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Cattedra Geopolitical Scenarios and Political Risk

The future of NATO-Russia relations in the wake of the Russo-Ukrainian War: the need for a new approach

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1 Introduction

The dramatic and abrupt escalation of the Ukrainian Crisis, marked by the Russian invasion of the country on 24 February 2022, calls for a swift and extensive reassessment and reconsideration of how to deal with the growing aggressiveness and assertiveness of the Russian Federation. Arguably, this escalation, while certainly dramatic, cannot be considered abrupt per se. The Ukrainian Crisis, together with the War in Donbas, has now passed its eight-year and all attempts at a diplomatic and political resolution have effectively failed. One could, therefore, question whether the paths undertaken in those years have been appropriate and well-guided or if they have only contributed to postponing or even triggering the decisive solution to the crisis. Understanding what has gone wrong in the past always marks the first step to commencing a new course. This thesis, therefore, aims at exploring the recent past of the NATO-Russia relationship to suggest a new and revised approach to dealing with the eastern neighbor. To do so, the first chapter will review some of the key points of this relationship from the collapse of the USSR up to the outbreak of the Ukrainian Crisis in 2014. The trajectories of both parties will be explored to show how, probably, the seeds of the current situation can be traced back to those, underlining an inevitable collision of interests somewhere in the future. A key focus will be the recognition that while some attempts at cooperation were indeed launched, these were not of the scale or intensity needed to fully allow to Russian Federation to, on one hand, reconcile itself with its past and, on the other hand, to integrate its economy and society in the western liberal world. In this perspective, the often-repeated claim of encirclement and excessive expansion of western security and political organizations (NATO and the EU) finds new significance. As a consequence, some of Russia's most aggressive foreign policy actions of those years can be more thoroughly understood as part of a continuous struggle for self-confidence as well as international recognition in years, often underestimated in western societies, deeply troubling and traumatic. While these actions do illustrate a deep frustration, with stimulating room for analysis of

the difficulties of democratization, another line of scrutiny will focus more on the lack of recognition of this trend and hence the lack of adjustment on the part of NATO and the EU. Chapter two will focus on the case study at hand: the political, diplomatic, and military situation in Ukraine. Again, a deep understanding of the path to the crisis is crucial to our analysis and key to inform our judgment. Intersecting with chapter one, we will show the evident significance of the so-called color revolutions (as well as successive ones) in informing foreign policy maneuvers of the Russian Federation, sometimes misunderstood or underestimated by western societies. The misjudgment of the genuine reasons guiding Russian foreign policy is significantly reflected in the responses of NATO and the EU, leading to a circle of misguided policies that ultimately fail to tackle the true contentious issues. These considerations purposely avoid trying to apply blame or fault to one of the parties, not because it is always impossible, but because of the recognition that every geopolitical choice is the result of a series of countless back and forth actions that in a time span of years and sometimes decades eventually leads to a drastic decision that we feel is morally reprehensible. While this kind of judgment may be legitimate in itself, it certainly doesn't contribute to the goal of this thesis and, therefore, has no practical use for our purpose. On the contrary, it may lead to a biased reading of the events and an analysis that, rather than focusing on understanding the roots of the problems and how a certain situation has arisen, tries to blame one of the parts by retroactively justify or condemn certain policy choices. In the second chapter, we will also try to understand what the principal short-term and long-term goals of Russian and NATO-EU actions are and how they are trying to reach those. Considering that the situation is still ongoing, these reasonings may be as well constantly evolving and therefore partly flawed. However, understanding the general prospect and aims of the parties is fundamental to explain their current choices and course of action. We will not try to provide a prediction or a definitive solution to the conflict itself because of the innumerable variables that can affect it both on and off the field, but rather we will show how it is merely the culmination of a series of colliding interests and conflicting actions that, because of specific circumstances, have led to this tragic outcome. In the final chapter, it will be shown why and how the war in Ukraine marks a decisive

turning point in the relations of western countries with Russia. We will explore the many and often unexpected consequences of the invasion especially on European countries, Germany above all, as well as some traditionally neutral countries such as Switzerland and Austria, but mainly Finland and Sweden. It is safe to say that the actions undertaken by the Russian Federation have at least partially backfired, causing unwanted and unpredicted consequences both economically and diplomatically. These consequences have a huge significance for the EU and NATO, their own relation, and therefore their future strategies and commitments. Finally, it is probably useful to be clearer and more precise in defining the aims and goals of this thesis. Our goal is to stress how decisive and significant this moment is for the definition of a new working relationship between the western societies and their eastern neighbor. In order to reach a new normality, it is crucial to create first the prerequisites and then the shared structure for a new security order in the region. In this perspective, as already mentioned, the war in Ukraine, while tragic, represents the end point of past, flawed policies and its conclusion will be definitive only if, in parallel with a military cessation of hostilities, a new, commonly agreed security architecture can be defined. Thus, the need to recognize (which doesn't necessarily coincide with legitimize) the frustrations and aspirations of the Russian Federation and allow for the creation of a political environment that promotes trust-building and diplomatic coordination and confrontation.

2 History of NATO-Russia relationship

In this chapter, we start our historical recollection of the evolution of NATO-Russia relations from the collapse of the USSR. We will try to highlight the main issues related to the complex process of democratic transition and why rather than if this process could not be completed within Russia itself while it succeeded, to various degrees, elsewhere in former Warsaw Pact countries. We will also analyze the main direction of NATO and EU policies in the wake of a new, unipolar world and why and how these have subsequently fueled Russia's frustrations. Particular stress will be placed on the inability or unwillingness of western societies to fully commit to the integration of the Russian society into their new global order, inadvertently reinforcing nationalist and anti-western sentiment in a period of tremendous political and cultural change and fragility. From this, we will briefly investigate the main crises and confrontations of the past three decades highlighting the collision course on which both Russia and the West were and why and how these occurred and unfolded. It is possible to detect a trend in Russian policies in this regard. A trend that has probably not been completely identified by the international community and that has, therefore, led to misunderstanding and underestimation of threats and risks.

2.1 Russia after the breakup of the USSR

Between 1988 and 1991, after decades of economic, social, and political stagnation, the Soviet Union dissolved into fifteen new sovereign states (including the Russian Federation) plus some largely unrecognized separatist states such as Transnistria in eastern Moldova, Abkhazia and South Ossetia in northern Georgia and Artsakh in southwestern Azerbaijan, which could maintain their de facto independence thanks to financial and military support from the Russian Federation itself. Partly

following a process already started under Gorbachev's secretariat, the new leadership of the country found itself having to cope with profound economic, financial, and political fragility. The years of the Yeltsin presidency (1991-99) marked the foundational period of the new Russian state. The aims of his presidency were quite clear: pursue political and institutional democratization, reorganize the country as a market economy, and realign its foreign policies with that of other liberal societies. However, the path to reach those objectives proved enormously complex and fragile¹.

2.1.1 The economic situation

The economic situation of the new Russian Federation was dire both because of unsound past policies and because of the disrupting reforms needed to reorganize the country. The country's GDP more than halved during Yeltsin's years, while inflation also reached enormous figures². Many of the complications the government had to overcome stemmed from the fact that the country had effectively been, for more than 70 years, the biggest centrally planned economy in history. The sudden dissolution of the Soviet political and bureaucratic apparatus had immense negative effects on the production and distribution systems, leading to painful shortages of consumer goods. At the same time, given the central role that factories and enterprises had from a social point of view, the government was often forced to subsidize inefficient and unprofitable companies to protect workers. In January 1992, the Yeltsin government removed price controls on most consumer goods to incentivize their production and distribution. This also marked the first crucial step toward establishing a market-based economy. While its immediate objective was met, it fueled hyperinflation, which eroded the real wages and buying power of the citizens. The situation failed to improve at least until 1995 when, thanks to loans from the IMF and rising export of oil and natural

¹ Medvedev, R. (2000). Introduction. In *Post-Soviet Russia*. Columbia University Press.

² The World Bank, World Development Indicators (2022), retrieved from <https://databank.worldbank.org/reports.aspx?source=2&series=NY.GDP.MKTP.CD&country=RUS>

gas, the state was able to stabilize the currency and the overall macroeconomic situation. However, the government continued to borrow significant sums of money on international markets while delaying true economic structural changes. As a consequence, by failing to build an efficient tax system and collection procedures, unambiguous property rights, and coherent bankruptcy legislation, as well as by continuing to fund failing enterprises, it became impossible to credibly defend the currency's value. The issue was that the artificial currency rate did not represent the country's economic realities, making the ruble a speculator's target. As a result, the ruble plummeted, once again, in 1998, and the government was compelled to stop making debt payments due to a rising number of bankruptcies. The currency gradually stabilized and inflation fell, but most Russians' living conditions did not improve much, even though a small percentage of the population became extremely affluent. Furthermore, the majority of economic benefits were concentrated in major cities, while broad swaths of Russia experienced economic stagnation³. Another key priority for the new leadership was disposing of the immense number of state-controlled companies inherited by the Soviet Union. Many liberal reformists within Yeltsin's entourage, starting from ministers Yegor Gaidar and Anatoly Chubais, felt that the economy could only be revived by privatizing industries and companies and allowing them to compete, often implementing a so-called shock therapy. Eventually, already by the end of 1992, almost one-third of service and commerce businesses had been privatized⁴. The second phase of privatization took place between 1994 and 95. However, the process quickly appeared to be for the benefit of a few selected individuals cooperating with those in power. In the field of natural and energy resources, companies were sold at rates far below those recommended by the IMF. As a result of these waves of privatization a new class came to the fore in Russian politics: the *oligarchs*. These are individuals who, thanks to their political ties, came to control large sectors of the Russian economy. Many of these oligarchs purchased businesses for unrealistically low prices and, notably, with no real plan or intention to turn them profitable. Many

³ Medvedev, R. (2000). Privatization, Government Crisis, and Elections (1993). In *Post-Soviet Russia*. Columbia University Press.

⁴ Medvedev, R. (2000). A Capitalist Perestroika: First Steps, 1992–1993. In *Post-Soviet Russia*. Columbia University Press.

of these companies were indeed fragmented, sold, and eventually shut down. Factory closures, inflation, and the general sense that the highly anticipated reforms did not work for the benefit of whole citizenship but rather for a small elite, contributed significantly to the public dissatisfaction with Russia's liberalization process and its President Boris Yeltsin⁵.

2.1.2 The domestic political situation

From a political perspective, his presidency started with enormous popularity. His active role in defeating the attempted coup against Gorbachev in 1991 and his image as a liberal reformist granted him high room for maneuver in the early years of presidency. However, the Soviet-era Constitution, that still governed the country, did not clarify in detail the balance of power between the legislative and executive branches of the state. This led to numerous political disagreements over a variety of issues with Yeltsin's supporters claiming that the president had ultimate power and his opponents claiming that the legislature did. In a short time, an acute opposition between the presidency and parliament started forming. Moreover, high inflation and a lingering economic crisis put Yeltsin under a lot of pressure. The government's perceived disregard of the public's social needs in favor of financial stability and economic transformation led to the escalation of the political struggle between the two branches. The fact that many members of the parliament had vested interests in the old economic and political structure only contributed to exacerbate problems. Eventually, Yeltsin convened a Constitutional Convention in the summer of 1993 to draft a new post-Soviet constitution. In parallel, the parliament established its own Constitutional Committee. Inevitably, the presidential and parliamentary constitutional versions clashed, and Yeltsin was concerned by the growing number of regional leaders who favored the legislative version. The political conflict between Yeltsin and the parliament ultimately intensified on September 21, 1993, when Yeltsin issued a series of presidential

⁵ Encyclopædia Britannica. (2022). The Yeltsin presidency (1991–99). In *Post-Soviet Russia*. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/place/Russia/Post-Soviet-Russia>

decrees dissolving the parliament and imposing presidential rule that would last until new elections and a referendum on a new draft constitution. The parliament, on its part, found Yeltsin's decision unconstitutional, impeached him, and swore in Aleksandr Rutskoy, his vice president, as president. Armed individuals were subsequently given weapons to protect the legislative building. On September 25, the Army encircled the structure. Eventually, after days of open confrontation, everyone inside was forced to surrender and was subsequently arrested. With parliamentary forces defeated, the path was open for fresh parliament elections and a referendum on a new constitution in December 1993⁶. The president was given extensive powers under Yeltsin's new constitution. He nominated the prime minister, with authorization of the Duma, the lower house of parliament, and he could issue lawful decrees as long as they did not infringe federal or constitutional legislation. The president was also given the authority to dismiss the Duma and call new elections. The role of prime minister would serve as a critical connection between the executive and legislative branches. He was formally accountable to the parliament, but still needed the president's confidence to remain in office. As has probably become clear, the first years of life of the Russian Federation were exceptionally dependent around the personality of its leader Boris Yeltsin and a small group of very precarious associates. The Duma's relationship with President Yeltsin was marked by public displays of hostility; behind the scenes, however, political adversaries hashed out concessions more frequently than not. Furthermore, Yeltsin had no qualms about threatening the Duma with dissolution if it appeared to be defying presidential legislation. When faced with the implied threat of dissolution, deputies backed down, terrified of losing their considerable privileges of office and of an unhappy electorate. In this environment of political instability, the state also failed to perform its core tasks. The judicial system was on the verge of collapsing due to a lack of resources and skilled employees, as well as a new legal code meant to support the emerging market economy. The low salaries and the worsening life

⁶ Ibid.

standards also contributed to the rampant corruption and a brain drain. Health, education, and social services in the country were also severely limited⁷.

2.1.3 The geopolitical situation

Together with the problems related with weak and incomplete political, institutional, and economic transformation, the new Russian state also had to deal with a plethora of new neighbors borne out of the dissolution of the USSR. Moreover, within the Russian federation itself, multiple administrative regions sought increased autonomy. Indeed, the concept of *near abroad* was eventually coined to refer to areas previously part of the ancient Russian Empire or Soviet Union and are that now formed neighboring sovereign states. Because of the long-standing cultural, political, and economic ties that exist between Russia and these countries, the Russian establishment has always felt that the nation's foreign policy should prioritize strong economic and political ties with these countries. While the dissolution of the Soviet Union entered its last stages, this perspective was clear not only in the newly independent Russian Federation but in many of the former soviet republics as well. In fact, with the exception of the Baltic States and Georgia, the remainder of the Soviet republics convened in Almaty, Kazakhstan, on December 21st, 1993, to proclaim the birth of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, repudiating the legitimacy of soviet integration, refused to join the organization, claiming full continuity with the independent states of the interwar period. Eventually, Georgia joined the CIS in 1993. As mentioned, one of the key reasons for its establishment was the attempt to retain some of the ties that had been established during the Soviet period. There were also hopes that the such a cooperative organization would be able to reduce potential tensions in Russian-majority areas outside the borders of the new Russian republic, given the fact that approximately 25 million people who considered themselves Russian had been separated

⁷ Medvedev, R. (2000). Privatization, Government Crisis, and Elections (1993). In *Post-Soviet Russia*. Columbia University Press.

from the newly formed Russian state and were now living in what were now considered to be other countries⁸. A clear example of this was the Crimean Peninsula, which had been a part of the Russian Soviet republic until it was transferred to Ukraine in 1954. The region exemplified the potential risks of attempting to put order in the internal borders of the Soviet state: its large ethnic Russian population had little understanding of the notion of an independent Ukrainian state and the presence of a strategically important naval base for the Black Sea Fleet. Despite the premises, the eleven republics that comprised the CIS had no real aim of establishing a properly integrated organization. Rather, it became a shallow institutional arrangement with the declared objective of supporting the coordination of economic and diplomatic policies while also guaranteeing the peaceful and effective dissolution of the USSR in its successor states⁹.

2.2 The West after the end of the Cold War

The end of the Cold War and the Iron Curtain had the effect of suddenly breaking down the intangible and sometimes physical wall that separated the two halves of the European continent. The last decades leading to the dissolution of the Soviet Union had seen the formation and expansion of a remarkable gap in technological as well as cultural advancements in favor of the western bloc. This was becoming more and more visible to neighboring eastern European countries and contributed to the growth of the elites and masses' appetite for western's economic as well as political system. In this context, it shouldn't be surprising that, after the transitional period of the '90s, most former Warsaw Pact countries in eastern Europe have either joined or applied to join the European Union and NATO. The conclusion of the Cold War had sparked substantial discussion regarding the prospects for future relations between East and West European countries. The bipolar military divide of Europe would be

⁸ Gvosdev, N. & Marsh, C. (2014). The Eurasian Space. In *Russian Foreign Policy: Interests, Vectors, and Sectors*. pp. 5-6. Washington: QC Press.

⁹ Brzezinski, Z. K., & Sullivan, P. (2015). *Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States*. New York: Taylor & Francis.

replaced by a series of larger and more dispersed security problems, within which economic considerations would become increasingly significant. As a result of this, in the early 1990s, some doubts arose concerning the future evolution of the European Community and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. While the European institutions were reasonably expected to continue to function as an ever more integrated economic and political organization, NATO's whole existence had always depended on the apparent Soviet threat. With this threat eliminated, the organization came under growing scrutiny and its legitimacy as well as necessity came under question. Therefore, there are several significant distinctions between the ways in which the EU and NATO discussions on expansion have progressed since their respective inceptions. In the case of the EU, the end of the Cold War provided a chance to continue the process of achieving a continental unity, as originally foreseen by many of its founding fathers. Conversely, NATO was created in response to European division and discord, and it was viewed as a vital way of countering the Soviet military threat by the countries of Western Europe at the time. Following that logic, it should be unsurprising that the conclusion of the Cold War called into question the very survival of the Organization. As a result, the EU and NATO found themselves at quite distinct theoretical starting places when developing post-Cold War strategies. The new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe were explicit in their belief that admittance into western organizations had to be considered both a goal in itself and a means to further fuel their progress towards political and economic transformation¹⁰. Still, to understand the crucial connection between EU and NATO in Europe, we should consider that neither organization is truly suited to meet all the problems of ensuring or increasing social or environmental security in the region. On one hand, NATO is a proper military organization despite regular requests that it should become more political after the Cold War ended. On the other hand, despite the attempts of certain member states to promote political unity and the formation of a true shared foreign and security policy, the EU continues to work most efficiently and cohesively in the economic and commercial sectors as a sort of standard setting organization. Even though their primary focus rests

¹⁰ Smith, M. A., & Timmins, G. (2018). *Building a Bigger Europe*. New York: Taylor & Francis.

elsewhere, assertions are frequently made regarding each institution's capacity to foster political security for member states. No one European institution or organization is capable of ensuring appropriate security on its own. In fact, it is unlikely that the EU and NATO can provide for all of Europe's security requirements if one adopts the broadest conceptions of security. Nevertheless, these two are, by consensus, the most prominent and influential international organizations in Europe. However, it was clear that, to fulfill their ultimate goal of ensuring security and prosperity in the region, both organizations needed to expand eastward. This viewpoint is certainly contentious, and not all leaders and experts embrace it. A major and outspoken school of thought in the West has resisted NATO's eastward expansion on the grounds that it is both unneeded for providing security to former Warsaw Pact countries and provocative to the Russians. This school of thought contends that what Central and Eastern European nations want is primarily the economic security that EU expansion can supply. The basic assumptions of this argument are that ex-Warsaw Pact nations and their neighbors faced no contemporary military danger, and hence the military component of security had little to no importance for them at that time¹¹. Some have stated that NATO expansion should be pursued only if this danger actually arises in the future, while others have preferred to advocate for the EU to have its own fully-fledged integrated military component to detach itself from NATO. It is easy to minimize the significance military security aspects in favor of other elements since the end of the Cold War. It would be unwise, however, to degrade or disregard it to the level that some critics seem to claim. States and peoples may very well feel that economic, political, or social aspects of the society should be prioritized but, especially in a rapidly transforming world, both politically and territorially, the military dimension still maintains a central importance. This, in fact, allows for the unimpeded and sovereign progress in all the other spheres. Considering the relative military weakness of the European Union, as well as that of other European organizations and institutions, NATO remains the only western organizations capable of offering high levels of military deterrence. It is similarly evident that NATO, as a primarily military organization, cannot meet, alone, the complete

¹¹ Brown, M. E. (1995). The flawed logic of NATO expansion. *Survival*, 37(1), pp. 34-52. DOI: 10.1080/00396339508442775

spectrum of security demands and therefore cannot serve as the only institutional basis of a European security community. It certainly provides a fundamental component of that, which is key to build a more profound and integrated political and economic community¹².

2.2.1 EU and NATO eastern enlargement policies

As mentioned, the end of the Cold War and the subsequent political and economic opportunities that sprung in Central and Eastern Europe caught the European Union completely off guard. Despite this, the Commission, with complacency from Washington, moved swiftly to assume the role of coordinating Western economic aid to Central and Eastern European governments and positioned itself, along with other institutions, as a supportive force for the process of democratization in the area. On the other hand, it is simple to underestimate the rate at which things were happening in the area in the 1990s. It would have certainly been challenging to predict that any of the Central and Eastern European states could be enjoying EU (or NATO) membership by the end of the 20th century. This is probably because western observers were mostly unaware, or greatly underestimated, the impact that the *perestroika* and *glasnost* reform programs, launched by Gorbachev in the USSR, were already having in Central and Eastern Europe. While the first years of the 1990s were mainly characterized by uncertainty and hesitation in the EU approach to former Soviet bloc countries, a major turning point happened with the Copenhagen summit of June 1993. This allowed for the formulation of the first criteria for EU accession. In brief, these include the presence of institutions to preserve democratic governance and human rights, to have a functioning market economy, and the willingness to accept the obligations and general intent of the EU. While the Copenhagen declaration was far from a proper and formal roadmap for accession, it certainly provided willing countries some form of guidance as well as reassurance¹³. Indeed, between 1994 and 1996, Hungary, Poland,

¹² Smith, M. A., & Timmins, G. (2018). *Building a Bigger Europe*. New York: Taylor & Francis

¹³ Ibid.

Romania, Slovakia, Latvia, Estonia, Bulgaria, Lithuania, Czech Republic, and Slovenia all applied for membership. Eventually, between the two enlargements of 2004 and 2007, all the above-mentioned countries successfully joined the European Union. Despite early overly optimistic thoughts about Russia's approval, or at least indifference, about such events, some key elements started arising as possible points of friction. Firstly, the EU's initial unity in its approach with Russia between 2002 and 2004 was quickly weakened by internal disagreements. One of the first challenges regarded the status of Kaliningrad. As a result of Poland and Lithuania's membership to the EU, the Kaliningrad enclave became surrounded by EU territory. The European Commission, not accommodating Russia's requests for a privileged agreement, implemented standard visa requirements for Russians traveling to and from the enclave. Since 1999, it was the first time in EU–Russia ties when an EU policy directly affected Russian nationals. Its effects were apparent when a number of Russian ambassadors protested the implementation of visas as a hindrance to the free flow of people. After bitter diplomatic confrontations between European and Russian officials, the Russian government was compelled to accept European Commission transit restrictions. EU's unity, however, would quickly be shaken by personal initiatives, mainly led by Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, aimed at promoting a more relaxed and accommodating policy towards the Russian federation. Several months after the EU announced a visa policy for Kaliningrad in 2003, Berlusconi, acting as president of the European Council, made some remarks that would undo European unity. His declaration referred to his intention to be considered Putin's partner over Chechnya was in direct opposition to the EU's position on the issue. EU responses to Berlusconi's unusual backing for Putin's war in Chechnya exposed the EU's shaky political cohesiveness in its dealings with Russia. In an effort to prevent future occurrences of a similar kind, the European Commission issued recommendations designed to both restore cohesiveness in the EU's policy towards Russia and prevent the European Council Presidency from in the future contradicting the EU's position. The Berlusconi episode demonstrated that the EU as an actor is still very sensitive to the actions of the individual who holds the European Council Presidency. A second friction point

is represented by the growing normative gap between the EU and Russia. The Russian government's rejection of the EU's invitation to make Russia a member of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) demonstrates that there are disparities between the EU and Russia about the importance of key values that the ENP was meant to foster in EU's partners. The Kremlin was unwilling to implement political and economic changes in order to join a relatively more integrated Europe. On the contrary, as indicated in both the Russian International Policy Concept and the Russian Medium-Term Strategy, the Kremlin attempted to preserve independence in both domestic and foreign policy. However, rising normative difference between Brussels and Moscow was not the main cause for this trend; a variety of variables, such as the EU's growing influence in the post-Soviet region, certainly contributed to the worsening of EU–Russia relations¹⁴. The EU Eastern enlargement started already in 1995 with the accession of the traditionally neutral countries of Sweden, Finland, and Austria. Crucially, these countries did not link their EU accession with any official approach to NATO, maintaining, as far as security policies are concerned, at least formal neutrality. On the contrary, successive EU enlargements, namely the 2004 and 2007 eastern enlargements, had also entailed security connections. Already in 1990, German reunification had automatically allowed for the territories held by the German Democratic Republic to be included within the boundaries of EU and NATO. In 1999, even before their accession to the EU, Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic were granted accession to the Alliance. Eventually, in 2004, all remaining former Warsaw Pact countries that had approached the EU were also allowed to join NATO.

¹⁴ Maas, A.-S. (2016). *EU-Russia Relations, 1999-2015*. London: Routledge.

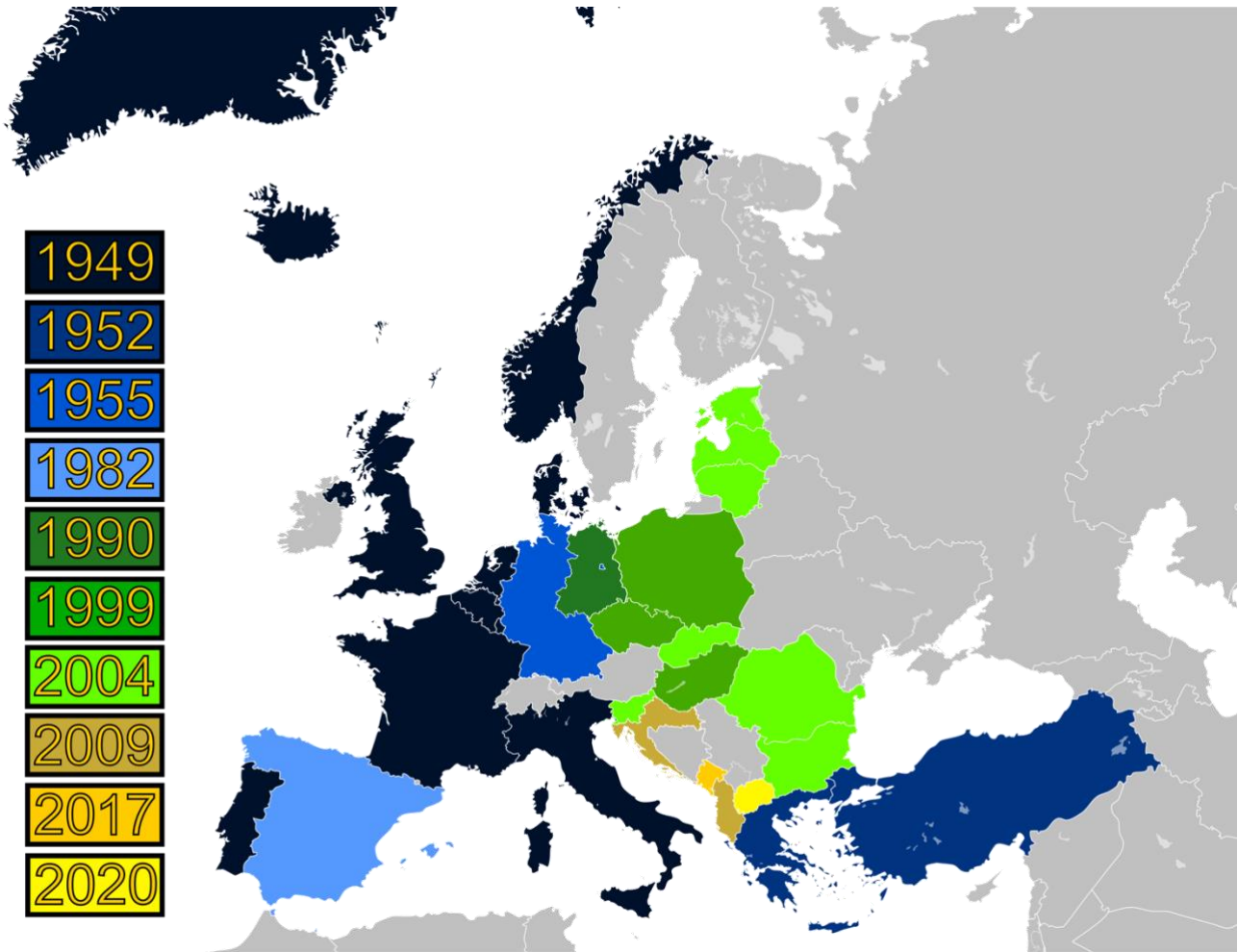


Figure 1. Progressive NATO enlargements¹⁵

¹⁵ Patrickneil. (2022, April 11). *History of NATO enlargement*. Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:History_of_NATO_enlargement.svg#/

2.3 Attempts at cooperation (1991-2014)

Boris Yeltsin made it quite apparent that he desired for his country to have a radically different kind of relationship with the United States of America when he served as first President of an independent Russia. He made clear that the post-Cold War order had to see a close relation between the two powers. He went considerably further than Gorbachev in trying to reshape the very foundations of Russian posture towards the West, addressing both the domestic and foreign crowds in that regard¹⁶. Despite acknowledging that Russia was in no position at the time to maintain its status intact, he wanted the United States and the West to recognize and even reward Moscow for its role in ending the Cold War and allowing for what, in Western circles, became known as the *peace dividend*, an expression that refers to the long-term advantages of a decline in defense spending made possible thanks to the termination of an emergency status. This is thought possible due to the reallocation of resources either towards tax reduction or other social programs. Indeed, Yeltsin proclaimed the unilateral conclusion of the arms race, announcing the intention to end a series of military projects considered as threatening by the West. While admitting to this situation, Yeltsin also wanted and needed the United States to recognize Russia as a great power and take into account Russia's interests when deciding on issues of global governance. To this regard, he also made the case that if the United States would not adequately take into account Russia's interests and input, then Russia would have to act in more assertive ways. He certainly recognized the fragility of the transitional period in his country and hoped to enlist western support to pursue its agenda rather than compromise it. Aware of the inability of his country to pursue an assertive independent global agenda, Yeltsin and his Atlanticist entourage recognized as the most feasible way to pursue their interests that of joining western institutions to shape their agenda from within. The election of Bill Clinton as President of the United States in 1992 gave hope to the Yeltsin administration that a new relation between their

¹⁶ Gvosdev, N. & Marsh, C. (2014). The United States: the main enemy or strategic partner. In *Russian Foreign Policy: Interests, Vectors, and Sectors*. p. 9. Washington: QC Press.

countries could be genuinely pursued. The two also established a productive personal relation. Indeed, between 1993 and 1999, they had 18 bilateral encounters, which is considerably more than any other American or Russian leader had ever had before. The Clinton administration hoped that Russia would become a reliable partner in international affairs in due time. For the time being, the country was in the process of transitioning to democracy and market economy and therefore still partly anchored to past doctrines and ways of doing business. The U.S. establishment believed that gradually Russian interests would realign with western ones as the process of transformation of Russian society went on. This also made so that Russian domestic affairs became a primary target of U.S. policies given the importance to keep the process on track. In other words, the United States is concerned that Russia's political institutions, business community, and defense establishment are reformulated along Western lines. It also contributed to shape in western minds the idea that Russia wouldn't attempt to pursue an independent and divergent foreign policy. It follows that it was considered natural that Russia would respect the U.S. lead in international affairs and that there was no genuine reason why it should oppose from Washington's policies. Any point of friction was usually blamed on past doctrines and ideologies as well as influence from domestic elites opposing the democratization process for their own personal gain. Without the interference of ideology, the U.S. argument goes, there is no reason why the U.S. and Russia wouldn't be global partners and in fact disagreements were mainly caused by inability of Russian elites to understand the true interests of their nation¹⁷. In addition, the rapidly deteriorating economic situation of Russia as well as its inability to maintain the Soviet's levels of military spending meant that United States were now the only remaining superpower. For these reasons, the U.S. government felt increasingly unnecessary to consult its Russian counterpart when dealing with a number of global issues. The need to compromise and appease the other superpower had now vanished. Moreover, the United States maintained a relevant leverage against Russia due to the important financial assistance it received in pursuing its reforms. The United States government, in fact, provided aid to Russia to support its disarmament. This

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 10.

process was considered crucial as to prevent Soviet technology, personnel, and unused arsenal from getting sold on the international arms market. The Freedom Support Act of 1992 mandated that the United States would provide assistance to Russia throughout its transformation into a western-like democracy. Due to its new position as a receiver of aid, Russia had effectively lost any leverage it had in dealing with the U.S. The situation also reinforced U.S. assumptions about their ability, and indeed legitimacy, in influencing Russia's domestic affairs. U.S. attempts at influencing the political and economic transformation of the country has had numerous adverse effects. The pressure used to promote a rapid privatization of public companies has been widely perceived in Russia as one of the main causes of the growth of corruption and of an elite class of oligarchs controlling key strategic industries in the country. Russia quickly became the highest IMF borrower country and was therefore obliged to recognize IMF loans conditions, that further promoted the fast privatization and liberalization of the economy¹⁸. With the country's economy continue shrinking, many felt betrayed and humiliated by the perceived loss of sovereignty and prestige that this caused. Despite U.S. hopes, the end of the ideological struggle between the two superpowers didn't coincide with the end of conflicting geopolitical and economic interests. After the collapse of the USSR, and during its process of demilitarization, U.S. focus shifted towards avoiding that arsenals and strategic technology would be transferred to non-friendly states and non-state actors. At least until 1996, an Atlanticist inclination of the Russian government allowed for a close collaboration within the two administrations to the point of neglecting Russia's more traditional allies and interests. Around the middle of the decade, attitudes in the Russian government began to shift due to the disappointing results of the 1993 and 1995 Duma elections that highlighted the growing support for nationalist parties. The appointment of Yevgeny Primakov as foreign minister in 1996 signaled this shift. He tried to gradually reorient Russian foreign policy towards collaboration with other emerging powers such as India and China as well and trying to appease internal lobbyists especially in the energy and military sectors. Both administrations taught that the progressive inclusion of Russia in Western international organizations,

¹⁸ Ibid. pp. 10-11.

and therefore granting it prerogatives to influence the agenda setting and policy making of these institutions, would be enough to allow for the establishment of a trustful relationship and avoid divergence in key international issues. However, problems like the expansion of Euro-Atlantic institutions such as NATO eastward to include the countries of the former Soviet space, the promotion of liberal democratic values, and the effective exclusion of Russian influence from Europe, remained critical points of contrast. Russia's elite, however, remained very distrustful of U.S. objectives and influence. The risk of not being able to fully integrate within the western global power structure reinforced an environment of mistrust. The Russian financial crisis of 1998 further reinforced the anti-American sentiment. It discredited U.S. counsel and leadership to the point that even staunch Atlanticists in the government were forced to modify their positions. The Kosovo crisis of 1999 further contributed to the growing distance between the parties. Russia was at the time experiencing a troubling separatist uprising in Chechnya and viewed with concern Western resolve in dealing with situation. Even more, U.S. willingness to employ NATO military assets without a clear UN mandate proved to be troublesome for US-Russia relations. Other proposals of collaborations in security matters, such as a possible joint operation in Afghanistan, failed due to divergences regarding Kosovo¹⁹. Boris Yeltsin eventually resigned at the end of 1999. His popularity, extremely high at the beginning of the presidency, had dropped after the First Chechen War and the financial crisis. After his resignation, Vladimir Putin became first interim President and then, after the March 2000 elections, the second President of the Russian Federation. Putin's presidency was, from the very beginning, more cautious in its approach with the West. The election of George W. Bush in 2001 contributed to the growing mistrust between the two countries. The new American administration was highly cynical in assessing Russia's transformation and pushed to depart from Clinton's policies of collaboration. Both parts, therefore, believed that the past governments had placed too much emphasis on their countries' collaboration and pushed for a reorientation of their foreign policies towards more short-term goals. Contrary to expectations, however, the two managed to build a close

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 12.

personal relationship. This allowed for the relaxation of the tensions that had built up and for the rising influence of those parts of both establishments that pushed for closer and renewed collaboration. The September eleven events have reaffirmed this connection when Putin became the first foreign leader to offer the American president and people both his sympathy and assistance. Both the presidents, for reasons at times similar, at time different, started to recognize the importance of a closer relationship between their countries. On one side, the Americans were interested to the non-proliferation of weapons, the stability of energy market, and the global war on terror. The US needed to reduce its dependence on middle eastern oil and gas as well as containing the threat of nuclear proliferation. On the other side, the Russians after the financial crisis of 1998 desperately needed Western assistance and economic cooperation. Indeed, some of Yeltsin's policies, such as the integration of Russia in Western international organizations and institutions revamped. For example, Russia and the US signed in May 2002 the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty, also known as the Treaty of Moscow, which required both powers to lower their nuclear arsenals. In June of the same year, the two countries also started the so-called strategic energy dialogue that was meant to foster greater collaboration and business relations in the field of energy production and trade²⁰. Still, major challenges remained in the relationship between the two countries. On the one hand the steadily rise of oil and gas prices allowed Russia to enjoy of period economic wealth that allowed it to repay its foreign debt and lower its reliance on Western markets and capitals. At the same time, that also eliminated one of the main leverages that the US could employ against Russians. That, in turn, encouraged a more independent and assertive Russian foreign and economic policy to the point of open opposition to some US policies. For example, Russia's explicit opposition to the US led invasion of Iraq of 2003 highlighted the willingness, as well as capacity, for an independent foreign policy not aligned with those of other western Countries. It can be said that especially in the beginning of Putin and Bush's administrations genuine efforts to create a stable and profitable collaboration were made. In both countries it appeared that, as already mentioned, the most skeptic people within the

²⁰ Ibid. p. 13.

governments had been sidelined especially after 9/11. The convergence in short term interests had also allowed for the shared collaborative ambition. The remainder of the Bush administration that would last until 2008 saw a decisive fall in bilateral relations between the countries. To sum up some of the most contentious situations we could say that, despite some contrasts already happening between 2002 and 2003, it is the year 2004 that marks a decisive turning point. The first Chechen war ended in 1996 with an eventual defeat of Russian forces. The issue of Chechen independence, however, was merely postponed. Indeed, in 2004, Russia's crackdown of Chechen separatists and insurgents escalated in brutality from the perspective of the Western world. Vocal Western criticism of Russian handling of the situation resulted in yet another crisis between Russia and the West. Putin and his government started accusing the West of using double standard in assessing the war on terror: legitimate when addressed by the Americans and to be condemned when led by the Russians²¹. To further deteriorate the relationship, between 2003 and 2005 a series of revolutions collectively known as color revolutions replaced in many formerly Soviet countries pro-Russian leaders with pro-Western ones. Although we will talk of these revolutions more in depth in the next paragraph, we can at least mention the 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia, the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, and the 2005 Tulip revolution in Kyrgyzstan. The transformation in the overall political outlook in these countries, traditionally considered in Russia's sphere of interest, has certainly reinforced Russian sentiments of encirclement and isolation. Moreover, Russian leaders have always been convinced of the key importance of foreign Western influence in the unfolding of these events rather than spontaneously arising from those peoples. Indeed, western praise and support of these newly elected governments thwarted Russia's hope that the West would recognize Russia as a regional power responsible to deal with issues within its neighbor countries. These concerns were certainly confirmed by the US apparent support for an accession of Ukraine and Georgia into NATO. This rapidly escalated in 2008 with the Russo-Georgian conflict. This year can be seen as the low point in the US-Russia bilateral relations that would set the stage for the following *reset* in relations promoted by the

²¹ Ibid. p. 14.

Obama administration²². Obama's first term coincided with the Medvedev Presidency (2008-2012) and the renewal of both administrations seemed like a good starting point to rebuild a fruitful relationship. As often, other circumstances also influenced this positive restart. The political situation in Ukraine, after the 2004 revolution, changed once again when in 2010 Viktor Yanukovich was elected President of the country. Yanukovich promoted a more balanced foreign policy between Russia and the West removing one of the most contentious points between the two: he withdrew Ukraine's request for joining NATO, signed new military agreements with Russia and generally discarded any kind of anti-Russian rhetoric used by his predecessors. The removal of Ukraine as a challenge to normal Russian-US relations allowed for the so-called *reset* to take place. Further diplomatic efforts in this direction were also taken by EU countries, especially France under the presidency of Sarkozy and Germany under the chancellorship of Angela Merkel. The two hoped to attract Russia towards deeper economic and political ties with Europe envisioning a new Russian market for EU manufacturing export and Russia as a cheap energy provider for Europe. The renewed US-Russian cooperation is exemplified by the growing collaboration and assistance Russia provided to US forces in Afghanistan which mainly included the much-needed logistic support. It was provided through the Northern Distribution Network, a privileged supply corridor made available to the American troops. Another key example is the support the Russian government declared to impose economic sanctions to Iran in 2010 as well as cancelling a series of already stipulated military contracts with that country. On the same year, the two powers also signed the *new START* treaty replacing the one expired in 2009 allowing both parties to claim success in fostering global peace and in dealing with the threat of nuclear war. The US government lowered its support to Georgia agreeing, as an example, not to supply advanced weapons to that country. Continuing with this approach, in 2011 Russia agreed not to veto a US sponsored UNSC resolution in support of the revolution against Ghaddafi in Libya, even arriving to impose economic sanctions against the dictator's government. However, 2011 also saw the collaboration between the two countries starting to deteriorate again.

²² Ibid. p. 16.

Two main issues triggered such development. Firstly, despite Russia's initial support, or indifference, for NATO actions in Libya, the handling of the operations quickly started worrying Moscow's leadership. Notwithstanding the initial objective was that to provide humanitarian assistance to civilians, the scope of US actions quickly seemed to escalate towards the overthrowing of Ghaddafi's government. Therefore, Russia feared that the new wave of revolutions called the Arab Spring was being manipulated by Western governments to install pro-Western regimes in those countries. Secondly, Putin return to the presidency in 2012 together with his increasingly anti-west rhetoric signaled the eventual collapse of the *reset* policy. From a US perspective, central to this policy was the attempt to support the creation of a more liberal and Western like political class in Russia, to be led by Medvedev. Between the end of 2011 and 2013 a series of protests broke out in Russia complaining about the legitimacy of 2011 legislative elections and the 2012 presidential elections. The US supported the claim with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declaring the elections as neither free nor fair, provoking Putin's allegations on the suspect origins of the mass protest^{23 24}.

²³ Labott, E. (2011, December 7). *Clinton cites 'serious concerns' about Russian election*. Retrieved from CNN: <https://edition.cnn.com/2011/12/06/world/europe/russia-elections-clinton/index.html>

²⁴ Elder, M. (2011, December 8). *Vladimir Putin accuses Hillary Clinton of encouraging Russian protests*. Retrieved from The Guardian: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/dec/08/vladimir-putin-hillary-clinton-russia>

3 Post-Cold War crises

The relationship between Russia and the West encountered moments of high and low degree of cooperation and trust along the past three decades. While the overall period between the birth of the Russian Federation and the annexation of Crimea, that we here consider as the end of the West-Russia illusion of collaboration, is generally seen as full of genuine and sincere attempts at cooperation and building dialogue as well as trust. However, it was also certainly full of misunderstandings, contrasts, and open opposition. The following few paragraphs will explore a series of contentious situations in which the West and Russia entered into a collision course. These include: the so-called color revolutions, the unresolved situation between Moldova and the separatist region of Transnistria, the war and border clashed with Georgia, the undercover cyber operations against Estonia, and escalation of tensions with Turkey following the shooting down of a Russian military jet by Turkey. These crises represent the materialization of some among the gravest threats perceived by Russia with regards to its strategic security. Some of these have certainly left a legacy that has influenced the current situation of conflict in Ukraine and of general opposition to NATO.

3.1.1 Color revolutions

Several anti-government protests affected the life of some of the European and Asian former soviet republics since 2003. The reference to colors is associated to the media accounting of these events identified with symbols used by the protest movements to identify themselves and spontaneously adopted by their affiliates. All these revolutions had some common specific causes. Generally, they are sometimes seen as a second wave of anti-communist revolutions that followed the one started in the late 80s and the 1990s mainly in Eastern European countries. Although all countries affected by the color revolutions formally appeared as post-communist republics on their way to a liberal and

democratic institutional transformation, it should be noted that in fact their political leadership remained unchanged and tied up with the Russian establishment. Therefore, many of these revolutions started because of broken promises of political pluralism and of democratic transition. Coincidentally that often entailed a replacement of governments perceived as corrupt and hostile to democracy with governments that would clearly promote it. This process also meant that a pro-Russian leaning political elite was replaced with a pro-Western one, triggering a broad and fast-track political realignment of the Euro-Asian region towards the west²⁵. Since its independence gained in 1991, the Georgian Republic has always been particularly attracted by Western like political and economic structures. Its first president Zviad Gamsakhurdia soon rejected the invitation to join the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) signaling the government's intention to maintain full autonomy with regards to security and foreign matters. Eventually, Gamsakhurdia was replaced after a coup d'état in 1991 with former Soviet foreign minister and communist party secretary of Georgia Eduard Shevardnadze. Despite his links with former Russian establishment, Georgian relation with Russia remained highly contentious. Shevardnadze grew closer to the United States and launched in 1997 an important security and economic initiative with likeminded leaders of former Soviet republics of Ukraine, Moldova, and Azerbaijan to foster closer economic and political links to gain full autonomy vis à vis Moscow. Eventually, after Uzbekistan's decision to join such association in 1999, it became a more organized forum in 2001 under the acronym of GUUAM (from the initials of the participating nations). The organization enjoyed the support of the United States since its inception due to its goal of keeping Russian influence contained. After the withdrawal of Uzbekistan of 2005, the organization reformed into GUAM Organization for Democracy and Economic Development continuing its effort with mixed results. The very contentious Georgian 2003 parliamentary elections sparked mass protests within the country. Exasperated by the perceived corruption of Shevardnadze's government, as well its ineffectiveness in dealing with the economic troubles of the country, and the allegation of electoral fraud, the demonstrations escalated into a fully-fledged revolution that

²⁵ Mitchell, L. A. (2012). *The Color Revolutions*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

culminated with the forced dismissal of President Shevardnadze and his replacement with former Justice minister and opposition leader Mikheil Saakashvili. This first regime change inaugurated the wave of the so-called color revolutions. It goes under the name of rose revolution because of the roses carried by the demonstrators protesting against President Shevardnadze. Following this change of leadership Georgia pursued a decisively more pro-Western policy. One of the main goals of Saakashvili was the achievement of NATO membership and further integration with Western organizations. As it can be expected this policy of alignment with the US and the EU met the opposition and concern of Russia that would eventually culminate in the Russo-Georgian war of 2008 which is the subject of the following paragraph²⁶. The Georgian events were mirrored almost precisely a year later in Ukraine. The country's first president, Leonid Kravchuk, strived to secure an autonomous and more liberal political framework for Ukraine. To this aim, he tried to maintain a balanced foreign policy when dealing with the US and Russia. For example, on one hand, he resisted Russian efforts to a greater military and economic integration within the CIS to which they belonged anyway. On the other hand, he agreed to make Ukraine a nuclear free country by giving up the entire nuclear arsenal left as legacy from the former Soviet Union in exchange for an increase in US economic aid as well as a privileged access to the Russian energy market. After the 1994 elections, a new government under Leonid Kuchma was established. It pursued a decisively pro-Russian policy supported by the rich Russian populated Eastern regions of Ukraine and by the largest corporations that would have benefited by closer economic ties between the two countries. Importantly, Kuchma agreed to resolve the contentious issue of the Sevastopol naval base, home of the former Soviet Black Sea Fleet, leasing it to Russia until 2017. This policy also achieved some key results for the country such as the 1997 Russian-Ukrainian Friendship Treaty which reaffirmed the territorial integrity of the two countries and the inviolability of their borders. Kuchma's poor results in terms of economic improvements and a series of corruption scandals investing his government led him to withdraw from

²⁶ Jakopovich, D. (2007). The 2003 "Rose Revolution" in Georgia: A Case Study in High Politics and Rank-and-File Execution. *Debate: Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, 15(2), 211-220. DOI: 10.1080/09651560701483311

the presidential campaign of 2004. However, in his effort to retain personal influence on the government he strongly supported as successor Viktor Yanukovich, who had an even more pro-Russian attitude. Kuchma's very low popularity, as well as the alleged electoral frauds to the advantage of his candidate led to mass popular protest. That became known as the Orange Revolution after the color wore by the protesters as an identification mark. The 2004 election awarded Yanukovich with the presidency. Protesters condemned the widespread corruption, voter intimidation, and outright fraud with a campaign of civil resistance, general strikes, and marches. That forced new elections that eventually awarded opposition leader Viktor Yushchenko as the new president of Ukraine. Together with Yuliya Tymoshenko, his prime minister, the two inaugurated a new pro-Western policy. In order to break away from Russia influence, Ukraine's leadership pushed towards NATO membership and started steps to further integrate with western European countries. This decisive turn in the country's foreign policy strongly worried the Russian leadership, especially after the Ukrainians challenged the status of the Russian naval base in Crimea. In a rather unexpected turn of the events, the 2010 presidential elections run between Victor Yanukovich and Yuliya Tymoshenko saw the victory of the former²⁷. His re-affirmation of the pro-Russian policy will eventually lead to the 2014 revolution which will end with his forced dismissal as president, and which will be one of the central topics of the next chapter. While the Georgian and Ukrainian revolutions may be considered successes from the perspective of the demonstrators, other color revolutions were less fortunate in promoting an effective change in their countries. In Kirgizstan, widespread dissatisfaction with the authoritarian regime of President Akayev and accusation of corruption and rigged parliamentary elections in 2005 brought to the outbreak of the so-called Tulip Revolution, as Akayev himself named it during a speech aimed at excluding that such a revolution could happen in his Country. Eventually president Akayev fled to Russia and resigned from his position in the government. However, even if the short-term goal of achieving regime change and at

²⁷ Aslund, A., & McFaul, M. (2006). *Revolution in Orange: The Origins of Ukraine's Democratic Breakthrough*. Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

least a formally more democratic system was reached, the revolution failed in that to a formal transformation did not follow a substantial one²⁸. That is also confirmed by the fact that in 2010, only 5 years after the first mass demonstration and its outcome, a second revolution, known as the Melon Revolution, hit the country ending with the ousting of President Bakiyev, Akayev successor. Another significant but unsuccessful revolution was the Jeans Revolution that took place in Belarus in 2006. Already in the aftermath of the Tulip Revolution, a series of protests were launched against President Alexander Lukashenko. That however was quickly dealt with by the government and did not escalate in a countrywide protest. A year later, in March 2006, following the results of that year's presidential election officially won by President Lukashenko with 86% of preferences, a new wave of stronger mass demonstrations was held. The demonstrators used as symbols of the action the former flag of the country and the blue jeans meant to represent cultural freedom. The firmness of the president in charge and the lack of a well-organized opposition led to the complete failure of the insurrection. The results of the elections were validated, and President Lukashenko retained his position which he continued with even greater strength²⁹. Another interesting case is represented by Moldova. Its relations with Russia have always been contentious due to the Transnistrian issue. In any case, in 2009, a late color revolution can be said to have happened in the country. A series of mass protests erupted in the aftermath of the 2009 legislative elections which originally awarded the presidency to the ruling communist party. The demonstrators claimed that the elections were characterized by widespread fraud and asked for new elections to be held. These protests are sometimes referred to as the Grape Revolution to highlight its ideological affinity with the other color revolutions. Eventually, fresh elections were held later in the same year and saw the victory of a coalition of all opposition parties, under the name of Alliance for European Integration, against the communists that were forced to the opposition for the first time since 2001, thus inaugurating a new season of pro-European

²⁸ Cummings, S., & Ryabkov, M. (2008). Situating the 'Tulip Revolution'. *Central Asian Survey*, 27(3-4), 241-252. DOI: 10.1080/02634930802535847

²⁹ The Economist. (2005, November). The Denim Revolution. *The Economist*, 377(8453).

policies³⁰. The U.S. open and covert support for the color revolutions, both moral and financial, highly worried Russian leadership about the ultimate goals of the U.S. in the region. Russia feared that the U.S. could use or foment these revolutions to further isolate them. A series of diplomatic initiatives launched by former soviet republics and supported by the west further reinforced this sentiment. Together with the already mentioned GUAM, Presidents Saakashvili and Yushchenko also launched the Community of Democratic Choice (CDC) initiative, an intergovernmental forum to promote a democratic transition in former Soviet Republics. The promotion of democracy and the rule of law, vocally sponsored by the U.S. and the E.U., was then interpreted as a direct threat to Russian interests. Indeed, the wave of color revolutions represented a serious shock to Russia's ability to influence its neighboring countries, which resulted in a growing perception of weakness and encirclement. According to Michael McFaul³¹, the US ambassador to Russia between 2012 and 2014, it is possible to highlight a series of features that allowed for the successful outcome of the revolutions:

1. The presence of a semi-autocratic regime.
2. An unpopular President.
3. A united and organized opposition.
4. The presence of enough independent media outlets to allow for the spread of non-censored information.
5. A political opposition capable of mobilizing demonstrators to protest.
6. Divisions among the regime's forces.

³⁰ Mungiu-Pippidi, A., & Munteanu, I. (2009, July). Moldova's "Twitter Revolution". *Journal of Democracy*, 20(3), 136-142.

• ³¹ McFaul, M. (2005, July). Transitions from Postcommunism. *Journal of Democracy*, 16(3), 5-19. DOI: 10.1353/jod.2005.0049

3.1.2 Moldova/Transnistria (1992-2016)

In September 1990, the region of Transnistria in Moldova cleared itself of the central government by declaring itself an independent state. This claim went ignored and when, in 1991, the national parliament voted to declare the Republic of Moldova an independent country, it included Transnistria. The issue immediately became highly contentious due to the presence of Russian troops in Tiraspol, the current capital of Transnistria. The presence of this military force is justified officially for the purpose of defending what was Russia's largest munitions depot. Eventually, after Russia's refusal to withdraw its forces in 1992, the brief Transnistrian War began. The outbreak of war between Transnistrian independence forces, supported by the Russian military, and the Moldovan army has resulted in the creation of a jointly controlled demilitarized security zone along the frontier. Maintaining firm Russian influence and preventing the former Soviet republic from forming strong partnerships with western countries and organizations was one of Russia's objectives for its involvement in Transnistria. Indeed, it enables it to maintain pressure on Moldova with the threat of intervention, fostering internal instability and territorial division. Moreover, being a predominantly agricultural country, Moldova relies heavily on Russia as an export market for its products. To complicate the matters, the energy security of the country is almost entirely dependent on Russian natural gas which, in addition, altogether passes through Transnistria. The separatist region is indeed home to most of the country's Russian-built power plants which provide more than 90 percent of Moldova's electricity. From 1992 to 2016 Moscow had cyclically put pressure on Moldova through a series of hostile measures in addition to the aforementioned stationing of Russian military personnel on Moldovan territory. These operations were carried out through funding of pro-Russian opposition political parties; sponsoring pro-Russian media companies and news outlets; artificially altering energy supplies; and using Transnistria as leverage in negotiations. For example, Russia effectively subsidizes 75 percent of Transnistria's budget through and by not requiring the collection of gas payments. By officially not recognizing Transnistria's independent status, Moscow can demand

payment of the gas debt directly to Moldova, exerting strong economic pressure on the country. Moreover, the Moldovan government, due in part to interference from Russian backed opposition parties, constantly fails to implement a policy of energy diversification that would allow a gradual break from Russian dependence. Despite Russian attempts, Moldova has certainly grown closer to the EU and NATO at least since 2014. Moreover, since April 2014, with the entry into force of new tourist visas agreements with the EU, more than 2.5 million Moldovan citizens have started traveling in the Schengen area. The development of tourism as well as new trade relations have kickstarted a learning process of political, economic, and social realities that until now were invisible to most of the population and that nurtured and updated the critical sense of this people. As far as independent media are concerned, the economic condition of the ruling class of the new Republic of Moldova did not allow a real development of this sector with the consequent depression of press autonomy. In addition to this, Russian backed media outlets further impeded the entry of other independent actors. Despite Russia's attempts to keep the Moldovan republic from getting closer to other Western countries, since 2014 a series of agreements has promoted such a development. It may be said that Russia's pressures have eventually backfired, ultimately pushing Moldova towards the EU and the US. The Grape Revolution of 2009, briefly analyzed in the preceding paragraph, is symptomatic of this realignment. Critically, the absence of any positive incentive in pursuing closer relations with Russia, as opposite to the wide use of negative incentives, has contributed to Moldova's decision to pursue further western integration. Indeed, in 2014, Moldova and the EU formalized an agreement to further their political and economic ties. It has also witnessed a steadily increase in its trade flows from and to the EU, a growing integration in the European energy market, and an intensification in military cooperation³².

³² Connable, B., Young, S., Pezard, S., Radin, A., Cohen, R. S., Migacheva, K., & Sladden, J. (2020). *Russia's Hostile Measures*. RAND Corporation. pp. 34-36.

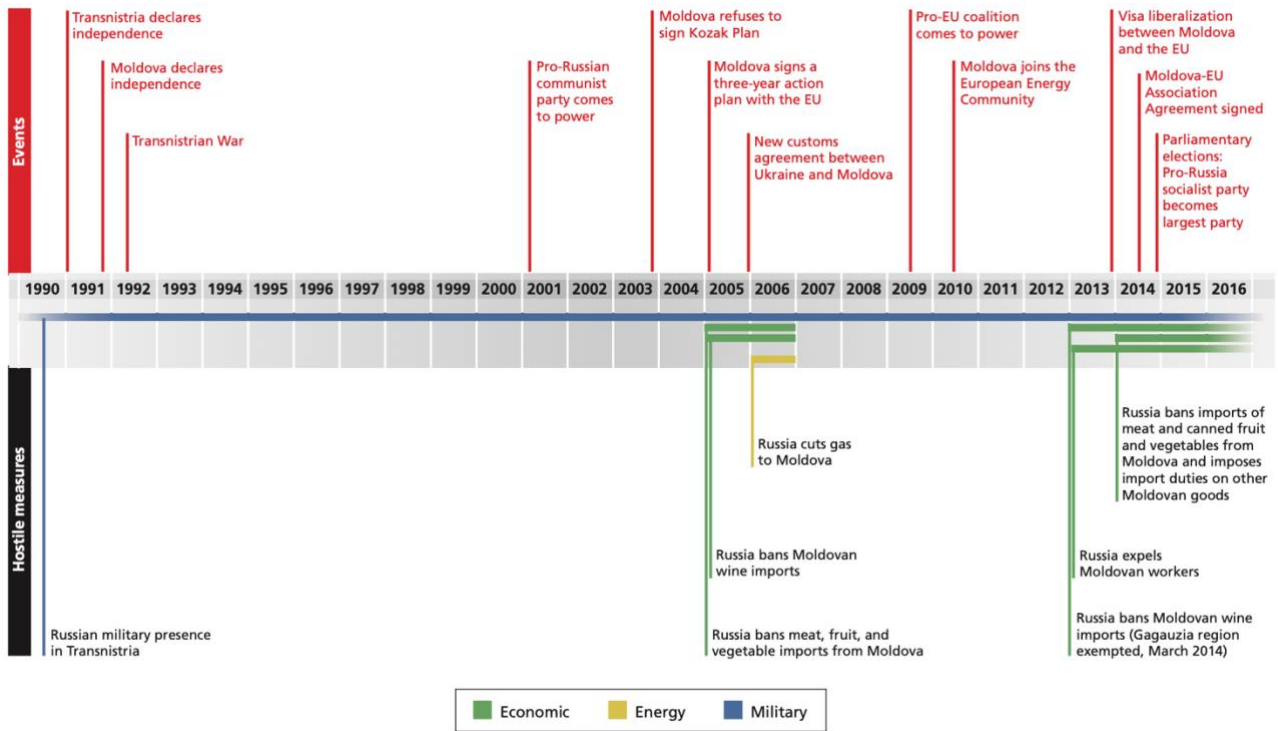


Figure 2. Moldovan crisis timeline³³

³³ Ibid.

3.1.3 Georgia (2004-2012)

As mentioned in paragraph 3.1.1, following the Rose Revolution of 2003, Georgia inaugurated a resolutely pro-Western foreign policy. The South Caucasus region has maintained a key position within the priorities of the Russian Federation: Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia have repeatedly been the objective of Russian diplomatic as well as military operations. The Saakashvili presidency (2004-2013) was marked by a firm anti-Russian rhetoric and a series of diplomatic initiative meant to secure Georgia's independence vis à vis Russia. Russian-Georgian relations during this period remained unstable, and the relationship was indeed characterized by several crises. One example is the energy crisis of 2006. The gas pipeline that connected Georgia and Russia through North Ossetia, from which virtually the entire Georgian infrastructure relied, was suddenly blown up in a period of extremely cold weather conditions. Georgian authorities quickly accused Russia of sabotaging its own infrastructure to acquire additional leverage against them and while the accusations were dismissed by the Russian government, the pattern of using gas as leverage just used in Ukraine that same month rose high suspects. Moreover, these events were followed by an escalation of sanctions in form of import barriers against Georgian products, mainly agricultural and winery. Another contentious event happened in September 2006 when four Russian officers accused of espionage were arrested in Georgia. The relations between the two countries, therefore, were already in free fall when at the Bucharest summit in early April 2008, Georgia formally asked for a NATO membership plan. Despite the fact that, during an informal meeting between Putin and Bush in Sochi, the Russian President had made known that Georgia's entry into NATO would have been considered a hostile act, eventually, at the insistence of the United States, NATO agreed to properly consider Georgia's proposal. Certainly, the most troubling issue between the two countries have been and still is the status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Internationally recognized as part of Georgia, the two separatist regions had always maintained a de facto independence from the central government following two brief wars between 1991 and 1993. A peacekeeping force composed of Russian, local and Georgian

units was tasked with maintaining peace and stability in the regions. With the growth of tensions between Russia and Georgia the issue of the separatist regions reemerged. After a series of clashes between South Ossetian forces and Georgian peacekeepers in the region, the Georgian government decided, considering South Ossetians actions to be in violation of the 1992 agreement, to send its army to stabilize the region. From its perspective, Russia considered this an outright aggression and launched a full-scale invasion of the country, labelling it a peace enforcement operation. After five days from Russian intervention, Georgian forces were effectively incapacitated. On August 12, eventually, French President Nicolas Sarkozy personally negotiated a ceasefire, putting an end to the armed conflict. Once again, Russia's motivations and goals were aimed at maintaining a significant influence on the country and avoid its alignment with the US and the EU. This general goal was probably complemented by an attempt to retain or regain control of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and showing Russian resolve in dealing with issues it considered vital for its security, namely the prevention that neighboring countries could become part of western military organizations. Undoubtedly, pressure on the Georgian energy system and the application of trade sanctions have contributed to the weakening of Georgian international trade as have the disruption of transport and postal delivery services and cyber-attacks, in particular under the form of denial-of-service attacks. Moreover, in Georgia just as in Moldova the deployment of Russian military forces along the borders represented an act of intimidation of obvious effectiveness. In Georgia, Russia can be said to have achieved the short-term goal of blocking Georgia's rapid accession to NATO by generating an ethno-territorial conflict in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, thus making this proposal highly undesirable. However, Russia's hostile actions against the country have, again, ultimately led the Georgian leadership to recognize the necessity of further, progressive, economic, and political integration with the west. So, while the country is not a member of the EU or NATO, it is enjoying an always increasing degree of support. Since the end of the 2008 conflict, the United States has stepped up its

aid to Georgia's military and government. In 2014, NATO approved the NATO-Georgia Substantive Package and reconfirmed the prospect for a future membership^{34 35}.

³⁴ Ibid. pp. 37-40.

³⁵ Rich, P. B. (2010). *Crisis in the Caucasus: Russia, Georgia and the West*. London: Routledge.

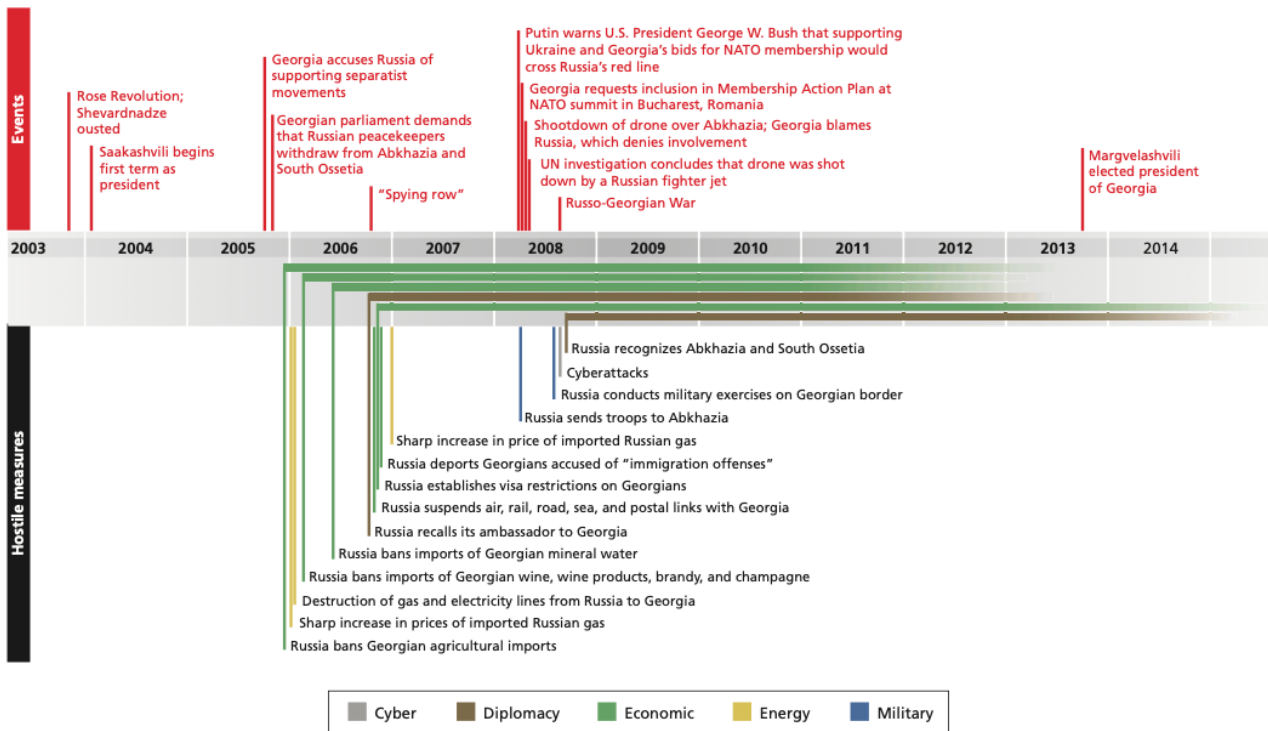


Figure 3. Georgian crisis timeline³⁶

³⁶ Connable, B., Young, S., Pezard, S., Radin, A., Cohen, R. S., Migacheva, K., & Sladden, J. (2020). *Russia's Hostile Measures*. RAND Corporation. p. 39.

3.1.4 Estonia (2006-2007)

The relationship of all three Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania with Russia has historically been turbulent. Jealous of their independence, the three republics today consider the years of Soviet rule as an outright occupation of their countries and therefore they claim full continuity with the pre-soviets' states. Estonia, together with Latvia and Lithuania, after gaining its independence in 1991, joined the EU as well as NATO in 2004. As with other states that have become independent from Russia, Estonia has also been under intense pressure from the government in Moscow, which still aspires to be able to assert some influence in virtue of the consistent Russian speaking population of the country. Indeed, the large component of ethnic Russian population living in Estonia allows Russia to still have an impact on Estonian politics. Estonia's very position within NATO allows Russia through manipulation and economic strategies to have a modicum of control over decisions that require unanimity at NATO. Russia's goals, therefore, are different from the previous two case studies. In the Estonian case, the Russian traditional main goal of avoiding substantial integration with the west had already been thwarted, with the accession of the country in both NATO and the EU at a time when Russia wasn't able to exert enough pressure to avoid it. However, especially counting on the asset of the consistent Russian minority in the country, Russia believed it could still obtain some successes in avoiding a full westernization of Estonia and generally supporting its instability to keep it more vulnerable to its pressure. The April 2007 Bronze Soldier statue incident was used by the Russians as a pretext to escalate tensions. The Estonian government had decided to relocate a statue commemorating the soviet liberation of the country from the Nazi occupation. Such removal triggered condemnations and economic boycotts and appears to have been instigated by the Russian government for this very purpose. After the statue was eventually moved, the Estonian embassy in Moscow was subjected to a week-long blockade by demonstrators in the apparent indifference of Russian authorities. The disagreements between the two nations are born out of a diametrically opposite interpretation of recent history. Very briefly, we can say that while Estonia considers the

Soviet Union an invading and occupying force, Russia considered it a benevolent liberator. The Russian narrative of course aims to maintain a positive image of the country in the common feeling of Estonians. Russian hostile measures against Estonia were in part similar in part dissimilar to those already employed in other theaters. The use of government funded media outlets was a common Russian strategy in trying to influence a country's public opinion. The pressure on private companies to boycott Estonian products or cancel projects in the country also responded to an already tested program. The most striking initiative was a wave of cyberattacks targeting government and civil infrastructures. Between April and May 2007, Estonia was the target of at least three waves of cyberattacks that authorities quickly attributed to Russian government organizations or government backed autonomous groups. Once again, however, we can see that while the tactical operations, meaning the attacks themselves, were certainly successful, no appreciable goal was actually reached by Russia. Not only the attacks had no effect as far as the relocation of the statue was concerned, on the contrary they only contributed to reaffirm Estonian resolve in addressing Russia as a threat rather than a partner³⁷.

³⁷ Ibid. pp. 40-42.

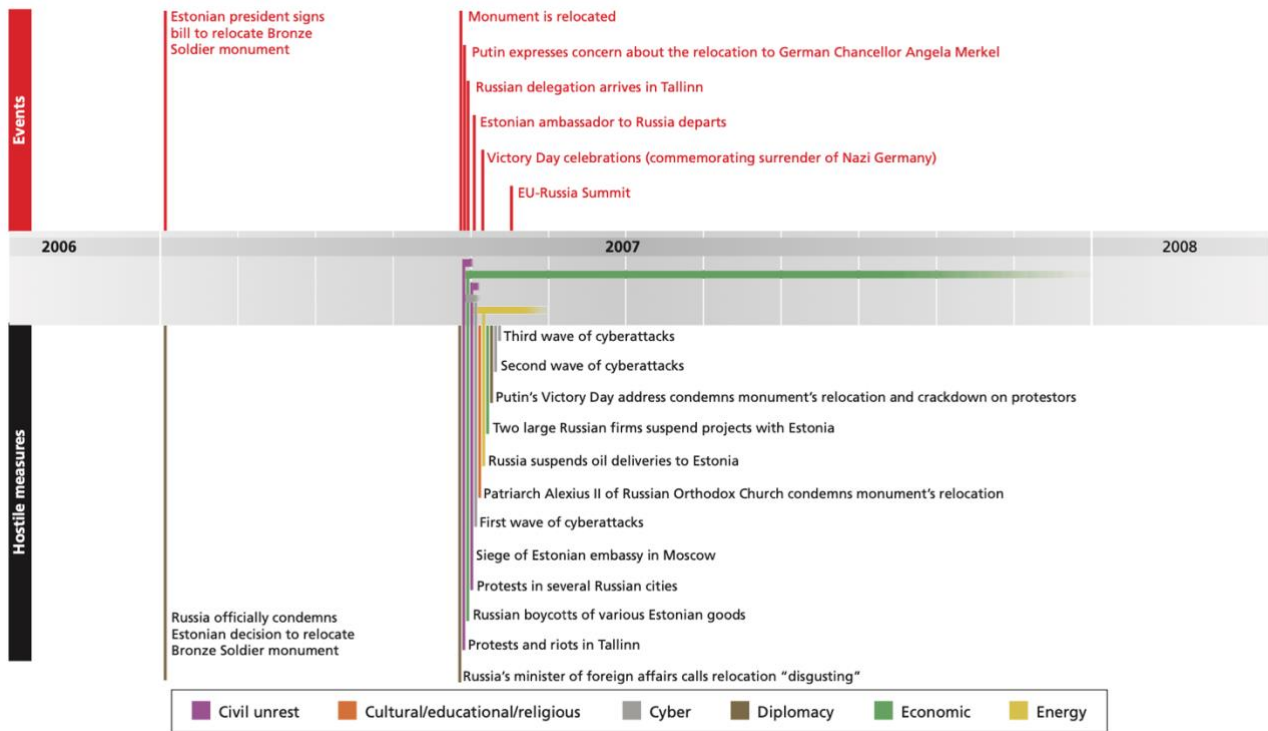


Figure 4. Estonian crisis timeline³⁸

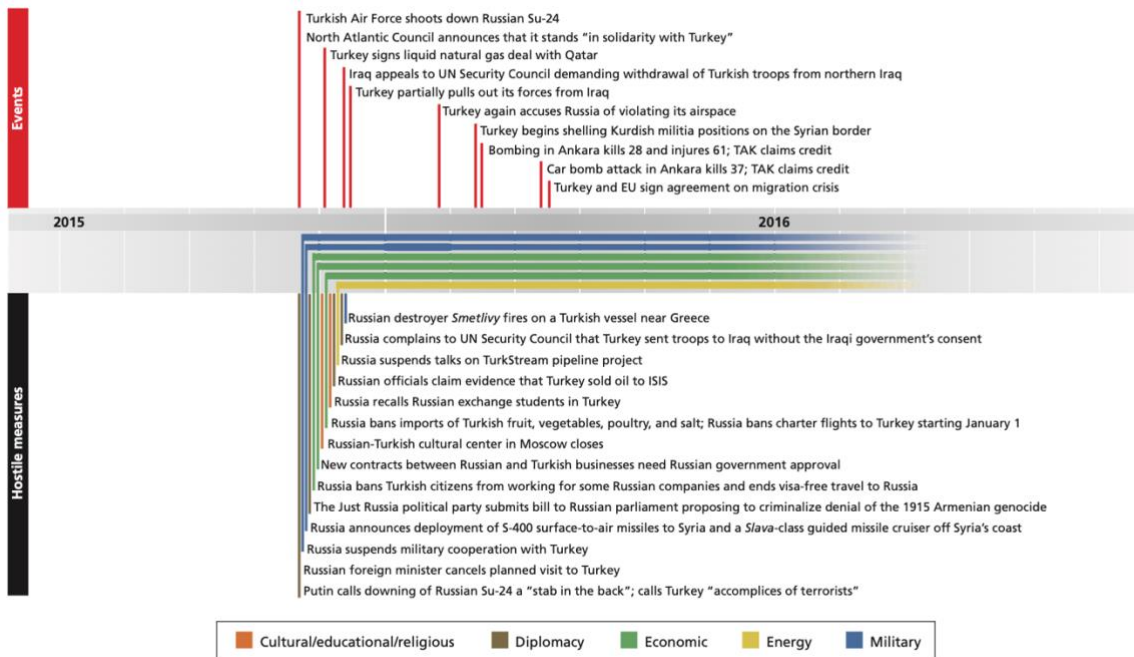
³⁸ Ibid. p. 41.

3.1.5 Turkey (2015-2016)

The relations between Russia and Turkey have been historically rather unstable, alternating periods of close cooperation with others of open confrontation. The crisis between the two countries occurred between 2015 and 2016 is framed within the Syria civil war context which started in 2011. The forces of the Syrian president Bashar al Assad were backed by Russia, while the rebels, both the internationally recognized fighting groups and other underground Islamic militias were supported logistically and militarily by Turkey. The two nations' strategies in the area were therefore bound to collide. It is critical to recall that Turkey has been a key NATO member since 1952 exactly because of its geographic position naturally containing the Soviet Union first and the Russian Federation then. Since October 2015, the Turks had denounced already twice a violation of their air space by Russian military aircrafts. Eventually on 24 November 2015, the Turkish forces shot down a Russian aircraft that had not answered several warnings launched by the Turks. The confrontational attitude between the two countries escalated quickly after this incident. It is possible to detect a number of specific goals Russia had in mind with its retaliatory activity, such a show of force to answer a military threat deterring any other hostile activities by Turkey, in addition to an attempt to divide the NATO partners with the threat of military escalation. To achieve the above goals Russia put in place a series of diplomatic as well as economic and military tactics to direct increasing pressure on Turkey. The diplomatic efforts included the explicit accusations to Turkey of collaboration with and sponsorship of Islamic terrorist groups. Also, Russia attempted to provide evidence of the correct behavior of its fighter plane by publishing the aircraft path records that would show the plane never crossed the Turkish airspace boundary. Most importantly, Russia threatened to officially recognize the 1915 Armenian genocide knowing it would be a very sensible topic for the Turkish domestic audience. On the economic side, Russia quickly employed a broad range of measures such as the suspension of talks on the critical Turkstream gas pipeline project, and other prospected joint collaborations in the energy sector. This measure was accompanied by the imposition of several other import barriers to

Turkish products. Finally, as for the military measures, Russia responded by stepping up its military presence in Syria and, most critically, by supporting the Kurdish militias near the Turkish-Syrian border, which was perceived as a vital threat by the Turkish leadership. As mentioned, Russia-Turkey relations are historically of a pragmatic nature and depending on very specific circumstances. Indeed, the relation quickly were restored to normality by June 2016 when Putin officially accepted Erdogan's apologies for the downing of the Russian aircraft. Just a month later, Russian-Turkish relationship would encounter a new high point when the Russian president became one of the most vocal supporters of Erdogan's reasons after the July 2016 coup attempt. In assessing Russia's results in pressuring Turkey, we can readily recognize Russia's short-term success. Indeed, it secured a Turkish apology, an important matter for Russia's domestic audience, as well as showing the internal division of NATO when dealing with high-risk threats military escalation. However, when looking at the medium to long term effects of its policies Russian international isolation becomes evident. In fact, no country other than Armenia explicitly condemned Turkish actions. Moreover, if we consider the sudden rapprochement and the growing collaboration in the following years as a sign positive resolution of this crisis, we would be mistaken. As a matter of fact, the already mentioned pragmatism of the two countries attitude towards bilateral relations accounted for much of that transformation. Erdogan's growing distance with other Western countries leaders following their mild response to the July attempt of coup d'état and their vocal criticism of the president's repression of perceived political adversaries can be seen as the true reason for Turkey's renewed collaboration with Russia³⁹.

³⁹ Ibid. pp. 46-48.



NOTE: ISIS = Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. TAK = Teyrêbazên Azadiya Kurdistan [Kurdistan Freedom Falcons].

Figure 5. Turkish crisis timeline⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 47.

3.2 Evaluating the past: goals, modus operandi, and results

This paragraph concludes the overview on the past 30 years or so of West-Russia relations proposed above. That had numerous ups and downs that translated in moments of even enthusiastic collaboration and worrying confrontation. After having analyzed several representative confrontational moments, we can now look for a common thread that links them together in order to understand their ultimate causes and how the crises unrolled. From there, we can use the knowledge acquired to shed light and understand to a greater degree the causes of the current tragic conflict in Ukraine. We will show in this paragraph, and more extensively in the following chapter, that Russia seems to be following a historically consolidated pattern in detecting a perceived threat, reacting to it, and dealing with the unfolding crisis. The case studies briefly used in the preceding paragraphs have been chosen not because they are the most critical per se but because they are representative of the different directions of Russian foreign diplomacy that is, in other words, how it devises responses to external hostile events, what are its preferred modus operandi and general goals, as well as how effective it is in achieving them. Of course, when discussing about the success or failure of a diplomatic or military operation we should keep in mind that different actors may perceive the results of such actions in different ways in accordance with their own perspectives, priorities, and positioning in the global geopolitical theatre. Let's now consider as first topic of analysis the sensitivity Russia shows when assessing the risk of a perceived foreign threat. To that regards some key consideration may be put forward. We have extensively discussed about the significance Russian leadership attributes to its own ability of keeping an at least passive influence on what it considers to be buffer countries naturally placed within its own sphere of interest. These countries obviously include all former Soviet republics both in Eastern Europe and central Asia. Georgia, Moldova, Estonia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, which we have discussed above, all fall under this category. Therefore, it can be concluded that Russia always perceived as a vital threat all external and domestic actions that may lead to changes to the established power structure of such countries. In this guarded attitude, even

purely domestic and legitimate ambitions of the peoples of these countries are perceived as either directly fomented by or susceptible to be manipulated by Western countries. Moreover, the degree of transformation that is considered a risk varies widely. Using our own examples, we can point out that very different kind of circumstances characterized the events unfolding in the different countries. Specifically, let us consider the cases of Estonia and Georgia. The pre-crisis conditions of the two former Soviet republics were profoundly different. On one hand, when the Estonian crises unfolded in 2006-2007, the country was already a member of NATO and the EU, and thus politically and militarily shielded by the two organizations. On the other hand, Georgia, in the aftermath of the Rose Revolution, was only starting to aspire to such Western integration. In addition, the triggers of the respective crises were also critically different in intensity. In the Estonian case, the pretext to open a confrontation was represented by the removal and transfer of a Soviet celebrating statue, hardly considerable an actual threat if not merely symbolic⁴¹. In the Georgian case, on the contrary, it is at least understandable the kind of genuine threat perceived by the Russians: certainly, mixed with considerations that are external to the specific scenario, the alleged security threat posed by the Georgian attempt at stabilizing South Ossetia militarily is definitely more factual and disturbing⁴². It can be concluded that Russia has an history of reacting to very different level of dangers with an at least generally similar approach. That should teach us that Western powers should be extremely careful when dealing with countries considered by the Russians within their sphere of influence regardless of the legitimacy or reasonableness of their actions. Our analysis stresses the importance of pretexts and apparent causes, rather than focusing only on the ultimate and true reasons for interventions. That because, employing a rather realist and pragmatic theoretical approach, we are not only interested in why countries and governments chose a specific course of action, but also what kind of specific circumstances can be used or manipulated to artificially engineer an escalation. Whether or not these are the real or apparent causes triggering a response, the removal of a statue

⁴¹ Connable, B., Young, S., Pezard, S., Radin, A., Cohen, R. S., Migacheva, K., & Sladden, J. (2020). Appendix B: Detailed Case Studies of Russia's Use of Hostile Measures. In *Russia's Hostile Measures*. RAND Corporation. p. 47-60.

⁴² Ibid. pp. 23-46

cannot be compared with the supposed violation of international agreements associated to the intervention in South Ossetia. However, with different degrees of intensity based on Russian's capacity to adapt to different circumstance, both actions triggered a decisive diplomatic, economic, political, and somewhat different, military response. As a second topic of analysis, let's now analyze the specific ways or means through which Russia deals with the various crises. Russia appears to employ a wide range of different tactics, in part depending on specific characteristics of the target, in part on its own overall goals and strategies. To understand how Russia behaves during a crisis let's first consider what its main objectives may be. For example, in the Moldova's case, Russian goals included keeping a significant leverage and influence on the political dynamics on the country trying to avoid any shift towards Western countries and institutions. That kind of approach entails a very specific set of measures to be used in pursuing those objectives. The Transnistria's status quo protection, the presence of Russian troops in the region, the so-called gas diplomacy, and heavy founding of pro-Russian political parties and media outlets are only a few examples tactics employed by Russia to maintain constant pressure on Moldova. These can therefore mainly be ascribed to diplomatic, economic, and mildly military domains⁴³. Let's compare this scenario once again with the Georgian one. Russian goals in that case were more focused on trying to reverse or at least stop an already undergoing transformation and realignment of the country rather than keeping the status quo for the circumstances mentioned above. Therefore, the tactics employed also differed greatly to those preferred in Moldova. Russia's actions responding to a rapidly changing scenario were definitely bolder as well as riskier. The diplomatic and economic escalation already under way since the Rose Revolution of 2003, that could be considered per se an already serious crisis, was followed by a full-scale military invasion stopped only by a ceasefire sponsored by President Sarkozy. The two examples show the wide range of alternatives Russia can employ when dealing with a foreign risk varying in intensity and seriousness depending on their goals and the specific scenarios. Let's compare the other two cases analyzed: Turkey and Estonia. In those cases, we can highlight some

⁴³ Ibid. pp. 1-20.

similarities in the goals and in the tactics employed. In both cases Russia decided to respond to a perceived offense. While certainly the downing of a military aircraft can be considered of a certain seriousness, we could argue that the perceived threat came from appearing weak and incapable of exerting deterrence rather than from fear of actual military clashes. With this perspective, the two cases both seem to revolve around the need of the Russian government to answer to legitimate concerns of prestige from their domestic public opinion as well as reasserting their ability to influence events in the near abroad. Once again, to similar objectives followed similar responses and tactics employed. Given both countries membership in NATO, a direct military threat, as employed in different degrees in Moldova and Georgia, could not be consider a realistic option. Therefore, Russia chose to employ a more indirect approach. In the Estonian case, together with the aforementioned diplomatic and economic measures, the Russian government backed a series of Cyberattacks waves meant to disrupt the government and civil society ability to function as normal. These asymmetric or hybrid kind of operations has had the effect of busting an image of a Russia that can be dangerous and effective even without exerting the traditional military pressure. In a similar way, the tactics employed against Turkey were characterized by an indirect approach. Once again following initial diplomatic and economic retaliatory measures Russia tried to pressure the Turkish government through the support of a proxy group that was the Kurdish forces in northern Syria⁴⁴. As shown, Russia appears to be perfectly capable of adapting its own tactics to its specific goals and priorities as well as to the actual circumstances and opportunities offered by the individual scenario. That teaches us that Russia is able to counter act towards even difficult targets such as NATO member countries employing a wide range of modern an effective tactics. Let's now consider the third and last topic of the analysis. The success or failure rate of Russia's strategies and tactics. To simplify, let's define the strategic level as the level on which the overall goals and objectives are assessed. Let's also define the tactical level as the level on which the specific measures and techniques employed are assessed. In addition, we can, again to simplify, ascribe at the higher level the

⁴⁴ Ibid. pp. 89-102

assessment of medium to long term goals and to the lower the assessment of short-term gains. Once again, it is possible to identify a specific trend when looking at the case studies examined above. Russia, as it should be already clear, appears to be effective and perfectly able to carry out decisive and well-timed actions at the tactical level. Therefore, allowing it to also often being able to reach predetermined short-term goals. This trend can be supported for example by the resolution of the Turkish crisis as well as the Moldovan and Georgian cases. In all the three situations it can be said that Russia, by successfully employing economic, diplomatic and military pressure was able to achieve, if not completely at least partially, its short term aims: respectively a normalization of the relations with Turkey as well as the official excuses by the country's president; the keeping of the status quo and of its own influence on the Moldovan government for a certain time; and the at least temporary interruption of the Georgian integration process with Western organizations such as NATO and the EU. An exception to the trend of tactical successes is the Estonia case, where the Russians, despite employing very successful practical measures, were not able to gain any visible advantages in the short term. On the contrary, the analysis of the strategic level of action of Russia reveals its limits and flaws. Indeed, in all the above cases Russia was not able to reach or even get close to its ultimate objective of keeping those countries either within its sphere of influence or keeping them susceptible to pressure. In the Moldovan case, while Russia was able to maintain a high degree of influence thanks to economic leverage, military pressure and strong political ties for some time, the so-called Grape Revolution of 2009, and the definitive ousting of the communist government from power brought about a profound shift in the political outlook and tendencies of the country. Moldova today, led by pro-European Maya Sandu, appears to be on its way to further integrate with the West primarily by becoming a member of the EU. In the last chapters we will in more depth discuss on the consequences of domestic and foreign policies of countries such as Moldova and Georgia in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In the Georgian case, although we have already affirmed Russia's success in avoiding a smooth and rapid accession of the country in Western institutions, Georgia still appears to be leaning towards even greater economic and political

integration with the EU and NATO. The Estonia and Turkish cases are to be considered somewhat differently because of their membership in NATO and, limited to Estonia, in the EU. Therefore, Russian strategic goals with regards to these countries are certainly more abstract and difficult to evaluate. However, in the Turkish case, as already mentioned before, the improvement in bilateral relations between the two countries cannot be easily considered as a consequence of Russian actions during the 2016 crisis but rather as depending on changing domestic Turkish circumstances in the following months. The Estonian case is probably the most complex case as far as the international circumstances are concerned. Therefore, an evaluation of the results on the strategic level are highly debatable. In any case the country's resilience, progressive westernization, economic and cultural growth provides evidence of the Estonian's autonomy and mature internalization of Western principles. In conclusion this paragraph suggests and highlights some of the key readings to be considered and understood from analyzing Russia's pattern of behavior when dealing with real or perceived threats to its interests. Russia appears to be highly sensitive to political changes happening in neighboring countries or countries where it historically exerted influence. Therefore, a Russian reaction is to be expected in an escalating manner when an opportunity arises that is perceived exploitable by the Russian leadership. Russian response appears to be very well tailored in intensity and variety of means employed to its specific goals and well as the specific circumstances of the related scenario. Russian retaliatory capabilities stem from highly effective diplomatic and economic pressures to hybrid and traditional forms of military activity. However, while Russia often achieves its tactical goals, the lack of a more comprehensive strategy based on positive incentives also, rather than only on negative ones, results in the inability to reach its strategic and medium to long term goals.

4 Case study: Ukraine

Let's now turn to the central part of our analysis: the path that has led to the current conflict in Ukraine. In this chapter we will firstly try to highlight why Russia considers Ukraine so critical in its consideration of foreign and security policies that it has arrived at the point of launching a full-scale invasion of the country. Secondly, we will recall some of the main events and issues that have characterized the Russian-Ukraine bilateral relations in the past decades. Finally, we will look into the recent 2022 military escalation that eventually led to the current conflict. This path aims at showing some similarities as well as highlighting some differences between the consolidated behavioral pattern of Russian, that we have extensively analyzed in the last paragraph, and its responses to the latest crisis in Ukraine. As already mentioned in the past chapter, many of Russia's perceived threats come from an actual or apparent sense of encirclement by Western security as well as political organizations and the subsequent loss of influence in neighboring countries. Understanding this point, without judging its legitimacy and reasonableness, is key to properly understand and analyze the Russian perspective when addressing an escalating scenario.

4.1 Why Ukraine

Among the different Republics born out of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ukraine probably represents the most significant for Russian interests. This holds true for reasons deriving from different domains: political, economic, and strategic. The two countries share a 2020 km long border close to the Volga region: an area of vital industrial and political importance for Russia. Moreover, from a security point of view, Ukraine's importance mainly relies on its control of the Crimean Peninsula, located strategically at the heart of the black Sea. As already mentioned above, Sevastopol,

in Crimea, is home to the most important Russian naval base on its Southern shores. Critically, from there Russia is able not only to exert its naval and therefore military influence directly on the NATO members countries such as Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey, but on the whole Mediterranean basin. Additionally, the country, together with Belarus, represents a natural buffer between the Russian Federation and NATO and EU territories on the Eastern European plains. From an economic perspective Ukraine represented a vast and important export market for Russian goods. Even more crucially, it is home to an extensive system of natural gas pipelines that makes it a key transit country between the gas fields of Russia and the importing markets of Central and Western Europe. Considering the vital importance of energy exports in the Russian budget, keeping an open and stable supply line towards Western Union is held as a high priority by the Russian leadership. This series of reasons have contributed to install in the Russian government level a sense of urgency and strategic priority when dealing with Ukraine. In a previous paragraph we have already discussed about the Orange Revolution of 2004 that, for a first time, decisively transformed Ukraine's domestic political landscape, promoting a transition from a traditional pro-Russian political disposition to a more openly vocal pro-Western one. In that occasion domestic as well as international circumstances hampered Russia's ability to influence the situation to its advantage. However, that still contributed to reinforce the idea that Western countries led by the US and EU, despite their rhetoric of openness towards Russia, were ready to exploit any opportunity to pursue their own interests discarding Russian's concerns. Between the collapse of the Soviet Union and the color revolutions progressively former Soviet satellites or Soviet Republics especially in Eastern Europe have radically shifted from their reliance and dependency on the Soviet Union to aiming at always growing integration into the political economic and security systems provided by the US and the EU. After a first wave of revolution gradually replaced the Communis regimes in Eastern Europe between the late '80s and early '90s, with at least formally liberal democratic governments, these countries all approached either the EU or NATO or both. Due to the good auspices of collaboration between the newly formed Russian Federation and the Western Countries the expansion eastward of NATO and the EU was not

met with open criticism or opposition by Russia. However, with the cooldown of relations in the following years, the new wave of liberal revolutions in former Soviet Republics between 2003 and 2006 was met with growing concern. Witnessing the progressive reduction of its sphere of influence Russia became gradually more assertive in trying to defend what it considered its vital interests, including keeping its westward frontier free from NATO's presence. In this regard two important recent revolutionary attempts can help further explain Russia's stiffening on the matter. Following the 2020 Belarusian presidential election when incumbent resident Lukashenko won by an enormous margin his sixth term in office, demonstrators started organizing what would become the largest antigovernment protest in the history of the country. Protestors condemned the growing authoritarianism and political repression by President Lukashenko. Moreover, the elections in the country were widely considered far below international standards as for transparency and fairness. Lasting almost one year the protests asked for the resignation of the president and his government, the call for new free and fair elections, the release of political prisoners and an end to police brutality. The growing revolutionary movement encountered strong support from the EU, the US, and other Western countries. The international condemn of the regime's brutality in suppressing the demonstrations escalated towards the imposition of economic sanctions against key governmental officials as well as businesses linked to them. Despite these efforts, President Lukashenko's refusal to leave office, as well as the support President Putin granted him, destined the revolution to inevitable failure. The outcome of such events resulted in a tightening of Lukashenko's regime of power accompanied by his growing isolation on the international arena. These factors combined have contributed to further encourage the relations between Belarus and Russia. In January 2022, following a sharp increase in energy prices, and due to widespread dissatisfaction with the government handling of the economy and its perceived corruption, a weeklong mass protest erupted in Kazakhstan. Once again, while Western countries were at least morally sided with the demonstrators, the support received by the Kazakh regime from Russia proved decisive in crushing the demonstrations and bringing back to its original status. Differently from the Belarussian case, Western Countries were more aware of their

inability to truly influence and support a liberal turn for the revolution and therefore, while expressing solidarity with the demonstrators, could not put forward into action any concrete or decisive measure to help them. The Kazakh unrest also showed the willingness and capacity of Russia to militarily intervene in its partner countries. Indeed, Kazakh President Tokayev, requested intervention of peacekeeping forces from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), an intergovernmental military alliance led by Russia, and comprising Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan. This new wave of mass demonstrations again contributed to create growing concern and frustration in Russian circles about the possibility of losing even more of their partner countries to movements that seemed, if not only directed, at least supported by Western hostile countries⁴⁵.

4.2 The path to the crisis

The following paragraphs will briefly underline those key events that would ultimately lead to the current conflict. In paragraph 3.1.1 (The color revolutions), the 2004 Ukraine's Orange revolution was discussed. As mentioned, this brought about a major shift in the country's political landscape and especially in its bilateral relations with Russia. Tensions between the countries arose between 2008 and 2009, during a NATO/ Russia Council Summit, held in Bucharest in April 2008, the issue of Ukraine's shift to the West was mentioned and partly discussed. In the same year Russia employed some diplomatic and economic measures to put pressure on the Ukrainian government. For example, in 2009, due to disputes related to the renewal of gas contracts between the Russian company Gazprom and Ukrainian authorities, Russia eventually halted all supplies to the country. In doing so, however, given the strategic importance of Ukrainian gas infrastructures to supply mainly Southeastern European countries, Russia also effectively cut off from the supplies several EU

⁴⁵ Ismayilov, E. (2021). Ukraine's Strategic Importance for Russia. In *Russia's military interventions in Georgia and Ukraine: interests, motives, and decision-making*. Washington: Academica Press.

member states. Eventually a new contract was signed, and the gas flow restarted. However, as had already happened with a similar dispute in 2006, the reputation of Russia as a reliable gas energy supplier was negatively impacted. As demonstrated by the patterns of action undertaken in Moldova and Georgia, Russia was ready to use the pretexts of protecting ethnic Russians abroad to intervene with different degrees of intensity in specific target countries. Mirroring the aforementioned strategies Russia started at least diplomatically to reassert its intentions to guarantee the safety and wellbeing of ethnic Russian in Ukraine. In this regard, in 2008, the Russian Federation started issuing passports to Ukrainian citizens in Crimea. Following this, the Ukrainian authorities decided to expel some Russian diplomats accused of fomenting antigovernment protests in the peninsula. When a series of demonstrations rose in the region in August 2009, calling for a Russian intervention in a way similar to that, at the time, recently employed in Georgia. On Ukraine's part, fears mounted that the Russians were actively pursuing policies aimed at the solicitation of an uprising in Crimea to repeat the patterns already followed in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria⁴⁶. The effects of the 2003 revolution, however, would eventually be reversed by the election of Yanukovich as President in 2010. His openly pro-Russian policies put momentarily aside Russia's concern over Ukraine for that time. Given the new position of Ukraine's government, Russia eased its hostile policies against the country. Kiev gradually turned back to its Russian partner increasing their political, military, and economic ties. While at the same time rolling back on the oath of integration with NATO and the EU. Although Yanukovich's presidency had clear pro-Russian tendencies, he still tried to reach some form of association agreement with the European Union, recognized as a key step to improve its country's economic well-being. Russia immediately demonstrated some concern and reservation on the issue. These depended on economic as well as security reasons. On the one hand Ukraine represented one of the biggest export markets for Russian goods and services, and an economic association between Ukraine and the EU risked damaging this profitable relation. On the other hand, Russia had started

⁴⁶ Ismayilov, E. (2021). The Origins of the Russia-Ukraine Crisis. In *Russia's military interventions in Georgia and Ukraine: interests, motives, and decision-making*. Washington: Academica Press.

considering the EU as sort of a light version of NATO. Placing its focus on political and economic matters rather than military ones, Russia believed, the EU appeared as less threatening than NATO. However, as it often happened in the past, EU membership is often prelude to NATO access. As a consequence of this line of reasoning, Russia, although nominally aligned with Yanukovich's government, started exerting mounting pressure on Ukraine to abstain to sign any form of agreement with the European Union. When Yanukovich eventually declared its intention not to sign the promised association agreement with the EU, in November 2013, a series of pro-EU demonstrations erupted in the country. For three months, these protests grew in strength and numbers escalating in the so-called Euromaidan Revolution⁴⁷.

4.2.1 Euromaidan and the Revolution of Dignity (2013-2014)

In March 2012, negotiations on the Association Agreement between the EU and Ukraine were concluded. To allow for the gradual integration of Ukraine in the European system, EU leaders provided a plan for Ukraine's full pursue of a democratic society based on the rule of law as a fundamental condition for the ratification of the agreement. Ukrainian Parliament Speaker Rybak pledged to adopt the plan on priority measures aimed at meeting such requirements. Ukrainian President Yanukovich, too, called on the Parliament to comply with these conditions so that, finally, the official signature could formalize the agreement in Vilnius on November 29, 2013, at the Eastern Partnership Heads of State and Government Summit. As mentioned, despite their otherwise affinity, the Russian government started seeing with suspicious Ukraine's efforts to get closer to the European Union. In retaliation, some changes were made to the customs rules regulating imports from Ukraine by the Russian Customs Department in August 2013, provoking major trade losses for the government of Kyiv. This first step can be considered as an instrument of economic pressure Moscow

⁴⁷ Ismayilov, E. (2021). Yanukovich's Presidency and Russia-Ukraine Relations. In *Russia's military interventions in Georgia and Ukraine: interests, motives, and decision-making*. Washington: Academica Press.

adopted on the Ukrainian government to prevent the signing of the agreement. Russia's intimidation eventually worked in that, on November 21, 2013, the Yanukovich's government requested a temporary suspension of the signing process, justifying this choice by economic concerns provoked by the declining trade with other eastern countries. This decision triggered a spontaneous protest by all those for whom the agreement represented a concrete step towards an approach to West and a possible future accession to the EU. Thousands of citizens, especially students, started gathering on the evening of November 21, 2013, in Independence Square in Kyiv (in Ukrainian *Majdan Nezaležnosti*, hence the name of the uprising) to defend European principles and values: freedom, democracy, and human dignity. Fearing the approaching anniversary of the Orange Revolution, that in November 2004 successfully imposed new presidential elections after repeated accusations of electoral fraud that brought against then candidate Yanukovich, the authorities responded harshly by banning all forms of gathering and demonstration. In response to what was perceived as growing authoritarianism, a huge crowd of people reached Ukraine's cabinet building on November 24, where a bloody crackdown on the demonstrators was carried out by special units and local police. While the Ukrainian government officially apologized for the unprecedented violence, city authorities in Kyiv continued to make numerous arrests among those who had continuously occupy the square. The escalation of violence culminated on the morning of December the 1st when activists occupied the city administration building and the home of the Federation of Trade Unions of Ukraine. Despite the launch of an internal investigation aimed at clarifying the facts, protests continued to escalate, and a new series of regulations were instituted with the aim of restricting freedom of speech and assembly⁴⁸. These provisions included: the criminalization of any activity considered extremist, without caring to specify the boundaries of such expression; a general amnesty for police and special forces using excessive violence on the protesters; simplifying procedure to allow in absentia trials for demonstrators; the ban on any unauthorized temporary use of tents and other kind of equipment useful

⁴⁸ Reznik, O. (2016, November). From the Orange Revolution to the Revolution of Dignity: Dynamics of the Protest Actions in Ukraine. *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures*, 30(4), 750-765. DOI: 10.1177/0888325416650255

to build barricades or occupy squares and roads; the ban on wearing face masks or other kinds of means to conceal one's identity and the participation in, even peaceful, meetings; a tightening in control and censorship over the internet as well as on the activity of international NGOs on Ukraine's territory⁴⁹. These laws caused a renewed explosion of violence throughout the country. Eventually, on February the 21st, negotiations between Ukrainian President and parliamentary opposition leaders reached an agreement that, among other initiatives, included holding early presidential elections by, removing the state of emergency, and proclaiming an amnesty for protesters arrested during the demonstrations. Between February 21 and 22, President Yanukovich fled Kyiv and went to exile in Russia. Due to his brutal repression of the protests, Yanukovich would be sentenced in 2019 to thirteen years' imprisonment for high treason^{50 51}. The Euromaidan protests lasted a little more than three months and finally culminated in the last days of February 2014 with the so-called Revolution of Dignity. The success of the protest was guaranteed by the enormous spontaneous citizens participation as well as the protesters' resilience in keep the demonstrations going even after the Yanukovich's government proved willing to employ tactics of harsh police repression. It is estimated that, at any given point during the peak of the protests between 200,000 and 400,000 people took to the streets in Kyiv alone⁵². In the protests died more than 100 people and, additionally, almost 2000 were injured as a result of police repression⁵³. Contrary to other similar revolutionary waves, like those taking place in Belarus and Kazakhstan between 2020 and 2022, the protesters were able persevere and resist government intimidation. Although rather disorganized initially, the high degree of participation from civil society, NGOs, and the international support have made possible the formation of a stable movement, critical condition for the positive success of the any form of revolution. Of course, the pro-European movement in the country, at least since the Orange

⁴⁹ Kotliar, D. (2014, January 17). *Summary of Laws enacted by the Ukrainian parliament on 16 January 2014*. Retrieved from Transparency International Ukraine: <https://web.archive.org/web/20140123190324/http://ti-ukraine.org/en/news/4269.html>

⁵⁰ Marples, D. R., & Mills, F. V. (2015). *Ukraine's Euromaidan*. ibidem Press.

⁵¹ Diuk, N. (2014, April). Euromaidan. *World Affairs*, 176(6), 9-16. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43555086>

⁵² Whitmore, B. (2013, December 6). *Ukraine's Threat to Putin*. Retrieved from The Atlantic: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/12/ukraines-threat-to-putin/282103/>

⁵³ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2016, May 25). *Accountability for killings in Ukraine from January 2014 to May 2016*. Retrieved from Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/accountability-killings-ukraine-january-2014-may-2016>

Revolution of 2004, was much stronger and had much deeper roots within society than the movements in Belarus and Kazakhstan never had. The Revolution of Dignity triggered a significant regime change in the country and the restoration of the 2004 constitutional amendments, which were previously discarded by President Yanukovich. As requested by the demonstrators, new elections were held in May 2014 that saw the victory of candidate Petro Poroshenko. He inaugurated a new explicitly pro-European foreign policy with the aim of definitively distancing Ukraine from Russia. In this regard, a series of policies were implemented with the specific goal of promoting the de-russification of the country⁵⁴.

4.2.2 Russo-Ukrainian Crisis: the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas (2014-present)

Following the Revolution of Dignity, the new Ukrainian government rapidly moved, once again, to reorient the country's foreign policy towards greater integration with EU and NATO, pulling away from Russian influence. These developments, considering Russia's fears of definitively losing Ukraine as a partner, became extremely troubling for Putin and his entourage. Consistently with past behavior, Russia had assessed the situation and found the possibilities of a positive outcome for its interest to be ever more remote. Consequently, the Kremlin policy rapidly shifted towards a more assertive one. Clear examples of this are the Moldovan and especially Georgian cases. Indeed, many similarities can be drawn between the two scenarios. Both Georgia and Crimea seemed on the verge of irreversibly joining Western political and security structure that would permanently push Russian influence out of the region; both countries presented areas on their Russian frontiers, with a vocal ethnic Russian majority population, whose security could be, as already mentioned repeatedly, used as a plausible reason for intervention. The Georgian case also represented a clear success in the eyes of the Russian leadership. While on the very long-term perspective we could argue that the Russian

⁵⁴ Zabyelina, Y. (2017). Lustration Beyond Decommunization: Responding to the Crimes of the Powerful in Post-Euromaidan Ukraine. *State Crime Journal*, 6(1), 55-78. DOI: 10.13169/statecrime.6.1.0055

were unable to permanently deter the Georgian from approaching Western institutions, it effectively succeeded, at least in the short term, in blocking its access into both NATO and the EU. This president allowed for an optimistic take on the success chances of similar actions targeting Ukraine. Russia's strategy mainly followed two directions. These were informed and decided based on both opportunities and geopolitical reasons. First target was the Crimean Peninsula, in this case the opportunity was represented by the presence of a consistent ethnically Russian population that could easily become the motive for Russians to intervene. Putin, indeed, tried to frame this operation as intended to protect Crimean Russians from the excesses and the anti-Russian brutalities of the revolutionaries. Crimea also represented a clear geopolitical objective due to its position and the presence of Sevastopol naval base. Following a pattern already employed in Georgia, before intervening, the Russians fomented and manipulated a general uprising in the region that eventually led to the protester's calls for Russian protection. This way, the Russian Government, could show the world, as well as its own domestic audience, that it was acting as a liberator rather than an invader and only per request of the local people. While it is widely believed that undercover Russian military personnel were already in the area managing the uprising, when the country's regular troops eventually entered Crimea, they were able to quickly seize the entire region. President Putin, after the international backlash provoked by his country's occupation of Crimea, tried to defend its decision using arguments of right to self-determination as well as protection of oppressed minorities. Moreover, Russian's territorial claims were also backed by the fact that historically Russia had exerted authority over that area for a much longer period than Ukraine. To reassure the international community of his country's legitimate intentions in Crimea, Putin initially denied any intention of formally annexing Crimea. Arguing that Russian forces present in the area were to be considered as a temporary guarantee of security of the Russian population, and that they would eventually withdraw after the normalization of the political situation in Ukraine. However, eventually, on the sixth of March 2014, the parliament of the self-proclaimed Crimean Republic, voted a deal to join the Russian Federation. The subsequent referendum held to confirm the parliament decision resulted in the

overwhelming victory for the support of the unification with Russia. Ukraine, as well as the majority of western countries, together with numerous international and regional organizations refused to recognize the legitimacy of the referendum. Nevertheless, following the referendum's results Crimea unilaterally declared its independence and formally asked to join the Russian Federation. One day later, a treaty signed in Moscow between the two parties, sanctioned the annexation⁵⁵. On 1 April 2014, NATO decided to suspend all co-operation with the Russian Federation in response to the annexation of Crimea, keeping, however, in place the NATO-Russia Council (NRC). Russia, furthermore, had also been suspended from the G-8. A series of economic light sanctions were also imposed by the U.S. and the EU as a denunciation of such an illegal act. The second target on the Russian strategy was to foment and support protests as well as separatists' movement elsewhere in Ukraine. Around the same period as its annexation of Crimea, a series of anti-Maidan protests erupted in the Southeastern provinces of the country. The most successful ones took place in the Donbass region namely within the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. Here Russian backed separatists' forces were initially able to seize the government buildings leading to a fully-fledged armed conflict with the central government. Other regions as well were interested by widespread pro-Russia rallies and demonstrations, namely the Kharkiv and Odessa oblasts. The escalation of violence in both regions, however, never reached the breaking point of full armed conflict. Following a major counteroffensive from the national military, the territory held by the separatists started to shrink. To avoid losing such an important asset, Russia, that until that time had only indirectly supported the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, began to step up its support by sending increasing amounts of military equipment and personnel. Russia's officials had always been consciously ambiguous when talking about the presence of Russian regular troops on the Donbass front, sometimes openly denying such allegations, sometimes admitting to the presence of instructors or other kinds of specialist

⁵⁵ Ismayilov, E. (2021). *Russia's military interventions in Georgia and Ukraine: interests, motives, and decision-making*. Washington: Academica Press.

individuals. Following the intervention of Russia, the Donbass front started stabilizing, eventually leading to the sign of the Minsk Protocol on the fifth of September 2014⁵⁶.

4.2.3 Attempts at peace: the Minsk Protocols

The Minsk Protocols refer to two different attempts at brokering a lasting ceasefire between Ukraine and the Russian-backed separatist regions of Donetsk and Luhansk. After an informal meeting between France, Germany, Russia and Ukraine that took place during the 70th celebration of the D-Day in Normandy, these countries agreed to meet again in this composition, thus renamed the Normandy Format, to further discuss the possibility of a peaceful resolution of the conflict in Donbass. The first important outcome of such a meeting was the establishment of the Trilateral Contact Group, a council of representative from the two countries involved in the hostilities and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. Its goal was to allow for the creation of a framework that would facilitate a diplomatic resolution to the conflict. In successive meetings, a series peace proposals were discussed and some steps to reach at least a temporary ceasefire were taken. This kind of multilateral or mediated meetings is fundamental to promote trust-building and decrease the risk of asymmetries of information that may lead the parties be frozen by the perceived risk of being taken advantage of. A first major breakthrough was achieved on the 20th of June Donetsk meeting, when Ukrainian President Poroshenko declared a unilateral ceasefire accompanied by a 15-points peace proposal. Eventually, the informal inclusion of representative from the separatist regions allowed for the establishment of a general temporary ceasefire and the beginning of more extensive talks. The fifth round of meetings took place in Minsk between the 31st of July and the 1st of September 2014. As the name suggest, finally after far-reaching talks, the Minsk Protocol was signed by representatives of OSCE, Ukraine, Russia, and, without any formal recognition, the Luhansk PR

⁵⁶ Bowen, A. S. (2019). Coercive diplomacy and the Donbas: Explaining Russian strategy in Eastern Ukraine. *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 42(3-4), 312-343. DOI: 10.1080/01402390.2017.1413550

and Donetsk PR with the mediation of Germany and France, mirroring the Normandy Format. The agreement represented the first proper attempt at finding a diplomatic rather than military solution to the conflict. The protocol contains twelve provisions meant to at least create the conditions to facilitate a more all-encompassing agreement between the parties. It reads as follows:

1. Ensure the immediate bilateral cessation of the use of weapons.
2. Ensure monitoring and verification by the OSCE of the regime of non-use of weapons.
3. Implement decentralization of power, including by means of enacting the Law of Ukraine “With respect to the temporary status of local self-government in certain areas of the Donetsk and the Lugansk regions” (Law on Special Status).
4. Ensure permanent monitoring on the Ukrainian-Russian state border and verification by the OSCE, together with the creation of a security area in the border regions of Ukraine and the Russian Federation.
5. Immediately release all hostages and unlawfully detained persons.
6. Enact a law prohibiting the prosecution and punishment of persons in connection with the events that took place in certain areas of the Donetsk and the Lugansk regions of Ukraine.
7. Conduct an inclusive national dialogue.
8. Adopt measures aimed at improving the humanitarian situation in Donbass.
9. Ensure the holding of early local elections in accordance with the Law of Ukraine “With respect to the temporary status of local self-government in certain areas of the Donetsk and the Lugansk regions” (Law on Special Status).
10. Remove unlawful military formations, military hardware, as well as militants and mercenaries from the territory of Ukraine.
11. Adopt a program for the economic revival of Donbass and the recovery of economic activity in the region.

12. Provide personal security guarantees for the participants of the consultations⁵⁷.

The text of the agreement seems uncontroversial in the points it raises. It is visible a clear attempt from the different parties to, on one hand, recognize the inviolability of Ukraine's borders and, on the other, the need to guarantee the rights and interests of the people of Donbass. The overall structure of the agreement, however, clearly rested on the firm respect of point n.1, the cessation of armed hostilities. In the days that follow the signature, nonetheless, numerous breaches of the ceasefire were denounced by both parties. Eventually, a follow-up memorandum complemented the first 12 points with additional measures to guarantee the peace. Many of the provisions included in the two packages never had any chance to be empirically tested. Certainly, to allow for the implementation of specific political and economic arrangements, stability and security are essential preconditions. The inability or unwillingness of both parties to ensure the respect of the ceasefire proved too critical to allow the protocol to succeed. By January 2015, it was clear that the Minsk agreement could not live up to the expectations. A contributing factor to the ultimate collapse of the accord were a series of local but significant separatist military victories that boldened their leaders in trying to reach a better negotiating position⁵⁸. Indeed, when the Trilateral Contact Group met again in Minsk the 31st of January 2015, however, the absence of representatives from the DPR and LPR effectively signaled the collapse of the attempt. To allow for the swift restart of the peace process, the Normandy Format met again in Minsk on 11-12 of February 2015. After decisive pressures from French President Hollande and German Chancellor Merkel, a new proposal was eventually debated. This would become the core of the new Minsk II agreement. It effectively was a revised and updated version of Minsk I. Officially known as Package of Measures for the Implementation of the Minsk Agreements, it took the form of an integration of the previous to boost its effectiveness. This new agreement was

⁵⁷ Mission of Ukraine to the European Union. (2014, September 8). *Protocol on the results of consultations of the Trilateral Contact Group (Minsk, 05/09/2014)*. Retrieved from Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine: <https://ukraine-eu.mfa.gov.ua/en/news/27596-protocol-on-the-results-of-consultations-of-the-trilateral-contact-group-minsk-05092014>

⁵⁸ Wittke, C. (2019). The Minsk Agreements – more than “scraps of paper”? *East European Politics*, 35(3), 264-290. DOI: 10.1080/21599165.2019.1635885

more detailed and crucially envisioned a more active presence of OSCE officials in monitoring the implementation of the protocol's provisions. The OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine was an observer force tasked with the general goal of assisting and facilitating the transparency and correct application of the protocol's provisions. Its tasks included the gathering of information, fact-finding missions, monitoring respect of human rights, facilitate dialogue between the different actors and coordinate with other OSCE bodies in supporting the peace effort. Although violence generally lessened after the signing of the agreement, it never ceased altogether, and the stipulations of the accord, therefore, were never extensively executed. The Minsk II protocol, just like its predecessor, would eventually fail because of the inability and unwillingness of the involved parties to sincerely pursue the diplomatic path as the main road towards a lasting peace⁵⁹. It is highly debatable whether Ukraine, Russia or the separatist republics had ever genuinely endorsed the Minsk process. In August 2014, the separatists' position deteriorated as the region under their control shrunk and Ukraine moved closer to recovering control of the border and entirely surrounding them. As mentioned, fear of total defeat cause Russia to change its approach to the war. Instead of relying on separatists' forces and support them with conventional weapons, including tanks and air defense, it resorted to send around 4,000 regular forces. While the presence of regular Russian troops proved decisive to block Ukraine's offensives, both sides needed time to reorganize and adapt. With the signing of the Minsk I ceasefire at the beginning of September, Russia launched a more extensive training mission aimed at transforming the separatists into a more conventional army. Eventually, the Russians felt confident enough to launch a new major offensive that coincided with the effective repudiation of the Minsk agreement. Following a series of defeats by the separatist forces, Ukraine finally agreed to sign the Minsk II. Under its provisions, Ukraine was obliged to provide separatist areas a special status, alter its constitution for more decentralization, and reintegrate them. While intermittent combat has continued, by mid-July 2015, Ukraine has begun, albeit at a very slow pace, implementing the

⁵⁹ Rosefielde, S. (2016). *The Kremlin Strikes Back*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 92-99.

political measures required to execute its duties under the accord⁶⁰. Progress in the implementation of the agreement further stalled in the next years and any attempt at reinvigorating the talks permanently failed. Despite its ultimate failure, the Minsk Protocol remains the only comprehensive deal brokered by the parties to be actually proposed and debated. While its implementation has never progressed beyond an appreciable rate, a few lessons may be taken from it. First, attempts at diplomatic resolution of conflicts, no matter how well designed, cannot work unless all parties involved are genuinely committed to it. The case of the Donbas War proves exactly that. Although the Minsk agreement, especially in their first inception, were widely received with enthusiasm and praise, as well as some critics of course, their implementation never even reached the initial stages. This despite it being openly endorsed by all parties and mediated by external powers. Formal acceptance, therefore, has no actual value in promoting a peace process. What matters the most is the factual support to be proved and exercised by employing transparent and honest steps in the direction agreed upon. Second, diplomatic efforts may be employed under a pretense of goodwill to allow the reassessment and reorganization of a changing scenario. Again, this appears to be the case between the end of 2014 and the beginning of 2015. The strategic use of ceasefires and negotiation has allowed Russian-backed forces to progressively gain more leverage and better terms in their dealings with the central government. After Russian conventional intervention in August 2014, Ukrainians were initially forced to make some formal and informal concession to separatist forces through the Minsk I agreement. However, the months of apparent lowering of tensions had been used, by both parties but with more effectiveness by Russia, to reorganize and prepare their forces for continued warfare. In this regard, the second Russian-led offensive in Eastern Ukraine at the beginning of 2015 has allowed once again separatist forces to start negotiating in a new improved position. It is in any case difficult to assess Russian results in this scenario. As we have already discussed, to evaluate the results of any operation it is fundamental to compare the actual situation with the goals and means at disposal that

⁶⁰ Kofman, M., Migacheva, K., Nichiporuk, B., Radin, A., Tkacheva, O., & Oberholtzer, J. (2017). Lessons from Russia's Operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. RAND Corporation. pp. 62-63 https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1498.html.

each party had. Russia's goals as regards the war in Donbass are difficult to assess and did probably change according to the changing circumstances. Initially, a Georgian style scenario was probably considered highly desirable for Russian leadership: a frozen, low-cost conflict that on the one hand allowed for the destabilization of the target country and on the other impede its substantial integration in western institutions. However, Russia's initial plans were probably thwarted by Ukraine's government resolve in challenging the status quo, something, for example, the Georgian government did never do. What initially was thought to be a low-cost low-grade conflict proved impossible to maintain and therefore further financial and material involvement from Russia was required. This, in turn, has also raised the political stakes for Russian leadership due to the difficulty in denying on the international stage its now more direct involvement. In any case, Russia's operations in eastern Ukraine may be considered a tactical success. Its short term aims, repeatedly discussed above, had been effectively reached. Once again, these developments prove Russia's ability to quickly adapt to very diverse scenarios and push, through conventional and non-conventional methods, towards a favorable position. Nevertheless, on the strategic level, Russia didn't appear to be able to maintain the desired state of things in the long term. With the replacement of President Poroshenko with President Zelensky in 2019, Ukraine shifted even more towards an Atlanticist and pro-EU positions. The inability of both parties to reach any kind of genuine and lasting agreement on Donbass gradually precipitated the situation to the point of today's tragic conflict⁶¹.

4.2.4 Renewed tensions and conflict (2021-present)

Beginning in early 2021, new tensions arose between Ukraine and Russia. Following the Ukrainians government crackdown on pro-Russian national parties at the end of 2020 and beginning of 2021, tensions rose once again between the two countries. In response the Russian government announced

⁶¹ Kofman, M., Migacheva, K., Nichiporuk, B., Radin, A., Tkacheva, O., Oberholtzer, J., (2017), *Lessons from Russia's Operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine*. Santa Monica, California: RAND Corporation. pp. 88-89 (Kofman, et al., 2017).

a large-scale military exercise on the Ukrainian border by the end of February 2021. This was accompanied by renewed clashes between the governmental forces and separatist forces on the front line. Following numerous occasions of separatist forces attacking Ukrainian positions, the Ukrainian government started stepping up its anti-Russian rhetoric arriving at proclaiming the intention of retaking not only the whole of Donbass but even Russian Crimea. In response to Russia's exercises in military buildup by the Ukrainian border NATO itself announced a series of military drills under the name of Defender Europe 2021. This represented one of the biggest NATO military exercises in Europe in decades consisting of almost 30,000 soldiers from all member countries. Russia denounced the exercise as a clear provocation and in response continued its military buildup in on his western frontier. Following this escalation, a series of reciprocal accusations of military provocation were launched by the two opposing sides. Both claimed that they are a buildup and their exercises were merely meant as a way of ensuring national security due to the threats coming from the opposite side. The situation further escalated in April 2021 when the Russian buildup along the border reached its mass maximum in terms of deployed personnel and equipment. Eventually by the end of the month Russia's agreed to withdraw large parts of the troops previously deployed back to their permanent bases. To justify its decision to amass such a formidable concentration of forces, Russia provided at least two kinds of answers: first; a defensive reaction to the provocative Defender Europe NATO exercise; and second, a preemptive move motivated by an alleged possible Ukrainian offensive in Donbass. These responses appear pretexts at best. On one hand, the Defender Europe exercise has, nominally, no link with the situation in Ukraine. It is an annual extensive exercise mainly conducted in the Balkan and, to a lesser extent, Baltic regions. In any case, the Russian buildup greatly exceeded in all aspects the NATO exercise at any of its points. On the other, while it couldn't be excluded a priori a possible Ukrainian's decision to resume active warfare in Donbass, no evidence was brought to back such an allegation. Two further explanations seem actually more credible. First, the election of Joe Biden to the Presidency of the United States of 2020. During the presidential campaign, Biden was the most vocal candidate to openly discuss about Ukraine's situation. He pledged to make

Ukraine a focal point of his foreign policy and expressed readiness to increase U.S. support and defensive military aid. In particular, President Biden declared that: “I would make Ukraine a U.S. foreign policy priority. On the military side, I would provide more U.S. security assistance — including weapons — to strengthen Ukraine’s ability to defend itself”⁶². Since moving into the White House, Biden and his staff have made a series of remarks expressing support for the Ukrainian government. This marks a decisive shift in policy from the previous administration in two aspects. On one hand, Trump’s administration foreign policy, especially with Russia, seemed much more lenient and ready to compromise over matters not considered of close interest to the United States. On the other, as exemplified by the Normandy Format, the U.S. appeared ready and happy to relinquish the management of the Ukrainian question to its European partners. Although the European Union has been growingly considered with hostility by Russia’s establishment, it still represents a much more flexible partner than the U.S. Indeed, Russia maintains ample leverage when dealing with European countries alone, not only for security reasons but, for the most part, for economic ones. Russia represents a lucrative and extensive markets for European export of goods and capitals, and, at the same time, it also represents an irreplaceable energy supplier. France and, especially, Germany had grown increasingly close to Russia in the past decades and their propensity to compromise had represented a key asset in maintaining the desired status quo in Ukraine. In this respect President Biden also added that “Finally, I would support a much stronger diplomatic role for the United States, alongside France and Germany, in the negotiations with Russia. For diplomacy to work, however, we need stronger leverage over Moscow, and that means working more closely with our European partners and allies to ensure that Russia pays a heavier price for its ongoing war in Ukraine”⁶³. For these reasons, it is credible that the Russian government opted to take preventative measures to maintain the status quo along Russia's borders before a more direct involvement of the U.S. could

⁶² Council on Foreign Relations. (2019, July 30). The Presidential Candidates on Russian Aggression Against Ukraine. Retrieved from <https://www.cfr.org/article/presidential-candidates-russian-aggression-against-ukraine>

⁶³ Council on Foreign Relations. (2019, July 30). The Presidential Candidates on Russian Aggression Against Ukraine. Retrieved from <https://www.cfr.org/article/presidential-candidates-russian-aggression-against-ukraine>

irreparably alter the situation. Russia also had a simpler escalatory initiative, meaning that, due to its position, it would have been much easier for it to take the initiative and change the status quo than for the Americans. Indeed, through its limited direct military involvement in Donbas, Russia made it already plain that it would not let Ukraine fully restore its sovereignty unless a more comprehensive agreement could be reached. The second plausible reason behind Russia's military buildup and escalation was the traditional goal of preventing Ukraine from joining NATO. Since joining, on June 12, 2020, the NATO Enhanced Opportunities Partnership program, Ukrainian authorities have shown increasing interest in further integrating within NATO. Russia's opposition to this eventuality is well-known, and we have discussed about it extensively elsewhere. To signal its sensitivity on the matter, therefore, Moscow decided to act quickly and forcefully. As Vladimir Putin made repeatedly clear, Moscow would do all in its power to prevent the countries of the former Soviet Union from serving as a staging ground for anti-Russian operations by foreign forces, namely the United States and NATO⁶⁴. In any case, Russia's April provocation appear to have at least answered to one of Moscow's primary concerns. Even after the June 2021 NATO summit in Brussels, where members publicly reaffirmed the 2008 Bucharest summit decision that Ukraine may one day become a member of the alliance⁶⁵, U.S. official statements made it apparent that Washington was not in favor of Ukraine joining NATO in the foreseeable future⁶⁶. This proves, at least partially, U.S. reluctance to take actions that would dramatically change the status quo and breach Russia's red lines. Ironically, while Ukraine's convergence towards NATO is limited by its member states' will, it is Russia the major responsible for Ukraine's growing desire to join the alliance. As already highlighted with the Moldovan and Georgian cases, in which Moscow attempts at keeping strong influence on the respective governments have increasingly been met with hostility, it appears that the more Moscow threatens Ukraine with directly or indirectly increasing its support for the Luhansk and Donetsk PRs,

⁶⁴ Bielineskov, M. (2021). *The Russian and Ukrainian Spring 2021 War Scare*. Center for Strategic and International Studies. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russian-and-ukrainian-spring-2021-war-scare>

⁶⁵ NATO Press Office. (2021, June 14). *Brussels Summit Communiqué*. Retrieved from https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_185000.htm

⁶⁶ Gregorian, D. (2021, June 14). *Biden says it 'remains to be seen' whether Ukraine will be admitted to NATO*. NBC News. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/biden-says-it-remains-be-seen-if-ukraine-will-be-n1270807>

the greater Ukraine's desire to join NATO. The war scare the April 2021 has brought on the Ukrainian government had certainly contributed to increase the sense of urgency and concrete possibility of a direct confrontation with Russia. Ukraine recognized how rapidly the security climate might worsen without the specific security assurances that NATO alone can guarantee. It is remarkable, on this regard, that Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky profoundly changed his stance on NATO membership. During the 2019 presidential campaign, his public statements on the matter were marked by a degree of uncertainty, but by the time tensions started to rise, his declaration were much firmer⁶⁷. As shown, this isn't the first time Russian achievement of short-term goals contributes to making the long-term ones more difficult to reach. In the Ukrainian case, the same happened in 2014. During presidential elections following the Revolution of Dignity, candidate Petro Poroshenko was not a staunch proponent of NATO membership, convinced that such a policy could not help bringing peace to Donbas but, on the contrary, contribute to harden Russia's position. However, his alternatives quickly proved ineffective, and the direct employment of Russian troops in Donbas and the difficulties in reaching an effective agreement left Ukraine with little choice but to actively seek NATO membership. After April 2021, the lessening of tensions, however, did not last long. Beginning between October and November 2021, Russia stepped up, once again, its anti-NATO and anti-Ukraine rhetoric. These were employed in a parallel and sometimes connected manner: on one hand, Russia brought accusations against the Ukrainian government trying to delegitimize it in the eyes of an international as well as domestic audience; on the other, it strongly pressed the issue of security guarantees against NATO. These increasingly public and frequent consideration were mirrored, once again, by the buildup of troops and equipment on an unprecedented scale. The actual situation on the ground didn't appear to have changed in any appreciable way in the previous six months, therefore, Russia's reasons for this new escalation are hard to detect. It can be argued that the previous war scare had indeed convinced the Ukrainian leadership to intensively seek new

⁶⁷ Sabbagh, D. (2021, April 6). *Ukraine urges Nato to hasten membership as Russian troops gather*. Retrieved from The Guardian: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/apr/06/ukraine-presents-nato-for-membership-as-russia-amasses-troops-at-border>

security guarantees from the West and that the sense of urgency in Russia's foreign and security policy started had risen dramatically. It can also be argued that, in fact, the April buildup was not an independent action but, rather, the first part of a more comprehensive aggressive strategy. Indeed, it is known that Russian troops withdrawal at the end of April was at best partial and did not include heavy equipment, left in position due to alleged future military drills⁶⁸. However, it isn't easy to assess whether Russia had a primary motivation or if there were more simultaneously competing and playing a role in informing its behavior. Moreover, it is equally possible that Russia did not have a fixed original goal but may have adapted to the evolving situation. Still, by mid-November 2021 Ukrainian and US intelligence already assessed that Russia had amassed more than 100,000 troops near the Ukrainian border, which already made this the largest concentration of active military personnel since the start of the crisis⁶⁹. Russia's responses to Western concerns about this development referred to an alarmist US-led propaganda, denying any intention of an invasion of the country. Critically, by the end of January 2022, large groups of Russian personnel and equipment were transferred near the Belarus-Ukraine border. This development greatly alarmed both the Ukraine's government and its Western partners, given the proximity of the country's capital Kiev to the Belarusian border. To repeated accusations of preparing to stage an invasion from a third country, Russian officials simply referred to the previously declared joint military exercises between the two countries to be held the following month. By the end of January, together with the unprecedented ground build up, Russia also announced a major naval exercise in the Black Sea. Many vessels detached from the different Russian fleets distributed in different parts of its territory were, indeed, called to join the Black Sea fleet in Sevastopol⁷⁰. By the beginning of February 2022, US intelligence and the Biden administration were apparently firmly convinced of the inevitability of a Russian

⁶⁸ Cooper, H., & Barnes, J. E. (2021, May 5). *80,000 Russian Troops Remain at Ukraine Border as U.S. and NATO Hold Exercises*. Retrieved from The New York Times: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/05/us/politics/biden-putin-russia-ukraine.html>

⁶⁹ Harris, S., & Sonne, P. (2021, December 3). *Russia planning massive military offensive against Ukraine involving 175,000 troops, U.S. intelligence warns*. Retrieved from The Washington Post: https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/russia-ukraine-invasion/2021/12/03/98a3760e-546b-11ec-8769-2f4ecdf7a2ad_story.html

⁷⁰ News Wires. (2022, 01 19). *US fears arrival of Russian troops could lead to nuclear weapons in Belarus*. Retrieved from France 24: <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20220118-us-fears-arrival-of-russian-troops-could-lead-to-nuclear-weapons-in-belarus>

invasion⁷¹. For this reason, they started an intensive information campaign preparing the international community to the now certain direction the situation had irreversibly taken. This strategy was highly effective in putting the Ukrainian situation under the spotlight removing Putin's advantage of surprise. US intelligence reports even arrived to precisely indicate the 16th of February as the most plausible starting date for a Russian invasion⁷². Following these statements, the US and other international partners gradually started the evacuation of their diplomatic personnel from the capital Kiev, as well as urging all their citizens to leave the country as soon as possible. Between the 14th and the 16th of February Russia claimed to have completed the announced military exercise and started the process of transferring its troops back to their barracks. However, such withdrawal never materialized. During a February 24 speech President Putin declared the launch of a special military operation intended not to occupy any of Ukraine's territory but rather to protect the oppressed Russian minorities as well as to promote the right to self-determination of the Ukrainian people themselves. The official goals of the operation were the demilitarization and denazification of the country⁷³. Following Putin's speech, Russian ground, naval, and air forces began a full-scale invasion of Ukraine from the Crimean border to the Belarusian one⁷⁴. The war can generally be divided in two main stages. These reflected the shifting goals Russia prioritized at different moments of the invasion. The first stage was characterized by an attempt to quickly seize control of the main centers of power of the country including, from South to North, the cities of Kherson, Mariupol', Kharkiv, Sumy, and, especially, the capital Kyiv⁷⁵. The primary objective in this phase was to force the swift capitulation of the Ukrainian government. To do that, extensive effort was placed into encircling and capturing

⁷¹ Herszenhorn, D. M. (2022, February 11). *US warns war could be 'imminent' in Ukraine*. Retrieved from Politico: <https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-russia-european-union-diplomats-leave/>

⁷² Euronews. (2022, 02 12). *Ukraine crisis: Biden warns Putin of 'swift and severe costs' in case of invasion*. Retrieved from Euronews: <https://www.euronews.com/2022/02/12/ukraine-crisis-biden-and-putin-to-talk-after-latest-us-warnings-of-russian-invasion>

⁷³ Bloomberg News. (2022, February 24). *Transcript: Vladimir Putin's Televised Address on Ukraine*. Retrieved from Bloomberg: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-02-24/full-transcript-vladimir-putin-s-televised-address-to-russia-on-ukraine-feb-24#xj4y7vzkg>

⁷⁴ Clark, M., Barros, G., & Stepanenko, K. (2022). *Russia-Ukraine Warning Update: Initial Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment*. Institute for the Study of War. February 24, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/ukraine-conflict-updates>

⁷⁵ Watling, J. & Reynolds, N. (2022, April 22). *Operation Z: The Death Throes of an Imperial Delusion*. Royal United Services Institute. <https://static.rusi.org/special-report-202204-operation-z-web.pdf>

the capital together with the president and his cabinet. While Russia's advance proved to be highly effective in reaching the outskirts of the city quickly, the disorganization, mismanagement of logistics and supply lines, as well as a stiff and largely unexpected Ukrainian army resistance, proved fatal to the achievement of the final success. In particular, the ability of Ukrainians forces to keep control of major urban centers on the road to Kyiv as well as elsewhere in the country hindered Russian attempts at amassing enough forces to capture it⁷⁶. Russia, conversely, encountered more luck and success in its southern offensive⁷⁷. The overall front can be divided into four major axes of advance: a Northern axis from Belarus towards Kiev; a Northeastern axis towards Sumi and then Kiev; an Eastern axis towards Kharkiv and in support of DPR and LPR; and a Southern axis from Crimea towards Kherson and Mariupol, with the objective of creating a land corridor around the Azov Sea. From Crimea, Russia's forces, aided by a favorable terrain characterized by plains and the absence of dense forests, like in the northern part of the country, were able in a matter of days to reach and capture the key regional cities of Melitopol and Kherson to the North and to encircle Mariupol to the East, gaining full control of the region⁷⁸. This success allowed Russia to threaten the highly symbolic city of Odesa as well. However, elsewhere, the operations did not proceed as smoothly. The Donbas front itself remained practically unmoved while the Eastern and Northeastern offensives failed to reach their evident goal of capturing the cities of Kharkiv and Sumy. From a tactical point of view, it is anyway unclear if the bypass of major cities in the North was done by design or represented a flaw in the operations. Indeed, assuming Kyiv as the key objective of the campaign, two main considerations can be put forward. First, the Russian leadership was convinced it could pursue a wide range of objectives at the same time with a high probability of success. This would imply the general failure of the campaign since just one out of four main offensives actually reached its goal. This failure may be explained either by faulty intelligence, bad preparation, underestimation of the enemy or a combination of the three. As said, assuming Kyiv as the number one goal, such a dispersion of forces

⁷⁶ Kagan, F., Barros, G., Stepanenko, K., (2022, March 4). *Ukraine Conflict Update 15*. Institute for the Study of War.

⁷⁷ Kagan, F., Barros, G., Stepanenko, K., (2022, March 3). *Ukraine Conflict Update 14*. Institute for the Study of War.

⁷⁸ Kagan, F., Barros, G., Stepanenko, K., (2022, March 3). *Ukraine Conflict Update 14*. Institute for the Study of War.

has proved disastrous to Russians aims. Second, Russia's planning hoped for a distraction of Ukrainians forces by advancing on all fronts while concentrating, with highly mobile units, on the capture of the capital. In this perspective the bypass of major cities center on the way to Kiev, such as Kharkiv, Sumy and Chernihiv, can be tactically explained by the decision to swiftly enter the capital in the initial days of the war. This second explanation is reinforced by a series of highly risky operations such as the airborne landing at the Hostmel airport just outside the city limits⁷⁹. Failing to capture the city as swiftly as expected, due to higher-than-expected Ukrainian resistance, put Russian forces in a very precarious military situation. Striding for a quick assault of the city or even its earlier surrender, meant that logistics and supply lines had not been considered a priority⁸⁰. The retained ability of very mobile Ukrainian forces to disrupt Russian supply lines as well as their control of all the major cities center and supply hubs forced the Russians in a complicated situation. The failure of the campaign, employing this perspective, again probably depended on faulty assumption of Ukrainians low morale and readiness to fight while the Southern successes can be explained more as a welcomed result rather than an actual primary objective. In any case, overall, the first phase of the Russian invasion, according to our assumptions of Russia's objectives, can be considered a complete or at least a partial failure⁸¹. Gradually, Russian troops in the North of the country, failing to adapt to the situation and to secure their zones of occupation, were forced on a defensive position⁸². In the last stages of the first phase of the war, it is possible to note a first attempt at adaptation by Russia's military to keep the capture of Kiev as main tactical goal of the campaign. Russian efforts were refocused on the securing of supply lines in order to be able to amass enough troops for an encirclement and final assault on the capital. This reassessment of the situation happened in the

⁷⁹ Marson, J. (2022, March 3). *Putin Thought Ukraine Would Fall Quickly. An Airport Battle Proved Him Wrong*. Retrieved from The Wall Street Journal: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/putin-thought-ukraine-would-fall-quickly-an-airport-battle-proved-him-wrong-11646343121>

⁸⁰ Vershinin, A. (2022, March 10). *Russia's logistical problems may slow down Russia's advance - but they are unlikely to stop it*. Retrieved from Modern War Institute at West Point: <https://mwi.usma.edu/russias-logistical-problems-may-slow-down-russias-advance-but-they-are-unlikely-to-stop-it/>

⁸¹ Kagan, F., Barros, G., Stepanenko, K., (2022, March 19). *Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 19*. Institute for the Study of War.

⁸² Clark, M. & Barros, G. (2022, February 28). *Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 28*. Institute for the Study of War. <https://www.understandingwar.org/background/ukraine-conflict-updates>

second half of March⁸³. Eventually, Russia's inability to make any appreciable gain allowed, for the first time, Ukrainians forces to launch a series of counter offensives. The progressive repulse of Russian forces from the area forced a major shift in Russia's leadership strategic and tactical goals for the war. Eventually, with Russians forces slowly retiring, the country's officials declared the successful ending of the first phase of the war by the end of the March⁸⁴. Realistically, Russia realized that its original goal of provoking a sudden regime change was ultimately thwarted. The grand strategic objective of promoting a general realignment of Ukraine by installing a pro-Russian president and executive had to be profoundly downsized in scope and ambition. The second phase, still ongoing today, has as declared objective the liberation of the Russian people in Donbas⁸⁵. Russia claimed the success in the first phase by negating to have ever considered the overthrow of Zelensky's presidency as a policy objective instead pointing out to the allegedly successful demilitarization achieved by claiming to have rendered the Ukrainian army incapable of further aggression and to have destroyed Ukraine's military industry. More realistically, Russia has abandoned the idea of restoring a pro-Russian or at least a neutral Ukraine, resorting to more practical goals of territorial conquest. At the moment of writing Russians forces have full control of the land corridor from Kerson to Mariupol and are slowly advancing on the Donbass frontline. Russia's aims, following the concept of Novorossiia⁸⁶, may include the now territories and, potentially, the Odesa and Dnipropetrovsk oblasts.

⁸³ Kagan, F. & Barros, G. (2022, March 26). *Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 26*. Institute for the Study of War.

⁸⁴ Adams, P. (2022, March 26). *Russia targets east Ukraine, says first phase over*. Retrieved from BBC News: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-608723588>

⁸⁵ TASS News Agency. (2022, March 25). *Operation in Ukraine proceeds as planned, first stage goals complete*. Retrieved from TASS News Agency: https://tass.com/politics/1427617?utm_source=en.wikipedia.org&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=en.wikipedia.org&utm_referrer

⁸⁶ Suslov, M. (2017). The Production of 'Novorossiia': A Territorial Brand in Public Debates. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 69(2), pp. 202-221. doi: 10.1080/09668136.2017.1285009

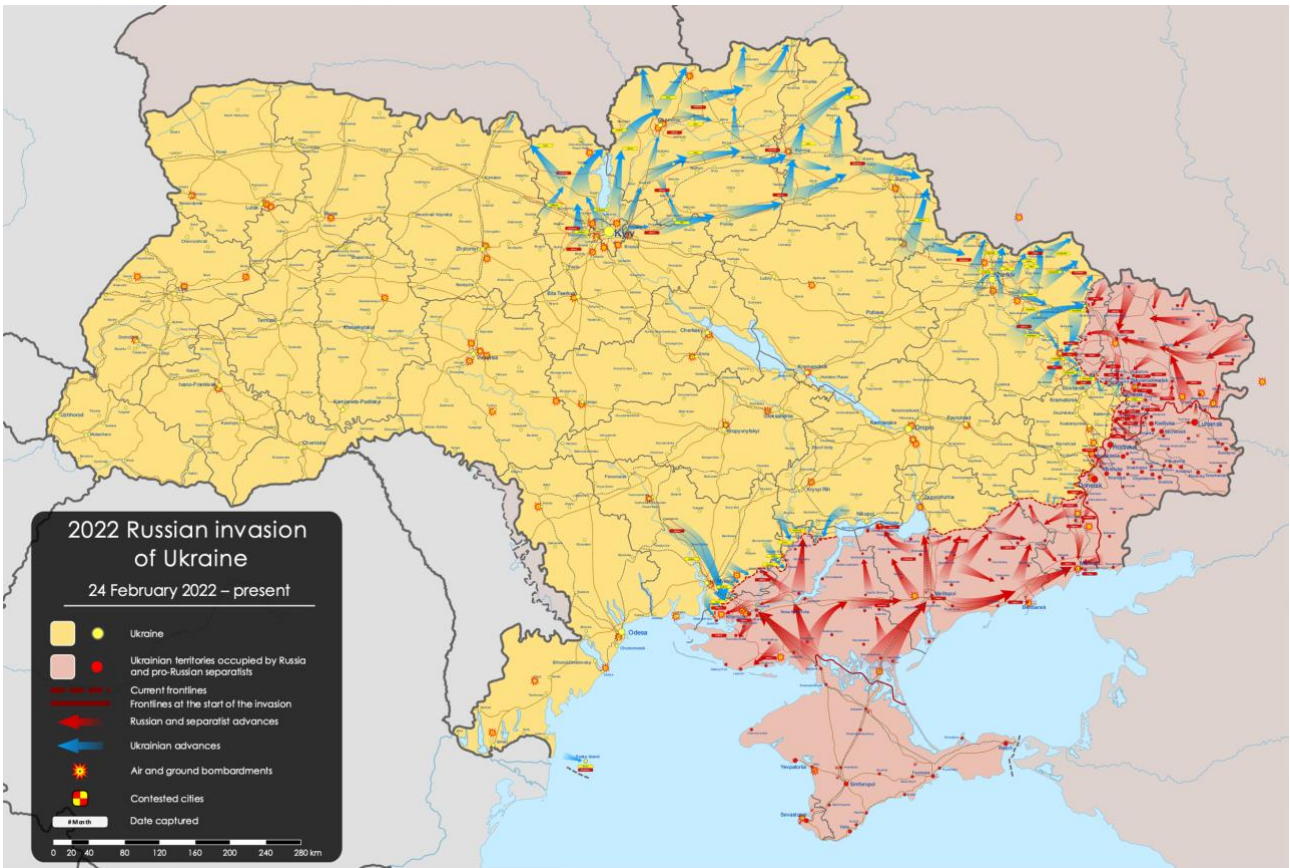


Figure 6. Russian Invasion of Ukraine as of September the 20th⁸⁷

⁸⁷ Viewsridgev. (2022). 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine – military offensive starting on 24 February 2022, part of the Russo-Ukrainian War. Creative Commons. Retrieved September 20, 2022. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/4f/2022_Russian_invasion_of_Ukraine.svg

4.3 Russia's goals and strategy

Putin decided to frame the war as a special military operation aimed at supporting the legitimate right of all the Ukrainian people to self-determination⁸⁸. To better understand the motives behind Russia's actions, it is crucial to recall and analyze the different pretexts and official causes the Russians put forward to justify their invasion. As mentioned above, Russian information campaign was mainly focused in two directions: security concerns against NATO and a delegitimizing campaign against Ukraine. First, cornerstone of Russian foreign policy at least for two decades, avoiding neighboring countries entrance in NATO remains one of its main priorities today. As already explained in paragraph 3.1, Ukraine is considered by Russia its most important neighbor for security as well as economic reasons. Progressive NATO enlargements have made so that Georgia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Finland remained the last buffer countries between proper Russian and NATO territories. Among them, Ukraine represented the one with the most changing environment. Indeed, while Finland has traditionally maintained a neutral stance, its EU membership made it a seemingly hostile country. In any case, Finland's attitudes towards neutrality didn't seem to have shifted for a long time. Belarus, vice versa, remains Russia's closest ally as well as a member of the CSTO military alliance. We have already discussed about the Georgian case and how the Russians consider it a policy success. Differently from Ukraine's scenario, the status quo in Georgia did not seem to be unstable and did not represent, consequently, a matter of immediate concern for Russia. Ukraine, therefore, given the volatility of its situation, proved to be the only country on which political gains could actually be achieved. Although President Biden had already repeatedly declared reservations about the possibility of a Ukrainian entry into the alliance⁸⁹, President Putin stated that the simple possibility of the

⁸⁸ Bloomberg News. (2022, February 24). *Transcript: Vladimir Putin's Televised Address on Ukraine*. Bloomberg. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-02-24/full-transcript-vladimir-putin-s-televised-address-to-russia-on-ukraine-feb-24#xj4y7vzkg>

⁸⁹ Gregorian, D. (2021, June 14). *Biden says it 'remains to be seen' whether Ukraine will be admitted to NATO*. NBC News. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/biden-says-it-remains-be-seen-if-ukraine-will-be-n1270807>

country's future accession was more than enough to raise vital security concerns for his country⁹⁰. Between December 2021 and January 2022, a series of meetings between Russian and US and NATO officials took place with the aim of reaching a comprehensive security agreement that could contribute to a long-lasting stabilization of the European security structure. Some points among Russians security demands, however, raised difficult moral questions for NATO partners. President Putin demanded to receive guarantees that Ukraine and other former Soviet republics would never join NATO. This specific point however directly opposes the well-known open-door NATO policy and thus is inadmissible and unacceptable because it would infringe the principle for which any country can independently choose to apply to join the alliance. It isn't for anyone but the requesting state and NATO members to decide on such a matter. On December the 17th the Russian foreign ministry put forward a proposal concerning the guarantees Russia believed as needed for its security. Specifically, Russia asked that NATO legally excluded the possibility that both Ukraine and Georgia join the alliance. In addition, it also demanded the termination of any military activity on the territory of Ukraine and the guarantee the Alliance would not establish military bases in former Soviet Union territories⁹¹. This proposal appears so clearly exaggerated and objectionable that one of two possible explanations can be proposed to justify it: either Russia's offer was deceptive in that it expected a negative response, or the Russians had put their initial demands so high to start negotiating from a position of force. In the first case, Russia's leadership may have considered that showing willingness to compromise and to reach a diplomatic settlement was crucial to convince the domestic as well as international public opinions of its good faith and of the legitimacy of its concerns, while, at the same time, presenting the United States has a hegemonic power with no intention to cooperate. Most probably, however, Russia's leadership was aware of the impossibility that such a proposal could be met positively and believed that repeated refusals to accept an agreement by NATO member states

⁹⁰ Trevelyan, M. (2021, December 10). *Russia urges NATO to break promise to Ukraine as part of security package*. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-demands-rescinding-nato-promise-ukraine-georgia-2021-12-10/>

⁹¹ Roth, A. (2021, December 17). *Russia issues list of demands it says must be met to lower tensions in Europe*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/17/russia-issues-list-demands-tensions-europe-ukraine-nato>

could be used to partially justify the ongoing escalation. A second reason for such demands is that Russia aimed to show seriousness and goodwill by progressively lowering its demand towards an agreement they would still consider very advantageous. In any case, as mentioned, any kind of proposal that would breach the open-door policy was to be considered unacceptable by principle. On January the 10th and again January the 12th representatives, first from Russia and the U.S. and then from NATO as a whole, met to discuss a possible agreement. In these two summits, Russia repeatedly advanced its demands, while NATO reconfirmed the impossibility to repudiate the open-door policy under any circumstances, offering, instead, alternative guarantees in terms of reduced presence on its eastern frontier⁹². Further negotiation stalled due to both parties' unwillingness to concede more than they already had. Given the rigidity of Russia's demands we can realistically argue that the first of the proposed two possible explanations appears correct: Russian proposals for an agreement were mainly directed at showing goodwill to compromise than actual willingness to do that. Starting in mid-January Russia's anti-NATO rhetoric violently increased. Denouncing the alliance as a tool of the United States to control its members and to encircle and isolate Russia, any further attempt at a diplomatic solution for the Ukrainian crisis effectively ceased. The second direction of Russian strategy to positively frame its upcoming invasion of Ukraine rested on the attempt to gradually delegitimize the Ukrainian government in the eyes of the international as well as domestic public opinion. This strategy aimed at reducing Ukrainians' citizens moral and support for their government and, at the same time, incite Russians support for theirs. To do that, the country's official used a wide array of arguments centered on historical, cultural, and social domains. This operation may be defined as an information or better disinformation campaign. Firstly, Russia tried to depict Ukrainians officials as warmongeries and borderline criminals because of their alleged active role in fomenting Russophobia and the repression of Russian minority in the country⁹³. Such claims intensified in the

⁹² Herszenhorn, D. M. (2022, January 12). NATO, *Russia in a standoff after talks in Brussels*. Politico. <https://www.politico.eu/article/nato-russia-in-a-standoff-after-talks-in-brussels/>

⁹³ AFP. (2021, December 10). *Putin Says Conflict in Eastern Ukraine 'Looks Like Genocide'*. The Moscow Times. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/12/10/putin-says-conflict-in-eastern-ukraine-looks-like-genocide-a75780>

weeks preceding the invasion to the point of openly declare the Ukrainian government as the instigator of a fully-fledged genocide⁹⁴ ⁹⁵. To further reinforce the narrative of a criminal and therefore illegitimate Ukrainian government, Russia repeatedly claimed it was effectively dominated by neo-Nazi groups and ideology⁹⁶. The use of such arguments served to support a vision of Russian intervention as a form of liberation from oppressors rather than invaders. Indeed, already in October 2021, former President and close Putin ally, Dimitri Medvedev had declared the impossibility to deal successfully with a Ukrainian government that refused to act in the interest of its own population⁹⁷. Russia's claims of an alleged Nazi influence or presence in Ukraine's government were certainly (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2014) based on a very well alimented portrayal that saw the War in Donbass fought between a brutally oppressed Russian minority and government-backed Nazi militias. This narrative revolved around the infamous Azov battalion: an originally volunteer militia admittedly composed in its core by individuals with strong neo-Nazi sympathy⁹⁸. Secondly, Russia also stressed the natural cultural and ethnical proximity of the two countries people. This effort was pursued through a systematic misrepresentation of history, at times openly false and at times carefully manipulated. This ulterior narrative strand aimed in two different directions: on one hand, appealing to ordinary Ukrainians to drop any support for their illegitimate government and embrace the Russian one as liberator; on the other hand, negating Ukraine's statehood depicting it as an artificial construct born out of the Soviet Union. The arguments used in the disinformation campaign launched by Russia has been widely and repeatedly confuted⁹⁹ ¹⁰⁰ ¹⁰¹. As far as the genocide

⁹⁴ Fisher, M. (2022, February 19). *Putin's Baseless Claims of Genocide Hint at More Than War*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/19/world/europe/putin-ukraine-genocide.html>

⁹⁵ TASS Russian News, (2022, February 18). *State Duma speaker says Kiev's genocidal crimes swept under the rug by US, EU*. TASS Russian News Agency. <https://tass.com/world/1405755>

⁹⁶ Beauchamp, Z. (2022, February 24). *Putin's "Nazi" rhetoric reveals his terrifying war aims in Ukraine*. Vox. <https://www.vox.com/2022/2/24/22948944/putin-ukraine-nazi-russia-speech-declare-war>

⁹⁷ Vedyashkin, S. (2021, October 11). *The Moscow Times*. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/10/11/russia-shouldnt-negotiate-with-vassal-ukraine-ex-president-medvedev-says-a75263>

⁹⁸ Schipani, A. & Olearchyk, R. (2022, March 29). *'Don't confuse patriotism and Nazism': Ukraine's Azov forces face scrutiny*. Financial Times. <https://www.ft.com/content/7191ec30-9677-423d-873c-e72b64725c2d>

⁹⁹ Stanley, J. (2022, February 26). *The antisemitism animating Putin's claim to 'denazify' Ukraine*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/25/vladimir-putin-ukraine-attack-antisemitism-denazify>

¹⁰⁰ Arnold, K. (2020, July 1). *'There is no Ukraine': Fact-Checking the Kremlin's Version of Ukrainian History*. LSE International History. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lseih/2020/07/01/there-is-no-ukraine-fact-checking-the-kremlins-version-of-ukrainian-history/>

¹⁰¹ Perrigo, B. (2022, February 22). *How Putin's Denial of Ukraine's Statehood Rewrites History*. Time. <https://time.com/6150046/ukraine-statehood-russia-history-putin/>

accusation are concerned, no evidence has been brought forward by Russians authorities to back those claims. Conversely, numerous international organizations have produced reports indicating that no indication of genocide nor ethnic cleansing could be found. These include the United Nation Human Rights Office, the OCSE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine and the Council of Europe^{102 103 104}. As regards accusations of a Nazi dominated government, the claims appear so absurd that an actual confutation is tricky to provide. In any case, the fact that President Zelensky is Jewish himself is directly at odds with such allegation. Moreover, excluding the mentioned Azov battalion, there is no organization of such sympathies with actual and appreciable popular support. For reference, the only openly far-right party in the country failed to reach the minimum electoral threshold of 5% in the 2019 parliamentary elections and, therefore, doesn't even have any representation in the country's political system¹⁰⁵. As far as the denial of nationhood is concerned, the complexities around the legal as well as moral and philosophical definition of such a concept makes it almost pointless to debate the argument. While the cultural and historical affinity of the Russian's and Ukrainian's peoples are undeniable, that is hardly any motivation not to recognize the legitimacy of them living in different nation states. As highlighted in the previous sections, a country's actions and operations must always be assessed on the basis of that country's strategic and tactical goals, which, to simplify, may be respectively linked to long- and short-term goals. We have discussed about the apparent shift in Russia's strategic and tactical goals since the beginning of the invasion. Such transformation has certainly been forced on Russia's leadership by the unfavorable development of the ground operation as well as the largely unexpected international resolve in support in Ukraine. Indeed, the information war running parallel to the ground one has largely been, contrary to expectations, conducted

¹⁰² OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine. *Daily and spot reports from the Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine*. OSCE. <https://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/reports>

¹⁰³ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2014). *Report on the human rights situation in Ukraine 15 June 2014*. Retrieved from <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Countries/UA/HRMMUReport15June2014.pdf>

¹⁰⁴ Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. (2014, April 2). *Ad hoc Report on the situation of national minorities in Ukraine adopted on 1 April 2014*. Retrieved from Council of Europe: <https://rm.coe.int/16800c5d6f>

¹⁰⁵ Abbruzzese, J. (2022, February 24). *Putin says he is fighting a resurgence of Nazism. That's not true*. Retrieved from NBC News: <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/live-blog/russia-ukraine-conflict-live-updates->

successfully by the Ukrainian government¹⁰⁶. The efforts to frame the invasion as a liberation attempted by Russian officials did not maintain its desired effects once the war has started. While it is difficult to anticipate any ulterior major shift in Russia's thinking for the foreseeable future, drastic military fortunes or misfortunes appear momentarily as the only possible variable impacting such decisions.

4.3.1 The concept of Novorossiia

The term Novorossiia dates to 1764, when Catherine the Great established a new administrative entity of the Russian empire on the territory of current Ukraine wandering between Odessa to the West and Donetsk to the East, along the coast of the Black Sea, extending northward for approximately 300 km. In 1943, the Soviet army anticipated almost the same operation carried out today by the Russian forces in that exact area, focusing on the lands along the river Dnieper. Although ultimately successful in defeating the Nazis, the 1943 operation had been among the bloodiest pages of World War II and extremely relevant for today's Russian homeland historiography of the Great Patriotic War (as the Russians refer to that conflict), with hundreds of thousand victims in both armies. Apart from the historical significance of the area, the region of Catherine's Novorossiia represents today a very attractive goal to Russia's aggression. When Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, Ukraine lost approximately 20% of that State's Gross Domestic Product, as well as 25% of its export. Even leaving out Odessa, the area represents the most important production and trade venues for Ukraine, represented by the port and steel mill of Mariupol. In addition, the region hosts approximately one quarter of Ukraine's mining and quarrying activities. Finally, the area is rich of natural gas, iron, uranium, titanium, and other rare metals. In that context, the narration of Novorossiia, which had disappeared quickly after the dissolution of the homonym governorate, found a new life in the Russian attempt of supporting the legitimation of the 2014 forced annexation of

¹⁰⁶ Butler, M. (2022, May 12). *Ukraine's information war is winning hearts and minds in the West*. Retrieved from The Conversation: <https://theconversation.com/ukraines-information-war-is-winning-hearts-and-minds-in-the-west-181892>

Crimea first, and the 2022 broader aggression to Ukraine that followed. The contemporary concept of Novorossiia defines an attempt of promoting a vision shared by the pro-Russian militants living in south-east Ukraine which has been observed as a mix of emotions linked to historical and cultural memories associated to the geographical conditions of the region. Being a modern narration, the concept has been synthesized similarly to a product a brand, with the substantial support of the local digital community and means such as Facebook, Twitter, and other¹⁰⁷. Revamped by President Putin during an interview on 17 April 2014, about a month after the semi-covert invasion and annexation of Crimea, he might have been suggested the restoration of the historical label for the interested territory would provide a final boost for the de facto annexation of the separatist republics of Donetsk and Luhansk without further violent actions. In May 2014, the leaderships of the two self-proclaimed republics declared the establishment of the Confederation of Novorossiia. The renewed notion of Novorossiia had a short life: on May 20, 2022, the leaders of the Lugansk and Donetsk republics declared the abandonment of the Novorossiia plan. DPR Foreign Minister Alexander Kofman justified the decision observing that the idea had not been endorsed by enough support outside the separatist republics. Other leaders provided different versions of the story. Oleg Tsaryov, the speaker of Novorossiia's "Unitary Parliament" and a frequent guest on Russian television, stated: "The work of Novorossiia structures has been frozen because it does not conform to the peace agreement signed in the presence of the Normandy Four countries." However, it is unlikely that the separatist leaders would have abandoned the project shouldn't the Kremlin had not pressured them. A key for understanding that unexpected halt can be found in the talks occurred a few days earlier, when Secretary of State John Kerry met with President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Sochi for a top-level meeting where, according to the ultra-right Russian ideologue Alexander

¹⁰⁷ Suslov, M. (2017), The production of 'Novorossya': a territorial brand in public debates, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 62:2, 202-221

Dugin suggested in his weekly column for the “Novorossiya Information Agency” that a covert “Crimea for Novorossiya” deal had been negotiated¹⁰⁸.

4.4 NATO’s goals and strategy

Addressing the relevant question of NATO’s goals and strategies as regards the war in Ukraine is quite complex. Firstly, it should be considered that NATO is an organization composed of 30 members with very distinct goals, identities, and attitudes. Generally, when confronted with security questions regarding Russia, the unity of the alliance is not guaranteed. A comparison in attitudes between Western European countries, such as France, Germany and Italy, and Eastern European ones, such as Poland and the Baltic states, is a clear example of this divergence in view. Due mainly to economic concerns linked to the importance of Russia as both a large export market and a key energy supplier, together with not so well perceived security threats, make Western European countries more prone to compromise. Other NATO member states instead, specifically the United States and former Warsaw Pact countries with the exception of Hungary, maintain a very different stance toward Russia. On one hand, the U.S., while clearly in the process of shifting its attention towards China, still considers Russia if not a systemic adversary at least a regional threat¹⁰⁹. On the other hand, Eastern European countries, especially Poland and the Baltics, keep a deep mistrust in Russian intentions and represent, despite their limited capacity, the most vocal supporters of Ukraine. Prior to the Russian invasion, NATO’s attention was not so focused in Ukraine. Although NATO and US instructors were active in the country, there is no evidence of any major assistance plan that could provoke a change of the status quo. First the military buildups and then the full-scale invasion have gradually

¹⁰⁸ Kolesnikov, A. (2015, 05 29). *Why the Kremlin Is Shutting Down the Novorossiya Project*. Retrieved from Carnegie Moscow: <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/60249>

¹⁰⁹ Petersson, M. (2017). *The Global Approach and the Regional Approach*. In D. Coletta, & R. Moore, *NATO’s return to Europe*. Washington DC: Georgetown University Press.

transformed NATO's plans for Ukraine. The months leading to the invasion served to reaffirm and signal worldwide the tangible worth of NATO membership for the security of countries. Still, according to NATO's own assessments, Ukrainian's possibilities of resistance were extremely low. The unexpected failure of Russia's campaign galvanized NATO member states to progressively step up their military and economic aid to the country providing a vital lifeline for the correct functioning of the state and the effectiveness of its armed forces. From an economic point of view, led by the United States and the European Union, large part of the western world has imposed harsh sanctions on the Russian economy. In order to reduce the Russian state's ability to fund its war it was decided to freeze the bank of Russia's currency reserve held in western countries¹¹⁰. This unprecedented move proved extremely detrimental to the Bank of Russia's ability to perform its tasks. In fear of extreme backlash on financial markets a general suspension of asset trading was declared on the Moscow's stock exchange. Furthermore, to defend its plummeting currency the Central Bank was also forced to more than doubled the national interest rate up to 20%. Together with an extensive number of public sanctions that include travel bans for Russian officials and business persons, asset freeze for people believed to be closely linked with the Russian government, the removal of specific banks from the SWIFT payment system and the attempt to progressively abandon Russia as an energy supplier, the public opinion condemnation of the invasion has also indirectly forced private businesses to withdraw or close their investments and businesses in Russia¹¹¹. As mentioned, it is not an easy task to assess Western strategic goals in Ukraine. On a tactical level the goal is realistically and plausibly that of allowing Ukrainian national forces to resist and, if possible, repel the invaders. The tactical level of analysis, however, cannot be considered independent from the strategic one. Indeed, in a constant scenario, from different strategic goals will follow different tactical ones. In Ukraine's case it is possible to argue that two extreme strategic objectives may be pursued and that different NATO

¹¹⁰ General Secretariat of the Council. (2022, June 3). *EU restrictive measures against Russia over Ukraine (since 2014)*. Retrieved from Council of the EU and the European Council: <http://europa.eu/lcB99XU>

¹¹¹ Bown, C. P. (2022, June 3). *Russia's war on Ukraine: A sanctions timeline*. Retrieved from Peterson Institute for International Economics: <https://www.piie.com/blogs/realtime-economic-issues-watch/russias-war-ukraine-sanctions-timeline>

members may see their interest lying somewhere in between the two. On one hand, especially after the debacle of the first stage of the Russian invasion and galvanized by the ability of the Ukrainian army to launch successful counteroffensives, a maximalist position may have seen in the ousting of President Putin an ambitious yet possible goal. On the other, to secure economic advantages or better to avoid the economic backlash caused by the war, in the form of the exorbitant increase in energy and agricultural prices as well as the massive inflow of refugees, an opposite position may ask for the cessation of any aid to the Ukrainian government to force it to compromise and concede something to Russia and bring the Eastern European situation back to normality. Clearly, both positions are extreme in the sense that it is highly improbable that any government endorses in their entirety either of the two as a concrete primary objective. However, it is certainly possible to recognize that governments may find themselves closer to one of the two or that, at least, they are lobbied by different domestic power groups in one or both of those directions. It is easily imaginable that there are components of the US administration and intelligence that try to actively pursue the first option while other components push in the opposite direction. At the time of writing the on-ground situation appears to be moving slowly, and while the overall economic environment has not yet stabilized and many problems still threaten international economic growth, it doesn't seem that these alone are enough to provoke an appreciable shift in NATO's approach to the war. Russia's military failures, the deterioration of their economy, as well as its growing isolation, appear all for now as desirable and affordable continuous objectives of NATO's policy. Unless a major escalation is envisaged the opportunity for initiative and to change the ongoing situation rests on the Russian side.

5 Going forward: current geopolitical changes and the need for a new approach

The first major conflict to happen on the European continent since the Second World War is revolutionizing the balance of power of the Eurasian region and the perceived security interests of many countries. In the previous chapter we have analyzed the Ukrainian war, its causes, and unfolding development. The principal takeaways to be taken revolve, for our purposes, on those actual or apparent reasons that influence states behavior, especially when these eventually resort to an aggressive one. Along with obvious reactions by explicitly or implicitly hostile countries, moreover, the war in Ukraine has also provoked some unexpected and radical consequences certainly not foreseen by either side. Consequently, the European security system, virtually unchanged since the last wave of NATO enlargements in 2004, is now undergoing a new process of reorganization. In this chapter, some of these transformations will be analyzed and addressed. Given the ongoing nature of this phenomenon, highlighting a credible trend is certainly very complex. However, it is still possible to perceive the general direction towards which the system is going. The recognition of this shift is fundamental to inform our conclusion about the way forward, that is, how we imagine the new security order in Europe will look like. In the conclusive paragraph of this chapter, it will be suggested that a new approach towards Russia should be adopted by the West. Recognizing not only Russia's security concerns but, pragmatically, those sensible topics it considers worth fighting a war for, is key, balanced with other moral and legal principles, to avoid that such tragedies may be repeated in the future.

5.1 Consequences of the war on third countries' foreign and defense policies

As should by now be evident given the extensive focus we have put on the matter, Russia's traditional foreign policy concerning security matters revolves around avoiding third countries joining what it considers to be explicitly anti-Russians organizations: NATO and the EU. Therefore, all its diplomatic and military efforts are informed by this belief and strive to pursue that goal. This has certainly been the case for the brief case studies we have analyzed in Chapter 2, especially as far as Georgia and Moldova are concerned. However, we have also identified a number of flaws in Russia's strategy in that it was often successful to achieve its short term aims but rather unsuccessful on the overall outlook and on medium- to long-term goals. This, we assessed, was due to the limited characteristics of Russian foreign policy and its inability to generate spontaneous popular consent not linked to nationalistic or ethnic matters. The absence of any kind of positive incentive when dealing with foreign partners, if not the ability to preserve a specific elite in power, has made Russian foreign policy apparently focused on keeping a specific society to reach its goals instead of trying to influence those goals themselves. Ironically therefore, a war waged under the justification that NATO was actively threatening Russia by promoting its encirclement and isolation is proving to be the main reason why third countries, that for different reasons had been traditionally neutral or far from joining Western political and security organizations, are now actively pursuing that goal. Four main examples can be used to show this unexpected trend, the cases of Finland, Sweden, Moldova and Georgia. Finland has maintained from World War II onwards a consolidated neutral stance as far as security and military affairs are concerned. By joining the EU in 1995, the country signaled its affinity to the Western political community. Still, at the time, the apparent possibility of a full democratic transition for the Russian federation did not entail that this move could actually be interpreted in an intimidating way. Indeed, since then, Finland government and people have always rejected the idea of joining NATO, believing that, having no territorial quarrels with Russia, nor a consistent Russian minority in its population, practical causes for confrontations were remote enough to prefer neutrality to the

military shield NATO could offer. Moreover, being part of the EU, although sometimes disregarded as a key factor, still provides ample security guarantees thanks Article 42(7) of the Treaty on European Union introducing the mutual defense clause. The issue of Finland's neutrality is so well internalized by international community that often the term Finlandization is used to refer to a situation of political integration towards the EU excluding any military integration with NATO. As Finland's considerations about its own security rested on the presumption that the Russian neighbors, while threatening, would never employ such aggressive and risky policies as to actually endanger the relations between the two countries, the Russian invasion of Ukraine however has had a profound impact. President Putin brinkmanship is growingly considered as a high risk for the security of the country. Despite Russian warnings that it would consider a Finland's attempt in join NATO as a direct threat to its own security, eventually, on the 18th of May 2022 in a joint statement President Niinistö and Prime Minister Marin announced the country official application to NATO membership¹¹². Crucially, several independent polls had shown that an ever-growing percentage of the country's people supported the accession. For reference, the percentage of people answering positively to the question of whether Finland should join NATO has risen from 20% by the end of 2019 to 76% at the beginning of May 2022; conversely, those who oppose such accession have diminished in the same period from 64% to 12%. This incredible transformation is entirely instigated by Russia's actions in Ukraine. A very similar development has, indeed, affected the situation in Sweden. Sweden's neutrality has historical and traditional roots dating at least since the early 19th century, when the country decided to adopt a balanced position between the different European continental powers. Just like Finland, Sweden's approach to the West has started at least in 1995 when the country officially joined the European Union. The considerations made for Finland concerning the military security guaranteed by the EU, starting from 2009, apply in the Swedish case too. Polls conducted on the matter show that Russia is clearly perceived as the country's main security threat at least since the 2014 annexation of Crimea. The percentage of people declaring their opposition

¹¹² (Henley, 2022)

to NATO membership has steadily declined mostly in favor of the undecided. Still, immediately before the war broke out a poll found that 41% of the interviewed was in favor of the NATO membership and 35% opposed. Just a couple of weeks later, for the first time, another poll has shown that the majority of the country's population now supported NATO membership. On the 18th of May 2022, in a joint accession bid, Sweden and Finland formally applied to the alliance. The two countries decision to reverse decades if not centuries of neutrality are certainly an unprecedented blow to Russia's interest. Ironically, however, it was exactly Russia's aggressiveness and attempts to enforce its will militarily to cause this unexpected shift in policy crucially accompanied by a genuine shift in public opinions considerations about the matter. Still, it could be argued that the two countries were already stably considered within the western camp and that their NATO accession does not drastically change Russia's security considerations. While this line of reasoning certainly raises a good point, if considerations about a potential war are to be addressed one cannot so easily dismiss the 1,340 km that run between Finland and Russia making it potentially the longest NATO-Russian Federation border. Two additional cases can be highlighted to show how much Russia's strategy actually backfired. We have at length discussed about the importance Russia places on its ability to maintain influence and pressure on the governments of Moldova and Georgia. In both cases Russia retains an important leverage in economic and political terms. Both countries heavily depend on Russia from an economic point of view especially because of Russia's role as key energy supplier. While the overall importance of these links is diminishing due to the rise of other international actors, namely the European Union, Russia still retains ample influence on the countries' governments. This is additionally reinforced by security concerns. The Russian backed separatist regions of Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia guarantee a constant military presence at the heart of those countries, fostering instability and disunity. Still, the political situation in both countries did not appear, prior to the invasion, to be in any way shifting, while the status quo at the time actually represented a satisfactory position for Russia. The now clearly visible threat of a full military invasion contributed decisively to the shift in the security consideration of the two. In the Moldovan case, a first shift in

the political outlook of the country happened as a consequence of the 2020 presidential election when the pro-European candidate Maya Sandu was elected as a new President of Republic replacing the pro-Russian incumbent. Less than a year later, in July 2021, parliamentary elections also guaranteed to a pro-Europeans parties the majority of available seats. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, already on March the 3rd Moldova's President Sandu signed the formal application for the EU membership. Similarly, Georgia had considered a possible accession to the European Union at least since 2014. However, the territorial issues concerning the status of the two separatist regions within its territory clearly represented an unsurmountable obstacle for such a membership. In January 2021, the new Prime Minister Garibashvili had announced the intention of his country to apply for EU membership around 2024¹¹³. The outbreak of the Ukrainian war has produced mounting fears in the country's leadership of renewed possibilities of a Russian invasion as already happened less than 15 years before. For this reason, Prime Minister Garibashvili eventually signed the official letter of application on March the 3rd, the same day as Moldova. Contrary to the situation with Finland and Sweden, which were already considered firmly part of the Western world, Moldova and Georgia seemed at least more uncertain on their actual possibility on European integration. It can be argued that the invasion of Ukraine has not only contributed to shift the mindset of the two country's leaders as well as their sense of urgency about the matter, but also provided an actual window of opportunity. Indeed, with Russian forces and attention entirely focused on Ukraine, its threats may have been perceived as less real and imminent than the before. The same can be argued for the cases of Sweden and Finland: together with provoking a major public opinion shift in favor of NATO membership, the war also decisively drew Russia's attention away from the matter. It is still too early to be able to properly assess whether any of these processes will actually progress in the direction hoped for by the applicants. However, a couple of considerations can be put forward. The two sets of situations, the Finland-Sweden one and the Moldova-Georgia one, while moving in the same direction, are

¹¹³ Gehrke, L. (2022, March 3). *Georgia, Moldova follow Ukraine in applying to join EU*. Retrieved from Politico: <https://www.politico.eu/article/georgia-and-moldova-apply-for-eu-membership/>

profoundly different. On the one hand there are two advanced and westernized states, already part of the European Union; on the other, two relatively poor states with enormous security issues. As regards the first, although apparently there's seems to be no major obstacle to the countries' membership in NATO, due to the high level of military preparedness of the respective armed forces as well as the general political outlook, Turkish President Erdogan raised a series of concerns about such memberships. While the true reasons behind this opposition are not easy to assess, at least three may be put forward. The reason quoted by President Erdogan himself refers to the fact that the Nordic countries traditionally employ a particularly favorable policy of welcoming refugees Turkey considers as terrorists, namely Kurdish militants of the PKK. However, while it is true that there is a consistent presence of Kurdish refugees in the countries, being both members of the European Union also means that they recognize, as the whole Union, the PKK as a terrorist organization and do not allow it to freely operate within their borders. A second contentious point regards the two countries arms embargo imposed after Turkish incursions in Syria against the Syrian Kurdish WPG militia, a group that Turkey considers affiliated to the PKK. Finally, a third option may be that President Erdogan, with the approaching 2023 presidential election, seeks to present the domestic public opinion some foreign diplomacy victories to boost his chances at the ballot. In conclusion, it is arguable that a mix of the previous three motivations informs President Erdogan's decisions, and that, in any case, he considers the accession of the Nordic countries as an opportunity to make some demands for the interest of his country. In successive developments, Turkey has agreed to lift its veto on the two countries' accession bid¹¹⁴. This has come after weeks of talks regarding two of the key aspects analyzed above: the Nordic countries' good relations with the PKK, and their embargo on armament export. In June, the three countries have finally signed a memorandum defining their willingness to overcome these issues and work together to strengthen NATO and international security. As far as Moldova and Georgia are concerned, it is at the moment absolutely improbable

¹¹⁴ Bayer, L., & Gallardo, C. (2022, June 28). *Turkey lifts block on Finnish and Swedish NATO bids*. Retrieved from Politico: <https://www.politico.eu/article/finland-sweden-nato-membership-turkey-lifts-block/>

that the two countries may be accorded EU membership in the foreseeable future. This holds true for a number of reasons: first, their economic convergence towards others EU members countries still appears very weak and slow; second, the accession process is anyway lengthy and complex and does not have a detailed nor prefixed timeframe; finally, most importantly, the already mentioned territorial question in both countries makes their accession bid extremely difficult to accept. The precedence of Cyprus' membership in 2004 should be considered the exception rather than the rule, especially considering the then highly desirable Turkey's accession. While we cannot readily judge whether the Russian invasion of Ukraine can be considered a foreign policy boomerang as of now, the abovementioned cases clearly show the unintended negative consequences of such an endeavor. It is not yet clear whether and when these processes will eventually come to an end, however, it still clearly shows the general reaction of governments and public opinions to Russia's growing aggressiveness and brinkmanship. Two additional cases can be briefly mentioned to highlight the relevance of the unexpected consequences of the invasion. Germany, since World War II and certainly since its reunification, has always strongly prioritized its economic interests and political stability over military and security concerns. The Federal Republic defense budget, indeed, has always been relatively small compared to the country's economic size and, for reference, smaller in absolute terms than the French one. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, together with the recent election as new German chancellor on December 2021 of the social democratic Olaf Scholtz, has induced the new government to announce an unprecedented raise in the defense budget up to a total of 100 billion euros, effectively more than doubling its current budget, and surpassing by far the NATO required 2% expenditure goal to be reached by 2024¹¹⁵¹¹⁶. This historic shift in Germany's foreign and security policy should not be understated. In the past decade, the European Union has launched numerous programs aimed at best integrating his Member States' armed forces and especially investment

¹¹⁵ Sheahan, M., & Marsh, S. (2022, February 27). *Germany to increase defence spending in response to 'Putin's war' - Scholz*. Retrieved from Reuters: <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/germany-hike-defense-spending-scholz-says-further-policy-shift-2022-02-27/>

¹¹⁶ Turak, N. (2022, February 27). *Germany announces major defense policy shift in face of Russia's Ukraine invasion*. Retrieved from CNBC: <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/02/27/scholz-germany-pledges-defense-spending-increase-in-shift-in-strategy.html>

programs. However, despite being the largest and most resilient economy in the Union, Germany's role on security affairs has never been a leading one, with such a position often taken by France that, on the contrary, enjoys a long tradition of prioritizing military issues. Moreover, during Angela Merkel's sixteen years long chancellorship, Germany had grown economically and diplomatically increasingly close to Russia and was in the process of becoming a major Russian gas hub in Europe. One of the first forms of economic retaliation against Russia launched by Germany, pressured from its European and Atlantic partners, has been, indeed, that of suspending all authorizations for the inauguration of the North Stream Two pipeline. This, just completed in September 2021, represents the culmination of Germany's strategy in the energy domain: bypassing any land-based pipeline coming from Russia through Ukraine or Belarus and therefore susceptible to disruption. The North Stream Two underwater pipeline, doubling the capacity of the already functioning North Stream One, would have provided Germany with direct access to Russian gas and made it a transit country to distribute the gas in excess to other European partners. Germany's example shows just how many unexpected negative consequences the Russian invasion has had on Russia's own interest. The rearmament frenzy happening all over Europe certainly runs opposite to Russia's interest just as the newly found unity among NATO members states. Following this trend, the EU position within NATO also appears to be gaining further space. Final telling example of Western shock for Russia's action comes from Switzerland. Neutral country par excellence, Switzerland has not only repeatedly condemned Russia's invasion but has also mirrored all EU economic sanctions against the country. This move is absolutely unprecedented and shows the enormous pressure Western governments felt in the wake of Russia's war.

5.2 The way forward: the need for a new approach

We have extensively discussed in the previous sections about the importance of strategy and long-term goals when trying to assess the effectiveness of a country's foreign and security policy. We have also stressed the importance of recognizing the legitimacy of different countries' own vision of what their interests are and that, in order to strive to ensure international peace and security, it is crucial to internalize such visions into our own to avoid misunderstandings and undesirable crises. The tools to achieve these goals are not easy to employ and often carry the risk of being misinterpreted or mistaken for something else. To achieve the ultimate goal of ensure stability and peace within a region, some factors must be prioritized: predictability, trust-building, and compromise. Predictability is key to avoid the risk of misunderstanding one's action and can be, for this purpose, linked to the concept of transparency: if all parties involved in a confrontation are aware of each other goals, interests, and line of reasoning, then it is easier to avoid those behaviors known to negatively affect the relationship. Trust-building refers to those processes that allow for the creation of reinforcing positive mechanisms of cooperation. These can be represented by international organizations and fora, being them of a global or regional dimensions, as well as economic, political, or concerning security in scope. Allowing for the formation of such conditions is similar as a concept to a prisoner's dilemma: choosing cooperation is often problematic as an option because of the impossibility to preventively know if the other party intends to cooperate as well; however, if both sides choose so, cooperation always generates higher benefits than noncooperation. To avoid the trap of the prisoner's dilemma, trust-building is key. Both parties involved in negotiations must be able to believe that the other will respect its end of the bargain. An effective way to reach this position is to advance cooperation in different fields and progressively involve the most contentious ones. Compromise, of course, is the most challenging point we have mentioned. It means to be ready to at least partially sacrifice one's own interest to reach a still desirable conclusion without risking to provoke undesired consequences. The question naturally arises of what the limits of compromise are and up to which point should a

country be expected to sacrifice its legitimate interests. The answer to this rests on the assumption that compromise shouldn't be considered a goal per se but rather a tool to reach a higher objective. As any tool, it can be employed in different manners and degrees of intensity according to the perceived achieving and sacrificing interests. The main caveat of this reasoning rests on the consideration that these tools can truly work only if all parties involved genuinely desire to employ them with goodwill and sincerity. If we look at representative historical precedents, the relaxation of tensions, known as *détente*, between the Soviet Union and the United States that occurred in the 1970s is a primary example. Following the Kennedy's and Johnson's administration that had seen an alarming rise in tensions between the two countries, President Nixon and Secretary of State Kissinger inaugurated, with the cooperation of General Secretary Brezhnev, a period of dialogue and arms control that greatly contributed to remove the general sense of imminency of a superpowers clash. To support such a policy, however, goodwill may not be enough. Opportunities to find common ground and common problems as well as connected interests are key, although often arbitrary, conditions. A shocking crisis, and the realization of the unexpected and undesired consequence it could bring, can be considered as such an opportunity. The Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 is often described as the event that reaffirmed the urgency of finding some way of lessening the tensions between the two superpowers¹¹⁷. Likewise, the current conflict in Ukraine may serve to convince Russia and NATO countries' leaderships of the need to reorganize the relationship between the sides. We have defined our vision of the future relationship between the West and Russia as needing a new approach. This appears imperative to avoid the repetition of tragedies such as the War in Ukraine. Recognizing Russia's interests and security concerns is only the first step in the direction of being able to design a well-functioning new security structure for the Eurasian region. Acknowledging one's interests or concerns, moreover, does not automatically mean legitimizing or justifying them. However, understanding them is certainly key. Additionally, once a country's interests and concerns are

¹¹⁷ Stone, W. (1988 September 18). *Moscow's Still Holding*. New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/09/18/magazine/moscow-s-still-holding.html?pagewanted=all&pagewanted=print>

recognized and understood, it doesn't follow that their achievement ought to be actively pursued by others but, rather, that now it is possible to negotiate on a levelled field understanding each other's goals and trying to find a meeting point acceptable for both parties. As mentioned repeatedly in the previous pages, this reasoning follows a rather pragmatic and realist view of international relations. However, the importance of principles and ideals should not be put out of the equation, in that they implicitly enter into leaders' and peoples' considerations about what their goals, strategies, and interests are. Until such an approach doesn't meet the favor of Western as well as Russian leaders, relations between the two are bound to follow the pattern extensively analyzed in these pages: feeling threatened by the other side, for fear of their true, unknown, intentions or because of a self-reinforced sense of insecurity, countries' resort to aggressive foreign policy that represents, in itself, an undesirable outcome for all parties.

6 Conclusions

In the introduction to this dissertation, we had called for a reassessment and reconsideration on how to deal with a growingly aggressive Russian Federation, in the following chapters and paragraphs we have also highlighted the path and main events that have led our world to the tragic conclusion of the war in Ukraine. With the explicit ambition of avoiding any moral or ethical consideration that could cloud a judgement that should always be unbiased, we have found that from our point of view Russia's reasons and motivations behind the invasion do not hold when compared to the reality of things. However, as has been the trend for all our considerations, let's once again recall that an assessment can never be totally objective. It always depends on the principles and goals of the subject as well as other pragmatic consideration regarding the practical situation. While it can be argued in light of our analysis that Russia has been the main instigator of the latest military escalation and that

it has since retained the initiative, this does not excuse Western inability to try and contain the crisis. If we put international peace and security as main objectives driving country's international behavior, then today's ongoing conflict clearly represents an abysmal failure for all parties. In recalling the last decades of NATO-Russia relations, we have tried to show that an enthusiastic period of at least apparent convergence certainly existed, and that the following diverging paths were all but bound to happen. Moreover, despite not sharing, at least consciously, the same principles and ideals in foreign policy and international affairs, it is at least reasonable for a Western observer to recognize Russia's growing security concerns of the past decade. From this kind of considerations has followed our proposal to employ a different approach when dealing with the Russian Federation. Again, assuming peace and security as main goals and assuming a general good faith, the only practical way to avoid the repetition of such tragic conflicts in the future, appears that of abandoning the current and past confrontational style to embrace a more compromising attitude. As repeatedly stressed compromise doesn't automatically entails sacrificing one's interests to allow someone else to pursue theirs, but rather balancing interests, principles, always with a pragmatic perspective, for the achievement of higher purposes. As the last paragraph also highlights, the main advantage of such a compromising attitude is not the specific agreement per se, but rather the possibility of inaugurating a virtuous circle of collaboration that makes in turn any further agreement slightly easier to reach. Understanding that this conclusion is far from a practical guide on how to achieve a normalization of the current tense relationship, we hope it may at least provoke some reflections on the urgency to change our behavior to ensure a progressive lessening of tensions.

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Zabyelina, Y. (2017). Lustration Beyond Decommunization: Responding to the Crimes of the Powerful in Post-Euromaidan Ukraine. *State Crime Journal*, 6(1), 55-78.

Executive Summary

The Russian invasion of Ukraine launched on February 24th, 2022, has radically changed the international scenario and the foreign and defense policies of many countries. If we consider the ultimate goal of international relations that of keeping peace and security globally, then we need to ask ourselves why countries resort to aggressive measures to solve their disputes. The question we ask ourselves is not philosophical, this thesis does not mean to answer the impossible question of why humans would ever consider the tragedy of war worth making. What we are interested in are the practical reasons that lead a country to prefer confrontation to cooperation. The war in Ukraine, although tragic, is hardly considerable surprising. It is worth remembering that the country has been torn by a quasi-civil war for almost a decade before the escalation of the past year. Therefore, it is important to assess how did we get to this point, why all diplomatic efforts failed, and finally what could have been done to avoid the tragedy of war. The aim of this thesis is twofold: on one hand, we want to suggest that a new approach should be implemented when dealing with the Russian Federation and other like-minded countries; on the other hand, we want to provide some tools, in the form of examples, that may be instrumental to reach the first goal. Understanding why countries act as they do and what reasons inform their judgments is key to taking an objective and unbiased point of view. It is important to clarify that understanding does not equal justifying: we can condemn a course of action as morally (and rationally) wrong and still try our hardest to understand it. Understanding gives the possibility to anticipate and foresee reactions that will follow a particular course of action so that, in the future, we may be able to avoid such tragic events. Understanding why Russia has decided to use military aggression to solve what they perceived as a Ukrainian issue is the first step we need to take to avoid this from happening again. To do all that, the paths taken by both sides will be examined to highlight how, likely, those paths led to the current predicament and highlight an impending clash of interests. Recognizing that while some attempts at cooperation were

made, they were not on the level or with the intensity required to fully enable the Russian Federation to, on the one hand, make peace with its past and, on the other, integrate its economy and society in the western liberal world, will be a key focus. The often-made assertion that western security and political organizations (NATO and the EU) have encircled Russia and have grown excessively will find new significance from this viewpoint. As a result, some of Russia's most aggressive foreign policy moves during those years can be better understood as being a part of a continuous struggle for self-confidence as well as international recognition during years that were deeply troubling and traumatic, often underappreciated in western societies. While these acts certainly demonstrate a great deal of discontent and open up discussion about the challenges of democracy, another line of inquiry will concentrate more on NATO and the EU's failure to recognize this trend and, as a result, their failure to adapt. To understand this process, chapter two provides a summary of how NATO and Russia's ties changed after the fall of the USSR. We attempt to emphasize the key problems with the difficult process of democratic transition and why it was unable to be completed within Russia itself although it was, to varying degrees, successful in other former Warsaw Pact nations. We also examine the thrust of NATO and EU policies following the emergence of a new, unipolar world, as well as the reasons for and mechanisms by which they contributed to Russia's resentment. The inability or unwillingness of western societies to fully commit to the integration of Russia into their new global order, which unintentionally reinforces nationalist and anti-western sentiment during a time of great political and cultural change and fragility, is also highlighted. The new Russian Federation's economic state was catastrophic as a result of bad past policies as well as the shocking measures required to rebuild the nation. During Yeltsin's tenure, the nation's GDP more than halved, and inflation spiked to extremely high levels. The country had essentially been the largest centrally planned economy in history for more than 70 years, which presented the administration with several challenges. The abrupt breakdown of the Soviet political and administrative structure had a terrible impact on the production and distribution networks, causing excruciating shortages of consumer goods. The government was frequently compelled to support ineffective and loss-making businesses

to safeguard employees due to the fundamental role that factories and businesses played from a societal perspective. The new Russian state had to contend not only with issues relating to weak and incomplete political, institutional, and economic reform but also with a multitude of new neighbors brought about by the collapse of the USSR. In addition, some administrative areas in the Russian federation itself wanted more autonomy. The phrase "near abroad" was eventually used to describe regions that were formerly a part of the Soviet Union or the historical Russian Empire but are now constituted by adjacent independent states. The Russian elite has traditionally believed that the country's foreign policy should emphasize maintaining close economic and political relations with these nations because of the long-standing cultural, political, and economic links that exist between Russia and these nations. This viewpoint was evident when the Soviet Union's breakup approached its final phases, not just in the newly established Russian Federation but also in many of the former soviet countries. Chapter 3 provides an analysis of the major crises of the past three decades, illustrating the collision path that both Russia and the West were on and explaining why and how they happened. Looking at these crises, it is possible to identify a tendency in Russian policy. A tendency that the international community has likely not fully recognized, which has resulted in misinterpretation and underestimation of Russia's claims. Over the past three decades, there have been periods of high and low collaboration and trust in the relationship between Russia and the West. While the overall period between the birth of the Russian Federation and the annexation of Crimea, which we consider to be the end of the illusion of collaboration, is generally viewed as being full of genuine and sincere attempts at cooperation and building dialogue as well as trust, there were undoubtedly many delusions, contrasts, and outright disputes as well. A series of crises has characterized this fluctuating relation: the so-called "color revolutions," the unsolved conflict between Moldova and Transnistria, the war and border clashes with Georgia, the covert cyberattacks against Estonia, and the rise in hostilities with Turkey when Turkey shot down a Russian military plane. These crises are the result of Russia's reaction to some of the perceived threats to its strategic security. Undoubtedly, some of these have left a legacy that has impacted the current state of the

Ukraine crisis and the overall antagonism to NATO. Since 2003, several anti-government demonstrations have had an impact on several of the former Soviet nations in Europe and Asia. These revolutions shared certain distinctive features across the board. They are typically viewed as the continuation of the anti-communist revolutions that began in the late 1980s and early 1990s, mostly in Eastern European nations. Although all of the color revolution-affected nations presented themselves as post-communist republics transitioning to liberal and democratic institutional structures, it should be highlighted that their political leadership remained the same and was still closely attached to the Russian establishment. The revolutions sparked because of the unfulfilled promises of political plurality and the transition to democracy. Coincidentally, this frequently involved replacing perceived corrupt and anti-democracy administrations with ones that would blatantly support them. As a result of this process, a pro-Western political elite was able to realign the Euro-Asian region's politics away quickly and broadly from Russia and toward the West. In the 4th chapter, we try to explain why Russia views Ukraine as being so crucial to its foreign and security policy that it has reached the point of considering an invasion of the country as the most convenient course of action. then, we review some of the major incidents and problems that have shaped bilateral ties between Russia and Ukraine over the years. Finally, we examine the recent military escalation in 2022 that ultimately resulted in the present crisis. Many of Russia's concerns stem from a real or imagined sensation of being surrounded by Western security as well as political organizations, which has led to a loss of influence in neighboring nations. It is essential to comprehend this point, without passing judgment on its validity and rationality, to fully comprehend and assess the Russian point of view when dealing with a rapidly deteriorating situation. Of all the Republics that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine probably reflects Russian interests the most. This is accurate for political, economic, and strategic reasons, among others. 2020 km of their shared border is near the Volga region, which is crucial to Russia's industrial and political development. Furthermore, Ukraine's significance in terms of security largely depends on its control of the Crimean Peninsula, which is strategically placed in the middle of the Black Sea. Importantly, from there, Russia can

immediately impose its military power not just on NATO allies like Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey but also on the whole Mediterranean basin. A natural buffer between the Russian Federation and the territory of NATO and the EU on the Eastern European plains is also provided by the nation, along with Belarus. From an economic standpoint, Ukraine was a sizable and significant export market for Russian products. More importantly, it is a vital transit nation between the Russian gas resources and the gas-importing markets of Central and Western Europe because of its extensive network of natural gas pipelines. The Russian government places great priority on maintaining an open and steady supply line toward Western Union because of the crucial role that energy exports play in the country's finances. This collection of factors has helped to instill a feeling of urgency and strategic priority when dealing with Ukraine at the level of the Russian leadership. The EU and Ukraine reached an association agreement in March 2012 after extensive talks. EU leaders presented a plan for Ukraine to fully pursue a democratic society based on the rule of law as a crucial requirement for the ratification of the agreement to allow for the progressive integration of Ukraine into the European system. As a result of Russia's intimidation, on November 21, 2013, the Yanukovich government asked for a temporary suspension of the signing process, citing economic worries sparked by the decline in trade with other eastern nations as justification. All those for whom the deal signified a tangible move towards a Western attitude and potential future EU membership spontaneously protested this choice. To protect European ideas and values—freedom, democracy, and human dignity—thousands of people, mostly students, began massing in Independence Square in Kyiv on the evening of November 21, 2013 (called Majdan Nezalenosti in Ukrainian). President Yanukovich left Kyiv on February 21, 2014, and went into exile in Russia. The so-called Revolution of Dignity, which took place in the last days of February 2014, marked the end of the Euromaidan demonstrations, which lasted a little over three months. The massive amount of unplanned civilian engagement and the demonstrators' tenacity in continuing the protests even after the Yanukovich government showed its willingness to use brutal police repression measures as a tactic ensured the protest's success. Although originally relatively chaotic, the high level of civil society engagement,

NGOs, and foreign backing has made it possible for the establishment of a durable movement, a requirement for the successful outcome of any type of revolution. Ukraine saw a substantial regime transition as a result of the Revolution for Dignity, and President Yanukovich rejected constitutional reforms from 2004 were reinstated. New elections were held in May 2014 at the protestors' request, and candidate Petro Poroshenko won. To completely distance Ukraine from Russia, he launched a new, overtly pro-European foreign policy. In this sense, several policies were put into place with the express purpose of fostering the de-russification of the nation. With President Zelensky taking over for President Poroshenko in 2019, Ukraine turned even farther in favor of pro-Atlanticist and pro-EU policies. The situation in Donbas deteriorated until it reached the war that exists today because neither party was able to come to any type of real and enduring accord. Vladimir Putin made it quite clear that Moscow would use whatever means at its disposal to stop the former Soviet Union nations from being used as a base for anti-Russian activities by NATO and the United States. Beginning in October or November 2021, Russia increased its critical rhetoric toward NATO and Ukraine. These were used concurrently and occasionally in connection with one another. On the one hand, Russia leveled accusations against the Ukrainian government to undermine its legitimacy in the eyes of both domestic and international audiences. On the other hand, it pressed NATO hard on the issue of security guarantees. These public statements were also accompanied by an enormous buildup of troops and weapons which ultimately led to the invasion of February 24th. Putin decided to portray the conflict as a unique military effort to uphold the legitimate right of the whole Ukrainian people to self-determination. It is essential to remember and evaluate the many pretexts and official causes the Russians advanced to legitimize their invasion to more fully comprehend the motivations underlying their actions. The major goals of the Russian media campaign were to delegitimize Ukraine and raise security worries about NATO. The Eurasian region's power structure and nations' perceptions of their security interests are undergoing radical change as a result of the first significant conflict to occur on the European continent since the Second World War. The key lessons to be learned revolve, for our purposes, on the real or apparent causes that affect state behavior, particularly

when such states finally turn to violent action. Furthermore, the conflict in Ukraine has sparked some unforeseen and extreme effects that were most definitely not anticipated by either side, in addition to the responses of unfriendly countries that are either openly or covertly hostile to the Russian Federation. As a result, a process of restructuring is currently taking place in the European security system, which has essentially not changed since the previous round of NATO enlargements in 2004. It is still possible to determine the system's broad orientation. To inform our judgment about the future, that is, how we see the new security order in Europe, it is essential to acknowledge this transformation. To prevent similar catastrophes from happening again, it is crucial to acknowledge not just Russia's security concerns but also, pragmatically, those reasonable issues it thinks to be worth going to war for. This must be balanced with other moral and legal considerations. The significance of strategy and long-term goals when attempting to evaluate the efficacy of a country's foreign and security policy has been covered in great detail in the preceding sections. We have also emphasized how vital it is to absorb other nations' views of their interests into our own to work toward maintaining international peace and security. This will help us prevent miscommunications and unfavorable crises. The methods to accomplish these objectives are rarely simple to use, and there is frequently a chance that they may be misunderstood or taken for something else. Predictability, trust-building, and compromise must be stressed to achieve the ultimate aim of maintaining stability and peace within an area. For this reason, predictability can be linked to the idea of transparency: if all parties involved in a confrontation are aware of each other's goals, interests, and lines of reasoning, it is easier to avoid those behaviors known to harm the relationship. Predictability is important to avoid the risk of one's action being misunderstood. Processes that enable the development of cooperative, constructive reinforcement mechanisms are referred to as trust-building. These can be represented by international organizations and fora, whether they have global or regional scopes, or are primarily concerned with security, economics, or politics. Creating such conditions is analogous to the prisoner's dilemma in that choosing cooperation is frequently difficult because it is impossible to know in advance whether the other party intends to cooperate as well. However, if both sides decide

to cooperate, cooperation always produces greater benefits than noncooperation. Building trust is crucial to avoiding the prisoner's dilemma trap. For talks to be successful, both sides must be able to trust that the other will uphold their half of the agreement. To get to this point, collaboration in many areas should be advanced, with the more problematic ones being gradually included. The most difficult topic we have discussed is compromising. It involves being willing to sacrifice some of your interests to arrive at a still-desirable result without running the danger of causing unintended effects. Naturally, the issue of what constitutes an acceptable compromise and the threshold beyond which a nation might be forced to forego its legal rights emerges. The solution to this question is based on the idea that reaching a compromise shouldn't be seen as a goal in and of itself, but rather as a means to an end. It may be used in a variety of ways and to varying degrees of intensity depending on the perceived accomplishing and surrendering interests. The primary drawback to this logic is that it assumes that everyone engaged will want to use these instruments in a sincere and good-willed manner. The easing of hostilities, known as *détente*, between the Soviet Union and the United States in the 1970s is the main example of representative historical antecedents. After the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, which saw a worrying rise in tensions between the two nations, President Nixon and Secretary of State Kissinger launched, with the help of General Secretary Brezhnev, a phase of dialogue and arms control that significantly helped to dispel the general sense of the imminence of a superpowers clash. Goodwill might not, however, be sufficient to support such a program. The most important, albeit sometimes arbitrary, criteria are those where there are chances to identify shared interests, challenges, and opportunities. Such a chance may arise as a result of a frightening crisis and the awareness of the unanticipated and undesirable outcome it might have. It is frequently said that the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis served as a reminder of the need to find a solution to the tensions between the two superpowers. The ongoing war in Ukraine may also persuade Russia and NATO officials that the two sides need to restructure their relationship. We have stated that a new strategy is required for the West and Russia's future relationship. This seems to be necessary to prevent disasters like the War in Ukraine from happening again. Understanding Russia's interests and

security concerns is just the beginning of being able to create a new security system for the Eurasian area that works effectively. Furthermore, acknowledging someone's interests or concerns does not entail immediately defending or legitimizing them. But it's important to comprehend them. Furthermore, once a country's interests and concerns are acknowledged and understood, it doesn't follow that others should actively work to advance those interests and concerns; rather, it makes it possible to negotiate on an even playing field while understanding one another's objectives and trying to find a compromise that is agreeable to both parties. As was frequently stated in the preceding paragraphs, this justification is based on a realistic and pragmatic understanding of international affairs. However, as they are implicitly taken into account by leaders and people when determining their objectives, plans of action, and areas of interest, the significance of principles and ideals should not be discounted. As long as such a strategy doesn't win over both Western and Russian leaders, relations between the two are doomed to follow the pattern in-depth examined in these pages: countries resort to aggressive foreign policy because they feel threatened by the other side, out of fear of their true, unknowable intentions, or out of a sense of self-reinforcing insecurity, which is, in and of itself, an undesirable outcome for all parties.