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Abstract. The article examines the influence of geopolitical factors on changes in the European Union's enlargement policy through the prism of structural realism. The Russian Federation's full-scale aggression against Ukraine has brought the issue of security in the European region to the fore and demonstrated fundamental changes in its structure, which, in particular, has led to intensified discussion about the transformation of the EU's role in today's conflict-ridden world.

The main postulates of structural realism (neorealism) theory, which was applied to study the transformation of the European Union's enlargement policy after 2022 under the influence of geopolitical factors, were analysed. In particular, the theory of neorealism was used to demonstrate the correlation between security threats and the acceleration of European integration processes, which had been stagnating for a long time due to the lack of political will on the part of EU member states. Particular attention was paid to the principle of balance of power, which can be seen in the European Union's relations with candidate countries such as Serbia and Georgia. Also, based on a neo-realist approach, the motivation for the enlargement of international institutions and its connection with the desire of states to protect their own national interests as well as increase their international political weight was outlined.

Thus, the study found that the current policy of European Union enlargement is increasingly determined by geopolitical factors and security challenges. The theory of structural realism provides a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of the EU political leadership's response to

fundamental changes in the international system and allows to trace the causal links between the reformatting of the balance of power and the intensification of integration processes.

Keywords: *EU enlargement, geopolitical factors, structural realism, neorealism, balance of power, Russian-Ukrainian war, European Union, European integration, Ukraine, Russian Federation.*

Анотація. У статті досліджено вплив геополітичних чинників на зміну політики розширення Європейського Союзу крізь призму структурного реалізму. Повномасштабна агресія Російської Федерації проти України актуалізувала проблему безпеки в європейському регіоні та засвідчила докорінні зрушення у її структурі, що, зокрема, призвело до активізації дискусії щодо трансформації ролі ЄС у сучасному конфліктогенному світі.

Проаналізовано основні постулати теорії структурного реалізму (неореалізму), яку застосовано для дослідження трансформації політики розширення Європейського Союзу після 2022 року під впливом геополітичних факторів. Зокрема, завдяки теорії неореалізму було продемонстровано кореляцію між безпековими загрозами та прискоренням євроінтеграційних процесів, що тривалий час перебували в процесі стагнації через брак політичної волі держав-членів ЄС. Особливу увагу було приділено принципу балансу сил, дія якого простежується на прикладі відносин Європейського Союзу з такими країнами-кандидатами, як Сербія та Грузія. Також на основі неореалістичного підходу було окреслено мотивацію розширення міжнародних інституцій та її зв'язок із прагненням держав захистити власні національні інтереси, а також збільшити свою міжнародно-політичну вагу.

Таким чином, у дослідженні було встановлено, що сучасна політика розширення Європейського Союзу дедалі більше визначається геополітичними факторами та безпековими викликами. Теорія структурного реалізму дає змогу глибше зрозуміти механізми реагування політичного керівництва ЄС на фундаментальні зміни в міжнародній системі та прослідкувати причинно-наслідкові зв'язки між переформатуванням балансу сил і активізацією інтеграційних процесів.

Ключові слова: розширення ЄС, геополітичні фактори, структурний реалізм, неореалізм, баланс сил, російсько-українська війна, Європейський Союз, європейська інтеграція, Україна, Російська Федерація.

Introduction. Over the past decades, the European Union's enlargement policy has been viewed primarily shaped by an institutional approach. In line with this framework, the Copenhagen criteria include requirements for stable institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights and the protection of minorities, a functioning market economy and the ability to withstand competitive pressure within the EU, the capacity to assume the obligations of membership, and the alignment of national law with EU acquis (European Council, 1993). However, the escalation of geopolitical tensions, culminating in the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation on 24 February 2022, led to a transformation of the EU's foreign policy and security priorities. At the same time, there have been precedents for the European Union's political establishment to take decisions on granting candidate status or opening negotiations on EU membership not only on the basis of a candidate country's compliance with formal criteria, but also in response to geopolitical challenges.

In this context, neo-realism – a theoretical paradigm in the field of international relations that interprets the behaviour of states and supranational actors, in particular the European Union, in terms of the anarchic structure of the international system, the distribution of power and the imperative of ensuring survival in conditions of global turbulence – takes on particular significance.

The purpose of the study is to demonstrate the influence of geopolitical factors on the transformation of the EU enlargement policy through the lens of structural realism.

Literature review. The founder of structural realism (neorealism), Kenneth Waltz, in his work "Theory of International Politics" emphasised the anarchic nature of the international system, which leads states to prioritise survival amid complex security conditions. According to Waltz, it is the structure of the international system that primarily influences the behaviour of states. Accordingly, states and, in the context of this study, supranational actors in international relations make strategic decisions based on the structural constraints of the international system, in particular the distribution of national capabilities and the balance of power (Waltz, 1979).

Within the framework of this theory, the concepts of defensive and offensive realism have developed, which also stem from the idea of the influence of the international system on actors in international relations. In his work "Myths of Empire. Domestic Politics and International Ambition", Jack Snyder was the first to use the terms "aggressive" and "defensive" realism. Snyder believes that defensive realism implies that the structure of the international system generally creates unfavourable conditions for state expansion. Therefore, a primary rational purpose of states is to ensure security in order to preserve their independence. Therefore, actors in international relations who think in terms of defensive realism realise that the costs of expansionist policies outweigh the benefits, and instead accumulate their power to create a balance of power and maintain a status quo. After all, given the limited resources available, it is more advantageous for a state to focus on defence rather than attacking. It suggests that expansion and the pursuit of hegemony are the result of the foreign policy aspirations of an individual actor, rather than structural imperative (Snyder, 1991).

In contrast, John Mearsheimer outlined his own vision of the key differences between offensive and defensive realism in his work "The tragedy of great power politics". According to Mearsheimer, the core idea of offensive realism is that states do not seek to maintain the status quo, as the international system encourages them to gain greater power at the expense of their rivals. And the ultimate goal of a state is to achieve hegemony within the international system (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 11).

An analysis of the relevance of structural realism to the transformation of the European Union's enlargement policy requires a thorough review of academic literature focusing on the international political role of the EU and the dynamics of European integration processes.

Frank Schimmelfennig's contributions to the study of EU enlargement deserve special recognition. His recent works, including the article "The advent of geopolitical enlargement and its credibility dilemma", highlite the growing relevance of geopolitical factors in rethinking EU enlargement policy after 2022 (Schimmelfennig, 2023). His research also addresses the issue of differentiated European integration of candidate countries, exploring its causes, consequences and main models of differentiation (Schimmelfennig, Leuffen, & De Vries, 2023).

American scholar Milada Anna Vachudova is also known for her work on EU enlargement. In particular, her seminal study, "Europe Undivided: Democracy, Leverage, and Integration after Communism", analyses how the prospect of EU enlargement influenced domestic political transformations in the post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe. This, in turn, demonstrates how the European Union's enlargement policy functions as a mechanism for extending its influence and strengthening its leverage on the international stage (Vachudova, 2005).

In his numerous works, Daniel S. Hamilton explores European politics and the reformatting of the roles of the EU and NATO in the so-called "age of disruption", characterised by high levels of competition between major powers, a global redistribution of power, and rapid technological change (Binnendijk, Hamilton, & Vershbow, 2022).

Main results of research. Since structural realism focuses on the influence of the international system, geopolitical factors are considered structural imperatives that shape the political decisions of actors in international relations. In analysing the transformation of the European Union's enlargement policy, **security threats at the EU's borders** should be emphasized as key geopolitical determinants. In this case, full-scale aggression by the Russian Federation is perceived as undermining the balance of power in the international system, forcing actors in

international relations, in particular the European Union, to change their behaviour in line with geopolitical realities.

A striking example supporting this argument is the granting of EU candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova in 2022. The outbreak of the large-scale Russian-Ukrainian war served as a turning point at which the political leaders of the EU member states realised the real threat to the existence of Europe. The European Union countries most at risk due to their shared border with Russia are Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Finland and Poland. Therefore, the security of European states directly depends on Ukraine's resilience.

With the outbreak of full-scale war on the European continent, EU leaders have come to the conclusion that they can no longer afford to delay Ukraine and the Western Balkans. This, in turn, led to the formation of a renewed enlargement strategy. At the beginning of Ursula von der Leyen's first term as President of the European Commission, she announced her desire to lead a so-called "geopolitical Commission" with the aim of supporting neighbouring countries, accelerating the enlargement process and focusing on multilateral relations when presenting her programme in 2019 (von der Leyen, 2019). However, since the Balkan countries have not made significant progress towards European integration, and accession negotiations with Turkey have been frozen since 2018, it was clear that enlargement would remain a matter of debate during Ursula von der Leyen's term. Instead, the full-scale invasion forced the EU to abandon its policy of strategic ambiguity regarding the European future of Ukraine and Moldova, granting them candidate status on 23 June 2022 and giving the long-stagnant enlargement process a "geopolitical momentum" (Stanicek, Przetacznik, & Albaladejo Roman, 2023).

Further evidence supporting this thesis is the acceleration of the European integration process for the countries of the Western Balkans, which for a long time lacked political will from the EU. However, following Ukraine's candidacy, which became the catalyst for a new wave of enlargement, the first intergovernmental conferences on accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania took place on 19 July 2022 (European Council, 2022). Simultaneously, the Commission immediately initiated the official screening to assess these countries' compliance of their national legislation with the EU acquis. These decisions marked a fundamentally new phase in the Western Balkans' path towards European integration.

The enlargement of the EU also serves as a crucial tool for **consolidation of the European space.** This has a direct impact on the **balance of power**, which remains the foundational concept in neorealist theory. In this way, the European Union seeks to strengthen its power by projecting its influence onto other states via its enlargement policy. This is especially relevant for countries situated at a geopolitical crossroads that face the risk of coming under the influence of the Russian Federation.

Considering the increased threats to Europe resulting from Russian aggression, EU member states are particularly concerned about Serbia's behaviour. Serbia has been a candidate country for EU membership since 2012, but has shown significant fluctuations in its progress towards European integration during this time. Seeking to balance its strategic goal of joining the EU with maintaining relations with Russia, the Serbian government has not imposed sanctions on Russia in connection with its invasion of Ukraine. This decision fundamentally contradicts Serbia's obligation to adhere to the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the European Union (CFSP). In particular, the European Parliament resolution of 7 May 2025 on the 2023 and 2024 Commission reports on Serbia (2025/2022(INI)) states that, given that Serbia has not imposed sanctions on the Russian Federation in response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the level of alignment with the CFSP has been steadily declining since 2021, reaching 51% in 2024. Meanwhile, other candidate countries in the Western Balkans region have 100% alignment (European Parliament, 2025).

This position is unacceptable for a candidate country, so under these circumstances, the further development of negotiations with Serbia is unclear. Although the European Union consistently employs a carrot and stick approach in its relations with the Serbian government, truly stringent sanctions against Serbia, such as a complete freeze on EU membership negotiations or even revocation of candidate status, would result in the country falling entirely within the sphere of

influence of the Russian Federation. Consequently, the European Union is resorting to more measured rhetoric in its relations with Serbia.

A similar motivation can be observed in the European Union's relations with Georgia, which, inspired by the examples of Ukraine and Moldova, applied for EU membership in March 2022. However, its progress was not as rapid as that of these countries, because when Ukraine and Moldova received candidate status, Georgia was given a so-called "European perspective" and twelve priorities that it had to fulfil in order to make progress on the path to European integration (European Commission, 2022, pp. 17-18). After implementing the recommendations of the European Commission, Georgia finally received the status of a candidate country for EU membership on 14 December 2023 (European Council, 2023).

However, as a result of the parliamentary elections, the Georgian Dream party came to power, whose political course is causing concern among the international community due to its ties with Russia and its tendency towards centralisation of power, which may negatively impact Georgia's prospects for European integration. The most telling evidence of this was the Georgian parliament's adoption of the Foreign Agents Registration Act and Law on Broadcasting, both of which restrict media independence and civil society participation. The European Union strongly condemned these political decisions. In particular, in a joint statement by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Vice-President of the European Commission Kaja Kallas and Commissioner for Enlargement Marta Kos, the legislation was described as undermining the foundations of democracy in Georgia and categorically incompatible with the fundamental values of the EU (Directorate-General for Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood, 2025).

Thus, although these candidate countries do not meet the fundamental requirements of the European Union, the EU political establishment cannot apply radical measures to Serbia and Georgia, as this could cause them to drift definitively towards Russia. As a result, the EU will lose opportunities to strengthen its geopolitical position in the region and will be forced to deal with the consequences of instability in these countries, which will only mean the failure of the Union's strategy in the struggle for global power distribution.

In his work "Structural Realism after the Cold War", Kenneth Waltz put forward another interesting hypothesis within the framework of neorealism, which he then applied to the issue of NATO expansion (Waltz, 2000, pp. 21-22). In this study, he emphasises that, despite criticism of the inability of international institutions to resolve important international political issues, the nature of these organisations is such that they exist not to advance the interests of the international community, but rather to promote national interests. Neorealism demonstrates that **state investment in the expansion of international institutions serves as an investment in their behavioural power.** This hypothesis can be extrapolated to the current EU enlargement policy within the framework of structural realism.

A neorealist approach to modification of the EU's enlargement policy after Russia's invasion of Ukraine is emphasizing security considerations, balance of power, and great power's interplay within international system transformations.

The latter are pivotal. The shift of power capabilities on a global level is transforming the structure of the international system towards bipolarity (Lind, 2024). China's steady economic growth has been converted into military and political advantages, enhancing the country's global role to the point where it is capable of challenging weakening American hegemony. China's rise to power is accompanied by ideological rivalry, geopolitical tensions, and involvement of the two superpowers into the competition for allies. Bipolarity, thus, is becoming a key structural parameter of international politics, defining, inter alia, foreign and security preferences of the EU.

From a neorealist perspective, a bipolar structure will make the EU either take sides with one of the poles or balance. On the other hand, growing tensions and deteriorating security institutions will increase demand for enhancing hard security capabilities. These are two primary factors shaping the Union's security strategy – and these are also factors behind security strategies of the EU's most powerful member states: Germany and France.

The EU enlargement has traditionally been seen through the lenses of functionalism/neofunctionalism. The logic of the process was perceived as primarily economically driven: rational agents have been better off with different sorts of barriers between states lifted and supranational institutions becoming stronger. However, geopolitical factors should not be excluded.

A shift in security paradigm, triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, is likely to make those factors much more important. Within neorealism, success of an actor's foreign and security policy is largely defined by its ability to make sense of the structural limitations, carefully assess the balance of power – and adapt to it.

In the context of the behavioural power of the state, we can look to France as an example. It is using the renewed EU enlargement policy to assert its status as the architect of a united Europe. Back in 2017, French president Macron shook up the EU with his statement on revising the European project and the need to reform the European Union (Élysée, 2017), which was then largely met with cautious scepticism (Erlanger, 2017). During his first term from 2017 to 2022, Macron promoted a strategic vision for Europe that included integrating the Russian Federation into the European security architecture. This is confirmed by the fact that, in June 2021, the French president and German chancellor submitted a proposal to the European Council for the first EU-Russia summit since 2014, with the aim of engaging in a "demanding dialogue" with Putin, which they deemed "necessary for the stability of the European continent" (FRANCE 24 with AFP, 2021). While this proposal was supported by Austrian chancellor Sebastian Kurz and Italian prime minister Mario Draghi at the time, it was met with resistance by the leaders of Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Poland. Consequently, the dialogue initiated by Macron never took place (Yevropeiska Pravda, 2021).

Yet, the outbreak of a full-scale invasion forced the French president to reconsider his attitude towards relations with the Russian Federation and the role of the European Union in the modern system of international relations. Given the urgent need to review the security dimension of the European Union's activities, Russian aggression also intensified discussions about the European project as a whole, initiated by Macron himself, who has repeatedly promoted the concept of Europe's "strategic autonomy" in a multipolar system of international relations. In his speech at the Conference on the Future of Europe, held on May 9, 2022, in Strasbourg, the President of France proposed the idea of creating a "European Political Community" – a pan-European platform based on the principles of a united Europe, which would include not only EU member states but also its main partners, countries aspiring to join the EU, and the United Kingdom (Macron, 2022). The main goal was France's desire to revive the idea of a "united Europe" by involving all European states in cooperation within the European Union and beyond. Macron separately noted Ukraine's role in the future European political community, because even though Ukraine is already "a member of our Europe", it will take more time for it to become a full member of the Union. One of the key tasks of this forum is to develop collective cooperation mechanisms to overcome common security challenges and threats (Moyer, 2022).

In addition, on 31 May 2023, at the GLOBSEC forum in Slovakia, Macron stated that there should no longer be a division between "old" and "new" Europe, as differences within the Union had made the EU unable to counter the threat posed by the Russian Federation (Macron, 2023). The French president also emphasised that he considers EU enlargement to be a process that meets the strategic needs of the Union, which should increase its security potential by strengthening its capabilities in the military, energy and industrial spheres.

Amid strategic uncertainty surrounding US security support for Europe, the need in developing the EU's strategic autonomy is growing stronger. As one of the most proactive advocates of this concept, France is seeking new ways to strengthen the EU's security capabilities, particularly through enhanced cooperation with other member states. One manifestation of this was the signing of an agreement to enhance cooperation between France and Poland in the fields of defence, nuclear energy and other areas on the symbolic Europe Day, 9 May 2025 (FRANCE 24 with AFP, 2025). Following similar strategic partnership agreements with Germany in 2017, Italy in 2021 and Spain in 2023, France has decided to deepen its bilateral relations with a country that

plays a key role on Europe's eastern flank. After all, Poland is particularly vulnerable due to its geographical proximity to the Russian Federation. Under such geopolitical conditions, this prompts the Polish authorities to spend more on defending their country. According to the Press Release of the NATO's Public Diplomacy Division, based on the indicator "Defence expenditure as a share of GDP" (based on 2015 prices and exchange rates), Poland spent 4.12% of its gross domestic product on defence in 2024, which is the highest indicator among all member states of the North Atlantic Alliance (NATO Public Diplomacy Division, 2024, p. 4). Accordingly, Poland is one of the most proactive countries advocating for the enlargement of the European Union in order to strengthen its eastern flank.

Since 2022, France has consistently supported EU enlargement and promoted the idea of an autonomous Europe. It has used this approach to strengthen its ties with Poland and increase its influence in Central Europe. The new agreement includes joint investments in the defence industry and arms purchases, effectively giving France additional opportunities to promote its military and industrial products in Poland (Pineau, 2025). In this way, France has reinforced its presence in a region that has historically been influenced by the United States and Germany, while at the same time opening up additional opportunities to promote French initiatives and products in the fields of defence procurement and nuclear energy. Thus, the enlargement of the European Union can serve as a framework for promoting national interests and increasing the political weight of the state, particularly by strengthening defence sector cooperation in the context of growing security threats.

Conclusions. The theory of neorealism allows us to interpret security threats, in this case the Russian-Ukrainian war, as a structural imperative that has significantly influenced the political priorities of the European Union. The geopolitical challenges caused by the largest war on the European continent in the 21st century have prompted the EU's political leadership to rethink the Union's international political role and weight, while also leading to the formation of a renewed enlargement strategy. The strategic uncertainty of the future of countries seeking to join the Union has been replaced by rapid political decisions, such as granting Ukraine and Moldova candidate status. Russia's full-scale aggression gave a "geopolitical impetus" and intensified the negotiation process with North Macedonia and Albania, which demonstrated a change in the EU establishment's attitude towards the Western Balkans region as an area for a new wave of enlargement. Thus, the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war has been a catalyst for fundamental transformations in European Union policy.

The updated EU enlargement policy is also linked to the concept of balance of power, as the Union's eastward expansion will strengthen the institution's position in the international political arena and contain the Russian Federation, which seeks to extend its influence to other countries. The cases of Serbia and Georgia illustrate a certain dilemma for the European Union. On the one hand, these states openly demonstrate a departure from the traditional values of democracy and the rule of law, which are mandatory for strict compliance by both member states and candidate countries. On the other hand, in the context of countries standing at the crossroads between the EU and Russia, the European Union has to compromise its pragmatism and build a special type of relationship in order to keep these states within its sphere of influence. After all, the final geopolitical shift of Serbia and Georgia towards the Russian Federation will have negative consequences that could further weaken the European Union on the global stage.

In addition, the example of France, which until 2022 considered it expedient to settle Europe's relations with Russia and not rush to expand eastward, demonstrates the interest of EU member states in intensifying the enlargement process. It is precisely in the context of an acute security crisis in the region that France is actively strengthening its influence in Central and Eastern Europe by deepening bilateral cooperation with Poland, a major state on the EU's eastern flank. This, in turn, serves as evidence that states interested in the EU's geopolitical stability and advocating its "strategic autonomy" perceive enlargement as a necessary step to strengthen the Union's institutional capacity, given that the EU is one of the key platforms for promoting national interests. In other words, a strong, enlarged European Union provides its members far greater opportunities to ensure security, realise their interests and achieve political influence in the international system.

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