.org/content/f18cf835-02a0-44ff-875f-7de7facba54e] [29.03.2022].
It was therefore in the interest of China, as in the case of Western Europe, to end the war as soon as possible, even if the outcome of the peace negotiations were not stable. A suspension or freezing of the Ukrainian conflict threatened to continue geopolitical tensions, and thus the possibility of resuming the war after some time and seeking a final settlement of disputes in Europe. An escalation of the Sino-American rivalry was also likely.

Already in the 1990s, specialists in international relations were predicting that within 30-40 years there would have to be a confrontation between the US and the PRC, in their opinion, because China's growth disturbed the strategic balance, which made such a clash inevitable. Beijing's growing power did not mean another great player had joined the game, but the greatest player in human history. The more so because, as scientists assessed, the goal of the PRC was to strive for domination, at least in Asia, in line with the historic Chinese maxim that if there are no two suns in the sky, there cannot be two emperors on earth.

The war in Ukraine was therefore an important episode in this conflict, and perhaps even the beginning of a global confrontation for domination. The EU Member States had to take a strategic position, whether they wanted to or not, in the face of this confrontation. According to international relations theory, they could choose between two main strategies. It was a choice between balancing a stronger power, which threatened the autonomy or interests of European countries, or joining a stronger one (so-called bandwagoning) in the hope that the winning power would provide conditions for economic development, stabilisation and respect for the basic interests of the allied countries in the future. Before the Ukrainian conflict, Western Europe chose a strategy of non-involvement in the American-Chinese conflict, trying to stand aside and maintain the economic benefits resulting from relations with both sides of the dispute. However, this did lead to the US's balancing strategy, especially given the Europeans' desire to strengthen the EU's strategic autonomy vis-à-vis Washington and NATO. In other words, Americans were perceived as a hegemon that was not trusted and which limited geopolitical autonomy and the economic benefits of the largest countries in Western Europe.

The key question was whether the war of 2022 changed this attitude. Even if the Western European allies focused around the US leadership during its lifetime, they did so rather reluctantly, and also with the hope that after the conflict was over, it would be possible to return to business with Moscow and that economic cooperation with Beijing would not have to be strained. This, it seems, was an illusion that could have potentially dangerous strategic consequences for the security of the Old Continent, especially since China's policy should aim - as before the outbreak of the Ukrainian war - at an attempt to break transatlantic ties and thus weaken the potential of the United States. A proof of this tendency was the encouragement of EU politicians by President Xi Jinping during the EU-PRC summit on April 1, 2022 to undertake their own, autonomous policy towards China, which was by default separate from Washington's recommendations.

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At the same summit, it was clear that both sides not only perceived the war in Ukraine differently, but that their mutual relations were systematically deteriorating in many areas. This concerned, inter alia, Chinese sanctions imposed on Lithuania, some politicians, European think tanks and EU institutions, as well as the suspension by the European Parliament of the ratification process of the Comprehensive Investment Agreement between the EU and the PRC negotiated at the end of 2020. Nevertheless, both sides were to a large extent economically dependent on each other, and European politicians could not afford to add to the existing economic problems additional sanctions resulting from the escalation of economic sanctions in relations with Beijing. In the first months of the Ukrainian war, the PRC tried to limit its support to the Kremlin essentially to the verbal sphere, without violating Western sanctions imposed on the Russian Federation. In turn, EU representatives at the aforementioned Sino-European summit did not dare to directly threaten with retaliatory sanctions against Beijing in the event of significant support provided to Putin in the economic or military dimension. This was in line with previous EU policy towards China. For many years, there has been a tendency to prefer good economic relations, even if this meant tolerating the violation of European values by the Chinese authorities.

6. Culture war

In 1993, Samuel P. Huntington published the famous article "Clash of Civilizations?" in which he predicted that major geopolitical disputes would arise between different cultures after the end of the Cold War. Looking at the war in Ukraine from this perspective, it is impossible not to notice that it concerned the same civilisation, described by the American scientist as Orthodox. It should be remembered, however, that the above-mentioned conflict was for Vladimir Putin not only a desire to dominate Ukraine, and thus to control the sphere of Orthodox civilisation. It was also a competition with the West, which had not only a geopolitical but also a cultural dimension. This was expressed in the widespread criticism of Western values both in the media and in Russian academia, as well as their belief in the decadence of Western civilisation. An example is the position of the influential philosopher Alexander Dugin. Moreover, the aggression against Ukraine in Russia was justified by the increasing occidentalisation of Ukrainians.

Russia’s attack brought a consolidation within Western civilisation. However, it is hard to expect that this will end internal conflicts. The transatlantic disputes in particular were very clear. They had a cultural dimension during the rule of Donald Trump. However, they mainly concerned the American domination over allies from Western Europe. For decades, French elites have promoted the need to increase autonomy from the US, for which they have tried to use Community instruments. The Germans largely supported this endeavour. At the same time, both countries sought to balance weakening transatlantic relations by bringing them closer to Moscow and Beijing. The consequence of

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this policy was the deep dependence of the EU on the supply of raw materials from Russia and Belarus, as well as on access to the Chinese market for European corporations.\textsuperscript{20}

As a consequence of the Russian attack on Ukraine in 2022, there was an attempt to make the EU independent from the supply of raw materials from the east. At the March EU summit this year, Emmanuel Macron promoted European sovereignty in the fields of technology, chip production, medicines and food. Traditionally, he strove to deepen strategic autonomy in defence policy, which mainly involved increasing the capabilities of the armed industry, especially the French and German corporations dominating the internal market. At the Versailles meeting, the leaders of the member states recognised that "an EU with greater security and defence capabilities will contribute positively to global and transatlantic security and will complement NATO's activities, which remain the cornerstone of its members' collective defence."\textsuperscript{21} This was an expression of the consolidation tendency of Western allies in the face of Putin's aggression. Despite this declaration, tension related to the pursuit of strategic autonomy is likely to persist, especially in the field of economic rivalry and the arms industries. It can also serve to challenge US leadership and Europe's willingness to follow it should US relations with the PRC deteriorate. It is hard not to admit that the Sino-American rivalry was not strengthened by civilisation differences.

At least two other cultural disputes threatened the unity of the EU. The first concerned the growing number of Muslim immigrants, especially in Western Europe, which was highlighted during the presidential campaign in France in 2021-2022.\textsuperscript{22} The second was related to ideological tensions between the liberal left and conservative and Christian Democrat politicians. While these divisions were visible across the EU, they were the strongest between the eastern and western parts of the EU. This dispute has highlighted the geopolitical tension related to the striving for autonomy on the part of some Central European countries. Here, it was essential to first support this autonomy by the Donald Trump administration, and then to delegate by Joe Biden at the beginning of his presidency the responsibility for stabilising the EU, including Central Europe, to Germany. This was related to the intention of the USA's gradual withdrawal from Europe and concentrating all forces on the Asian geopolitical theatre. The Americans' appreciation of the role of Poland after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine was probably one of the reasons for a hasty change in the directions of Berlin's policy. It was about rebuilding Germany's allied credibility in the USA, but also in Central and Eastern Europe.

The Ukrainian war hampered Washington's intention to leave Europe and necessitated the strengthening of NATO's eastern flank. The Americans also had to decide whether to support the autonomy of Central Europe, for example the Three Seas project, or to continue to focus primarily on Berlin in transatlantic relations. For strategic reasons, the United States should support Central Europe as a counterweight to Western Europe and its ambitions of strategic autonomy. For the same reasons, they should support a decentralised vision of European integration and put pressure on Berlin and Paris to stop putting pressure on Warsaw over the rule of law. This was because it was contributing to the weakening of an important American ally in the region, and thus of NATO's eastern

\textsuperscript{20} Tomasz Grzegorz Grosse, „Cztery wymiary integracji”, op. cit., rozdz. 7 i 8.
\textsuperscript{22} Tomasz Grzegorz Grosse, „Francja dość sceptyczna”, „Rzeczpospolita”, 03.01.2022, https://www.rp.pl/publicystyka/art19252011-francja-dosc-sceptyczna [29.03.2022].
flank. In this context, it is worth recalling the statement of the former US ambassador to Warsaw, Georgette Mosbacher, who admitted that after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, Poland became the most important country in the region that coordinated humanitarian policy and the transport of weapons to Ukraine. It has become NATO’s eastern flank in the full sense of the word, a key element of the continent’s security architecture. At the same time, it recognised that in the time of this conflict, the EU was unnecessarily dealing with the rule of law in Poland. Moreover, a large part of what reached the West in terms of breaking the rule of law on the Vistula River was the result of Russian disinformation. That is why Poland deserves an apology from the EU and the USA.23

An argument of the Federal Republic of Germany that could discourage Americans from Central Europe could have been, as before, the cultural conflict over EU values. They were - especially in their left-wing and liberal interpretation - close to the Biden administration. However, this dispute was a disintegrating factor in the EU, and in the era of rivalry with Russia, it became very risky. In a situation where Poland was struggling with the challenge of an influx of over two million refugees and the need to mobilise public spending for military purposes, Brussels consistently refused to launch new financial instruments for 2021-2027 and demanded from the government in Warsaw to pay financial penalties.24 It was €69 million in the case of the so-called interim measures imposed by the Court of Justice of the EU (CJEU) in the case of the Turów mine, although no final judgement was reached as the proceedings were discontinued. In another case, the CJEU imposed a gigantic daily penalty of €1 million, which meant that by the end of March 2022, about €130 million had to be paid to the EU budget. This was a controversial decision, not only because of the sanction imposed, which exceeded the previously used practice several times in this regard. It concerned the reform of the judiciary (i.e. assuming the exclusive competence of the Member States) and the superiority of CJEU jurisprudence over the Polish constitution and its interpretation by the only institution appointed for this, i.e. the Constitutional Tribunal. Thus, the decision concerned a fundamental dispute about the possibility of creating new treaty rules by judgements of the EU tribunal, i.e. without the appropriate delegation of new competences to the EU by unanimous consent of the member states. An additional context of the case were ideological disputes over the interpretation of European values, which would have been of great importance if the national constitutional courts were upholding local democracy and the right to settle ideological disputes by local voters. At the time of the crisis, it was more important that, instead of the EU’s financial aid, Brussels was enforcing the sanctions imposed on Poland, thus actually reducing the possibility of using EU funds for refugees. This context of defending the declared values has clearly been overlooked in the actions of EU officials.

I ideological disputes about EU values should be suspended for the common good. In the longer term, it is worth considering the basic systemic challenges revealed by the conflict over the rule of law. They concern the division of competences between the EU and its states, the primacy of EU law and CJEU rulings over national constitutions, the scope of centralisation of the management of EU policies, and finally the interpretation of EU values and their enforcement in the Member States regardless of the choices of local democracy. The conference on the future of Europe, which began in 2021 and was a


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process of broad public consultations on the directions of development of the integration project, did not, in principle, deal with these challenges. Meanwhile, without resolving them, it is difficult to integrate successfully. It would be a mistake to solve them only through financial sanctions imposed on rebellious governments from Central Europe.25

7. Summary
Cultural differences fuel geopolitical disputes. They can concern allies, as was the case in transatlantic relations and within the EU. They should be overcome for the sake of common security, economic development and Western cohesion. The challenge for the EU is not only to stop the Russian aggression and the refugee crisis, but also inflation, changes in climate policy and food security. The euro area is particularly at risk, as it has not benefited from previous crises. Next, integration processes should be improved so that they do not cause cultural conflicts.

In response to the Ukrainian war, the European Union should introduce fundamental changes in its functioning. These should be systemic reforms, but also a profound change in the way of thinking about European ideas and values. Previous ambitions for military independence from the US and NATO should be abandoned. The development of the EU's defence potential should be implemented within NATO, and not to duplicate or weaken the structures of the transatlantic alliance. It is also necessary to abandon the excessive centralisation of the European project, as this not only contradicts the rules of democracy, but also causes ideological and identity conflicts. It thus unnecessarily weakens the EU. Therefore, the model of decentralised and subsidiary integration - but more democratic, because strong with national democracies - may be a better systemic perspective for geopolitically difficult times. The problem, however, is that the majority of Western European elites do not agree to such a vision of integration, and also do not want the geopolitical consequences mentioned above. They perceive them as a threat of marginalisation of their own strategic position, and yet the processes of European integration were to essentially rebuild the influence of France and the united Germany.

Therefore, Western Europe is striving to end the war in Ukraine as soon as possible and to stabilise the geopolitical situation in the region. Its main goal is to overcome the economic crisis and normalise relations with the Russian Federation and China. The prospect of deepening economic problems on the internal market in 2022 may further weaken the common front with the US, especially in relation to the Chinese challenge. Moreover, dreams about the independence of Western Europe realised under the slogans of strategic autonomy or European sovereignty are still alive. It can also be expected that dealing with the Ukrainian conflict will open the way to exerting pressure on some Central European countries to act in accordance with EU values, and at the same time not to hinder the implementation of the ideas of Berlin and Paris regarding the development of European integration - in line with the geopolitical interests of both influential capitals.

Summing up, it should be noted once again that the geopolitical vision of the leaders of Western Europe included not only the reconstruction of external relations with the US, Russia and China, but also had an important component concerning the shaping of the federal system in the EU. Such ambitions differed from the strategic interests of at least some Central European and Baltic states,

which pointed to an alternative geopolitics. That is why, shortly after Joe Biden’s visit to Poland, the chairman of the European People’s Party in the European Parliament, Manfred Weber, attacked the government in Warsaw, saying that it was guided by its own interests and was blocking centralising reforms in the EU. He also asked rhetorically whether Prime Minister Kaczyński was aware that we would not defeat Putin without a strong EU, and thus without progress in integration. He also recognised that the Ukrainians are actually fighting for the rule of law, which should be a model for the European Union. The aforementioned statement heralded an attempt to use the Ukrainian crisis by French and German politicians to accelerate efforts to implement their own integration vision, as well as to continue attacks on opponents of these plans. Although the Ukrainian war created some chances for the correction of integration processes to the benefit of Poland and other countries in the region, it is more likely that the conflicts and crises in the EU will be deepened.


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Date 4/2022

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