

# Geopolitical competition of global powers during the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>1</sup>

**Diana Mykhailova-Kacimi**, *Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv (Kyiv, Ukraine)*

E-mail: [mrs.mykhailova.kacimi@gmail.com](mailto:mrs.mykhailova.kacimi@gmail.com)

ORCID ID: 0000-0003-1300-5305

## Abstract

Despite the fact that the classical concept of geopolitics was first formed by Rudolf Kjellén in the early 20th century, modern experts in international relations still discuss the feasibility and relevance of these classical methods in today's conditions. The academic debate revolves around new methods of geopolitical struggle in the foreign policy of the states in the international arena. Geographical features take a back seat, and economic, military, technological and informational factors come to the fore. The article's aim is to analyse the impact of geopolitical competition of world leaders during the COVID-19 crisis. The author demonstrates the tendency of aggravation of geopolitical competition between the so-called Collective West and Chinese–Russian alliance. The degree of intensity of geopolitical competition poses a threat to the security and stability of the EU. To discuss the geopolitical competition, it is proposed to include the following issues: the main actors of geopolitical competition, the key methods of competitiveness and their evolution under the coronavirus pandemic.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, coronavirus, pandemic, USA, China, European Union (EU), Russia, geopolitical competition

## Geopolityczna rywalizacja światowych mocarstw w czasie pandemii COVID-19

### Streszczenie

Pomimo tego, że klasyczna koncepcja geopolityki została po raz pierwszy sformułowana przez Rudolfa Kjelléna na początku XX wieku, współcześni eksperci stosunków międzynarodowych wciąż dyskutują o relewantności jej pierwotnych założeń w dzisiejszych warunkach. Dyskusja akademicka toczy się wokół nowych metod geopolitycznej rywalizacji aktorów na arenie międzynarodowej. Czynniki geograficzne schodzą w niej na dalszy plan, podczas gdy na pierwszy wysuwają się czynniki ekonomiczne, militarne, technologiczne i informacyjne. Celem artykułu jest analiza wpływu geopolitycznej rywalizacji

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<sup>1</sup> The opinions expressed in this article are the author's own opinions, which do not represent in any manner this journal or the University of Warsaw. The conclusions and assessments in this article are based on the knowledge, research, and experience of the author.

globalnych liderów podczas kryzysu COVID-19. W tekście przedstawiono tendencję do zaostrzania się konkurencji geopolitycznej między Zachodem a sojuszem chińsko-rosyjskim. Stopień nasilenia rywalizacji geopolitycznej stwarza zagrożenie dla bezpieczeństwa i stabilności UE. Rozważania dotyczące rywalizacji geopolitycznej powinny dotyczyć następujących zagadnień: jej głównych aktorów, kluczowych metod tej rywalizacji oraz ich przemian w dobie pandemii koronawirusa.

**Słowa kluczowe:** COVID-19, koronawirus, pandemia, USA, Chiny, Unia Europejska (UE), Rosja, rywalizacja geopolityczna

Geopolitics as a tool of foreign policy of the leading states is the popular topic discussed among scholars in international relations and political sciences. This trend could be noticed since early 2000. The classical concept of geopolitics was formed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by such researchers as Rudolf Kjellén, Halford John Mackinder, Friedrich Ratzel and others. The classical definition by Kjellén assuming that *geopolitics is the science of the state as a geographical organism that develops in space*, is no longer relevant. The modern studies on geopolitics relegate the geographical features to the background, and put economic, military, technological and informational factors forward.

This research is based on the studies of the modern geopolitical school, such as American (Zbigniew Brzezinski, Henry Kissinger), Russian (Aleksandr Dugin), Chinese (Deng Xiaoping, Chen Dinding and Hu Zhanyang) and European researchers. Some of the authors, as Sergey I. Shubin underlines that "modern geopolitics is a science that studies the unity of geographical, economic, military, historical, political, and other interacting factors that affect the strategic potential of the state" (Shubin 2008: p. 11). And Gearóid Ó Tuathail believes that geopolitics is a discourse about world politics, with a particular emphasis on state competition and the geographical dimensions of power (Ó Tuathail 2006). However, geopolitics during the pandemic in the contemporary world is a completely new phenomenon for investigation. The main trends and problems have been accumulating for a long time and are exposed in times of crises.

The aim of this study is to determine the impact of geopolitical competition of global powers during the COVID-19 crisis. The object of research is modern international relations, and the subject of the analysis is geopolitical competition as a foreign policy tool. In this context the author proposes a definition of geopolitical competition as a political science concept which describes competitiveness between the actors of international relations in the military-political, socio-economic and information spheres.

For discussion on geopolitical competition, it is proposed to include the following issues: the main actors of geopolitical competition, the key methods of this competitiveness and their evolution under the coronavirus pandemic. Among the global powers that compete on geopolitics principles, it is necessary to mention: the United States and the European Union (so-called "Collective West") and Chinese–Russian alliance. The tendency of aggravation of geopolitical competition of these main actors of the international arena is demonstrated. The escalation of geopolitical competition of global powers is a threat to regional security and stability of the EU and global security in general.

## Materials and Methods

Research methodology is mostly based on a *case study* method and political discourse analysis. In this article there are different situations analysed, which demonstrate the level of the geopolitical competition between the main global players, especially in the EU's neighbouring region. Also, a method of comparative analysis is used to determine the characteristics of the politics and policies of the EU, the USA, Russia and China in the last few years. Description is also a typical instrument in such studies and is used for the illustration of the coronavirus crisis chronology and reaction of the world community to it.

## Research results and discussion

With some frequency the outbreaks of epidemics occur in the world. Each of them has its own name, a source of origin, and certain consequences (during the last two decades: H5N1 Avian Influenza in 2005, H1N1 Swine Flu in 2009, Ebola in 2014). If previous outbreaks affected developing countries and countries with fragile economies, the CoViD-19 (CoronaVirus Disease) challenged all previous pandemics. As of February 2022, 5,882,036 people died from the COVID-19 outbreak (Worldometer 2022). The exact end of this pandemic is unknown and it may result in a new reality to which the world needs to adapt. The coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 constantly mutates into new variants (Alpha, Beta, Delta, Gamma, Omicron...), easily adapts to the human body and causes devastating damage.

On 11 March 2020, World Health Organization (WHO) President, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus called COVID-19 a pandemic for the first time. During the first wave of the pandemic, when the globe and every state in it remained isolated, everyone had to adhere to strict quarantine requirements. The media remained then almost the only means of information and, in general, communication with the world. Humankind is closely confronted with the digitalisation of many processes. Coronavirus pandemic, like a litmus test, has accelerated and exposed all the painful places of public policy, not only in developing countries but also in developed ones.<sup>2</sup> It showed the failure of the international system to combat it.

## Collective West

The coronavirus pandemic had struck a blow to European solidarity. No EU government had a recipe for how to act during the epidemic. States closed their borders, restricted contacts and banned the export of medical supplies, instead of joining forces to fight the coronavirus crisis. In the winter and spring of 2020, Italy, Spain and France became the first countries of the European Union to suffer the most from the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic. In the early stages, the coronavirus crisis in Italy seemed to be

<sup>2</sup> See previous publications on this topic in "Przegląd Europejski": Dziembąta, Ktos 2021; Lehrner 2021; Fan, Wang 2021; Ruszkowski, Żurek 2021.

rather mild. However, within a few weeks (from 21 February to 22 March 2020) the pandemic in Italy turned into a catastrophe and a continuous stream of deaths. The *Harvard Business Review* dubbed it the biggest crisis in Italy since World War II (Pisano et al. 2020). China was the first to help Italy, followed by Russia, thus demonstrating its superiority. President Putin "joined the game" by sending military planes with special machines "capable of disinfecting vehicles, buildings and public spaces, as well as medical specialists and equipment, including testing devices, to the worst-hit Italian regions" (Osborn 2020). With the military planes, the Russian leader made a kind of message to the EU and NATO to emphasise the presence of Russia and the "helping hand" in the difficult time for Europe. Fostering a plan of creating political rift within the European Union and the alliance between European states and United States, Kremlin's strategists took advantage of the despair of Europeans, which played a role when Rome demanded the lifting of sanctions against Moscow during the coronavirus (Emmott, Osborn 2020). China and Russia have cleverly filled in the gaps in the production and delivery of masks and special protection in Europe's failures to combat the coronavirus.

The historic *axis* of friendship between Hungary and Russia during the coronavirus period began with an Inter-parliamentary Commission to discuss socio-economic, humanitarian and cultural co-operation, in which "health diplomacy" became a new area of cooperation. The next round of Hungarian–Russian relations was the import of the Russian vaccine *Sputnik V*, despite warnings from the European Commission and certification procedures from the European Medicines Agency, where the *Sputnik V* has not yet been registered. After the "vaccine triumph" of Budapest as the first EU capital to approve the Russian vaccine (Simon 2021), the Hungarians did not stop and signed 15-year gas contracts with Russia bypassing Ukraine (Gazprom 2021), effectively step by step destroying the EU's energy security. The "Trianon Syndrome" of Hungarians<sup>3</sup> continue to exist in their public consciousness to this day, as they recall the rights of Hungarian minorities in Moldova, the Western Balkans, Romania and Ukraine. The use of Russian methods on minority issues, similarly Budapest uses as a tool of pressure in relations with neighbours, which is very impressive to the Kremlin, especially when it comes to giving Ukraine the Membership Action Plan (MAP)<sup>4</sup>, where Hungary continues to block Ukraine's integration into NATO (Brzozowski 2019), because decisions to join the Alliance are made by consensus.

Another country that uses Russian gas and the vaccine *Sputnik V* is Slovakia. It is also possible to observe there the strong influence of Russia in different spheres of economic, political, social and cultural life. The same trends apply to the entire Central European region.

The 30-year conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh during the pandemic has clearly demonstrated the failure of the Eastern Neighbourhood Policy. The conflict that has erupted between the two member states of the Eastern

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<sup>3</sup> The *Trianon Syndrome* or *Trianon Trauma* is a social phenomenon mostly occurring in Hungary. It consists of resentment about the consequences of the Treaty of Trianon and in the belief that Hungary was better in the past than in the present (Inotai 2019).

<sup>4</sup> MAP is NATO's programme of assistance, advice, and practical support for states wishing to join the Alliance.

Partnership shows the lack of tools for comprehensive cooperation or a strategy ahead of the curve. It should be noted that the positions of the EU Member States were divided. For example, Paris expressed support for Yerevan at the time when Budapest supported Baku. It becomes obvious that in the first case the influence of the Armenian diaspora in France played an important role. When Russia, the USA, and France condemned the conflict's escalation and exchanged declarative statements, the Karabakh knot was unleashed by Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who won this geopolitical game by advancing his geopolitical interests in the Caucasus and strengthening his position in the region. After all, the capitulation in 2020 was signed on his terms (mediated by Russia) and now fully meets Turkey's strategic interests.

The pipeline *Nord Stream 2*, which became an instrument of geopolitical struggle, also made adjustments to the political and security landscape of Europe during the coronavirus period. The price of gas on the London Stock Exchange during the crisis rose to historic highs and reached a record \$ 2100 per thousand cubic metres in December 2021 (Golubkova et al. 2021). In this sense, it is necessary to consider the positions of the states divided on the issue of completion and commissioning of this project. On the one hand, Germany, Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands and partly France were in favour of the gas project, and on the other hand, the United States, Ukraine, Poland and the Baltic states called for it to be stopped. Despite the fact that the gas project was launched in the summer of 2015 by the Russian state energy company *Gazprom* together with five Western European partner companies that are financial investors (ENGIE, OMV, Shell, Uniper and Wintershall Dea), the coronavirus crisis has brought this issue to the surface. The pragmatism of the German political elite and the helplessness of Brussels are impressive, as only four years after the start of construction of the gas pipeline, the European Parliament revised the Gas Directive 2009/73/EC and amended it by Directive (EU) 2019/692 concerning common rules for the internal market in natural gas. Moreover, the Lisbon Treaty enshrined the right of the EU Member States to pursue their own "energy diplomacy" under the Article 194 (2) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union: "Such measures shall not affect a Member State's right to determine the conditions for exploiting its energy resources, its choice between different energy sources and the general structure of its energy supply..." (TFEU 2008: art. 194, par. 2), thus laying the foundations for future gas crises and the construction of the German–Russian *Nord Stream-2* gas pipeline. Geopolitical tensions with Russia could be reduced by U.S. shale gas, "freedom gas" (Russel 2020: p. 17). The issue of diversification of sources supply to Europe should be an alternative to the Russian monopoly on the European market.

The warming of U.S. relations with the EU following the accession of the president Biden's administration united for the first time the two houses of Congress and the EU's political elites around the Ukrainian issue. The biggest security crisis for Europe since World War II today is on Ukraine's south-eastern borders, signalling to the civilised world that the Russian Federation's "strategic coercion" is working (Lee 2021). The Collective West has "a window of opportunity" to offer the world a new security strategy, and for the United States – to return to the role of world arbiter.

## Chinese–Russian alliance

The coronavirus outbreak occurred in China. Therefore, this country suffered the first humanitarian and economic losses. Despite this, China was also the first state to recover, and then it shipped billions of masks and other personal protective equipment to other countries, most of which were short in supply. Accordingly, China's growing economic, diplomatic and military power is a matter of particular concern to Americans. The meeting of Trump and Jinping at the G20 summit in Osaka (Japan, 29 June 2019), with the statements of the leaders on the preparation of the next negotiations on the trade agreement, somewhat reduced the degree of tension. However, the last straw in their relationship was an outbreak of a coronavirus pandemic in the Chinese city of Wuhan. President Trump's official accusations of a coronavirus outbreak directly indicated that it was China's fault. However, China claimed that the virus is American, and a delegation of American soldiers brought it to Wuhan (Economic Times 2020), where sports games took place on the eve of the pandemic. During the pandemic, Moscow joined the political game between Beijing and Washington, which was accompanied by spreading information that the coronavirus was invented in American laboratories.

The Biden's administration has largely continued Trump's foreign policy to contain China and radicalised it somewhat in the economic sphere, countering the spread of Chinese digital technology and the military (Moon Cronk 2021). The U.S. opposition to China and Russia as the authoritarian states is clearly expressed in the *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*: "Anti-democratic forces use misinformation, disinformation, and weaponized corruption to exploit perceived weaknesses and sow division within and among free nations, erode existing international rules, and promote alternative models of authoritarian governance" (The White House 2021: p. 7). There is also mentioned: "Both Beijing and Moscow have invested heavily in efforts meant to check U.S. strengths and prevent us from defending our interests and allies around the world" (The White House 2021: p. 8).

The pandemic has become "a window of opportunity" for Beijing to increase its presence in the South China Sea (Bengali 2020). These waters are rich in energy resources. It is worth mentioning the events of 2017 at the 9th Congress of the Communist Party of China, where the *National Revival Action Plan* and the implementation of Deng Xiaoping's "three-step strategy" were adopted. The strategy has been formulated since 1978 and defines the tasks of China's 3 stages of development: (1) to build capacity by 2010, (2) to make a technological breakthrough by 2021 and (3) to become a world leader by 2049. China's pandemic goals demonstrate not only further strengthening, but *de facto* control of the South China Sea as its own maritime empire and complete dominance in its waters. Vietnam is concerned about China's behaviour around the Paracel archipelago. The growing competitiveness of America with Chinese "check diplomacy" on the African continent during the pandemic demonstrates rivalry in the commercial dimension. A striking example of Chinese "check diplomacy" is the Zimbabwe Parliament building project during the pandemic (Nyabiage 2020). According to the official Beijing position, this gift is

a symbol of Sino-Zimbabwe friendship and commitment to *One Belt One Road* initiative. It is clear that with such generous gifts, Beijing ties African leaders to itself as global centre of power. The U.S. International Development Finance Corporation launched the *Africa Investment Advisor Program* in July 2020 (DFC 2020). Thus, Americans need this programme to attract investment in this priority region, which clearly demonstrates the Chinese–American competition in the commercial sphere.

An interesting fact of the coronavirus crisis in Russia is that it began during a political reshuffle. The Kremlin initiated amendments to the Constitution, which should have given Vladimir Putin the opportunity to remain in power even after the expiration of his current term in office in 2024. The Russian constitutional referendum officially took place on 1 July 2020. The culmination of the Kremlin's political reshuffle was the signing of the Union State decree with Belarus, which has formally existed for more than 20 years since 1999. The coronavirus crisis clearly demonstrates the challenges of a democratic world with the authoritarian regimes of Russia and Belarus as demonstrated by their new-old alliances. At the time when Belarus, led by president Lukashenko, is sinking deeper into external isolation from the civilised world, the president Putin is stepping up his military presence on the Belarusian-Ukrainian border and raising influence across the region to push his interests forward. As for the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan during the coronavirus period, it is also interesting to note that Moscow and Ankara in Karabakh acted not as opponents but as situational allies. For both Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the opportunity to resolve the conflict without Western involvement was much more valuable. The OSCE Minsk Group (led for many years by the United States, France and Russia) and other mediators (Collective Security Treaty Organisation, of which Armenia and Russia are members) in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict have demonstrated their inability to influence the situation in the region. Thus, Moscow has maintained a presence in Syria and Libya, and a partnership with Ankara on this issue is crucial, because the Kremlin needs peace of mind to conduct its operations in Africa and the Middle East. The Kremlin also gained political points as a result of restoring control over the situation in Kazakhstan in January 2022 on the one hand, and on the other hand – through the territory of this country, pumping millions of tons of oil to China and thus strengthening the rouble and Moscow Exchange (stock market).

The coronavirus pandemic and all its consequences have prompted Moscow and Beijing to deepen economic, political and technological ties. The joint statement of Putin and Xi Jinping at the opening of the XXIV Olympic Winter Games in Beijing demonstrates that Putin is supported by the Chinese leader in the confrontation with the West. The joint statement, signed by the parties, referred to NATO's non-expansion to the East and the concern of military alliances in the Indo-Pacific region: "The sides oppose further enlargement of NATO and call on the North Atlantic Alliance to abandon its ideologized cold war approaches" (Joint Statement... 2022). AUKUS<sup>5</sup> and Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD)

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<sup>5</sup> AUKUS is a trilateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, announced on 15 September 2021. This pact is focused on military capability, it includes cooperation on quantum technologies, artificial intelligence, undersea capabilities, hypersonic and counter-

are perceived as potentially threatening by both authoritarian leaders, who interpret democracy in their own way: "There is no one-size-fits-all template to guide countries in establishing democracy. A nation can choose such forms and methods of implementing democracy that would best suit its particular state, based on its social and political system, its historical background, traditions and unique cultural characteristics. It is only up to the people of the country to decide whether their State is a democratic one." (Joint Statement... 2022). "To draw dividing lines based on the grounds of ideology, including by establishing exclusive blocs and alliances of convenience, prove to be nothing but flouting of democracy and go against the spirit and true values of democracy" (Joint Statement... 2022) and signalling a high probability of a new regional conflict. However, China is unlikely to think of starting a war in Europe, because the EU is its second largest trading partner. That is why it is crucial for China to demonstrate consensus with Russia and at the same time "squeeze" the maximum advantaged out of Russia, especially in the light of the threat of U.S. sanctions package ("mother of all sanctions") against Russia comparable to the ones against Iran.

Another important fact is that China has not yet recognised the annexation of Crimea by Russian Federation in 2014. Russia has already made a statement about the One-China principle and does not recognise Taiwan's independence: "The Russian side reaffirms its support for the One-China principle, confirms that Taiwan is an inalienable part of China, and opposes any forms of independence of Taiwan" (Joint Statement... 2022). At first glance, it seems that China can indeed easily cover Russia from U.S. or European sanctions, so they will not give tangible results. But if we look deeper, China can easily reverse the same scheme as in 2014. After the annexation of Crimea, Russia faced sanctions and sought help in China, that indeed helped but on the most favourable terms. It's about a 30-year contract for the supply of gas to China (Wan, Hauslohner 2014), but at the same time the *Siberian Power* pipeline to China was being built. Beijing then took advantage of the situation, realising that the Kremlin had nowhere to go, and said that it was ready to buy Russian gas only on its own terms, knocking out fabulous gas prices for the next 30 years. For comparison, spot gas prices in Europe hit a record \$ 2100 per 1000 cubic metres in December 2021, while China buys Russian gas at \$ 196 per 1000 cubic metres (Interfax 2021). Thus, Russia's opposition to the West is pushing the Kremlin into the arms of Beijing, which is using the situation to its advantage.

Russia is increasing oil supplies to China with new deals worth about \$ 117.5 billion. This looks like Putin's attempt to prepare for the West to cut Russia off from its market, including gas. Both countries share a desire to reduce their dependence on the USD (dedollarisation) in order to reject American dominance. It is important for Russia to circumvent many U.S. sanctions that hit it economically. For China it is more important after Washington imposed tariffs on Chinese goods. Moreover, in 2020 they joined forces in the construction of the large petrochemical complex, which is being implemented

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hypersonic, electronic warfare, information and innovation exchange. Under the pact, the US and the UK will help Australia to acquire nuclear-powered submarines.



by Sibur Holding (Russia) with the Sinopec Group (China), which is aimed at the Chinese market and is planned to be completed by 2025.

China is using large telecommunications infrastructure companies to increase its influence and gain control of the Internet. To suppress dissents and consolidate its power, Russia imports the Chinese model of digital authoritarianism and uses it domestically. "Troll armies" are used as a tool of authoritarian diplomacy to silence dissidents. The legitimisation of Russia's digital authoritarianism is evidenced by the 2019 Sovereign Internet Law.

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

In times of crises, the relationship of world powers cannot be called specific explicitly. They start to pursue different and more assertive foreign policies. Therefore, it is not possible to consider geopolitics only through the framework of relations in the international arena, but as competition. The coronavirus pandemic has been a factor in the development of geopolitical competition between global power and players at the regional level. Geopolitics continues to be used as a foreign policy tool. That is why so often the world community could observe a dichotomy in the relationship, when for different purposes geopolitics works for the benefit of some states at the expense of other states. Classical tools of geopolitical struggle are gradually receding into the background, giving way to new methods of geopolitical competition: diplomatic, technological, economic, innovative, informational, military and others. All of them are not present in the classical interpretation.

Following the example of geopolitical competition between the Collective West and the Chinese-Russian alliance during the pandemic, the degree of tension in international relations increased, changing the balance of power. Deepening economic, political, and technological ties between Moscow and Beijing and their open confrontation with the U.S., polarise the world more and more. European security and defence policy is under threat. In view of the fact that the national factor of some European Union capitals prevails over the collective approach, the coronavirus pandemic has brought these problems to the surface. There is a danger that the EU will gradually become an object of international relations rather than an active player.

The events of geopolitical competition on the background of the coronavirus pandemic shape policy at the national, regional and global levels. External challenges that destabilise the situation in Europe may become new opportunities. The quintessence of the combined efforts of the Collective West will be a new security mechanism of world order, otherwise the Western ideas of democracy, freedom and the rule of law will be destroyed.

Based on the objectives of the study, some recommendations may be provided: revision of the treaties currently in force; revision of the Eastern Neighbourhood Policy, strengthening strategic capacity; creation of the regular EU army.

**Diana Mykhailova-Kacimi** – MA in International Relations, Social Communication and Regional Studies (Educational and Scientific Institute of International Relations, Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Ukraine). Expert on social and political issues, diplomacy and international cooperation. Active participant of national and international conferences. Her scientific of interests include: EU energy security, international organisations, Ukraine on the international stage.

**Diana Mykhailova-Kacimi** – absolwentka stosunków międzynarodowych, komunikacji społecznej i studiów regionalnych w *Educational and Scientific Institute of International Relations* na Narodowym Uniwersytecie im. Tarasa Szewczenki w Kijowie. Ekspertka w zakresie problematyki spraw społeczno-politycznych, dyplomacji i współpracy międzynarodowej, uczestniczka licznych konferencji krajowych i międzynarodowych. Zainteresowania naukowo-badacze: bezpieczeństwo energetyczne UE, organizacje międzynarodowe, Ukraina na arenie międzynarodowej.

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