Commentary
February 14, 2022

The Moment of Truth: Scenarios for Regional Policy in Eastern Europe in 2022

Yauheni Preiherman

Originally published by Discussion Club Valdai

Summary

2022 will be a new moment of truth for Eastern Europe and could determine the future of the region for years to come. The current tensions in European security neutralise all nuances and shades, presenting the region with a simple black-and-white alternative: a hopeless escalation with the prospect of a complete implosion of Eastern Europe or an agreement to preserve the regional infrastructure of cooperation.

Eastern Europe, for natural geographical reasons, has found itself at the very epicentre of the confrontation between Russia and the US/NATO over the present and future of European security. Historically, this is the usual state of affairs for the border region, where, according to Samuel Huntington, Western and Orthodox civilisations collide. The aggravation of contradictions between the centres of geopolitical attraction on the continent has traditionally caused conflicts in Eastern Europe. This is the situation we observe in the region today, despite the structural changes in international relations that have taken place over the past three decades.

In this sense, the expansion of the West's military-political (NATO) and political-economic (EU) institutions to part of the Eastern European space after 1991 did not simply fail to lead the region (including the newcomers to Euro-Atlantic integration) to the "end of history", it also wasn't able to yield a qualitative change in the foundations of its security, despite the fact that the direct line of geopolitical rivalry shifted about 1,000 km to the east compared to the Cold War period.

The fact that Eastern Europe was moving in the direction of new systemic tensions became clear already in the early 2010s. The alarm sounded for the security landscape in the form of a five-day Russian-Georgian war in 2008, which seemed to go unnoticed. Russian proposals to seriously discuss a new treaty on European security were actually

ignored at that time. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that the gap in the interpretation of fundamental security issues, including in Eastern Europe, has continued to widen. In 2014, the contradictions reached a critical new point and led to the Ukrainian crisis, which reminded everyone that in the 21st century the centre of the European continent is not immune to military conflicts.

However, even those tragic events did not stop Eastern Europe from sliding into a large-scale structural confrontation. On the contrary, the process has actually accelerated. Quite quickly, negotiations on the implementation of the Minsk agreements reached a dead end, the success of which, hypothetically, could have become a harbinger of the normalisation of the situation in the region. In addition, in parallel, there was a dismantling of almost the entire system of arms control and strategic stability, which are of key importance for Eastern European security.

At the same time, in 2014-2020, there was a slight hope that the sharpest corners of the geopolitical confrontation in Eastern Europe could still be smoothed out through the minimisation of risks and promotion of a constructive agenda within the region itself. Such goals were most actively pursued by Belarus, which sought to downplay tensions and used political as well as military tools to do so. In particular, this was manifested in attempts to provide security guarantees to its immediate neighbours, an increase in the transparency of its military activity, and numerous diplomatic initiatives.

In its pursuit, Minsk relied on both allied relations with Russia and on improving relations with the European Union and the United States at that time. In addition, Belarus had a unique infrastructure of bilateral agreements on confidence building and security measures with neighbouring countries (Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine). These agreements were concluded in the early 2000s as regional measures under Chapter 10 of the Vienna Document, but have become particularly relevant after 2014.

However, in parallel with the Belarusian attempt to downplay tension, the opposite regional course was followed by the Baltic countries, Poland and Ukraine. Their general will for confrontation with Russia only intensified in the context of the events of 2014-2015 in Ukraine. And the Trump administration's NATO policy has given an additional impetus for them to up the ante. Fear that Trump's actions would undermine solidarity within the North Atlantic alliance and call into question bilateral military and political support from the United States, pushed these Eastern European countries to increase tension, both through rhetoric and through military-technical activities. Perhaps the clearest reflection of this was Warsaw's insistence on a permanent and expanded presence of American troops in Poland, known as "Fort Trump".

Unfortunately, this practice of raising stakes and tensions in Eastern Europe has dominated after 2020. First, after the Belarusian presidential elections, the EU and the US began to exert increasing political and sanctions pressure on the country, and also unilaterally stopped communication with the Belarusian government on many issues, including security. The natural consequence of this was the actual refusal to allow Belarus to play an emphatically constructive regional role (which, even if desired, would be impossible to fulfil amid conditions of economic sanctions, an air blockade and a lack of political communication).

Second, against the backdrop of the coronavirus pandemic, which has generally accelerated geopolitical time, the military-political contradictions between Russia and the West have intensified, quickly reappearing in Eastern Europe. In general, it seems that there has already been a final desynchronisation of mental maps on both sides of the still conditional new Iron Curtain. Listening to the public speeches of politicians and talking privately with diplomats, it is difficult to get rid of the feeling that many of them simply live in parallel realities.

The apogee of these trends was, in fact, Moscow's ultimatum proposals on European security, made public in mid-December 2021 and addressed to the United States and NATO. The proposals concern the most basic foundations of security, and therefore inevitably have served as a moment of truth for Eastern Europe, a region of direct contact between Russian and Western interests. Taking into account the off-scale mutual claims and increased military-technical activity on both sides, the situation in Eastern Europe is also simplified as much as possible to the most basic foundations. Nuances are quickly disappearing from political and media discussions around Russia's demands and their practical significance for the region; everything takes on coarsened forms and comes down to big episodes.

In such conditions, by and large, only two basic scenarios for the development of regional policy in Eastern Europe in 2022 are possible: hopeless escalation with the prospect of a complete implosion of Eastern Europe or an agreement to de-escalate and preserve the regional infrastructure of cooperation.

The **first scenario** — a hopeless escalation — so far looks more probable. It will imply the further military-political overheating of the region and the high probability of a major crisis that could erupt as the result of an uncontrolled development of events and have the same uncontrolled consequences. Moreover, this scenario will consolidate the long-term trend towards a complete implosion of the region in terms of various forms of

cooperation, communications and infrastructure, which is already taking shape due to the partial destruction of established logistics chains and transport corridors in the region.

Given that the global confrontation between China and the United States will inevitably continue to grow, the long-term consequence of this scenario may be the transformation of Eastern Europe into a dividing zone in the context of the US-China confrontation.

The probability of the implementation of the second scenario depends on the ability of the parties to de-escalate tensions in one way or another and preserve the regional cooperation infrastructure. Drawing even a hypothetical route to this goal is becoming increasingly difficult. It is obvious, however, that this scenario and its long-term consequences are most beneficial to all countries in the region, as well as to the United States and Russia. However, its implementation will require not only responsible statesmen who are able to think and act strategically (which is rare these days), but also just luck.

Which of these scenarios is implemented and, accordingly, what fate awaits the region of Eastern Europe, will depend mainly on the key actors — Russia and the United States. However, the ability of regional states, even the smallest ones, to influence the course of events should not be written off. They cannot impose their will on others, but they are capable of both creating additional problems and actively helping to find mutually beneficial solutions.

Yauheni Preiherman
Director, Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations