

CONNECTIONS

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How Russia, Step by Step, Wants to Regain an Imperial Role in the Global and European Security System

Zofia Studzińska *

Abstract: Russia has been an empire for centuries. After the fall of communism and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, many countries saw a chance to build a new world order and a new international and European security system. But for Moscow, the last 15 years were simply an aberration to be rectified rather than the new reality. Currently, we are witnessing the Russian Federation attempt to rebuild its sphere of influence and restore its borders to what they were during the time of the Cold War. The first sign of Russia testing this plan was the Russo-Georgian war in August 2008. After a poor reaction from the West, Moscow decided to pursue another confrontation, this time going much further, challenging the limits of the possible – the annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, ongoing from April 2014. With the lack of a strong response from the Western countries, one can assume that Russia is on its way to rebuilding its imperial position and will continue to grasp for control of other territories.

Keywords: Sphere of influence, imperial role, Russian Federation, conflict, crisis, parastate, separatists.

Introduction

The actions taking place in Ukraine (the annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, ongoing from April 2014) and the growing tension between Russia and the countries of the West is the result of a planned and conscious new-old Russian geopolitical doctrine that is oriented to compete with the West and exert Russia's dominance in Eurasia.

After the fall of communism and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, opportunities appeared for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe to build a new world order and new international and European security architecture. This amounted to creating a Europe free from any divisions and spheres of influence. An important event that helped to implement this idea was the signing of the Charter of Paris for a New Europe in 1990, which was confirmed nine years later in the Charter for European Security (adopted by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, OSCE). Article 8 of this charter posits "an equal right to security, inherent right of each and every participating State to be free to choose or change its security arrangements, including treaties of alliance, as they evolve. Each State also has the right to neutrality. Each participating State will respect the rights of all others in these regards. They will not strengthen their security at

* Zofia Studzińska graduated from the National Security Faculty of the National Defense University (Warsaw, Poland). Her area of interests concerns the geopolitics of the Southern Caucasus whether there are real possibilities to reduce Russia's influence in this area of the world and what can be the role of Poland in it.

the expense of the security of other States.”¹ The steps the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the Baltic States have taken,² including their willingness to integrate with the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), are examples of them exercising precisely these rights.

Europe and the United States wanted to build a cooperative European security system with Russia. Examples of this more than two decade-long effort to build a partnership with Russia include the mechanism of the NATO-Russia Council (NRC),³ through which Russia was to be incorporated into the Western structure, and the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA),⁴ signed in 1994, which established a mechanism for summits between the EU and Russia. As described by Dr. Robert Czulda from the University of Lodz, the period of cooperation with Russia after the Cold War can be illustrated as a sine wave: at one moment it functions the correct way and at another it is refracted, only to later again return to improved relations.⁵

Today we are witnessing the Russian Federation sidestepping from a path of integration with the West in a clear and conscious way onto a road based on a new geopolitical, Eurasian, anti-liberal doctrine oriented to compete with the West and towards the restoration of the Kremlin’s hegemony over the majority of the post-Soviet countries, as well as the subordination of its neighbors.⁶ This began when President Vladimir Putin came to power after Boris Yeltsin and stated in the Russian Duma “that the collapse of the USSR was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century.”⁷ The turning point when Russia started to pursue this new doctrine can be assumed to be the years 2003 (Rose Revolution in Georgia) and 2004 (Orange Revolution on Ukraine). These two cases were met with a very positive response from the Western countries, who saw them as signs of the beginning of the democratization process in the East; in Russia’s opin-

¹ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, *Istanbul Document 1999*, 6th OSCE Summit of Heads of State or Government, Istanbul 1999, Article 8.

² Three northern European countries east of the Baltic Sea – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

³ “The NATO-Russia Council (NRC) was established at the NATO-Russia Summit in Rome on 28 May 2002. It replaced the Permanent Joint Council (PJC), a forum for consultation and cooperation created in 1997 [...]. The NRC is a mechanism for consultation, consensus-building, cooperation, joint decision and joint action, in which the individual NATO member states and Russia work as equal partners on a wide spectrum of security issues of common interest.” Cf. <http://www.nato.int/nrc-website/en/about/index.html> (accessed 23 March 2015).

⁴ The aim of this agreement was to strengthen democracy and develop economic cooperation in a wide range of areas through political dialogue.

⁵ Robert Czulda, “Rosja-NATO: w stronę partnerstwa czy nowej zimnej wojny,” in *Ze studiów nad polityką zagraniczną Federacji Rosyjskiej*, ed. Małgorzata Pietrasiak (Piotrków Trybunalski, 2013), available at www.academia.edu/3710268/NATO_Rosja_W_stronę_partnerstwa_czy_nowej_zimnej_wojny_NATO_Russia_Towards_a_Partnership_or_New_Cold_War (accessed 23 March 2015).

⁶ Jolanta Darczewska, *The Anatomy of Russian Information Warfare. The Crimean Operation, a Case Study*, OSW Point of View series 42 (Warsaw: Center for Eastern Studies, 2014), 36.

⁷ Roger E. Kanet, “The return of imperial Russia,” in *Conflict in the Former USSR*, ed. Matthew Sussex (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 26.

ion—its main aim being the restoration of its imperial position—these cases were seen as threats to its existential interests. In both cases, Moscow blamed the West, mainly US non-governmental organizations, for bringing about revolution, and “Russia thus became a ‘strategic competitor’ rather than a ‘strategic partner’.”⁸ The Kremlin did not want to recognize the efforts of these two countries — the efforts of two sovereign states that had, and still have, the right, in accordance with the Charter for European Security, to make their own decisions and choose their own alliances. Subsequently, these countries became major targets of Russia’s aggressive new policy. Moscow feared that if these countries managed to implement reforms and successfully complete the integration process with the West, other countries of the South Caucasus and the former Soviet republics would follow in their footsteps. This, for Russia, would be tantamount to a *de facto* loss of influence over their policies. It was for this reason that Russia moved to stop the enlargement of NATO and the EU by new Eastern states. To achieve its objective, Russia took actions that shook Europe and the world, and which revealed the crisis of European security. All these steps were certainly carefully thought-out and intended to force Western states to recognize the Russian Federation’s special position, and to recognize the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) as Moscow’s privileged zone of interest. In addition, the Kremlin demanded from the West the right to co-decide the political, economic, and military European order and the right to decide on any relevant matters of international security.⁹

In analyzing Putin’s current activities, it is not impossible to predict his next moves. The Russo-Georgian war in August 2008, the annexation of Crimea in March 2014, and the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, ongoing from April 2014, show some convergent mechanisms of action in Russia’s conduct. In this article, I would like to portray these mechanisms, as well as try to consider what the West should strategically do in the future to mitigate Russia’s imperialist intentions.

The First Warning for the West: The War in 2008

Russia’s war against Georgia in August 2008 was the result of several factors and long-term historical processes which Russia, without hesitation, used to hinder the pro-Western aspirations of this small country. Russia played a significant role in Georgia’s two protracted conflicts with Abkhazia and South Ossetia from the very beginning.

Two “frozen conflicts” have existed within the territory of Georgia since the collapse of the Soviet Union: one in South Ossetia and another in the separatist region of Abkhazia. Both conflicts were escalated beyond the political level, frequently taking the form of armed confrontation. The region settled into a tenuous peace monitored by Russian peacekeepers. Russia continuously took advantage of its power in organizations such as the United Nations (UN) or the OSCE. The Kremlin used both terminated mis-

⁸ Robert Ondrejcsák, “Partnership for Stability: How to Connect the Strategic Futures of Central Europe and the EaP,” *The Polish Quarterly of International Affairs* 23:4 (2014): 125.

⁹ Marcin Kaczmarek, *Russia’s Revisionist Policy Towards the West* (Warsaw: Center for Eastern Studies, 2009), 5.

sions—the UN Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) in Abkhazia and the OSCE mission in South Ossetia¹⁰—for its own purposes. The missions began operations in the 1990s in order to control the course of a ceasefire in both provinces. However, neither was effective. The staff were dominated by Russian officers, thereby undermining their neutrality from the very onset. Russia, expected to act as a mediator, was a de facto hidden actor in this conflict. The peacekeeping forces, who were peaceful in name only, were constantly reinforced and rearmed by Moscow – an open violation of the law and international agreements. Western countries reacted passively, pretending that everything was normal. As Ronald D. Asmus accurately points out, the West tolerated this situation, apparently convinced of having selected the best of the bad options for action. In their view, the presence of both these missions was better than none at all.¹¹

Throughout the duration of these two conflicts, Russia “manipulated ethnic disputes to gain political advantages and encouraged minorities and regional leaders to express various grievances against the central governments that it opposed.”¹² The Kremlin supported the efforts of rebellious regions by providing weapons, military training and sending fighting units to battle.¹³ These actions were not a sign of “good will” and a desire to help Abkhazia and South Ossetia win their independence. While the aim of these operations was to ensure the continued existence of these minority regions, they were mainly targeted against the state of Georgia, which would be weakened and embroiled in internecine conflicts, thus remaining primarily dependent on assistance from Russia. Any agreement that was concluded by the separatists and the Georgian and Russian side were soon broken off, which led to further escalation of the conflict. Here, the Kremlin drew strategies from the former imperial policy of “divide and rule.”¹⁴ As a result, “Russia’s increasing influence in South Ossetia and Abkhazia over the years transformed the separatist conflicts into essentially Russia-Georgia disputes.”¹⁵

¹⁰ Including about 530 Russians, a 300-member North Ossetian brigade (which was actually composed of South Ossetians and headed by a North Ossetian) and about 300 Georgians.

¹¹ Ronald D. Asmus, *A Little War That Shook the World: Georgia, Russia, and the Future of the West* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 112.

¹² Janusz Bugajski, *Georgian Lessons. Conflicting Russian and Western Interests in the Wider Europe* (Washington, D.C.: CSIS, 2010), 45.

¹³ Kamil Janicki, “Gruzja, Abchazja, Osetia Południowa,” in *Źródła nienawiści. Konflikty etniczne w krajach postkomunistycznych*, ed. Kamil Janicki (Kraków-Warszawa: Instytut wydawniczy ERICA, 2009), 250.

¹⁴ The terms and conditions of “divide and rule” policy were used first by the ancient Romans in relation to conquered peoples. The main idea of this policy was to divide the population into manageable parts, which made it impossible for them to come together and fight against the sovereign authority. In ancient times, the occupied provinces had to sign an agreement with Rome as “allies,” but they could not do the same between each other; as a result, they could not unite and defeat Rome. The principles of this policy were applied by the Russian Empire and, later, by the Soviet Union on the occupied territories of the Caucasian countries, Central Asia and Siberia.

¹⁵ Jim Nichol, “Russia-Georgia Conflict in August 2008. Context and Implications for U.S. Interests,” Congressional Research Service Report for Congress, 3 March 2009, 6.

After the Rose Revolution in 2003, when Mikheil Saakashvili's anti-Russian faction came to power, a time of democratic and economic reforms began in Georgia, which brought Tbilisi closer to NATO and the EU. Saakashvili also wanted to regain central government authority over the separatist regions. This process was constantly hindered by Moscow, which was striving to restore its lost imperial position. Russia used all means and all possible mechanisms at its disposal to achieve this objective, which later resulted in a final settlement. One of the methods was the gradual Russification of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (which was also carried out in Crimea and the eastern part of Ukraine, and which is currently being applied in Transnistria).

This process boiled down to:

- granting Russian citizenship and passports to people living in these two districts (after the war, Russians explained its involvement as a need to protect its own citizens). The Kremlin's passport policy, as rightly pointed out in Heidi Tagliavini's EU report, was conducted in violation of international law, which led to interference in Georgian internal policy, visibly questioning its sovereignty;¹⁶
- important positions in the various bodies were filled by Russian officials, so that the Kremlin could freely and without any obstacles affect their policies;
- the Russian ruble became the official currency of both entities;
- gradually increased reliance on Russia's economy for these regions;
- implementation of a system of educational exchange;¹⁷
- Russian cultural and linguistic domination of the regions of Abkhazia and Ossetia.¹⁸

The second method was aimed directly at Georgia:

- Russia unilaterally introduced a visa regime for Georgia;¹⁹
- economic sanctions on Georgian products;
- control of energy supply, with periodic disruption in gas supplies during the winter season, cut-offs, and price hikes.²⁰

¹⁶ Heidi Tagliavini, ed., *Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia*, Report (Brussels: The Council of the European Union, 2009), 26.

¹⁷ Janicki, "Gruzja, Abchazja, Osetia Południowa," 265.

¹⁸ One-third of Abkhazians cannot speak Abkhaz, even on a basic level, and only few can read or write in it.

¹⁹ Françoise Companjen, "Recent Political History of the South Caucasus in the Context of Transition," in *Exploring the Caucasus in the 21st Century. Essays on Culture, History and Politics in a Dynamic Context*, ed. Françoise Companjen et al. (Amsterdam: Pallas Publications, 2010), 113.

²⁰ Fatma A. Kelkitli, "Russian Foreign Policy in South Caucasus Under Putin," *Perceptions* 13 (2008), available at <http://sam.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Fatma-Kelkitli.pdf> (accessed 25 March 2015).

Georgia, seeing how Russia is using both republics in its policies against their country, has established a new strategy, which boils down to these questions:

- attempts to internationalize the issue of parastates;
- engagement of Western structures (NATO and the EU) in the conflict;
- attempts to transfer the mediation role from Russia (which, in the opinion of Georgians, was a participant in this conflict) to international organizations.²¹

None of these Georgian objectives have been achieved, yet they remain only in the form of declarations, which contribute little to any real changes.

It is assumed that the factors that had a dominant influence on the outbreak of war between Georgia and Russia were two events, which occurred at the beginning of 2008. The first was the recognition of the independence of Kosovo. The second was the NATO Bucharest Summit. These events led to a “cooling” of relations and to several years of armed conflict. When the US and some of the EU countries recognized Kosovo’s independence, “Moscow fumed and resolved to flex its muscle in an area that it considers its own sphere of influence.”²² This declaration aggravated Russia because of its veto, which was ignored in the matter. As a result, Moscow used the precedent of granting Kosovo independence as a basis for granting the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In the second important event, the NATO Bucharest Summit, neither Georgia nor Ukraine were granted Membership Action Plans.²³ This was something on which Saakashvili had truly been counting. The NATO states did, however, agree that in the future these countries would become members. These two events clearly show the bigger picture, revealing that Moscow has steadily escalated its policies against Georgia with a number of measures, culminating in war.²⁴ On 8 April 2008, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov told the *Echo of Moscow* radio station that “[w]e will do everything possible to prevent the accession of the Ukraine and Georgia to NATO.”²⁵ This is what Russia was really doing over the course of those six months of conflict with Georgia, and it is also what it is doing now with Ukraine.

The war was far from a surprise: it had been planned for months and the geopolitical foundations of the war had been building up since 1992. Georgia was the ideal setting for Russia’s response. First of all, it presented a perfect opportunity to demonstrate Moscow’s military power and to show the West how powerless it is regarding Russia’s

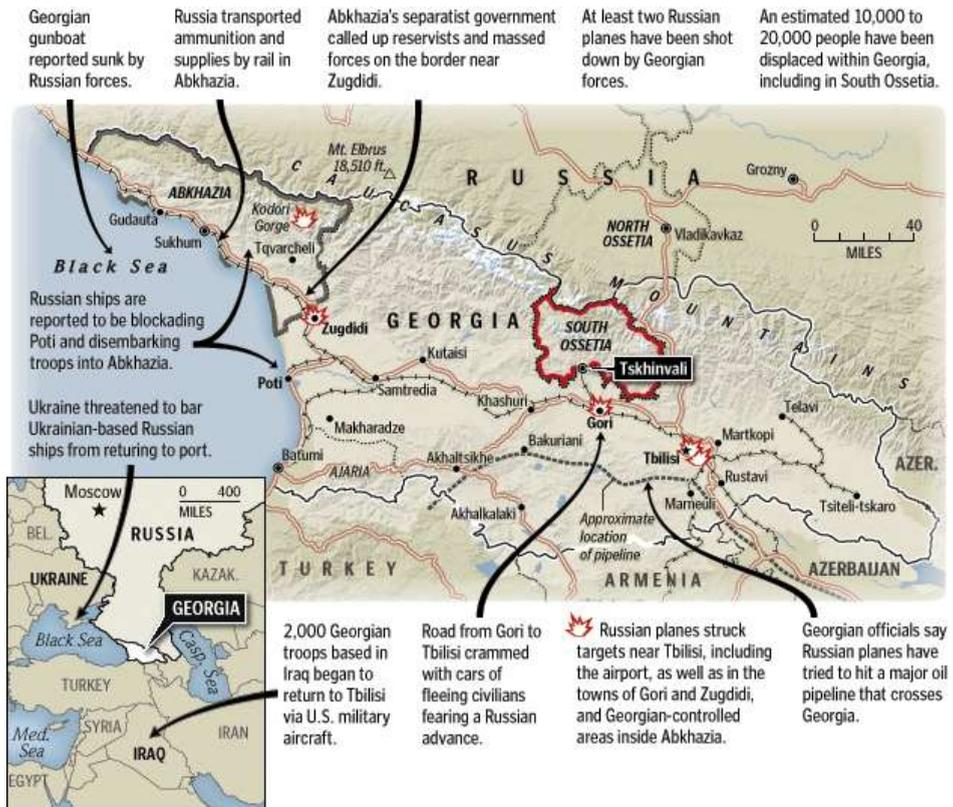
²¹ Janicki, “Gruzja, Abchazja, Osetia Południowa,” 273.

²² Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr, eds., *The Guns of August 2008: Russia’s War in Georgia* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), 125.

²³ “The Membership Action Plan (MAP) is a NATO program of advice, assistance and practical support tailored to the individual needs of countries wishing to join the Alliance. Participation in the MAP does not prejudice any decision by the Alliance on future membership,” cf. http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_37356.htm.

²⁴ Cornell and Starr, eds., *The Guns of August 2008*, 127.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 127.



Source: <http://kelsocartography.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2008/08/gr2008081100071.gif>.

Figure 1: Russo-Georgian War in 2008.

periphery.²⁶ The Russo-Georgian war lasted five days, from the 7–12 August 2008. As in all wars, this one caused only hatred and ethnic conflict. Nations and cultural groups that had lived side by side for centuries crossed the line of mutual coexistence, leading to bloodshed among neighbors. The end of the war brought about a six-point peace plan announced by French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who was representing the EU, which called for:

1. the prohibition of further use of military force;
2. the cessation of all further hostilities;

²⁶ George Friedman, “The Russo-Georgian War and the Balance of Power,” *Stratfor Global Intelligence*, 12 August 2008, https://www.stratfor.com/weekly/russo_georgian_war_and_balance_power (accessed 27 March 2015).

3. the guarantee of free access to humanitarian aid and the return of displaced persons;
4. the withdrawal of Georgia's armed forces to the positions they held before the conflict began;
5. the return of the armed forces of the Russian Federation to pre-conflict areas of deployment;
6. the opening of an international debate on the future status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.²⁷

Although this plan was a result of compromise, it has not been respected by Russia, which has put the country's credibility in question. Point 5 was realized by Russia only after two years. On 18 October 2010, Russian troops left the Georgian village of Perevi, which lies on the administrative border with South Ossetia.²⁸ Point 6 was not fulfilled at all, as Russia recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Russian intervention in Georgia was not met with any serious consequences. The US and EU members did not accept the secession of both republics as these were in violation of international law, which rendered the recognition of their independence by Russia invalid. However, the international community did not place any sanctions on Moscow. As Bugajski points out, "most Western governments concluded that Russia was too important a country to be isolated, that sanctions would be ineffective, and that Moscow's estrangement would be counterproductive and fuel further hostility."²⁹ The war, which was short and did not leave a large number of victims, exposed the weakness of the standards and principles that shape the European security system. The UN and OSCE missions, which were stationed in the breakaway republics, had no real effect on what has happened around them. Structures that in principle should be neutral and also ensure peace were used rather by the side of the aggressor to suit its own needs. Currently, the only international mission in Georgia is the EU's Monitoring Mission (EUMM), which was put in place to help stabilize the situation on the ground, but it has been denied access to the territory of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by Russia. Also, diplomatic efforts have been unsuccessful – they did not stop the war and the conditions of the negotiated peace were not effectively enforced by Western countries against Russia. They also could neither take back the lands gained by Russia, nor restore the pre-conflict status quo.³⁰ Ironically, the small US commitment to resolve the dispute and the

²⁷ Nichol, "Russia-Georgia Conflict in August 2008," 11.

²⁸ According to the Tbilisi government, the agreement is still not respected by Russia, because Moscow constantly maintains its military presence in South Ossetian and Abkhazian break-away regions of Georgia.

²⁹ Bugajski, *Georgian Lessons. Conflicting Russian and Western Interests in the Wider Europ*, 1.

³⁰ With regard to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia still occupies the land of the two republics, and did not stop their militarization, despite the protest of international opinion. On March 5, 2015, the Russian-Abkhaz Treaty on "Alliance and Strategic Partnership," first signed in 2014, entered into force. Its main goal is a slow connection of Abkhazia with the Russian Federation, which will mark the end of the actual functioning of this para-state and its real annexation with

lack of a strong response was probably a consequence of the imminently concluding term of President George W. Bush.

Moscow, forcibly changing the borders of a sovereign state, has shown the ugly neo-imperialist side of its policies. The Kremlin warned the world that it is ready to use military force to pursue strategies related to the protection of its interests. Russia's actions in Georgia showed how far Moscow is ready to go to retain influence on other Soviet successor states. At the same time this strengthened its position in the region, delaying the integration process of Georgia for at least several years. This policy was openly confirmed by former Russian president Dmitry Medvedev, who in 2011 stated that the war from 2008 had an important aim: successfully thwarting NATO's expansion to the region.³¹ Furthermore, Lavrov said that Georgia's further efforts in this direction could lead to a repetition of the events of 2008.³² Despite these threats, Georgia continues its pro-Western policies while trying to restore good relations with Russia. During the Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius, which was held in November 2013, Georgia signed an Association Agreement (AA) with EU and an agreement creating a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). However, Russia's determined attitude and its desire to rebuild its sphere of influence in the CIS, along with the current situation in Ukraine, raises concerns for Tbilisi that Georgia might once again become the target of Moscow, which will strive to block the implementation of the AA.

The Second Warning for the West: The Conclusive Result?

After the war in 2008, many specialists (such as Asmus) believed that Moscow's next target would be Ukraine. In turn, Ukraine's officials were expressing their heightened concerns about Russian intentions, including threats made by Putin and others in Russia to encourage secessionism by Eastern Ukraine and the Crimean Peninsula.³³ The 2008 war was Putin's way of testing the waters. As Otashvili points out, "the minor international outrage and lack of any meaningful punishment was what Putin hoped for and achieved. This laid the groundwork for the war in Ukraine."³⁴

Russia. A similar situation is occurring in South Ossetia now. The treaty was, of course, condemned by the US, NATO, the EU and the European Parliament. However, the vision of the end of the Russian-Georgian conflict was rejected even more strongly. There is a high probability that the threat of annexation of one or both of these republics will be another form of pressure on the government in Tbilisi.

³¹ Iskra Kirova, *Public Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution: Russia, Georgia and the EU in Abkhazia and South Ossetia* (Los Angeles: Figueroa Press, 2012), 14.

³² Irakli Matcharashvili, *2008 rok. Wojna rosyjsko-gruzińska. Wojna która nie wstrząsnęła światem* (Oświęcim: NapoleonV, 2013), 186.

³³ Nichol, "Russia-Georgia Conflict in August 2008," 24.

³⁴ Maia Otashvili, "Georgia and Moldova Remain Fragile as Russian Aggression Continues," Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI), Geopoliticus: The FPRI Blog, 30 January 2015, <http://www.fpri.org/geopoliticus/2015/01/georgia-and-moldova-remain-fragile-russian-aggression-continues> (accessed 30 March 2015).

In the early years of his presidential term, Putin did not seem to be concerned with the prospect of accession of the post-Soviet countries to NATO. At the press conference after the NATO Prague Summit (2002), when a journalist asked him about the Ukrainians' aspirations to membership in NATO, he said that Ukraine is a sovereign, independent state, and can decide its own security policy. He added that Russia's interests are not harmed by good Ukrainian relations with NATO and it certainly will not cast a shadow on relations between Russia and Ukraine.³⁵ It was the calm before the storm. The tone of his speech changed dramatically while at the NATO Bucharest Summit, where he admitted that the possible extension of NATO to include Ukraine could lead to the disintegration of the country.

When Viktor Yanukovich, a supporter of the pro-Russian policy, became the president of Ukraine, several important decisions were adopted. In 2010, the parliament of Ukraine proclaimed a non-block status, which is equivalent to non-participation in military alliances. However, from today's perspective, the event with the most far-reaching consequences was the Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius in 2013. The Ukrainian government had refrained from signing the Association Agreement with the EU, explaining this move with reasons of national security and the need for improved relations with Russia and other CIS countries. This decision resulted in the largest protests since the Orange Revolution. The government's actions were targeted by strong pressure from Moscow. The Kremlin sought to stem the increasing possibility of integration with the EU through the introduction of an embargo on goods from Ukraine, putting Kiev in a very difficult economic situation. Restrictions on exports between Ukraine and Russia gave a clear signal that further efforts to bring Ukraine closer to the EU were unacceptable to Russia. Via protests, which were the consequence of social discontent because the agreement with the EU had not been signed, Ukrainians wanted to force the government to change the decision. The demonstrations, which began to slowly weaken due to the lack of response from the government, strongly intensified when Yanukovich's administration used force to try to end them. Protests, which started to take on an anti-government character, lasted several months and became bloody in nature (many people were killed and several hundreds were wounded). The consequence of what happened in the Euromaidan was the signing of an agreement to hold early elections by president Yanukovich and the opposition, which were consequently won by Petro Poroshenko. Yanukovich decided to flee the country. The new authorities, chosen in a democratic way by the Ukrainian citizens, were not recognized by Russia, which described them as "fascist."³⁶

The process leading to the secession of Crimea from Ukraine began immediately after the overthrow of Yanukovich. There were a series of clashes between the supporters and the opponents of the secession of Crimea and its annexation by Russia. Despite the

³⁵ Bertil Nygren, *The Rebuilding of Greater Russia: Putin's Foreign Policy towards the CIS Countries* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), 55.

³⁶ Andrea Chalupa, "Putin's Fabricated Claim of a Fascist Threat in Ukraine," *Forbes*, 4 April 2014, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/realspin/2014/04/04/putins-fabricated-claim-of-a-fascist-threat-in-ukraine> (accessed 30 March 2015).

opposition, the authorities of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea announced a referendum on independence. Russia, similarly to the case of its aggression against Georgia, justified its involvement and use of troops as a need to protect the lives of its own citizens. US President Barack Obama warned Russia that the possibility of Russian intervention in Ukraine would have far-reaching consequences. The EU also recognized Moscow's actions as acts of aggression. Despite the protest from the West, however, Moscow continued its policy towards Ukraine and Crimea. The escalation of tensions on the Crimean Peninsula deepened. Pro-Russian forces took control in Crimea in February. On 16 March they organized a referendum calling for a separation from Ukraine and incorporation into Russia. Less than a week later, Putin signed a law formalizing Russia's takeover of Crimea from Ukraine. This step was not recognized by the international community and Ukraine.³⁷ The loss of the peninsula by Ukraine caused heavy damage to its armed forces and far-reaching economic consequences, especially for the energy and mining sectors.³⁸ By contrast, the annexation of this strategic territory by Russia was a chance to change the balance of power in the Black Sea region. Right now, Moscow undoubtedly has become a dominant force in this region.

The incorporation of Crimea into the Russian Federation has been accompanied by information warfare, blending elements of cyber warfare, propaganda, economic pressure, energy blackmail, diplomacy, and political destabilization on a large scale. Moscow explained that it was attempting to counteract the "aggressive information policy" of Western countries under the leadership of the US, which was targeting Russian civilization.³⁹ This information warfare, which began with the Euromaidan protests, has several goals. Firstly, it aims to manipulate information and exert psychological influence on another state's political and military leaders, soldiers, and civilian population to destabilize Ukraine, so that Kiev can be controlled by Moscow. Second, it serves the purpose of strengthening the presidential power center in the Russian Federation by providing support from its own citizens as well as the broader Russian-speaking community – the subject of previously planned manipulation.⁴⁰ It has been pointed out that "Russian-speaking citizens of Ukraine who had undergone necessary psychological and informational treatment (intoxication) took part in the separatist coup and the annexation of Crimea by Russia."⁴¹ The same mechanism can be observed today in Eastern

³⁷ "Ukraine: Putin Signs Crimea Annexation," *BBC news*, 21 March 2014, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26686949> (accessed 30 March 2015).

³⁸ Tadeusz A. Olszański and Agata Wierzbowska-Miazga, "The Consequences of the Annexation of Crimea," Center for Eastern Studies (OSW), Analyses, 19 March 2014, available at <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2014-03-19/consequences-annexation-crimea> (accessed 30 March 2015).

³⁹ Darczewska, *The Anatomy of Russian Information Warfare*, 5.

⁴⁰ John R. Haines, "Russia's Use of Disinformation in the Ukraine Conflict," Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI), E-Notes, February 2015, available at <http://www.fpri.org/articles/2015/02/russias-use-disinformation-ukraine-conflict> (accessed 30 March 2015).

⁴¹ Darczewska, *The Anatomy of Russian Information Warfare*, 6.

Ukraine where the citizens are predominantly pro-Russian. The intent is to demoralize and provoke a popular backlash against the Ukrainian government, even a putsch.

After the annexation of Crimea, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The escalation of the conflict in the eastern regions of Ukraine turned into regular fighting between separatists (supported by Moscow with forces, training, and advanced weapons) and the Ukrainian army. In August 2014, regular units of the Russian armed forces invaded Donbas, occupying part of the territory of Donetsk and the Luhansk region. According to NATO,⁴² Russian soldiers are actively taking part in fights, and even if the Kremlin is denying that there are any Russian soldiers in Ukraine, “their credibility is nil and no one takes them seriously anymore.”⁴³ Fights were interrupted for a moment, in the framework of signed ceasefires, but “peace” did not last long, as agreements were immediately broken by the separatists. The conflict in Donbas, which continues to absorb more and more human lives, touches not only the military personnel. Increasingly, it is apparent that the attacks are directed on civilian populations, as exemplified by rocket fire in the Ukrainian city of Mariupol. In early February 2015, a peace agreement, the Minsk Protocol, was signed by Ukraine, Russia, France, Germany, the OSCE, and pro-Russian separatists.⁴⁴ The protocol provides for, inter alia, a ceasefire, withdrawal of troops, and, critically for Kiev, imposes an obligation to adopt a new constitution and decentralization of Ukraine with special status given to the territories controlled by the separatists.⁴⁵ Russia has long demanded this from Kiev. Decentralization would leave Moscow to interfere in Kiev’s policies and take effective action to prevent Ukraine’s integration with the West without any restrictions. In fact, for Ukraine it would mean a waiver of a fundamental right as a sovereign country to self-manage its system.⁴⁶ Accepting a truce cannot be recognized as a success because, interestingly, it requires more responsibility on the Ukrainian side than on that of the separatists. As could be predicted, the agreement did not stop the fighting, which still continues.⁴⁷ In

⁴² Zeke J. Miller, “Russian Forces Fighting Alongside Separatists in Ukraine, NATO Says,” *Time*, 28 August 2014, available at <http://time.com/3209084/ukraine-russia-nato-obama> (accessed 30 March 2015).

⁴³ Alexander Motyl, “Russo-Ukrainian War Now a Reality,” *The World Post*, 29 August 2014, available at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alexander-motyl/russo-ukrainian-war-reality_b_5737412.html (accessed 30 March 2015).

⁴⁴ Szymon Kardaś and Wojciech Konończuk, “Minsk 2 – a Fragile Truce,” Center for Eastern Studies (OSW), Analyses, 2 February 2015, available at <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2015-02-12/minsk-2-a-fragile-truce> (accessed 30 March 2015).

⁴⁵ Michael Kofman, “Don’t Doubt the Ceasefire, Minsk II Could Freeze the Conflict in Ukraine,” *Foreign Affairs*, 22 February 2015, available at <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/143165/michael-kofman/dont-doubt-the-ceasefire> (accessed 31 March 2015).

⁴⁶ Tadeusz A. Olszański, Andrzej Wilk, and Jan Strzelecki, “Kyiv refuses to make concessions to the separatist republics?,” Center for Eastern Studies (OSW), Analyses, 25 March 2015, available at www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2015-03-25/kyiv-refuses-to-make-concessions-to-separatist-republics (accessed 31 March 2015).

⁴⁷ The ceasefire agreement concluded in Minsk on 12 February has not been implemented, either militarily or politically.



Source: https://www.iiss.org/-/media/Images/Military Balance Blog/April 2014/Ukraine_ConflictArea_large.jpg?la=en.

Figure 2: The map of conflict in Ukraine in 2014.

addition, there was an increase of activity among separatists in neighboring regions, such as Odessa and Kharkov. Surely the aim of the separatists, and at the same time that of Russia, will be the gradual expansion of the controlled area.

Ukraine is the target of Putin’s dream to resurrect the Soviet Union. The main goal of Russia in the coming months will be to fuel the conflict and create further destabilization in Ukraine in order to block its political transformation and any attempts to integrate with the EU. Putin is counting on time and endurance to bring the collapse and division of Ukraine and a revision of the post-Cold War world order by maintaining a permanent crisis that will make Ukraine a “failed state,” incapable of making any reforms or initiatives. This would prompt Ukraine to end the conflict on unfavorable terms. Russia wants to reassert itself as the dominant power, having a real impact on the policies of other countries of the CIS. Therefore, the matter of Ukraine remaining within Russia’s sphere of influence will be one of life or death. In turn, Ukraine will try to

“freeze” the conflict in Donbas,⁴⁸ as well as reduce its destabilizing effect on the entire country.⁴⁹

Are the diplomatic efforts and the commitment of the Western countries to solving the conflict effective? For the time being, one cannot say that they are. Of course, the Russian aggression and the annexation of Crimea have been met with international condemnation. The escalation of the conflict in the eastern part of Ukraine is the subject of international criticism. The EU and the US have imposed a series of economic sanctions on Russia, but in the case of the EU they are limited and mainly directed towards several oligarchs associated with the camp authorities. These sanctions are the minimum of the minimum. Berlin is trying to resolve the conflict on behalf of the EU. Its position is, on the one hand, critical of Russia, but on the other hand it is cautiously undertaking diplomatic action, which so far has contributed to a sense of frustration and helplessness in the face of Russia’s effectiveness.⁵⁰ In April 2014, NATO suspended all practical cooperation with Russia, including in the NRC. However, the Alliance agreed to keep channels of communication open at the ambassadorial level and, above all, to allow for the exchange of opinions.⁵¹ In the resolution of the conflict so far, there has been little involvement from the US and Obama, although there is a visible change of attitude. At the end of March 2015, the US House of Representatives passed a resolution asking Obama to send weapons to help the Ukrainian government.⁵²

Conclusion

The conflicts and consequences presented in this article demonstrate that they are not only a problem for Georgia or Ukraine, but that they go much farther, touching all of Europe and practically all of the world. It is an obligation to think about European security, the relations of the EU and NATO with young democracies, as well as the increasingly aggressive policy of Russia, which constantly strives to regain its sphere of influence. Both aforementioned conflicts were provoked and developed by Russia. Their

⁴⁸ The Ukrainian government considers the separatist-controlled areas to be “temporarily occupied,” which absolves Kyiv of responsibility for the situation in these areas. The Ukrainian authority has turned to the UN and the EU to ask for a peacekeeping mission to be sent to the Donbas, which will be synonymous with “freezing” the conflict under international control.

⁴⁹ Tadeusz Iwański, “Still Together, but Apart? Kyiv’s Policy towards the Donbas,” *Commentary* 160 (Center for Eastern Studies, 6 February 2015), 8.

⁵⁰ Anna Kwiatkowska-Drożdż and Kamil Frymark, “Germany in the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict: a Political or a Humanitarian Mission?,” *Commentary* 163 (Center for Eastern Studies (OSW), 18 February 2015), 1.

⁵¹ “NATO-Russia Council,” available at http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50091.htm (accessed 31 March 2015).

⁵² The White House announced it will deliver a \$75-million package of nonlethal defensive equipment to the Ukrainians, cf. Peter Baker, “US to Give Ukraine’ Military an Additional \$75 Million in Nonlethal Aid,” *New York Times*, 11 March 2015, available at www.nytimes.com/2015/03/12/us/us-imposes-sanctions-on-pro-russian-separatists-in-ukraine.html?_r=0 (accessed 31 March 2015).

cause was not, as in the case of Georgia, the unclear status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russia used these two republics as a tool to destabilize the internal political situation of Georgia. The case is similar in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, where Moscow has openly supported the separatist activities in the mutinous regions of Donetsk and Luhansk. The aim of Russia, which elicited the crisis in both countries, was to stop their integration into Western structures. Georgia and Ukraine, which in accordance with the provisions of the Charter for European Security wanted to guarantee for themselves security, sovereignty, and independence through membership in NATO and the EU, were brutally suppressed by their bigger neighbor, which, incidentally, is a signatory of the Charter and took part in the building of this new international order. The war in 2008 with Georgia was a test of how far Moscow would be allowed to go, as well as a means to gauge the West's reaction. With Ukraine, Russia went much further, pushing the limits of what is possible. As a matter of fact, this process is still under way. There is a high probability that the next target of massive pressure from Russia will be Moldova.⁵³ Moreover, NATO fears that Putin will direct his aggressive policy towards the Baltic states – Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania.⁵⁴ Anders Fogh Rasmussen, NATO's previous secretary general, said there was a "high probability" that Putin would test NATO's Article 5.⁵⁵ It is also expected that pressure will increase further in relation to Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia.

There is much reason to fear that Moldova might become the next Crimea or Eastern Ukraine. An autonomous region, Transnistria is located on the east side of the Dniestr River in Moldova. This part of Moldova, which is pro-Russian territory, declared its independence in the early 90s, although this was not recognized by most of the world.⁵⁶ Now this region depends on the presence of Russian peacekeeping troops⁵⁷ and on Kremlin subsidies.⁵⁸ Transnistria is a post-Soviet "frozen conflict" zone, which Russia uses as a tool to influence the policies of Moldova. The crisis in Eastern Ukraine and Moldova's signing of the Association Agreement with the EU in June 2014 renewed concerns that Russia will use all possible measures to stem Chisinau's integration with Western structures, inter alia by supporting Transnistria in its independence efforts or by enacting embargoes on Moldovan export products.

⁵³ Kamil Całus and Agata Wierzbowska-Miazga, "Russia is Playing Harder for Moldova," Analyses (Center for Eastern Studies OSW, 2 April 2014), available at <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2014-04-02/russia-playing-harder-moldova> (accessed 31 March 2015).

⁵⁴ These countries have large Russian-speaking minorities.

⁵⁵ "From Cold War to hot war," *The Economist*, 14 February 2015, available at <http://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21643220-russias-aggression-ukraine-part-broader-and-more-dangerous-confrontation> (accessed 31 March 2015).

⁵⁶ Only Abkhazia and South Ossetia recognize Transnistria as an independent country.

⁵⁷ Russia keeps about 1,500 troops in Transnistria, stationed in Tiraspol and Bender (close to the border with Moldova).

⁵⁸ Victoria Puiu, "Russia's Ruble Crisis Threatens Support for Rebel Republic Transnistria," *The Guardian*, 20 February 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/20/transnistria-russia-rouble-crisis> (accessed 31 March 2015).

Armenia is another victim of the imperial policies of Russia. Under pressure from Moscow, Armenia did not sign the Association Agreement with the EU at the Vilnius summit in 2013. Putin effectively used the ongoing conflict between Yerevan and Baku in Nagorno-Karabakh, openly hinting at the possibility of conflict escalation in that region by selling weapons to Azerbaijan, whereby he was able to persuade the president of Armenia, Serzh Sargsyan, to withdraw from the agreement.⁵⁹ As a result, Armenia joined the Eurasian Economic Union in January 2015. Moscow is also ready to use the frozen conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh as an instrument of influence on Azerbaijan and put pressure on Baku to obstruct its progress toward Western institutions. The Kremlin's actions as a mediator in the conflict between Yerevan and Baku are not intended to improve the relations between them, as this would result in Moscow losing its tool of impact on the region.

According to Michael Fallon, a British politician, the next object of Putin's aggression will be former Soviet bloc countries such as Latvia, Lithuania, or Estonia, where he "could involve irregular troops, cyber attacks, and inflame tensions with ethnic Russian minorities in nations seen as part of the country's 'near abroad' by Moscow."⁶⁰ As a result of rising tension in the area of the Baltic states, the US is planning to send 3,000 soldiers, about 750 tanks, helicopters, and other equipment near Russia's border for training exercises with the militaries of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.⁶¹

"Russia has been an empire for centuries. The last 15 years or so were not the new reality, but simply an aberration to be rectified. *And now it is being rectified.*"⁶² Currently, Russia wants to rebuild its position as a regional power with its own sphere of influence, where it will have the sole right to decision. Russia has used and is still using the same mechanisms to destabilize Georgia and Ukraine, along with other former post-Soviet countries. All of these mechanisms are represented in the table at the end of this article. In addition, Russia wants to rebuild the European security system in order to attain the same position in it as that of the US and NATO.

With this in mind, what should the Western countries do to strategically stop Russia's attempts at imperialist expansion? Russia, like every country, has the right to take care of matters close to its borders that appear to be dangers or threats to its sovereignty. However, it does not have the right to interfere in the internal politics of its neighbors,

⁵⁹ Elzbieta Kaca and Anita Sobják, "Recalibrating the Eastern Partnership: Pressure for a More Relevant Policy," *The Polish Quarterly of International Affairs* 4 (2014): 54.

⁶⁰ Michael Fallon, "Russia a Threat to Baltic States after Ukraine Conflict," *The Guardian*, 19 February 2015, available at <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/feb/19/russia-a-threat-to-baltic-states-after-ukraine-conflict-warns-michael-fallon> (accessed 31 March 2015).

⁶¹ Howard Koplowitz, "Ukraine Crisis: US Sending 3000 Troops to Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania for Military Exercises," *International Business Times*, 9 March 2015, available at www.ibtimes.com/ukraine-crisis-us-sending-3000-troops-latvia-estonia-lithuania-military-exercises-1840934 (accessed 31 March 2015).

⁶² George Friedman, "The Russo-Georgian War and the Balance of Power," *Stratfor Global Intelligence*, 12 August 2008, available at http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/russo_georgian_war_and_balance_power (accessed 31 March 2015).

change their democratically-elected governments, or decide on the direction of their foreign policy. For such actions, there is absolutely no consent. It is clear that Russia will not change its policy in the near future, as it is not afraid of political confrontation with the West. In Moscow's opinion, the EU members are too divided and poorly interested in their Eastern neighbors. The Kremlin does not care about the sanctions, as it believes that in the near future everything will return to normal, especially in the economic sphere, and revert to the circumstances after the Georgian War in 2008. Bearing in mind that efforts of Western diplomacy were not effective, Russia believes that there is nothing to fear. The West was not able to stop the outbreak of war in 2008, and only compliance by Russia enabled a peace plan. The lack of lessons learned from the Russo-Georgian War and the helplessness of the West in the face of the current conflict in Ukraine reveals that Europe and the EU, if they want to have influence on the conduct of Russia, must act decisively and unanimously, with strong support from the US. Europe and the US should tighten the economic sanctions against Russia and send a clear signal that if Moscow does not change its policy, they will begin arming Ukraine. The West must raise the price paid by Putin for the escalation of the conflict, so that the costs are significantly higher than he projects when compared to the benefits.

Russia's mechanisms of action leading to the destabilization of the post-Soviet countries						
Mechanisms of action	Georgia	Ukraine	Moldova	Armenia	Azerbaijan	Baltic States
Passport policy ⁶³	Used in Abkhazia as well as South Ossetia.	In Crimea and the eastern part of Ukraine.	In Transnistria.	Many citizens hold Russian passports in Armenian territory.	The case is the same as it is in Armenia.	Russia is using "passportization" efforts: it is offering its passports and citizenship to Russian-speaking citizens of Baltic states.
Supporting the entrance of pro-Russian politicians into national governments.	In both republics, Russia began to replace Abkhazian and Ossetian politicians with those who have strict pro-Russian views, for example former KGB agents. In Georgia, Russia is giving financial support for pro-Russian politicians such as Nino Burjanadze.	In Crimea and in the break-away Donetsk and Luhansk regions Russia supports separatists and separatist leaders.	In Moldova, pro-Russian parties using illegal funds from Russia are very strong. In Transnistria, the president is a pro-Russian politician, Yevgeny Shevchuk, who is entirely dependent on Moscow's support.	In Armenia, there are many individuals who are ideologically pro-Russian in the presidential administration, such as the Minister of Foreign Affairs Eduard Nalbandyan, who is following orders from the Kremlin. ⁶⁴	The Government of Azerbaijan, which is quite independent from the Kremlin, is under constant pressure from Moscow, which is using the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict as a leverage for influence over Azerbaijan.	In the Baltic states there are a number of political parties and politicians who represent the Russian-speaking minority.

⁶³ Georgia is believed to have about 179,000 Russian passport holders, the Transnistria enclave in Moldova about 100,000, Azerbaijan 160,000, Armenia 114,00 and Ukraine's Crimea up to 100,000, with approximately half a million Russian citizens in Ukraine as a whole, despite dual citizenships being illegal under Ukrainian law.

⁶⁴ Eduard Abrahamyan, "Russia's Main Strategy for the Nagorno-Karabakh Issue," *Foreign Policy Journal*, 28 November 2014, available at <http://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2014/11/28/russias-main-strategy-for-the-nagorno-karabakh-issue> (accessed 31 March 2015).

Russia's mechanisms of action leading to the destabilization of the post-Soviet countries

Mechanisms of action	Georgia	Ukraine	Moldova	Armenia	Azerbaijan	Baltic States
Financial and economic dependence	The budget of Abkhazia and South Ossetia is dependent on Moscow. Due to strategic partnerships with Russia signed by both Republics, they will be slowly incorporated into the Russian area of defense, economic, and social affairs. The Russian ruble has become the official currency in both entities. Russia put economic sanctions on Georgian products and was controlling energy through periodic disruptions of the gas supply during the winter season, as well as cut-offs and price hikes.	Russia is financing the Crimean Peninsula in order to adapt it to the Russian economy, defense, and social affairs. Control of energy is also a tool to pressure Kyiv. In 2005–2006, Russia cut off exports of gas in the middle of winter. Moscow also enacted an embargo on Ukrainian goods.	Transnistria is dependent economically, politically, and militarily on the support of Russia. The Russian ruble is an official currency there. Moldova is dependent on Russia's energy supplies. Moreover, by placing embargoes on Moldovan export products, Moscow is trying to influence Chisinau's policies.	Armenia, which suffers from a weak economy, is entirely dependent on Russia and its energy supplies.		Russia has de facto control over the energy supplies of the Baltic states.

Russia's mechanisms of action leading to the destabilization of the post-Soviet countries

Mechanisms of action	Georgia	Ukraine	Moldova	Armenia	Azerbaijan	Baltic States
Information warfare	During the 2008 war, Russia disrupted communication channels and generated confusion at a time of crisis in Georgian government and news media websites.	Has continued since the protests on the Euromaidan, combining both cyber and information warfare tactics.				By 2014, following Russia's annexation of Crimea, Russia's information warfare in the Baltic states intensified.
Fuelling hatred and nationalism	Although Russia is a mediator in the Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts, and should thus be striving for peace, Moscow has encouraged violence against Tbilisi.	Supporting the Crimean Autonomous Government's efforts to secede, as well as the separatists in the east.	Transnistrian separatists are supported by Russia. Now there is huge possibility of a similar scenario to what happened in Crimea and the unfolding situation in Ukraine.	Moscow is using the "frozen conflict" in Nagorno-Karabakh as a way to keep Armenia and Azerbaijan under its control. It is a tool to exert pressure on their policy.		In the Baltic states, the Kremlin is using their minorities as political tools. In Lithuania, Russian-speakers comprise 15 percent of the entire population; in Latvia, the number is 34 percent; and in Estonia, the number might be as high as 30 percent.

Russia's mechanisms of action leading to the destabilization of the post-Soviet countries						
Mechanisms of action	Georgia	Ukraine	Moldova	Armenia	Azerbaijan	Baltic States
Military support	Ossetian and Abkhazian separatists were supported, armed, and trained by Russia. Russian troops took part in conflicts in both republics. Currently, Moscow has several military bases in Abkhazia – zone near Gudauta; in South Ossetia, one in Tskhinvali, and another in Java.	Russian support for separatists from Donbass, apart from the supply of ammunition and modern combat equipment, consists of providing direct combat support of its military forces. Units of the Russian army are taking an active part in the fighting. There is a base of the Russian Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol in Crimea.	As of early 2010, Russia had 1,500 troops on Transnistrian territory, which are helping ensure the region's invulnerability to Western influence.	In the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia supported the Armenian side. Russia has a collective security agreement with Armenia (Russia maintains a large military base in Gyumri and an air base at the Erebuni Airport near Yerevan with 4,000-5,000 troops), and it provides the country with discounted weaponry.		

Source: own work.

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