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'COLD WAR' GHOST HAUNTS EUROPE AGAIN

FANTASMA DA "GUERRA FRIA" ASSOMBRA DE NOVO A EUROPA

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Abstract

The illusions born with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the 'honeymoon' and the promises of a close cooperation between Russia and the west during the Yeltsin era gave way, two and a half decades later, to an atmosphere of growing hostility and confrontation.

Since the end of the Cold War, the relationship between Russia and the west progressed in fits and starts. The contention grew under Vladimir Putin's leadership, but the problems stemmed from the Yeltsin years, as well as NATO's eastward expansion and the Kosovo crisis. This paper intends to analyse this process to demonstrate that the present situation is the product of a clash of strategic objectives, of political miscalculations and deliberate choices made both in Moscow and in the NATO capitals.

Tensions between Russia and the west have reached unprecedented levels since, creating one of the most dangerous situations in and around Europe since the end of the Cold War. The flexing of military muscles between Russia and NATO and the growing tension in flashpoints like Ukraine, the Baltics or Syria raises concerns that an incident or miscalculation could spark a military clash of unpredictable proportions.

Keywords: Cold War, Nationalism, Russian Identity, Dierjavnost, Influence Areas, Military Threats.

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Resumo

As ilusões nascidas da queda do Muro de Berlim, e as promessas de uma acentuada aproximação entre a Rússia e o Ocidente na era Ieltsin cederam lugar, duas décadas e meia depois, a um clima crescente de hostilidade e confronto.

Desde o fim da guerra fria as relações entre a Rússia e o Ocidente registam altos e baixos Os contenciosos com o Ocidente vão agravar-se sob a liderança de Vladimir Putin mas os problemas vêm já desde o período Ieltsin com o alargamento da NATO ou a crise do Kosovo. Este ensaio propõe-se analisar esta evolução e demonstrar que a situação actual resulta de objectivos estratégicos irreconciliáveis, de erros de cálculo mas sobretudo de opções deliberadas feitas tanto em Moscovo como em Washington e nas capitais da NATO.

A tensão entre a Rússia e o Ocidente atingiu níveis sem precedentes e criou uma das situações mais perigosas na Europa desde o fim da Guerra fria. A exibição força entre a Rússia e a NATO e a crescente tensão em cenários críticos como a Ucrânia, a Síria ou o Báltico alimenta receios de que um incidente ou erro de cálculo possa provocar um choque militar de proporções incalculáveis.

***Palavras-chave*:** *Guerra fria, Nacionalismo, Identidade Russa, Dierjavnost, Áreas de Influência, Ameaça Militar.*

Russian and NATO vessels are engaged in mutual surveillance and hostile posturing in the Atlantic and in the Arctic. Washington accuses a Russian fighter of 'aggressively' intercepting an American reconnaissance aircraft over the Baltic. Russian fighters repeatedly fly over an American destroyer that was sailing near the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad.

Over the last months, tensions between Russia and the west reached unprecedented levels since the collapse of the former Soviet bloc. NATO and Russia are accumulating an impressive military apparatus on the fronts in Eastern Europe, in an escalation of threats and counter-threats. Russian planes simulated an attack on the Swedish capital. NATO performs manoeuvres simulating a Russian assault on Poland.

The illusions born with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the hopes of a rapprochement between Russia and the west in the early 1990s gave way to a climate of hostility and tension. The 'cold war' returns to the discourse of politicians and the imaginary of the media and the possibility of a military conflict in Ukraine, Syria or the Baltic is being reopened in the scenarios of analysts.

Over the last quarter century, relations between Russia and the West have had highs and lows, from the Yeltsin-era (1991-99) pledges of cooperation to the mounting tensions of the middle of the following decade, from the reset of the late 2000s to the escalating tensions of today.

The reasons for the erosion of relations between Russia and the west have sparked heated discussions among academics, analysts and political and military officials. Many tend to focus on Vladimir Putin's political personality and on the orientation that the Kremlin's number one man has given to Russia's foreign and security policy. Strictly speaking, the issue is more complex and

goes far beyond the current Kremlin leadership. The current situation is the result of the clash of competing strategic objectives and of miscalculations, but, above all, of deliberate political choices made in both Moscow and Washington and in the NATO capitals.

The roots of this progressive divorce between Moscow and the West date back to the second half of the 1980s, to Mikhail Gorbachev's negotiations with Ronald Reagan and Helmut Kohl, which aimed to dismantle the old structures of the Warsaw Pact and to reunify Germany[1]. In the ensuing decade, in the midst of the Yeltsin era, disputes multiplied over the Balkan conflict, NATO's expansion to the East, and the growing American influence in the former Soviet republics.

The 'honeymoon' phase of Russian-American relations in the perestroika era, and especially in the early years of the Ielstin era (1991-1999), had long since faded when Putin took office in early 2000. In his 'reconstruction of Russia' programme, the new leader of the Kremlin saw cooperation with the West in political, economic and security matters as a strategic gamble.

This paper aims to analyse this process, focusing essentially on three angles. First, the analysis of the critical situations that marked this evolution - from NATO expansion to the 'colour revolutions' of 2004-2006, from disagreements on anti-missile defence to the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, from the annexation of Crimea by Russia to the uncertainty of the crisis in Syria – taking into account both the positions of the west and the perspectives of the political elite and of Russian public opinion.

External calculations and Russian domestic motives closely interact in how Kremlin responds to these situations (Snetkov, 2015, p.3). We will thus seek to analyse the evolution of Vladimir Putin's regime, its conceptions of national security and of the regime, and the threats to that security.

The strategic and military documentation produced by the Kremlin over the last quarter century - military doctrines, national security concepts, and foreign policy concepts - provides a closer look at how Russia views the world and at the evolution of the Kremlin's strategic calculations.[2]

This essay will seek to assess the challenges that the tension in relations with Moscow poses to the future of the Euro-Atlantic space, as well as to anticipate risk scenarios that, in the most alarmist visions, can even be the threat of a direct military confrontation.

Yeltsin's legacy

Boris Yeltsin stepped down from office on New Year's Eve of 2000, after a long physical and political agony. He left his 'dauphin' and successor, Vladimir Putin, in charge of a heavy legacy.[3] A paralysed state, a social and political fabric undermined by corruption and nepotism, a shattered economy, the armed forces adrift.

[1] Gorbachev later complained that he had been betrayed when he rellied on the formal assurances from Washington that NATO would not expand to the countries which had hitherto been part of the Warsaw Pact.

[2] Foreign Policy Concepts for 2000, 2008 and 2013, National Security Strategy for 2000 and 2009 and military doctrines for 2000, 20010, 2014.

[3] Putin took over as leader of the Government in August 1999, became interim president following Yeltsin's abdication on 31 December 1999 and took office as President-elect on 7 May 2000.

The Kremlin's new leadership quickly assessed the situation. Regional jurisdictions and economic powers were outside the reach of federal institutions and laws. The Russian economy was on the verge of collapse. The secessionist challenge in the Caucasus threatened the very integrity of the Russian Federation.[4]

The 'shock therapy' of the early 1990s, the 'reforms' run by Yeltsin's ultra-liberal team with the support of western institutions - the IMF and the World Bank - plunged the Russian economy into chaos and hit the population hard. Inflation soared, wages were frozen, and unemployment was on the rise.

A forced privatisation programme sold the country's industry and key resources at a sale in the mid-1990s, enriching a powerful group of businessmen - the oligarchs. The effects of the global crash of August 1998 further aggravated the situation. Russia was defaulting on the IMF.

The first post-Soviet Union decade left the population with a feeling of huge disappointment and deep humiliation. The Russians refer to the experience of *diemokratsia* (democracy) as *diermokratsia* (*diermó* is the Russian slang for 'faeces').

At the same time, Russia underwent a profound existential crisis, in search of a new identity (Hosking, 2001). With the collapse of the USSR, the country could see it was losing many of the conquests that, from Ivan the Terrible to Alexander II, had expanded the Russian borders to Siberia, the Baltic and the Pacific.

NATO's expansion to the east was another factor compounding the constant setbacks that Russia had suffered in recent years and was a shock to Moscow. Russia's efforts to recreate regional integration in the space of the former USSR within the framework of the CEI were being delayed by the resistance of several republics.

In the early 1990s, cooperation with the west was an enthusiastic prospect and that there were expectations of rapid integration in western institutions. Boris Yeltsin systematically chose to align with NATO and with western stances in the Gulf in 1991 and in the Balkans. Russia even attempted to accommodate NATO's expansion to the east, joining the Partnership for Peace and the NATO-Russia Council in the near-hopeless expectation of ensuring that Russia's voice would be heard in the Alliance's major decisions. Disputes did not take long to accumulate.

The question of Russia's place in the world and the country's strategic options fuelled a passionate discussion in Moscow. Ievgueni Primakov, who took on the Foreign Affairs folder in March 1996, represented the 'Eurasian option' of Russian diplomacy. There was a notable rapprochement between Moscow and Beijing.

In the Russian capital, there was a growing sense that the so-called 'strategic partnership' with the west was one-sided - it meant complete submission to American points of view. The Russians felt that the west did not respond to Moscow's gestures and that the enormous concessions of the recent years - the German reunification, retreat from the east - had been in

[4] See, by Vladimir Putin, 'Russia at the turn of the millennium' issued on 29 December 1999, available at www.pravitelstvo.gov.ru.

vain.[5] At the turn of the decade, expectations about the west gave way to mistrust and a sense of wounded pride.

The old 'siege complex' harassed Muscovy again. Many saw America's 'hand' in Russia's embarrassment in the CEI. Washington decided to directly challenge Russia in areas that Moscow claimed as areas of 'direct interest', such as the Caucasus or Central Asia.

NATO's attack on Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro) in the spring of 1999 left deep marks on the way Russia sees the west. The bombing of Serbia was a 'humiliation' and a 'slap on the face' for Russia - wrote Aleksei Arbatov, one of the most respected Russian authors in the field of defence and foreign policy.[6]

Several disarmament treaties that had been signed or that were in the process of being signed were frozen or had their ratification suspended. The illusions of a true partnership between Russia and NATO on security matters were quickly buried.

'Today Yugoslavia, Russia tomorrow...' - is the common feeling among the Russians regarding NATO's bombing of Belgrade. Shocked by NATO's attack on Serbia, the Kremlin enlarged the defence budget and enacted a thorough review of the concepts of security and military doctrine.

The 'reconstruction of Russia'

The problem rests first and foremost within Russia. 'The reconstruction of a powerful Russia will not come from the outside because no one will do it for us' - concluded the new leader of the Kremlin. Russia has to 'find its own way to renewal' and rely on its own strengths to do it[7].

Vladimir Putin's programme simultaneously invested in market economy and on the reinforcement of the Kremlin's authority in order to give the state control over the country's social and economic life.[8] The shocking Beslan hostage-taking by a Chechen commando in September 2004 was a watershed event. A series of reforms limited regional political autonomy and imposed the authority of the Kremlin and federal budget and tax rules on regional governors.

A new party law (issued in 2001 and amended in 2004) and a new electoral law (2005) sought to rearrange the political framework. United Russia, a party created in 2001 to support Vladimir Putin, quickly asserted a virtual hegemony.[9]

Independent business and new media moguls - Vladimir Gusinski, the founder of Media Most, and the owner of the independent television network NTV, Boris Berezovski, among others – were on the Kremlin's sights. Mikhail Khodorkovski, the head of Yukos (the largest Russian oil company at the time) was arrested in 2003 for 'corruption' and 'misappropriation'.

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[5] Jacques Sapir: 'Russie, la responsabilité occidentale', *Le Monde*, 2 September 1999.

[6] Alexei G. Arbatov, 'The Kosovo Crisis: The End of the Post Cold War Era', Occasional Paper, the Atlantic Council of the United States, Washington, DC, March 2000.

[7] 'Russia at the turn of the millennium', *op. cit.*

[8] *Idem*.

[9] Clémentine Fauconnier, 'Après la vague de protestation de l 'hiver 2012: La scène politique russe a-t-elle changé? ', *Diplomatie*, 66, January-February 2014.

The results began to emerge.

Benefiting from an exceptionally favourable situation in the hydrocarbons market, Putin refilled the state coffers, restored growth to 6.5% a year in the following years, which substantially improved the standard of living, and settled Russia's external debt.

Putin has extensive support in various sectors of Russian society. United Russia dominated the 2003 legislative elections, winning 37.57 % of the vote (223 out of 450 seats in the state *duma*), while liberal parties such as Iabloko or the Communist Party suffered significant setbacks. The presidential elections of March 2004 saw Putin triumph across the board (71% of the vote) and rewarded the 'tough' image he projected of someone capable of putting the house in order and handle the fight against terrorism with a firm hand.

Putin's programme is based on an economic and political rapprochement to America and Europe - a policy that elicits some scepticism, considering the disenchantment with the west by the elites and by the Russian population. Regarding security, Putin calls for close cooperation, particularly in the fight against terrorism, identified by the Kremlin as one of the most serious threats to the security of the country (Smith 2005, Baranovski 2000).

After the events of 11 September 2001, Putin was one of the first to express solidarity with America. Moscow offered ready support for the campaign launched by the Bush Administration in Afghanistan and even practical assistance in installing the American apparatus in Central Asia.[10] However, this investment in the west was conditional to the prospect of the full recognition of Russia as a 'partner among equals' in the international concert (Snetkov, 2015, p.70).

The Khodorkovsky case was a turning point. The dismantling of Yukos and the mogul's trial were seen in Washington as an attack on western-style reforms in Russia and on an independent legal system. The western press pointed the finger at the intimidation of those who challenged the Kremlin line and at the measures against freedom of the press. American Vice President Dick Cheney talked of an 'authoritarian drift' in Russia.

Three months after NATO's occupation of Kosovo, Russia launched a large-scale offensive in Chechnya, ignoring criticism from the west, this time, unlike what had happened five years earlier, with strong support from the population.[11]

US plans for a missile defence system - the National Missile Defence (NMD) announced by the Bush Administration in September 2002 and the new NATO expansion plans - in 2004 the three Baltic republics would join the ranks of the Alliance - further aggravated disputes between Washington and Moscow.

The new versions of the 'military doctrine' and of the 'national security concept', adopted after NATO's attack on Serbia, revisited nuclear deterrence as a key element of the country's

[10] Moreover, this support is related to the Russian security concerns with the threat of militant Islamism in the North Caucasus, and in particular in Chechnya. Moscow has always viewed the dominance of the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan with concern, as well as the increase in drug trafficking into Russia.

[11] The Russian attack launched in September 1999 successfully retook Grozny and essentially regained control of Chechenya in April 2002, thus beginning the process of 'normalisation' of Chechnya.

security, allowing the use of nuclear weapons in the event of a serious threat to the country and recommending the regular use of Russian military forces in local conflicts even at the domestic level.[12]

The Foreign Policy Concept for 2000 points to changes in the international system and looks at 'strengthening the position of the United States in the World as the main and only centre of power' as a 'threat to the security of Russia'.[13]

At the same time, Moscow is committed to a multifaceted foreign policy and continues to try to explore alternatives to the US 'hegemony' - the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the creation of the BRIC forum - and is taking on an increasingly active role in large international fora such as the G20. Russian diplomacy thus mobilises 'different identities for different spaces and actors - European in Europe, "transcontinental strategic partner" to the US, Eurasian in Asia, cautiously integrationist in the CEI' (Snetkov, 2015, p.194)[14].

In the space of the former USSR, Moscow has adopted a pragmatic policy line, avoiding costly 'neo-imperial' commitments, essentially aim to prevent developments that could jeopardise Russia's security interests.

The Russian leadership increasingly rejects what it sees as the imposition of 'western values' and the notion of 'universal standards' inspired by the west, and accuses Washington and its allies of 'double standards' in the management of international issues, while underlining the importance of Russia's own values, culture and interests[15]. Russia is even beginning to question whether its values are compatible with those of the west.

Moscow will thus mobilize its remaining assets to establish Russia internationally - energy resources, nuclear deterrence, military capabilities and the Russian minorities themselves in the new independent states that surround it, particularly in the case of the Baltic republics.

In the eyes of the Kremlin, the US decision to invade Iraq in 2003 without a Security Council resolution is a sign of the west's readiness to use force unilaterally, ignoring international law and the principles of sovereignty, and is seen in Moscow as a dangerous precedent that poses a threat to international order and security[16].

In Moscow, questions have re-emerged about the country's civilizational identity and geopolitical orientation, revisiting the old debate between Slavophiles and Occidentalists that marked the 19th century in Russia.

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[12] Voiennaia Doktrina Rossiiskoi Federatsii. Utverjdena Ukazom Prezidenta RF ot 21 aprelia 2000 g. No. 706, 21 April 2000, available at www.scrf.gov.ru.

[13] Kontseptsiia vnieshniei politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii ", *Diplomatitcheskii Viestnik*, 2000: 8, cited in Snetkov, 2015, p. 104.

[14] See, for an analysis of the diverse identities in Russian foreign policy, by Duncan, P. J. S., 'Contemporary Russian Identity between East and West', *The Historical Journal*, 48, 1, pp. 277-294.

[15] Dmitri Trenin 'Russia Redefines Itself and Its Relations with the West', *The Washington Quarterly*, 30:2 pp. 95-105, Spring 2007, available at faculty.maxwell.syr.edu/.../Trenin_RussiaRedefines.pdf.

[16] Bessmertnykh, A. (2003) 'The Iraq War and Its Implications', *International Affairs*, 4, 49, pp. 24-36, cited in Snetkov, 2015, p. 71.

The 'colour revolutions'

From 2004 onwards, a series of upheavals substantially altered the political situation in Russia's vicinity. The so-called 'colour revolutions' - the 'pink' revolution (Georgia, 2003), the 'orange' revolution (Ukraine, 2004) or the 'tulip' revolution (Kyrgyzstan, 2005) between 2003 and 2004 installed pro-western leaders in Tbilisi, Kiev and Bichkek.

These 'colour revolutions', and in particular the case of Ukraine, raised the alarm in Moscow over western actions in the post-Soviet space - in what the Kremlin called the 'zone of privileged interests'[17].

In Moscow, warnings are mounting regarding the threat of 'outside forces' (that is, the west) that are attempting to undermine Russia from within. The official Kremlin discourse now describes the west as a 'threat'[18].

The effects at the domestic level were immediate. Oligarchs, independent media, liberal political parties, and Russian and foreign NGOs working in politically sensitive areas and foreign foundations, mainly north-American, such as National Endowment for Democracy, pinpointed as the main factor of western influence in Moscow, were denounced as actors seeking to undermine stability and prosperity in Russia. The security of the country and that of the regime became conflated.

There was a growing trend towards closer scrutiny of Russia's political, economic and social life (Sakwa, 2008). Just as it happened in the era of the Tsars or during the Soviet regime, political citizenship and individual freedoms were once again subjected to the sovereign interests of the state. Vladimir Putin's regime has traits of 'sovereign democracy', a concept that puts forward a political model anchored in Russia's historical traditions by Vladislav Surkov, a key ideologue of the Putin regime[19].

The conflict between Russia and Georgia in the summer of 2008, in the midst of Dmitri Medvedev's presidency, led to a climax and lent a new dimension to the 'colour revolutions' crisis.

In the dawn on 8 August 2008, the Georgian army launched an assault on Tskhinvali, and in a few hours it had taken control of the territory of South Ossetia, which since 1991 had been the stage for a separatist conflict with the Tbilissi authorities monitored by a Russian-Osseto-Georgian peace force. The Russian reaction was immediate. The 58th Army's advanced units crossed the line separating the two Ossetias (North Ossetia is a member of the Russian Federation), penetrating deep into Georgian territory and taking control of several strategic objectives in Georgia.

This was the first major Russian military action outside the Federation since the times of the USSR. In light of the American investment in Georgia and of Washington's direct support of the

[17] Lavrov, S. (2005) 'Democracy, International Governance and the Future World Order', *Global Affairs*, 1, January-March, available at http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/n 4422. Months later, on 24 December, Putin himself would define the former USSR as Russia's 'area of influence'.

[18] See, by Dmitri Trenin, 'Russia Leaves the West', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 85, Number 4. July/August 2006, available at https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/.../2006.../russia-leaves-west.

[19] Fauconnier, *op. cit.*

modernisation of the Georgian army under the regime of Mikheil Saakashvili (installed by the 'pink revolution'), the harshness of the Russian response immediately took undertones of a tug-of-war between Washington and Moscow[20].

Washington's reaction did not take long. Russia was excluded from an emergency meeting of the G8 on the crisis in Georgia. NATO froze relations with Russia. Kiev threatened to block the return of war vessels from the Russian Black Sea fleet to the port of Sevastopol. In November 2008, Russian authorities threatened to install the Iskander missile system in the Kaliningrad enclave in retaliation for the US decision to install anti-missile defences in Eastern Europe[21].

Russian military intervention, however, had achieved yet another great objective: to halt the integration of Georgia into NATO. The Georgian candidacy (like Ukraine's) was heavily backed by Washington but divided European allies at the Euro-Atlantic summit in Bucharest in April 2008. And the reluctance of the French and the Germans, who clearly preferred to avoid confronting Russia, were reinforced by the military adventure launched by Saakashvili in South Ossetia.

The Russian 'Military Doctrine' of 2010 reflected in its priorities the changes taking place on the international scene and the new types of conflict[22]. The list of 'risks' and 'threats' to the Russian Federation - and Russia's own actions in Georgia - again reflected one of the permanent features of Russia's strategic culture - the extreme fear of instability on its national borders, or what it considers as its security borders'.

Putin's return

The economic crisis of 2008-2009 - the fluctuations in the financial markets, the falling oil prices, the drop in consumption in Europe, the global recession - hit the Russian economy hard, threatening to jeopardise the growth of the previous years. At the same time, reforms which aimed to modernise the economy, rectify the excessive dependency on oil and gas, attract foreign investment and combat corruption announced by Medvedev in 2008 were virtually nothing but paper.

Rising food prices created a climate of discontent in the country. The situation jeopardised the implicit contract between the Putin regime and the population - Russians accept political and social constraints in return for an improvement in their standard of living (Snetkov, 2015, p.103)[23].

Signs of discontent multiplied over the following months. A wave of protests with the participation of groups with diverse political, liberal, nationalist and communist affiliations, as well as local groups and parties, with the Internet taking on a crucial role for the first time,

[20] The dispute between Moscow and Tbilissi is related, among other reasons, to the accusations that the Saakashvili regime was providing direct support and offering sanctuary to the Chechen separatist guerrilla.

[21] In early 2007, the White House announced an agreement to install anti-missile defences in the Czech Republic and Poland - an initiative denounced by Moscow as a manoeuvre to encircle Russia under the pretext of an Iranian threat.

[22] According to the contents of the 'Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation', endorsed by the Russian Presidency on 5 February 2010, translated into English by the Carnegie Foundation, available at http://carnegieendowment.org/files/2010russia_military_doctrine.pdf.

[23] Ver McFaul, M. e Stoner-Weiss, K. (2008) 'Myth of the Authoritarian Model – How Putin's Crackdown Holds Russia Back', *Foreign Affairs*, 87, 1, pp. 68-84.

challenged the results of the legislative elections of 4 December 2011, in which United Russia won 52.88% of the seats in the Duma, and demanded a repeat of the elections.

It was the first wave of direct contestation of the regime since Putin took office. Still, the escalation of the protests did not offer any credible alternatives. Vladimir Putin was re-elected in March of the following year with 63%, 60% of the votes.

The crisis that marked the electoral cycle of 2011-2012 triggered a new exchange of accusations between Moscow and the western capitals. Hillary Clinton was particularly harsh in criticizing Moscow, and Putin responded by accusing the then Secretary of State of fomenting a wave of protests against the regime.

Relations with the west still showed some progress as of spring 2009. The arrival to the White House of the new Obama administration resulted in a clear detente in the relations between Russia and the United States. On 5 March 2009, at a meeting of NATO Foreign Ministers in Brussels, Hillary Clinton said it was time for a 'fresh start' with Russia. The START III agreement was finally signed in Prague on 8 April 2010 and there were signs of progress in Russia's efforts to join the OMC[24].

But stressors were still present. Negotiations on the US anti-missile device in Western Europe were slow-going. Hilary Clinton made a point of reiterating that Washington would continue to fund non-governmental organizations in the region and pledged $2 million to a fund supporting the NGOs the Kremlin had denounced as an instrument of US political manoeuvring in the area.

Putin's third term was marked by the beginning of a period of greater political and economic uncertainty. The Kremlin discourse now had undertones of a patriotism increasingly focused on promoting 'traditional Russian values'.

Moscow was increasingly showing signs of hardening: the repression of the anti-regime demonstrations that continued after Putin's inauguration in May 2012, the persecution of opposition leaders, the new Internet regulations that put pressure on opposition websites on the pretext of preventing child pornography online, the imprisonment of the singers of the rock group Pussy Riot, and the Foreign Agents Act targetting NGOs receiving foreign funding (2012).

Internationally, the 'Arab Spring' period and what Moscow saw as 'interference' from the west, such as the NATO intervention in the 2010-2012 Libyan crisis, the issue of the international recognition of Kosovo, or the Iranian nuclear program created new tensions between Moscow and the West.

The Ukrainian crisis of 2014-2015

The Ukrainian crisis of 2014 erupted as the result of the climate of instability that marked the political scene in Kiev since the orange revolution of 2004. The origin of the crisis was precisely

[24] The Kremlin also promoted cooperation between the Security Treaty Organization (Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan) and NATO, and between the 'Single Economic Space' (or Eurasian Union, a customs union created in 2012 by Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and later Armenia and Kyrgyzstan) and the European Union as part of an effort to gain the west's recognition of the country's role in the former USSR (Snetkov, 2015, p.159).

the competition between Russia and Europe regarding the projects to integrate the space of the defunct USSR. The 'Eastern Partnership', an initiative proposing association agreements to six former Soviet republics (with the exception of Russia), was adopted by the EU in May 2009, months after the Georgian conflict and Kiev's decision for neutrality[25]; and the 'Eurasian Union', an initiative by Moscow aiming to bring together several republics of the former USSR in a common economic space[26].

The decision to suspend the signing of an agreement with the EU in November 2014 unleashed an uprising in Kiev - the EuroMaidan -, which led to the fall of Viktor Yanukovych's pro-Russian regime four months later.

The reaction was immediate. In late February, Russian forces occupied Crimea in a lightning movement, and a few days later Moscow declared the annexation of the peninsula, a crucial strategic objective for Russia. The Russian-majority regions of eastern Ukraine - Donetsk, Luhansk and Kharkiv - rejected Kiev's authority and initiated an armed uprising with covert support from Moscow.

The tensions between Moscow and Washington ran high. The west denounced the annexation of the Crimea as an intolerable violation. Moscow pointed to the role played by the MEPs and by Victoria Nuland, the deputy secretary of state for European affairs, in the EuroMaidan, and accused the West of orchestrating the 'Kiev coup' and of trying to 'sow instability' in Russia's neighbouring countries[27].

In a long speech before the Russian Federal Assembly on 18 March 2014, Putin underlined the ties between Russia and Crimea from the time of Catherine the Great, and argued that the annexation of the peninsula only came to correct Krutchov's 'illegal' decision to deliver Crimea to the Ukraine RSS in 1954[28]. Moscow also reinforced that it had the responsibility of protecting the 'Russian communities' in eastern Ukraine against the 'fascist' and 'russophobic' forces that seized power in Kiev.

In Moscow, the vigilance of the public discourse and the pressure on the media were increasing. Several analysts even maintained that the regime's domestic concerns, and in particular a fear of contagion from the Kiev rebellion, weighed heavily on the Kremlin's reactions to the Euromaidan[29]. Nevertheless, the annexation of Crimea was accompanied by a surge of patriotism in Russia and by a reinforcement of Putin's popularity.

The Ukrainian crisis was part of the duel of influences in the space of the former USSR that was prompted by the 'colour revolutions'. The agreement between Kiev and Brussels that had

[25] *The Guardian*, 12 December 2013.

[26] The customs union between Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan established in 2009 and transformed four years later into a single economic space, later joined by Armenia and Kyrgyzstan.

[27] In an interview with Russia Today on 23 April, Serguei Lavrov denounced the role of the CIA and the US embassy in the events of the Independence Square in Kiev.

[28] 'Address by President of the Russian Federation', available at en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603. In a foreign policy statement issued on 3 June 2014, Putin stated that the west had not given Russia an alternative to the annexation of the Crimea as NATO was preparing to move quickly to Sevastopol and radically change the balance of power in the region by depriving Russia 'of everything they had fought for since the time of Peter the Great'.

[29] The Kremlin also feared a possible contagion effect caused by Kiev's rapprochement to the west in Russia, where secessionist impulses had been recorded throughout the 1990s (Chechnya, Karelia, Pacific Rim).

been solemnly ratified by the Kiev Parliament on 16 September was effectively suspended. The palpable result of the troubled process of association with the EU was thus the overthrow of the Yanukovych regime and the rupture between Moscow and Kiev.

Washington and Brussels imposed a package of economic and political sanctions, Moscow's participation in the G8 was suspended, NATO suspended all cooperation with Russia, and the Kremlin responded with retaliatory measures against imports from EU countries.

The Russian occupation of Crimea unleashed a spiral of measures and military counter-measures between Moscow and the Atlantic Alliance. NATO announced the creation of a new reaction force of 4000 men ready to deploy to Poland or the Baltic States within 48 hours. The United States announced the installation of six new companies on the Alliance's eastern flank - Poland, the Baltic States, Romania and Bulgaria. In May and June 2016, NATO promoted the Anakonda-16 exercise, which enacted a scenario of military threat to Poland and the Baltic states, involving 31,000 soldiers, including a Ukrainian contingent[30].

Russia responded with a series of exercises, including mobilisation training of reservists and cooperation with civilian authorities in emergency situations; on 13 June it installed its most modern anti-aircraft system, S-400, in the Kaliningrad enclave, and on 9 October it announced the installation of Iskander missiles capable of reaching the Baltic republics, most parts of Poland and Berlin[31].

Internal and external 'threats'

Another important consequence of the Ukrainian crisis was the marked deterioration of relations between Russia and Europe[32]. In response to the annexation of Crimea, Brussels suspended cooperation with Moscow and in June 2014 it joined Washington in imposing sanctions that severely limited Russia's access to the capital market and blocked exports of sensitive technologies.

In the Yeltsin period, Moscow was heavily involved in Europe and worked in close cooperation with the European Union and the CEI. The deterioration of relations between Russia and the west has compromised these expectations, and the EU expansion to the east - and especially the Eastern Partnership of 2009 - came to be perceived in Moscow as a threat, much like the expansion of NATO[33]. Europe remains Russia's first trading partner but the 2006 energy crisis has introduced an element of mistrust between the two sides[34].

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[30] Dmitri Trenin, 'East-West Standoff in Europe Becoming Progressively Institutionalized': *Eurasia Daily Monitor* Volume: 13 Issue: 108, June 16, 2016.

[31] The Iskander system, known as SS-26 (and nicknamed 'Stone' in NATO jargon) has generated some controversy given its range of action and, above all, its dual capability, since it can carry both conventional and nuclear warheads.

[32] James Sherr, 'How Russia's relationship with Europe has evolved', BBC News, 5 January 2016, www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35154633.

[33] The decision to launch draft association agreements with states from the former USSR (with the exception of Russia) was taken months after the decision to postpone the integration of Ukraine into NATO due to pressure from eastern countries strongly hostile to Russia.

[34] The crisis of the spring of 2006, when a Russian gas cut to Ukraine caused a serious crisis in supply to several European countries, raised red flags regarding the Kremlin's willingness to use energy as a weapon and an instrument of political pressure.

At the same time, the Kremlin attempted to take advantage of potential transatlantic mismatches, exploiting the occasional complicity between Moscow and Paris in the Bosnia conflict and the combined resistance of France, Russia and Germany to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and especially the divisions within NATO regarding relations with Russia.

At a press conference in St. Petersburg in June this year, within the framework of the International Economic Forum, Putin accused America of using NATO to create a gap between Europe and Russia, and Washington's strategists of being obsessed with the 'ghost' of a rapprochement between Russia and Europe, in the midst of renewed calls for a 'united Europe'.

Following the annexation of Crimea, in 2007 several EU countries blocked the renewal of the Russia-EU Partnership, established in 1994 and renewed in 1997, with the aim of creating a common economic area.

Russia has been accused of supporting and subsidising a series of Eurosceptic movements - from the radical left to the far right, including ecologists, anti-globalists, financial elites, populist and conservative parties' - in an apparent manoeuvre to create a common anti-union front. Moscow did not hide its glee over Brexit, and Brussels officials repeatedly accused Russia of attempting to 'weaken' and 'divide' Europe.

The impact of the Ukrainian crisis in the mounting tensions with the United States and NATO was a prominent feature of Russia's latest strategic documents - the Military Doctrine for 2014 and the National Security Concept approved a year later, in late 2015[35].

The new version of the Russian Military Doctrine signed by Vladimir Putin on 25 December 2014 describes the displacement of NATO's 'military infrastructure' along Russian borders and the 'installation of military contingents of foreign states' in neighbouring countries as 'military threats' to the Russian Federation.

The document also points as military risks that must be taken into account the 'strategic missile defence systems', the 'intention to install weapons in space' and the development of 'non-nuclear strategic weapons systems', explicitly mentioning for the first time the 'global strike' capabilities developed by the US, as well as the use of information technology, from social networks to cyber-attacks, as a tool to achieve political-military objectives.

The new doctrine reiterated the importance of nuclear deterrence and the right to resort to nuclear weapons in the event of a large-scale attack threatening the existence of the Russian Federation. In the face of the new conventional US capabilities, it also introduced the new concept of 'non-nuclear deterrence'.

The 2014 doctrine advanced the new concept of 'non-linear warfare' - which, according to the experts, corresponds precisely to the Russian actions in Ukraine - and introduced the concept of 'mobilisation preparation' which provided for the mobilisation of society and of the economy in case of a domestic or foreign threat to the country. Finally, it established a close

[35] 'The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation', endorsed on 25 December 2014; English translation available at http://rusemb.org.uk/press/2029; 'The Russian Federation's National Security Strategy' of 31 December 2015; English version available at http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/OtrasPublicaciones/Internacional/2016/Russian-National-Security-Strategy-31Dec. 2015.pdf .

link between foreign and domestic threats[36]. At the internal level, the document drew attention to the possibility of 'ethnic and religious clashes' within the Federation and placed special emphasis on the activities of 'foreign intelligence services', 'radical social groups' and 'national and foreign NGOs' as potential 'destabilising' agents, as well as on the 'violent transformation of the [country's] constitutional order'.

The new National Security Strategy for Russia issued on 31 December 2015 revisited most of the concerns raised by the Military Doctrine. At the internal level, the references to 'traditional Russian spiritual and moral values' are worthy of notice.

Both documents underline the commitment to political, economic and military cooperation with the west, in particular in the fight against terrorism and jihadist extremism, arms control and anti-missile defences, but only within the proper 'respect for Russian interests' and insisting on the idea of a 'dialogue between equals' with the US and NATO.

Russian military reforms

The rapid movement of Russian troops that occupied Crimea in late February 2014 and the effectiveness of the support (which the Kremlin has always denied) to the Donbass rebel forces in the summer of 2015 surprised many observers in the west.

The Russian action has revealed agility of movement, new operational effectiveness and new tactics and skills that contrast sharply with the army that fought in Georgia in 2008 - analysts say[37]. This was the first visible result of the military reforms undertaken in Russia in recent years.

The issue of the military reforms in Russia has developed in fits and starts since the collapse of the USSR, but in more than two decades they have barely been put into practice. In 2000, under the impact of the NATO attack on Serbia in 1999 and 2006, Vladimir Putin announced, with great media pomp, substantial increases in Russian Defence and an ambitious programme to retrofit the Russian forces[38].

The Russian reaction in Georgia in 2008 drew the attention of observers to Washington. The disproportion of the military capabilities in the confrontation is huge, but analysts are almost unanimous in underlining the careful preparation and effectiveness with which the Russian blitz disrupted the Georgian military instrument. [39]

Analysts also point to obvious shortcomings in the Russian operation - both in terms of equipment and organisation, deficiencies in the coordination of air and ground assets, and Georgian supremacy in logistics, night vision and anti-tank weapons - which in fact did substantial damage to the Russian forces, including the loss of some aircraft.

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[36] See, by Margarete Klein, 'Russia's New Military Doctrine NATO, the United States and the Color Revolutions', SWP Comments 2015/C 09, February 2015, available at https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/.../2015C09_kle.pdf.

[37] Dmitri Trenin, 'The Russian Military in the Ukraine Crisis', Cernegie Moscow, 12 January 2015, available at http://carnegieendowment.org/2015/01/12/russian-military-in-ukraine-crisis.

[38] See, by Zoltan Barany, 'The Politics of Russia's Elusive Defense Reform', *Political Science Quarterly*.

[39] 'The Russian Military and the Georgia War: Lessons and Implications', by Ariel Cohen Robert E. Hamilton Strategic Studies Institute (SSI), June 2011 (www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/pub1069.pdf)

The Georgia conflict introduced a new element in the duel between Russia and the west due to the interference in the space of the former USSR: the use of force. The Defence reforms acquired a fresh urgency. Russia reorganised its military structure from the strategic commands to the new combat brigades, and implemented deep reforms to improve organisation and logistics and increase the readiness and mobility of its military forces[40].

Ukraine was the first major test[41]. Russian forces revealed a surprising capacity for coordination in a highly complex manoeuvre and notable expertise in unconventional war tactics. Observers also noted the new importance of the Russian Special Operations forces (SOF), the 'little green men', as they became known in Ukraine and in the western media, operating without insignia, which played a crucial role in the Crimean assault.

The Russian manoeuvre also displayed sophisticated capabilities in the field of electronic warfare, from the use of drones and also at the level of strategic reconnaissance - a domain in which Russia was lagging behind, and where it sought to compensate by mobilising human intelligence resources and by penetrating the opponent's command structures.

But the aspect that must have most alarmed western analysts was what they called 'hybrid war' - an action that integrates semi-clandestine operations, information warfare, propaganda and cyber warfare into a coordinated manoeuvre.

Russian action has effectively coordinated civilian and military actions with the help of paramilitary and non-military forces, benefiting from the capabilities developed by Russia since the collapse of the USSR to mobilise complicity (agents and state-owned structures) in neighbouring countries.

The Russian military retrofitting programme announced by Putin in 2012 remains largely suspended due to the economic crisis and Russia's diplomatic isolation[42]. Since the Medvedev presidency, the Russian war industry has been investing on partnerships with European countries and has resorted to imports to remedy some gaps or modernise the equipment available - tactical drones, new radio equipment, computer simulation and training facilities, command and control networks, and night vision instruments, or even partnerships to improve the production and management techniques of the Russian defence industry[43].

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[40] See, by Gustav Gressel 'Russia's quiet military revolution, and what it means for Europe' European council on foreign relations, available at www.ecfr.eu/page/-/Russias_Quiet_Military_Revolution.pdf. See also, for a summary of Russian military reforms, by Alexei G. Arbatov, 'Military Reform in Russia: Dilemmas, Obstacles, and Prospects' *International Security* (The MIT Press), Vol. 22, No. 4, Spring, 1998, pp. 83-134, and, by Bettina Renz 'Russian Military Capabilities after 20 Years of Reform', *Survival* vol. 56 no. 3 June–July 2014, pp. 61–84.

[41] Pavel K. Baev (2015), 'Ukraine: a test for Russian Military Reforms', IFRI reports, available at https://www.ifri.org/.../ifri_rnr_19_pavel_baev_russian_military_reform_eng _may_2015_0.pdf.

[42] Putin's ambitious programme encompasses a broad spectrum of fifth-generation equipment, including modernisation of nuclear weapons, advanced conventional weapons, infowar instruments, guided precision munitions, high-tech combat aviation, anti-stealth radar, among others. See, by Markus Heinrich, 'New Century, Old Rivalries: Russian Military Modernisation and NATO', *E-International Relations*, 25 June 2016, 6554, available at www.e-ir.info/.../new-century-old-rivalries-russian-military-modernisation- and-nato-responses/

[43] The most controversial of these projects was the sale of two Mistral class French helicopter carriers, which was cancelled by Paris in 2015.

The tensions in Russian-European relations and budgetary difficulties have, however, caused a number of setbacks and the postponement of various retrofitting programmes. The introduction of a new generation of aircraft, warships, and ground systems is still in its early stages, and analysts predict that the first results of the retrofitting effort should only be noticeable in 2020[44].

Despite the shortcomings that still persist in the Russian military organisation, analysts are unanimous in considering that Russia is once again a conventional military power that must be taken into account[45].

The Russian campaign in Syria

News of the arrival of a Russian force in Syria in September 2014 came as a shock. It was the first deployment of Russian forces outside the space of the former USSR.

Since 2011, Russia has resisted US, British and French efforts with the international community and the Security Council in calling for support to the intervention in the Syrian conflict. After Iraq, Libya and Syria became a 'line in the sand' for Russian diplomacy - the cut-off moment to react to the west's interventions in domestic conflicts since the end of the bipolar era[46].

The support of the US-led coalition for rebel groups threatened to bring Assad to the brink of military collapse. This endangered an ally with military and political ties since the times of the USSR, and one of Russia's last strategic positions in the Middle East.

Domestically, the Kremlin justified the Syrian campaign primarily as an action to combat 'international terrorism', therefore done in the name of Russia's national security. Moscow envisaged a rapid military operation at the time, as it wished to reassure public opinion due to concerns about the costs of the operation vis-à-vis the country's economic problems.

One year later, Moscow seemed to have achieved most of its objectives - much to the surprise of many analysts, particularly the United States, who refused to recognise Russian forces as being capable of an expeditionary war and predicting that Russia would be mired in a conflict with no end in sight. On the military level, Russian support allowed the Syrian regime to regain ground and take the initiative. Assad gained more room for manoeuvre and Russia became an unavoidable element in the search for any solution to the conflict in Syria.

At the same time, Moscow multiplied its diplomatic initiatives to capitalise on military gains politically and diplomatically. Along with several failed attempts to reach a ceasefire and start a negotiation process, the Kremlin announced last March a partial withdrawal of the Russian contingent from Syria, while exerting slight pressure on Assad to come to a compromise with the opposition. In mid-June, Vladimir Putin himself called for the immediate start of negotiations

[44] Among the systems already introduced or projects under development are the new T-14 tank (MBT), the new Kalashnikov AK-12, the modernised Mi-28 attack helicopters, the Sukhoi PAK FA T-50 stealth fighter, the Borei-class submarines, the Coalition-SV self-propelled artillery system, the Kurganets-25 armoured vehicle, the S-500 new generation anti-aircraft system and the RS-24 Yars Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM).

[45] See, Zoltan Barany, 'Defense Reform, Russian Style: Obstacles, Options, Opposition', *Contemporary Politics*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2005, p. 33.

[46] Statement by Serguei Lavrov in Moscow to the Council on Foreign and Defence Policy, cited in Snetkov, 2015: 161.

and for the integration of some elements of the opposition in the Assad government, warning the west about the catastrophic scenario of an uncontrolled disintegration of Syria.

In early September, Secretary of State John Kerry and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov announced a 'cessation of hostilities' and the coordination of efforts to combat the Islamic State and the al-Nusra group. For the first time, Washington waived the demand for Assad's withdrawal as a precondition for negotiations for a political solution. The agreement even contemplated an eventual coordination of Russian and American military actions against Daesh and other al Qaeda-linked radical groups, in an unprecedented action that divided the Obama Administration and was viewed with great scepticism by the Pentagon[47].

The cease-fire dragged on for a week amid constant violations and mishaps. Then, on 17 September, American planes bombed a Syrian position, killing dozens of soldiers. The 'ceasefire' and the prospect of a peace process had been definitely compromised. The US Central Command issued a statement saying that it was a mistake and that the pilots thought they were striking Islamic state positions. The incident still fuelled rumours that it had been a Pentagon initiative without John Kerry's knowledge[48].

Lavrov accused the US side of conducting a 'double play' and of failing to persuade US-backed rebels to distance themselves from the jihadist faction[49]. The head of Russian diplomacy also pointed the finger at the systematic reinforcement and rearming of the groups with each 'humanitarian pause' in hostilities, which had been agreed with the American side to provide assistance to the populations[50].

After the truce agreed between Kerry and Lavrov, forces loyal to Assad launched a large-scale assault on the eastern part of Aleppo, a rebel bastion. This was a crucial moment in the Syrian battle. The Aleppo takeover would decisively tilt the military balance and the fate of the arms to the side of Assad's forces and forced the rebels to negotiate under the conditions of the Syrian regime[51].

Meanwhile, indifferent to international protests, Damascus intensified the bombing of Aleppo while Washington and its allies were trying at all costs to halt the advance of Assad's forces on the city, flinging accusations at the Russian and Syrian forces of war crimes and the indiscriminate bombing of civilians, along with covert pressures and threats of new sanctions.

The intervention in Syria marked, in the opinion of many analysts, the return of Russia to the role of global 'actor' on the international stage. The Syrian campaign placed Moscow in a leading role in the Middle East which it had not occupied for a long time, strengthening ties with Iran, another crucial ally of Assad, and even enabled a reformulation of its relations with Israel.

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[47] 'Syria ceasefire: Pentagon disquiet over US-Russia air war plan', BBC News, 15 September 2016, www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-37360075.

[48] *Idem*.

[49] The al-Nusra Front, self-retitled as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham at the time of the group's assurances that they had severed any ties with al-Qaeda, is one of the most feared militias. Several other militias have made more or less fleeting alliances with al-Nusra.

[50] Speaking to Russia Today, on 30 September, Lavrov accused the United States of holding al-Nusra in reserve as a 'plan B' to overthrow the Assad regime.

[51] See 'Syria crisis: Russia's strategy and endgame?' - BBC News, 8 October 2015, www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34474362.

Russians and Turks have conflicting targets in the Syrian conflict - Turkey has supported the opposition to Assad politically and militarily - and they were on the brink of confrontation when, in November 2015, Turkish fighters shot down a Russian airliner over the Turkish Russian border. The evolution of the Syrian conjuncture led, despite clashing strategic objectives, to a sudden rapprochement between Moscow and Ankara[52].

The Russian-Turkish rapprochement took on alarming overtones to the West when, in an interview with the Russian magazine *Sputnik* on 18 August, Ankara Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu spoke of political disagreements with NATO and of the Turkish disillusionment with the European Union and accepted the possibility of closer military cooperation with Russia. Turkey is of crucial importance to NATO's southern flank, and the rapprochement between Moscow and Ankara introduces new data into the Syrian conflict and new dynamics across the entire Middle East.

Despite the progress on the ground, the situation in Syria remains a high-risk move for Moscow. Russia has not yet been able to capitalise on its successes on the ground in light of its objectives. The Syrian army is still experiencing great difficulties despite Russian support. The ghosts of Afghanistan (1979-89) and Chechnya are still very much present and, if it drags on, the intervention in Syria is likely to create resistance in Russian public opinion. Furthermore, Moscow's strategic calculations do not coincide with those of Assad (or even those of the Iranian ally). In short, Russia does not have an exit strategy and the strategic gains achieved in Syria may prove to be uncertain.

'Losing Russia'

The reasons for the erosion of relations between Russia and the west divide the western political, journalistic and academic circles. On the one hand, alarms are being raised regarding the authoritarian drift of Putin's regime and the return to Soviet reflexes, and the Kremlin is being accused of pursuing an aggressive and revanchist policy committed to recovering by force the territory lost with the collapse of the USSR. Has Vladimir Putin himself not described the collapse of the USSR as 'the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century'?

On the other hand, several authors point to the expansion of NATO, and to the fact that the west has never failed to look upon Russia, as a successor to the USSR, with suspicion, and that it has never recognised Russia's interests as a full member of the concert of Nations.

Russian politics have wavered in the post-Soviet era between 'gestures' toward the west, in the pursuit of recognition as a 'peer among equals' status, and tense reactions. Even in its expressions of greater diplomatic and military assertiveness, Russian politics, throughout the duration of this process - from Gorbachev to Yeltsin and Putin - have had a fundamentally defensive character of damage control in the setbacks caused by the collapse of the USSR, the successive NATO expansions or the 'colour revolutions'.

[52] 'Turkey Invasion of Syria Highlights Shifting Alliances', Spiegel Online, 26 August 2016, available at www.spiegel.de/.../turkey-invasion-of-syria-highlights-shifting-alliances-a- 1109649.html.

The west has chosen to deny Russia the space claimed by the Kremlin. From Moscow's perspective, the west has never really listened to Russia on key international security issues such as the 'war on terror' of the 2000s, the Afghanistan crisis (2001-2014), Iraq, the issue of a nuclear Iran (2011), the 'humanitarian interventions' in Libya (2011) and Syria (2011-2016), or even the management of formerly Soviet space, especially after the conflicts in Georgia and Ukraine. Washington has vowed to dispute even areas that Russia claims as part of its historic 'sphere of influence', and NATO's expansions have militarily pressed Russia to its own borders.

Several political figures have expressed alarm at the situation. On 18 June, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier warned, in an interview with *Bild am Sontag*, against NATO's 'warmongering' in the eastern borders of the Alliance.

Dmitri Simes observed in 2007, at the apex of the 'colour revolutions', that the West was somehow 'losing Russia', noting the impact of NATO's expansion to the east, or Washington's actions in the space of the former USSR in the evolution of Russian politics[53].

Considering Russia's domestic problems, the clashes in relations with its main external partners, with the United States, and with the European Union, and the uncertainty surrounding its future relations with other players of the concert of nations, such as China, Russia's position in the world is once again at stake[54]. Actions such as the annexation of Crimea or the intervention in Syria have earned Russia the image of an aggressive and unpredictable power, both in the media and among the political elites of the west, which have condemned it to an isolation that can jeopardise the country's development (Snetkov, 2015: 165).

The lacklustre behaviour of the Russian team and its supporters in the recent European football championship, the anti-doping sanctions that drove so many Russian athletes out of international competitions, and the booing that systematically greeted the country's athletes who managed to compete in the Rio Games painted an image of Russian isolation in one of the domains in which the country used to enjoy great international prestige. The Russians feel this situation to be discriminatory, dictated by political reasons, which made Russian sport a scapegoat for practices that are recurring in many other countries.

NATO's expansion (and even European expansion) has transformed the former allies of the USSR - Poland, the Baltic, even loyal Bulgaria - into a political and even military confrontation with Russia, and into a powerful anti-Russian lobby in the NATO and European Union structures.

Tensions with Moscow have even given a new raison d'être to a NATO that has undergone several existential crises since the collapse of the former eastern bloc, and even provided new arguments for Washington's demands from its Alliance partners - many of them reticent about confrontational politics with Russia – of reinforced strategic discipline and greater sharing of the burden of defence.

[53] Simes, Dimitri K. 'Losing Russia: the costs of renewed confrontation', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 86, No 6, November-December 2007.

[54] 'Is Russia still a key world power?' BBC News, available at www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34857908.

Still, analysts admit, Russia is back. Even at a high price, Putin has largely achieved the overall goal of the 'reconstruction' programme which he set out to achieve when coming into power 17 years ago - to return Russia to the status of *drjanvost*, or 'great power'.

Russia's economic crisis and the signs of discontent fuelled speculation of a drop in domestic support for Vladimir Putin. There is, however, no evidence of any direct threat to the regime or authority of the Kremlin. The Russian economy is going through difficult times but is not on the verge of collapse as it was in the late 1990s. And the hostility of the west offers Putin arguments for a closing of the ranks among the Russians.

The 'cold-war' climate is again installed. In light of the accumulated tensions and extreme positions on both sides, as well as of the armed dimension of the confrontation, the return to a climate of dialogue and cooperation between Russia and the west seems difficult to achieve. Moscow's policy of isolation promises to increase the aggressiveness and the military investment of Russia's foreign and security policy.

There is even a potential risk of direct military confrontation that could be triggered by incidents in the Ukraine, a confrontation in Syria, or even a random incident, given the proximity of NATO and Russia's war apparatus in the vicinity of the Baltic. The prospect of a military clash has already entered the imaginary of those who consume culture and media. In early February this year, the BBC hosted a well-received documentary entitled 'World War Three: Inside the War Room', staging the scenario of a hypothetical attack by Russia on its Baltic neighbours and a large-scale military confrontation between Russia and NATO.

At the same time, the situation is suspended pending the answers to new questions, in particular regarding the policy that will be pursued by the new US administration, its implications for the relations between the US and Europe, and the dilemmas stemming from the European process - questions that may soon bring new data to the troubled equation of relations between Russia and the west.

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