



Competing Strategies: The Russian Federation vs. the European Union and the United States through Georgia and Ukraine

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Abstract: This article analyzes the shaping and transformation of the post-Soviet security thinking of Georgia and Ukraine in the context of the post-Soviet Russian foreign policy in the near abroad, often designated as a *legitimate sphere* of Russian influence, and the competition between Russia and the EU and the US in the region. After the Rose Revolution of Georgia and the Orange Revolution of Ukraine, these two countries' independent/pro-Western orientation became the main issues securitized by the Russian Federation. Correspondingly, the preservation of territorial integrity became the top security issue for Georgia (since the early 1990s), and it became so for Ukraine after the Crimean occupation (March 2014) and the renewed armed hostilities across the entirety of Ukraine since February 2022. The changes in the internal politics of these countries were transposed into the international competition between Russia and the EU/US, expressed through the clash of "Sovereign Democracy" and "Color Revolution" paradigms for the future of post-Soviet states in the 2010s and transformed into active military measures in Ukraine since 2020s and through the so-called creeping annexation of Georgia since 2010s. Practically, these are the tools of maintaining the Russian influence on the one hand and opposing the Western values and power influence, supported firstly by the European Neighborhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership projects and secondly by granting candidate status to Ukraine in 2022. Russia's military actions against Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014-2023), a response to the soft power applied by the West, aimed at the creation of buffer zones in the shape of "frozen conflicts," which could be used as indirect leverage in the hands of the Russian Federation to block the Western aspirations of Georgia and Ukraine.

Keywords: Georgia, Russia, Ukraine, European Union, United States, European Security, foreign policy.

Introduction

This article analyzes the construction and transformation of the post-Soviet security thinking of Georgia and Ukraine in the context of the post-Soviet Russian foreign policy in the near abroad, quite often designated by high-ranking Russian officials as the *legitimate sphere* of Russian influence. It presents the panorama of Russian foreign policy in the post-Soviet period across the former Soviet Union (FSU) space from the early 1990s till the present, where the independent and pro-Western orientation of Georgia and Ukraine are the main issues securitized by the Russian Federation. Correspondingly, maintaining territorial integrity became the top security concern for Georgia (since the early 1990s) and for Ukraine after the Crimean occupation by the Russian Federation and the subsequent developments in Eastern Ukraine and beyond since February 2022. Therefore, it could be argued that the post-Soviet Russian and Georgian/Ukrainian security thinking (after the Velvet Revolutions) represents a zero-sum game. The security thinking of Georgia and Ukraine is related to their foreign policy choices of joining the Western political-economic and military blocks (the EU and NATO), which annoys Russia as this will detach these two countries from its orbit—the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU)—and will erase the buffer zones with the EU and NATO.

The study will explore the main lines of Russian foreign policy since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, based on Orthodox Geopolitics, as a legitimizing narrative for its authentic sphere of influence across the FSU area on the one hand and the narrative of the victimization of Russia and Russians by the West after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, on the other. These paradigms fall within the offensive¹ and defensive realism,² construing the picture of Russia fighting against its status of a second-ranked country downgraded after the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Soviet Union. In this respect, the evident clash between the Western liberal democracy and the Russian orthodoxy in the foreign policy of the Russian Federation will be deconstructed in some detail. The Rose and Orange revolutions of Georgia and Ukraine, followed first by the Association Agreement (AA) and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) and secondly with the candidate status in the EU, are considered as the main problems securitized by the Russian Federation, while seen by Georgia and Ukraine as a chance to leave the Russian geopolitical axis. Paradoxically, the Russian-Ukrainian war brought Ukraine closer to the West (EU and US), which, alongside the military-economic support, materialized in granting the EU candidate status to the country in 2022 amid the brutal military conflict with Russia. On the other hand, Georgia seems to have peaceful and normalized relations with Russia, “thanks” to the policies of the ruling Georgian Dream party and its informal governor, ex-Russian tycoon Bidzina Ivanishvili. Under the charges of

¹ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001).

² Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1979).

the oligarchic and corrupt government of Bidzina Ivanishvili and his party, Georgian Dream, Georgia failed to receive the EU candidate status in 2022. Hence, there are legitimate concerns among the political establishments in Brussels and Washington that Georgia is gradually moving closer to the Northern orbit, attested by the failure of building the Anaklia deep sea port on Georgia's Black Sea coast and the rejection of the document brokered with the mediation of the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, between the governing and opposition political parties on the continuation of normal domestic politics in Georgia.

The article will reflect on Russia's reactions to emerging changes in the near abroad since the early 1990s through the Velvet Revolutions till the wars on Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014/2023. The second part of the study will contextualize the main transformation lines of Russian foreign policy in its near abroad in the process of Georgia's and Ukraine's aspiration toward EU/NATO membership. In this respect, the article will point to the main tools through which Russia successfully blocks this process. Last but not least, the study will place Russian-Georgian and Russian-Ukrainian conflicts within the wider prism of the post-Soviet contradiction between Russia and the West. The article concludes by highlighting, for each interaction of various actors mentioned above, each country's security thinking and motivation at different times.

Russian Reaction to the Changes in the “Near Abroad”

The advance of the national-liberation movement into power in Georgia in the early 1990s and the victory of the pro-western forces in the post-Velvet Revolution periods in post-Soviet Georgia and Ukraine (the early 2000s) were defined by Moscow as a triumph of nationalists in Tbilisi and Kyiv. Correspondingly, Kremlin securitized the discussions on national minorities in Georgia (Abkhazians and South Ossetians) and the Russian-speaking population of Eastern Ukraine. If the imminent threat of the East-West partition of Ukraine was avoided in the 1990s, Georgia witnessed two conflicts in minority-populated autonomous provinces during 1992-1993 and a full-scale war with Russia in 2008. The Civil War of the early 1990s and the secessionist conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia forced Georgia to join the CIS in exchange for stabilization of the country and freezing conflicts over 20 percent of the country's territory. Unlike Georgia, and although Ukraine managed to avoid the bloody start of the post-Soviet transition in the 1990s,³ the *Maidan Revolution* and the *Revolution of Dignity* of 2014 brought the country into chaos and war in Eastern Ukraine, with the Russia-supported secessionist drive in the Luhansk and Donetsk regions, preceded by the fully-fledged Russian occupation of Crimea. The price of ending the war, as Putin promotes throughout the FSU area, comes at a high cost for Ukraine—negating its pro-Western aspirations. Both Georgia and Ukraine persist in their desire to

³ A range of explanations could be found for this – starting with the legacy of elites and ending with their balancing politics towards Russia and the EU.

join the EU and NATO. However, the actual progress for each of them so far is signing the Association Agreement and various formats of cooperation with NATO, emerging as interim steps to gaining a Membership Action Plan (MAP).⁴

What is the main problem for Russia here? Firstly, the fact that the “Soviet Union merely transposed the Russian Empire to the twentieth century, and state-building efforts of Russian leaders, such as Putin, are similarly hostage to such pre-determined paths [...] Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union both resulted in a similar blend of authoritarianism, militaristic expansion and defensive paranoia.”⁵ The Rose and Orange Revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine alarmed Moscow. These were the very first signals of the future eastward expansion of the EU and the US interests. The term “Sovereign Democracy” entered the political lexicon as Moscow’s response to the pro-democracy “color revolutions” in the post-Soviet states.⁶ There is a man behind the term Sovereign Democracy – former deputy prime minister and close adviser to Putin, Vladislav Surkov, who outlined his thinking in *The Nationalization of the Future: Paragraphs pro-Sovereign Democracy*, which could be summarized as: “The striving for political wholeness and centralized power, the idealization of goals and the personification of politics” [...] “Russia was governed by a ruling class with a strong patriotic vision of the country’s development and undoubtedly it drew on the long tradition of national self-affirmation against real and perceived enemies.”⁷ Thus, the clash of the two mutually exclusive ideologies, the liberal democracy of the West, promoted in the near abroad of Russia through the Velvet Revolutions, and the “Sovereign Democracy” of Russia, is quite apparent.

Undoubtedly, the Velvet Revolutions, which started in Serbia and stretched across the FSU area, including Kyrgyzstan in Central Asia, were an alarm signal for Moscow. Russia was further irritated by the recognition of the independence of Kosovo, which clearly demonstrated the failure of the Kremlin’s Orthodox paradigm. Russia was unable to lend a hand to Serbia back in 1999-2000 during the NATO bombing. The Velvet Revolutions were the events that triggered a gradual transformation of Russian foreign policy into an openly aggressive stance towards its near abroad. On April 18, 2014, during his address to the Russian Parliament, President Putin justified the annexation of Crimea by citing the humiliation Russia had suffered due to many broken promises by the West, including the alleged promise not to enlarge NATO beyond the borders of reunified Germany. He stressed that “for 20 years the narrative of the alleged ‘broken promise’ of not enlarging the NATO eastward is part and parcel of Russia’s post-Soviet

⁴ The existence of external constraints which lead to the EU’s and NATO’s caution in their enlargement policy need to be recognized as well.

⁵ Christopher Leigh, “Back to the Future? Pre-Soviet History and Political Thought in the Putin Era,” in *Post-Soviet Politics: Politics, Foreign Policy and Strategic Competition*, October 3, 2013.

⁶ Leigh, “Back to the Future?”

⁷ Leigh, “Back to the Future?”

identity.”⁸ As Bruce Riedel, Senior Fellow and Director of the Brookings Intelligence Project, admits, “Vladimir Putin’s strategic goal is to undo the results of the defeat of the Soviet Union that the CIA’s secret support for the Afghan mujahedin accomplished in 1989 [...] for Putin it was the ‘greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century’.”⁹ Similarly, in 2009, Gorbachev himself recalled that “the Western Germany, the United States [...] pledged that after Germany’s reunification in 1990 ‘NATO would not move a centimeter to the east’,”¹⁰ whereas in 2007 during the Munich Security Conference, Putin stressed: “it turns out that NATO has put its frontline forces on our borders and we [...] do not react to these actions at all.”¹¹ In a broader perspective, if Russia’s real intentions in 2008 were masked by the pretext of minority protection in the Tskhinvali Region (formerly referred to as South Ossetia during the Soviet era), as President Putin claimed at that time, the aggression in Ukraine in 2014 and 2020-22 was an act of revenge, by Putin himself, for past humiliation.

The Russian Revenge: Blocking Georgia and Ukraine on the Way to EU/NATO?

Russian *revenge* has two dimensions: practical and ideological. The former is neatly highlighted by NATO’s Defence Planning Committee: “Russia’s ability and intent to undertake significant military actions without much warning, represents a far-reaching threat to the maintenance of security and stability in the Euro-Atlantic zone,”¹² whereas the latter is succinctly summarized by Aleksandr Dugin, who writes about the clash of civilizations and the danger that Russian orthodoxy faces in the modern age, linking the Catholic expansion to NATO expansion:

Here the geopolitical sense is more complex. Catholicism symbolizes Europe, the same way as Orthodoxy symbolizes Russia. The provoked conflict hinders the development of Russian-European relations [...] Who stands to gain from this? Neither Europe, not Russia, nor the Vatican, nor the Russian Orthodox Church. Only the U.S. does. We are for dialogue with Catholicism: but in this case there is no dialogue but provocation, analogous to NATO’s eastward expansion.¹³

⁸ Michael Rühle, “NATO Enlargement and Russia: Myths and Realities,” *NATO Review*, July 1, 2014, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2014/07/01/nato-enlarge-ment-and-russia-myths-and-realities/index.html>.

⁹ Justin Lynch, “Putin’s Machiavellian Moment,” *The Weekly Wonk*, July 24, 2014, accessed September, 2014, <http://weeklywonk.newamerica.net/articles/putins-machiavellian-moment/>.

¹⁰ Andreas M. Bock, “Too Blind to See the Threat We Pose to Russia ...,” *European Union Foreign Affairs Journal*, no. 3 (2014): 45-56, 50.

¹¹ Bock, “Too Blind to See the Threat We Pose to Russia ...,” 50.

¹² Bock, “Too Blind to See the Threat We Pose to Russia ...,” 52.

¹³ Leigh, “Back to the Future?”

Russia became particularly insulted due to the decision of a number of former Soviet republics or “allies” in Eastern Europe to join NATO and the EU (two very different “creatures” in Russian eyes in terms of threat perception and acceptability) and due to US support of pro-Western governments in countries such as Georgia and Ukraine.¹⁴ The Orange Revolution in Ukraine and the Rose Revolution in Georgia brought to power elites who envisioned the future of their respective countries in the EU and NATO. Precisely because the two organizations’ respective enlargement processes are not intended as anti-Russian projects, they are open-ended and—paradoxically—are bound to be perceived by Russia as a permanent assault on its status and influence.¹⁵ This is the main security threat to the Russian state: with the incorporation of Georgia and Ukraine into the EU and NATO, the so-called “buffer zones” between Russia and the West will disappear and the military block will border Russia itself.

Thus, if the August War of 2008 was a Russian attempt to stop Georgia’s aspiration from joining NATO and the EU, or at least to transform it into a more vague promise for the future, the attack on Ukraine in 2022 reveals Putin’s true desire and his broader intentions. If, during the inception phase in 2014–2015, the war with Ukraine could be seen as “a reunification of Russian lands and Russian souls, mirroring the process of German reunification in 1990 and [...] a national reconstruction entailing some sort of revisionism of the post-Soviet geopolitical settlement,”¹⁶ the large-scale aggression launched in 2022 was evidently aimed at changing the regime in Kyiv. The two cases of military drive of the post-Soviet Russian foreign policy in Georgia (2008) and in Ukraine (in 2014 and 2022 in particular) could be seen as revenge for the humiliation of Russia in the early 2000s and cementing its influence in the legitimate zone of its strategic interests termed as the Near Abroad. Considering the fact that the NATO bombing campaign over Serbia was seen as a catastrophic humiliation in Russian foreign policy circles, Putin is now intent on reasserting Russian strength and gaining respect on the world stage.¹⁷ There is no argument against the claim that in 2008, Russia attempted to use Kosovo’s de-facto independence after the NATO intervention as a justification for obtaining international recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. During the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia, Putin sent a clear message that he was prepared to use military force to promote foreign

¹⁴ Thanos Dokos, “How the EU Got It So Wrong in Ukraine,” *Friends of Europe*, April 24, 2014, <https://www.friendsofeurope.org/insights/how-the-eu-got-it-so-wrong-in-ukraine/>.

¹⁵ Rühle, “NATO Enlargement and Russia.”

¹⁶ Roberto Orsi, “The Irreversible Crisis of the Ukrainian Experiment,” *Eurocrisis in the Press Blog* (London School of Economics and Political Science, May 12, 2014), <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/eurocrisispress/2014/05/12/the-irreversible-crisis-of-the-ukrainian-experiment/>.

¹⁷ Leigh, “Back to the Future?”

policy objectives.¹⁸ Obviously, the occupation of Crimea and Abkhazia/ South Ossetia are relatively similar developments and newly emerged problems in qualitative terms, but undoing their results would be much harder in Crimea than in Abkhazia or South Ossetia, considering the Russian co-ethnicity in the area. However, this will depend on the decisiveness of the western countries to withstand the Russian Federation's new military policy towards its near abroad. For the moment, the Russian Federation is concentrated on consolidating its power in the so-called Donetsk (DNR) and Luhansk (LNR) Peoples' Republics in Eastern Ukraine, as with the Western/ US support to Ukraine the aim to capture Kyiv and impose the pro-Russian regime under Victor Yanukovich (as it was assumed) became unrealistic.

The main Russian objective—the creation of buffer zones between the Russian Federation and the EU/NATO member states—is achieved successfully through creating frozen, or what would be frozen conflicts in Georgia and Ukraine, respectively. In the meantime, the drive of Georgia and Ukraine towards effective membership in the EU and NATO is “blocked.” As the experience of some countries demonstrates, there is a long run between the EU candidate status and the actual EU membership, whereas with the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO directly, the mechanism of the Membership Action Plan [MAP] was officially removed and off the table. From now on, any reference to the MAP as the only path to joining NATO is utterly hypocritical. Either one is ready for NATO or not! The reference to angering or provoking Russia would be utterly hypocritical as well! NATO's credibility will be tested by its commitment to admit Georgia and Ukraine any time soon. This will also be a top challenge for the US policymakers in the wider region of the South Caucasus, with Georgia on its priority list, as the other two countries of the region—Armenia and Azerbaijan (plus Belarus on the Eastern border of the EU)—have made a clear choice for the Russian orbit in military and economic terms.

The August War of 2008 and the Ukrainian Crisis of 2014/2022 should be considered in this context. According to Vicken Cheterian, international competition was the main cause of the August War and the main source of instability in the Caucasus – a result of “increasing engagement (and competition), both military and economic, between the two major powers – the United States and Russia.”¹⁹ This holds true for the later developments in Ukraine, which became the main competitive battleground between the Russian Federation and the West: the imposed sanctions, military deployments, and economic aid to Ukraine are the testimony to the above-mentioned statement.

¹⁸ Dokos, “How the EU Got It So Wrong in Ukraine.”

¹⁹ Vicken Cheterian, “The Big Re-freeze – Has the Regional Balance of Power Merely Cooled into a Different Configuration?” (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2011), accessed May 17, 2011, <http://www.iiss.org/programmes/russia-and-eurasia/about/georgian-russian-dialogue/caucasus-security-insight/vicken-cheterian/the-big-re-freeze/>.

The Case of Georgia

I would argue that it was not the developments of the pre-August 2008 in particular that brought the change to the conflict zones of Georgia, but rather the premeditated activities of all actors, resulting in changes in their external allegiances. A broader pretext of the August War could be constructed, stretching its roots back to 2001. “What really changed the situation was the change of administration in Russia the following year. Vladimir Putin came to power and gradually instituted policies to punish Georgia, end Abkhazia’s isolation, and change the balance of power in the conflict,” de Waal claims.²⁰ Ronald Asmus adds that “Moscow had little interest in a resolution of these conflicts which could have allowed Georgia to go to the West even faster,”²¹ thus supporting the idea that the openly declared pro-western, pro-EU, and pro-NATO course of the Rose Revolution government was particularly alarming for Moscow and Russia could not tolerate encirclement by the NATO member states. According to Asmus, the August War was the start of a long chain, which was not only directed against Georgia or targeted at a regime change in the country; rather, it was aimed at undermining European security: “an increasingly nationalist and revisionist Russia was also rebelling against the European system that it felt no longer met its interests and had been imposed on it during a moment of temporary weakness.”²² The August War was not a problem of Georgia itself, but a testing ground for the future actions in Europe, as “through the August War Russia managed to win out over its more powerful competitors in its most volatile and vulnerable borderland – the Caucasus frontier.”²³

Russia did not even hide its intentions at that time. Dmitry Rogozin, the Russian envoy to NATO, mentioned that “as soon as Georgia gets some kind of prospect from Washington [in terms] of NATO membership [...] the next day, the process of real secession of these two territories from Georgia will begin.”²⁴ This is an indirect testament to the claim that Russia was comfortable with the status of the frozen conflicts as there were no real aspirations towards the Euro-Atlantic structures on the part of Georgia. As soon as Saakashvili’s government openly embarked on a pro-western path with the aim of bringing more security to the country, looking for possible solutions to Georgia’s secessionist troubles through

²⁰ Thomas de Waal, *The Caucasus: An Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 166.

²¹ Ronald D. Asmus, *A Little War that Shook the World: Georgia, Russia, and the Future of the West* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 4.

²² Asmus, *A Little War that Shook the World*, 4.

²³ Ronald G. Suny, “Russia has Taken on Its Powerful Competitors for the First Time Since 1991” (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2011), accessed May 17, 2014, <http://www.iiss.org/programmes/russia-and-eurasia/about/georgian-russian-dialogue/caucasus-security-insight/ronald-suny/a-watershed-in-east-west-relations/>.

²⁴ David J. Smith, “The Saakashvili Administration’s Reaction to Russian Policies Before the 2008 War,” in *The Guns of August 2008: Russia’s War in Georgia*, ed. Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program Joint Center (New York: Routledge, 2009), 125.

western institutions, the need for immediate action in the conflict zones against the Georgian government became clear for Moscow. The resolution of these conflicts was the main prerequisite for Georgia's membership in NATO. Hence, playing the secessionist territories against Georgia would bring Russia its desired goals – to counter the pro-western, anti-Russian aspirations of the government of Georgia. Military intervention was the final measure undertaken by the Russian Federation against Georgia. The attitudes of the current Georgian Dream government toward Russia and the West—zero problems with Russia and stumble (over) its way towards the Euro-Atlantic structures—with heightened anti-Western rhetoric from the side of the far-right groups of Georgia, is in the best interests of the Russian Federation until it is preoccupied with the war in Ukraine. Russia is active in Georgia through its policy of creeping annexation beyond the Administrative Boundary Lines (ABLs) in the Tskhinvali Region, constantly creating problems for the population living in the nearby villages, whereas the reaction of the central Georgian authorities is passive, short of informing the European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM) in Georgia and tabling the issue at the Geneva International Discussions on Georgia.

The Case of Ukraine

A similar reasoning could be valid for Russia's actions in Ukraine. The following aspects are listed as the main motivations: "foreign policy concerns, especially worries about Ukraine building closer ties with Europe in general and NATO in particular, are behind Kremlin policy toward Ukraine."²⁵ The tabled Association Agreement (AA) and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA), followed by the Revolution of Dignity and the change of the government in Kyiv, became the first alarm for Moscow in 2013, pushing Moscow to capture Crimea and then to extend its warfare activities in Eastern Ukraine in 2014 following to the parliament unseating president Viktor Yanukovich on February 22, 2014. It could be argued that the quick action of Russia, first in Crimea and later in eastern Ukraine, was conditioned by the surprising success of the *Maidan* and the advancement of the Eastern Partnership Program to the Association Agreement, which Russia saw as a stepping stone to organizations such as the EU and NATO, whose eastward expansion was seen by Russia's security establishment as a major threat.²⁶ However, some experts blame the EU itself for granting Russia "free reign" over Ukraine. In this respect, they point to the personal friendship between Gerhard Schröder and Vladimir Putin, leading the latter to yield to the international deal for the construction of the Nord Stream gas pipeline, transporting natural gas under the Baltic Sea from the Russian Vybord directly to the German gas hub in Greifswald, which effectively bypassed Ukraine

²⁵ Timothy Frye, "A Tale of Two Russian Narratives," *Perspectives on Peace & Security* (Carnegie Corporation of New York, August 2014), <https://perspectives.carnegie.org/us-russia/a-tale-of-two-russian-narratives/>.

²⁶ Robert McMahon, "Ukraine in Crisis," *Council on Foreign Relations*, updated August 25, 2014, <https://www.cfr.org/background/ukraine-crisis>.

and leads to its possible geopolitical instability (materialized with great punctuality).²⁷ In this context, could one argue for a clash of the two security matrices—of the EU and Russia—in the process of shaping energy security diversification projects running across the FSU countries – Georgia and Ukraine? And if this is so, how can the liberal democracy promotion projects of the EU/US withstand the Russian energy and military policy? The developments of 2022 in Ukraine and the change of the cabinet and chancellor in Germany totally changed the balance in favor of EU vs. Russia – starting with the negation of certification of the Nord Stream gas pipeline from the side of the EU and activation of the leading European countries to reduce their dependencies on the Russian energy commodities, primarily through increasing the gas flow from Azerbaijan.

Different Timing, Similar Outcomes

In this respect, what are the ensuing problems for Georgia and Ukraine locally and for the EU/US internationally? Firstly, there is the issue of territorial integrity. The key to resolving the border violations lies with the Kremlin. In seeking a way out of the civil war and constant defeats in the war in Abkhazia, Georgia joined the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in December 1993. Afraid that Russia would recognize the independence of secessionist regions, Georgia more or less paid tribute to Russia's interests until 2008 by accommodating internal and external policies. Likewise, Ukraine was initially ready to consider options of joining the Eurasian Economic Union if this would secure peace in Eastern Ukraine. However, due to the negative experience, Ukraine and the European countries did not trust Russia. Just like Georgia in the 1990s, they currently have a bad and a worse choice between a deeply frozen conflict at the border of Europe or a total erosion of the European security system. The developments since 2022 make the former scenario a realistic one, where Russia successfully manages to securitize national minorities in its near abroad in service to its foreign policy interests – Abkhazians and South Ossetians in Georgia and Russians in Ukraine. The alleged motives of the early 1990s—protecting national minorities in a neighboring county, Georgia—were cemented into the national security concept. The same policy line is applied to Ukraine in 2022 in terms of granting Russian citizenships to the inhabitants of the occupied territories: Russia will defend its citizens in any part of the world through any means necessary. To this end, Putin initiated changes in the security concept note of the Russian Federation. Thus, the free actions of Russia in its near abroad bring some constraints to the EU's choices to lend a hand to its partners in the former Soviet Union area. Nevertheless, since 2022, the EU's determination to support Ukraine economically and militarily, with the leadership of the United States and Great Britain,

²⁷ Orsi, "The Irreversible Crisis of the Ukrainian Experiment."

ultimately changes this EU policy line, and the ongoing transformation in its domestic and foreign policies signals a gradual transition from the “Quiet Superpower”²⁸ into a more active player in global politics.

Collision of the Russian and the Western Paradigms

Georgia and Ukraine are not Russia’s primary objectives; rather, they are tools for gaining leverage over the West. This clash between Russia and the West was not the case in 2008 and 2014, or the open aggression against Ukraine since 2022, but the expression of the broader post-Soviet contradiction of two main paradigms: orthodoxy or Orthodox geopolitics for the FSU area, promoted by Russia, and the spread of liberal democracy and western values, promoted by the EU and the U.S. Qualitatively, these are the tools of maintaining the Russian influence on the one hand and exerting Western values and power across the FSU area on the other. Russia is successful in transferring “ethnic” problems beyond its borders – Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the 1990s and Chechnya in early 2000, whereas the August War of 2008 signaled a shift in Russia’s foreign policy approach – a direct intervention where necessary, repeated in the case of Ukraine of 2014 at a small scale and in 2020-23 as a full-blown policy of the Russian Federation.

As a counter-narrative, the West suggested an umbrella of European values for those who would share it, proposing tools for political rapprochement, such as the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) and the Eastern Partnership (EP). Although these tools triggered Georgia and Ukraine to adopt successful foreign policy driven by cultural values, which gradually led them to depart from the Russian Orthodox camp, they have some limitations. Namely, they do not provide new partners and would-be members protection from Russian aggression, as demonstrated in 2008 and 2014 in the cases of Georgia and Ukraine, respectively. The leadership of the US assumed during 2021-2022, and the activation of the EU added to the security dimension and turned the EU into an active security player on its Eastern flank. In addition, this drive of detachment from Russia became a “mental revolution” for Georgia, as declared by Saakashvili. Immediately after 2014, a similar kind of separation seemed difficult for Ukraine due to its ethnic diversity; it was fully realized by 2020-2022. Nevertheless, one overall conclusion can be made: through its wars in Georgia and Ukraine, Russia eroded the foundations of the Russian Orthodox camp, meaning that relations between Russia and Ukraine would never be the same after this crisis. Nevertheless, it presented a serious challenge to the modern system of European security.

Still, this is not only an ideological and political problem. The above-described intervention of Russia in Georgia and Ukraine demonstrates that Russia could easily shift from applying soft power to hard power when it deems it necessary

²⁸ Andrew Moravcsik, “Europe: The Quiet Superpower,” *French Politics* 7, no. 3/4 (September-December 2009): 403-422, <https://doi.org/10.1057/fp.2009.29>.

for the protection of its foreign policy interests. Russia will not tolerate the possibility of losing influence over the FSU member states. It will maintain it either through soft or hard power, as demonstrated in the gas wars with Georgia and Ukraine following the Velvet Revolutions of 2003 and 2004 (soft power) and through the military interventions in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014/2022 (hard power), respectively. It could be claimed that these are not only problems for Georgia and Ukraine, as Russia plays across the vulnerable European periphery through these crises. In turn, the EU found itself unable to foresee the real desires of Russia in the August War, and therefore, got the so-called Ukrainian crisis, later transformed into the Russian-Ukrainian War, which is the second military inter-state conflict in Europe after the Balkan Wars of the 1990s if we consider the 2008 Russian-Georgian War as the first one. From the experience of the initial years of the Russian aggression, the West, both the EU and the United States, acted more firmly against the Russian second invasion of Ukraine and provided significant military and economic support to Kyiv, transforming Ukraine into a vast buffer zone between Russia and the West.

Conclusion

The transformation of Russian foreign policy in the post-Soviet period in the near abroad and the subsequent developments in Georgia and Ukraine demonstrate some important similarities. These are mainly issues that became represented and, later, securitized in both Georgia and Ukraine. These include Georgia's territorial integrity and independence in the early 1990s and independent foreign policy choices since the 2000s. Following the Rose Revolution, in particular, Georgia became threatened by Russia within the framework of its post-Soviet foreign or strategic interests in the near abroad. The same problems emerged for Ukraine after 2004 when Ukraine's foreign policy choices became securitized by Russia, in 2014 – when the division or partition of Ukraine became a real problem for the country, and since 2020 – with the start of Russia's open and direct intervention in Ukraine.

In this context, the erosion of the Russian Orthodox paradigm is apparent: after the events of 2008 in Georgia and 2014/2020 in Ukraine, Russia could not hope for the success of the Orthodox card, but it is questionable whether this can be altered through military means. Arguably, the wars of 2008 and 2014 could be seen as reactions to the success of the Velvet Revolutions that encircled the Russian Federation in the region. The wars were aimed at altering the changing international realities in Russia's near abroad. As for the domestic "market," the Kremlin proposed the concept of "sovereign democracy" as an alternative paradigm to the liberal democracy project promoted by the West and reinforced with the idea of fighting against Banderists and neo-Nazi groups in Ukraine. In addition, the wars mentioned above were not revenge for the Velvet Revolutions—a sign of the rude interference of the West in Russia's near abroad—but the reactions to Russia's international humiliation. The humiliation began with

German reunification, continued through the precedent of Kosovo and concluded with the EU's eastward expansion to Ukraine's borders.

Thus, the Russian military confronted the West's applied soft power in the strategic countries of the Eastern Partnership – Georgia and Ukraine. Russia's drive was aimed at creating buffer zones in Georgia and Ukraine by initiating "frozen conflicts," which could be used as indirect leverage in the hands of the Russian Federation to block the progress of Western aspirations in those two countries. The fact that both the EU and NATO are neither ready to provide meaningful tools for the resolution of these problems, nor accept any new member with territorial problems within the state or with another state is a testament to the regrettable reality: Russia has an *indirect veto right* on the EU's and NATO's expansion policy in its near abroad (the process of NATO accession of the Nordic countries sends some counter signals) and no longer tolerates Western expansion through political tools. Russia's use of military action to exercise its interests became visible through emerging security challenges at the borders of the EU, where "termination of the eastward expansion of NATO may serve as a bargaining chip."²⁹ Whatever the final outcome, it is evident that the geopolitical and security challenges are at the top of the EU's current agenda in its eastern neighborhood and will have to cope with the increasing rhetoric of the Russian Federation regarding the non-feasibility of the UN and the post-WWII world order. This world order is Western-centered and does not accommodate the legitimate interests of the other global players in contemporary politics, such as Russia and the BRICS in general. The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has been accompanied by an intensification of Russian rhetoric, especially in the context of the Sino-Russian diplomatic nexus. At least on a rhetorical level, the two states are now attempting to formulate an ideological prerequisite and a united geopolitical front to directly challenge the existing international order.³⁰

Disclaimer

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²⁹ Andreas M. Bock, "Too Blind to See the Threat We Pose to Russia," 53.

³⁰ Angela Stent, "Russia and China: Axis of Revisionists?" (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, February 2020), https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/FP_202002_russia_china_stent.pdf.

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