

Security threats in Europe's neighbourhood: echoes from Georgia in Ukraine today¹.

Introduction

The 2014 events in Ukraine have given a strong incentive to rethink EU-Russian relations. These international relations are embedded in a complex network of security, energy and economic trade forces, involving not only the EU and the OSCE, but also NATO and transatlantic relations. Germany – the strongest economy in the EU and economically closely interwoven with Russia – has² a leading role in helping to resolve the conflict though safeguarding its national interests at the same time.³ The events in Ukraine – the annexation of Crimea and violence by pro-Russian rebels in Eastern Ukraine – are not an isolated case. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union there was the shocking yet apparently forgotten August 2008 war on Georgian territory with Russia first occupying, then recognizing South-Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states, and recently informally annexing them⁴.

Analysis of the Russian - Georgian relations reveal similarities with Ukraine, suggesting a pattern of behavior. If we can refer to a pattern, this means the crisis is larger than Ukraine itself, showing Russia's ambitions in general. What can we learn for a better understanding of Russian foreign policy by comparing the 2008 war on Georgian territory with Russia's interference in Ukraine in 2014?

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the West thought that Russia had come to terms with the idea that cooperation would be more in their interest than open conflict as reflected also in talks with NATO.⁵ Kosovo was a first major setback in this process of opening up relations. A Russia-friendly discourse is that the West did not do enough to help Russia get back on its feet after the humiliating implosion of the Soviet Union. More specifically, this discourse recounts that Putin I (2000-2004) reached out to the West but was not taken seriously, hence Putin's changed attitude in his second (2004-2008) and third term (2012-2018) of becoming a world power and regaining control over the lost territory after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Let us first have a closer look at the new political and economic organizations and institutions established by the Russians to replace the dissolved Soviet Union in an effort to maintain control over the Newly Independent States (NIS). These have not proven to be as uniting as was hoped for. What turns out to be effective from a Russian perspective however, is to maintain pressure on its neighboring states by interfering in the break-away regions thus creating destabilizing forces which make these countries unattractive for the EU and NATO (art. 5).⁶ Moreover this pressure hampers their development because so much energy goes into maintaining territorial integrity. In the case of Ukraine, the EU suffering from "enlargement fatigue" and expecting a candidate country to be sufficiently prepared (EU values, no corruption) met the Vilnius summit in 2013 with measured enthusiasm. Paradoxically, after Putin's aggression however, the EU was forced to get heavily involved in Ukraine: exactly the opposite of Putin's interest.⁷

¹ With many thanks to W.H. de Beaufort for reviewing and commenting on this text at such a short notice. The responsibility of the content naturally remains ours.

² With the United States. The latter has shown more force defending the West.

³ Stephen Szabo on Germany emancipating, redefining itself and also diverging its economic interests to Poland and China. *Germany, Russia, and the Rise of Geo-Economics*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2014.

⁴ Russia and Abkhazia signed an alliance on November 24 2014 and are in the process of signing a treaty with South Ossetia. <http://www.breitbart.com/national-security/2015/01/17/effective-annexation-russia-and-georgias-south-ossetia-sign-integration-treaty/>

⁵ As mentioned in the Russia-NATO founding act of 1997 and the Russia NATO council signed late spring 2002. Jason 2002, 27: 1 page 29-32. The danger of involution and of NATO becoming 'merely' a political organization is discussed there.

⁶ An armed attack against one or more members shall be considered an attack against them all.

⁷ Karen Donfried, German Marshall Fund: <http://www.gmfus.org/archives/karen-donfried-on-press-conference-usa-with-carol-castiel-insights-on-ukraine-russia-u-s/>

The second aspect we need to understand is the international law on territorial integrity which in the case of the post-Soviet space is based on the last Soviet Constitution which was translated into international post-Soviet law. The third aspect involved is intercultural communication and a different world view. The West thinks economically: security strategies have become economic strategies, whereas Russia thinks of security in terms of military, nationalism, and personal political power.

The Dissolution of the SU

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union the Russian Federation invested in the creation and maintenance of international institutions that were meant to regulate the politics, economics and defense of post-Soviet states. The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) was the first of these. At its pinnacle it counted 12 member states among which Ukraine and with a two year delay Georgia, but nowadays the CIS is a loose alliance with various states that either withdrew (Georgia), merely participate (Ukraine), or do not show up at yearly meetings due to disputes with Russia (3 Central Asian countries). The Secretary of the Russian Security Council himself stated that the Eurasian Economic Community was becoming a more relevant unifying institution than the CIS.⁸ The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Russia's variant of NATO, also appears to have little practical use apart from joint military exercises. Georgia and Azerbaijan have withdrawn because of conflicts with other members in the organization (Russia and Armenia).

The much smaller GUAM Organization for Democracy and Economic Development formalized in 2001 by Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova, meant to prepare these countries for European Integration. It was seen by some as a means to counter Russian influence. It focused on issues such as the ban of national products by Russia, the frozen conflicts in the region and the recognition of the *holodomor* – the 1932-3 famine that was practically orchestrated by Stalin - as genocide. Other than that it is not seen as being very active and basically has been bypassed by the EU-Eastern Partnership (EaP) arrangements inaugurated in 2009. The goal of the EaP is to bring partner countries closer to the EU on the basis of EU values, norms and standards. This includes activities aimed at deep integration through Association Agreements, Free Trade Areas, and visa-free regimes.

The Eurasian Customs Union, created in 2010 to be transformed into the Eurasian Economic Union, is Putin's alternative to the EU and the most recent attempt to keep Russia's neighbours closely knit. Former Ukrainian president Yanukovitch first rejected the European offer because Putin offered him a better deal into the EEU,⁹ but both had overlooked the will of the people, tired of corrupt practices and eager to live in a state that functions properly. Even though Putin emphasizes the economic importance of this union, it seems to be more politically motivated.

All in all, Russia created a number of institutional mechanisms that lost their relevance as the participating countries lacked a common purpose. Putin's EEU might well be next on this list of failed international organizations through which it aims to keep the Newly Independent States closely knit. Whereas Russia used to influence the politics of these neighbouring states under the pretext of protecting the rights of 'compatriots', it now forces them to opt for Moscow-led integration in the EEU as an alternative for the EU. Both Ukraine and Georgia pay high prices for their pro-Western turn.

⁸ [Russia questions further existence of the CIS post-soviet organisation](#) InfoNIAC

⁹ The same with Armenia – who was bullied into not signing papers with EU by buying them into ECU/EEU

Territorial Integrity and the Soviet Constitution

Besides the above mentioned institutions as manifestations of organizing post-Soviet space, we need to understand that today's international law is based on the way territory was arranged legally according to the Soviet Constitutions. The Soviet Union (SU) was composed of Republics (for example the Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) Georgia and the Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) Ukraine) that on paper were sovereign. These republics included provinces with a certain degree of political and cultural autonomy: the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics such as the ASSR Abkhazia and ASSR Adjara in Georgia. A delineation with less autonomy was the Autonomous Oblast such as the AO South Ossetia in Georgia.

Ukraine between 1924-1940 had the Moldavian ASSR that became a full-fledged SSR in 1940 and claimed independence during the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Thus Ukraine remained with one other province, Crimea that first had the status of Autonomous Oblast, was promoted to ASSR following a referendum in 1991, and has now been annexed by the Russian Federation in 2014. In fact, almost the same pattern as with the Georgian territories South Ossetia and Abkhazia was followed. Only this time instead of having a full-fledged war changing legal borders, the annexing forces involved in Crimea were more covert and not easily identifiable.

Recent political History of Georgia and Ukraine

Due to Ukraine's history in Soviet times, its nowadays' relation with Russia is complex. The largely pro-Russian Crimea (with also a significant amount of mostly anti-Russian Crimean Tatars) was transferred to the Soviet Republic of Ukraine by Khrushchev in 1953 for unknown reasons, probably to 'compensate' for *Holodomor*. West Ukrainian territories were only annexed by the Soviet Union in 1939 through a secret clause in the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact and generally consider themselves part of Europe, having once belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Southern Ukraine with the important cities and ports of Odessa and Mikolaev at the Black Sea is more trade-oriented towards Turkey and Romania, and subsequently more open in terms of civil society.¹⁰ Lastly, there is the eastern Donbass region: its industrial economy (mainly coal mining) is managed by a corrupt oligarchy, which took over the politics of the whole country when Viktor Yanukovich (1950)¹¹ whose initial victory in the presidential elections of 2004 triggered the Orange Revolution (November 2004-January 2005). Yanukovich was elected president in February 2010. His friends received influential positions all over the country and after four years of corrupt reign, he was forced to flee the country in February 2014 after violent mass protests at Euromaidan because of his refusal to sign an Association Agreement with the EU at the Vilnius Summit.

When Georgia claimed independence from the Soviet Union, the ASSR Abkhazia had in the Likhny declaration of 1989 already declared its independence and the AO South Ossetia followed suit shortly. This led to (civil) wars ending in "frozen conflicts" monitored by UN peace keeping forces, with Russia as the biggest supplier of troops. After the Rose Revolution of 2003 and the election of pro-Western president Saakashvili, tensions between Georgia and Russia grew with Russia handing out Russian passports in both regions, interfering behind the scenes in the negotiations between Georgia and Abkhazia. Tensions increased in terms of visa regime, the throwing out of diplomats, the ban of Georgian products from the Russian market, flights in Georgian airspace, buildup of Russian military at Georgian borders, culminating into

¹⁰ <http://time.com/10032/ukraine-donbass-yanukovich-kurkov/>

¹¹ PM 2006-2007; and president of Ukraine from February 2010-February 2014.

the August war of 2008. Russia first occupied the territory of South Ossetia and then recognized both South Ossetia and the Abkhazia as independent states. Even if the rest of the world with a couple of exceptions did not recognize these states, these borders are de facto closed now and both break-away regions are being annexed into the Russian sphere.¹²

The Abkhaz signed a treaty with Russia in November 2014 on an Alliance and Strategic Partnership, and South Ossetia is in the process of signing a similar treaty. After almost seven years, Russia still has not complied with all Six Points of the Ceasefire brokered by then French President Sarkozy. On the contrary: Russia is building a huge fence around South Ossetia cutting through villages, houses and other private property in direct breach of formal borders and Human Rights. Finally, organizing the Winter Olympics on the border with Abkhazia in 2014, making use of Abkhazia's infrastructure, was another way of showing Russian superiority to the world and specific control in the region.

During Soviet times Russia had sensitive military equipment in ASSR Abkhazia, many Russian generals had their *dacha*'s there. South Ossetia with its Roki tunnel through the Caucasus mountains is of strategic importance. In an almost straight line down from South Ossetia, the region of Samsa Javakheti close to the Armenian border, used to shelter Russian military camps. Speculations exist that Russian troops could either resettle in Samsa Javakheti or simply move on to existing Russian military bases in Armenia itself, thereby able to cut off the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline and perhaps splitting Georgia in two.¹³

Putin is said to have bragged about being able to reach the Baltic states militarily in two days.¹⁴ Such statements give rise to more speculations as that the Russian army could easily establish a controlled corridor straight through Ukraine to Transnistria – a Russian-controlled no-man's land in Moldova, taking control of some sensitive aircraft industry on the way, also splitting the country for easy control.

Comparing the two cases: what Georgia and Ukraine have in common are that both had coloured revolutions (2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia and 2004 Orange revolution in Ukraine). A difference between the two countries is that the Rose Revolution heralded a clear direction towards NATO and the West with many anti-corruption measures put into place, whereas the Orange revolution did not bring about a stable regime with a clear view of the future for their country. Georgia signed the EU Associate Agreement, but when Ukraine wanted to sign, Russia came with a better offer and Ukraine switched sides, unleashing protests which then led Ukraine back to the EU-table. In both cases Russia gathered a large number of military troops at the respective borders and subsequently annexed parts of Georgia and of Ukraine by force. In the meantime, various experienced Georgian government officials have been hired by Ukrainians for advice, some Georgians taking on the Ukrainian nationality for this lucrative opportunity.

The West has a bigger interest in Ukraine than in Georgia: Ukraine is large country that borders the EU, whereas Georgia is a small country, small population, further away from Europe. Whereas Europe is dependent on Ukraine for the transit of Russian energy supplies and is directly affected in case of a conflict with Russia, the amounts of oil and gas that Georgia transits from Baku Azerbaijan to Ceyhan Turkey on the Mediterranean coast (the BTC line) and from Kazakhstan via Baku to the Georgian port of Batumi and are less significant.¹⁵ Whereas

¹² <http://www.breitbart.com/national-security/2015/01/17/effective-annexation-russia-and-georgias-south-ossetia-sign-integration-treaty/>

¹³ <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2015/01/russia-overstretching-itself-2015111531816963.html>

¹⁴ <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/en/blogs/natosource/putin-russian-troops-could-be-in-vilnius-or-warsaw-in-two-days>

¹⁵ There are old Baku-Batumi pipelines but so far new planned ones have not been completed. In the meantime the Kazakhstan oil company KazMunajGaz with encouragement of the EU wanting to be less dependent on Russian energy, is transporting oil from Kazakhstan to Batumi over sea and overland (by road and rail) to the Black Sea. <http://www.eurodialogue.eu/Kazakhstan-Defended-It-%20Interests-for-Oil%20-Transit-via-Batumi-Black-Sea-Port>

Georgia more or less maintained its pro-Western course after the Rose revolution, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine was soon deceived as it was more party-bound and lacked the spirit of a pro-European future for the country, a theme that only became a dominating factor in the Euromaidan protests in 2014.

The pattern: Putin's strategy of destabilization and intimidation

The military advantage of annexing Crimea is clear. Russia had to lease the Sebastopol naval base on the Black Sea coast for its Russian fleet at a high price with a recurring tension about renewing the lease contract every so many years. In April 2010 Medvedev and Yanukovich signed an agreement concerning the extension of the lease: Sébastopol, which has been home to the Russian Black Sea fleet since it was set up by Catherine II the Great at the end of the 18th century, should have been leased until 2042. With the annexation of Crimea the lease and high cost problem is removed altogether. Does this mean Russia will also want to annex East Ukraine? This scenario is unlikely because it is of no special military importance and furthermore, the Russian tax payer would have to cover for peoples pensions, the high unemployment rates in the region, healthcare, education and the rebuilding of the infrastructure. In view of Russian stagnating economy this would be an extra heavy burden with little to no advantage in return. Apparently it is perceived as more efficient to maintain pressure on Ukraine, destabilizing the country and thus maintaining control at a cheaper price. Question is whether this really is in Russia's advantage. From the Western economic logic, it would be more advantageous for Russia to have a prosperous Ukraine importing goods from the Russian market. Another pattern appears to be, that western leaders have not taken what Putin says too seriously, yet so far his actions match his words. Unfortunately he has also mentioned the possibility of using nuclear weapons.¹⁶ From the Georgian and Ukrainian experience so far it is clear that Putin is following the same strategy of intimidation, force and destabilization of former Soviet Republics to regain the influence lost 25 years ago.

What has the EU done?

So far about 4,700 people have been killed in Ukraine since April 2014 and almost a million have been Internally Displaced.¹⁷ Russia was immediately excluded from the G8 in 2014 as a result of having annexed Crimea and the EU imposed a series of economic sanctions against Russia: travel bans, asset freezes of officials, suspension of negotiations over Russia's joining the OECD and the International Energy Agency. A re-assessment of EU-Russia cooperation programmes is currently ongoing with a view to suspending the implementation of EU bilateral and regional cooperation programmes. Projects dealing exclusively with cross-border cooperation and civil society will be maintained. The EU has adopted a prohibition on imports originating from Crimea and Sebastopol unless accompanied by a certificate of origin from the Ukrainian authorities. Any kind of investment in Crimea or Sebastopol is outlawed, including tourism, financial aid and loans.¹⁸ Furthermore, the EU embargo includes technology and services for the use of military purposes and oil exploitation in Russia.¹⁹

Besides such sanctions the EU has brokered peace talks. During the Minsk talks late August and early September 2014, mediated by the OSCE, 12 points were negotiated ranging from immediate and two-sided ceasefire, to providing the opportunity for the OSCE to monitor the cease fire, to more self-governing power to certain districts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, with early elections to be organized on the special status of both regions, exchange of

¹⁶ *New Eastern Europe*, January-February no 1:114. Interview with M. Saakashvili.

¹⁷ <http://rt.com/news/185700-lugansk-donetsk-special-status/>

¹⁸ http://europa.eu/newsroom/highlights/special-coverage/eu_sanctions/index_en.htm

¹⁹ Ibid.

prisoners, economic development for the region, encourage national dialogue and such. Ukraine would regain control over its border and the Russians would withdraw their army and agents.²⁰
²¹ ²² Unfortunately, all the commitments of the Minsk protocol did not translate into actual results on the ground and whereas negotiations on both high and lower levels continue, even though a planned meeting in Astana was cancelled in January because both Russia and Ukraine keep accusing each other of mobilizing forces in the eastern part of Ukraine. A large column of vehicles was filmed entering Ukraine this January in Krasnodon and Ukraine plans to conscript up to 200,000 soldiers in 2015.²³

What can EU learn from the Georgian case?

Taking Putin's actions in Georgia as a test case, it could have been predicted that he would do the same with his bigger neighbour Ukraine, as people in Georgia warned several times, and as people in Poland and the Baltic states are warning now: Putin will not stop and he will push his power to the extreme. The Russians are now testing how far they can go with Europe by flying into European airspace many dozens of times, most recently over the Channel, but also by increasing pressure on EU-Greece relations by giving support to Greece, which could have great consequences should Greece need to step out of the Eurozone. Another potential source of pressure on the EU is Cyprus, backed by Russia. Historically, Russians have seen the Eastern Mediterranean as a natural extension of the Black Sea. Under the leadership of Putin, Russia is trying to regain control in the Mediterranean. The way to go about this is by controlling the natural gas (off shore natural gas) in the Levant Basin as a way to contain the energy independence Europe is striving to achieve. Hungary for example has suggested using Israeli gas to substitute for reliance on Russia. By backing Cyprus, Russia can negotiate both some kind of naval basis there, as well as get a piece of the gas-action.²⁴ What the EU can learn from Russian behavior in Georgia and Ukraine is that he will not stop but continue to find weak spots in Europe trying to get a hold over Europe, rather than cooperating with Europe.

What more can the EU do?

Even though the intention of the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP) is deep economic integration, Russia perceives this mechanism as a security threat. In the Russian worldview, the Euromaidan protests are supported by the West (mainly the U.S.) in order to establish a sphere of influence in Eastern Ukraine "In the modern world extremism is being used as a geopolitical instrument and for remaking spheres of influence. We see what tragic consequences the wave of so-called color revolutions led to,"²⁵ so said Putin in a recent speech at the Russian Security Council. This all makes clear that EU integration with states in the Eastern neighbourhood can impossibly be merely economic, and that the EU should also offer security guarantees to these countries. It would be good to have the OSCE monitoring and/or UN peace keeping forces in Eastern Ukraine. Most recently, various politicians also want to provide Ukraine with arms to defend itself against Russia. Opponents argue that this will only escalate matters and lead to a full-fledged war. Better to follow the example in the Caucasus and freeze the conflict and introduce

²⁰ <http://rt.com/news/184791-putin-ukraine-kiev-militia/>

²¹ <https://www.kyivpost.com/opinion/op-ed/osce-releases-the-12-point-protocol-agreements-reached-between-ukraine-russia-and-separatists-in-minsk-363816.html> : The document is titled 'Protocol on the results of consultations of the Trilateral Contact Group' and signed in Minsk on September 5, 2014.

²² <http://rt.com/news/185700-lugansk-donetsk-special-status/>

²³ <http://www.kyivpost.com/content/kyiv-post-plus/astana-peace-summit-postponed-as-both-sides-mobilize-in-east-ukraine-2-377285.html?flavour=mobile>

²⁴ <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/12/27/putins-mediterranean-move/>

²⁵ Putin says Russia must prevent 'color revolution', <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/11/20/us-russia-putin-security-idUSKCN0J41J620141120>

peace keeping forces instead. A UN-peace keeping force logically would consist of military from such countries as India, Brazil, Norway, but most probably also from Russia. The question of the command structure for such a force should be considered carefully in advance.

Finally, the West can do more by opening a NATO basis in Poland. Because NATO has a 1997 treaty with Russia that forbids permanent bases in the Baltic States, a close alternative is Poland. The basis would consist of a new 4,000 strong NATO 'spearhead' force of which 1,000 troops from Britain. In view of Putin's claim that he can reach the Baltic States militarily in two days, hopefully opening such a basis offers some reassurance to the people of the Baltic States²⁶ and some deterrence to Russia.

Conclusion

From the Georgian case we can learn that Russia is determined to behave as a world power and to regain control of former Soviet territory and rekindle the influence it had in the Mediterranean. Experts are divided on whether economic pressure on Russia is working. Fact is that their economy has stagnated, but the question is whether this will change Putin's political agenda. Some say he has become more compliant during peace negotiations on Eastern Ukraine. Others point out that the Russian people have been used to self-reliance since Soviet times and are willing to make sacrifices for having a strong leader and regained respect in return. Putin's increased popularity after the annexation of Crimea (almost up to 80 %), and the fact that many Russians do not see a direct correlation with Putin's policy and the economic malaise²⁷, make a strong argument for this claim. Economic malaise has so far not prevented Russia from war; in the 1990s, despite Russia's collapsed economy, the 'frozen conflict' zones came into existence and Russia fought a war with Chechnya.²⁸ Besides the Russian people as a whole, we also need to take into consideration the group of extremely wealthy businessmen around Putin. They will not gladly accept lasting damage to their financial interests and a point might be reached where they will put pressure on Putin to come to an agreement with the West.

Whereas Europe perceives security more and more in terms of economic power, the Russian people and power structures traditionally believe in the effect of a strong military.²⁹ It appears that Russia has found a way to reassert itself in the post-Soviet space with minimal military force through the destabilization of neighboring countries and parts of the EU (e.g. Greece and Cyprus) with specific problems. Therefore, the West should maintain economic and political pressure on Russia and show the intention to curb Russia's behaviour consistently and unremittingly especially in case they touch any NATO countries.

Meanwhile, the future will depend on which logic will win in Russia: the West's logic of economic interdependency and cooperation or the Russian logic that is embedded in nationalism, in an identity of Orthodox-Slavic values³⁰ and that is based on military power and destabilization of former Soviet space and Europe. The Russian proverb "economy is a good servant but a bad master"³¹ may hint at the answer.

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²⁶ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2745013/Britain-send-1-000-troops-lead-new-Nato-spearhead-force-based-Poland-amid-growing-threat-Russia.html#ixzz3QiWXn4m3>

²⁷ "Крымнаш' и Русские север", Новое Время, июнь 2014 стр. 28/29

²⁸ Leonid Bershidsky, «Poetin vecht door, sancties of niet» *NRC Handelsblad* Woensdag 4 februari 2015.

²⁹ Mihail Barabanov, «Testing a 'New Look'», <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/Testing-a-New-Look-17213>

³⁰ Inglehart's value survey; Huntington's clash of civilizations, etc.

³¹ Although the literal translation of the proverb would be "thrift is fine but stinginess is terrible", we also encountered this free translation on http://masterrussian.com/proverbs/russian_proverbs.htm and in <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/12/putin-man-year-russia-ruble/383809/>

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