

The Dubious Perspective of the Eastern Partnership Countries Joining the European Union

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Abstract

There were significant geopolitical shuffles in Europe in the early 1990s. The dissolution of the Soviet Union, the collapse of socialist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe & the disintegration of Yugoslavia emerged as severe threats to destabilizing the international system. Some European countries of the former Eastern Bloc joined the E.U. and NATO swiftly. In contrast, the adjacent countries to Russia of the so-called Eastern Partnership, even Russia in the early '90s, have shown interest in close cooperation with the West. However, the E.U.'s support for the Orange Revolution in Ukraine and the Rose Revolution in Georgia led to a loss of confidence. Discontent escalated, and the EU-Russia partnership froze after the occupation of Crimea and its annexation to Russia. Having recovered economically and politically, Russia seeks its restoration as a superpower and the rival U.S. In this perspective, Russia envisages perpetuating its influence on the countries that had been members of the Soviet Union. Presumably, Russia is directly or indirectly trying to impede the European course of the Eastern Partnership countries that have already declared an interest in becoming E.U. members. The developments in the most significant countries of the Eastern Partnership countries, Ukraine and Georgia, confirm the difficulties they face in claiming the right to join the E.U and N.A.T.O. Has the E.U. Enlargement to the East reached its limits? Can the Eastern Partnership countries ever become E.U. members?

Keywords: E.U., Eastern Partnership, Russia, Ukraine, Georgia

1. Introduction

After the fall of existing socialism, the reunification of East & West Germany, and the U.S.S.R dissolution, many of Russia's most influential countries rushed to strengthen their relations with the West and achieved some of them in a relatively short time to join the E.U. and NATO. While Russia no longer had the power to contain the massive exodus of its old comrades to the society of abundance and prosperity represented by the West, the E.U., with the encouragement and support of the United States, hastened to welcome and "Europeanize" the emerging new states.

The Enlargement policy's mantle embellished the project's aim at peaceful coexistence and regional cooperation between European countries. Nevertheless, the former superpower Russia has lost considerable ground from its territories and has threatened its strategic depth. Moreover, the new Republics neighboring the European Union have adopted more liberal policies, while the Soviet Republics, particularly in Central Asia, have retained leadership personnel from the Soviet time to this day. Intending to avoid dividing lines between enlarged Europe and its neighbors, the E.U. launched first 2003 the European Neighborhood Policy.¹

For the six adjacent to Russia countries^{1 2}, the backyard of Russia, in other words, a joint initiative was launched in 2009³, the Eastern Partnership. Unsurprisingly Russia interpreted this initiative as an intrusion to its sphere of influence and was further distanced from the West.

¹ European Commission, 2003. *Wider Europe - Neighborhood: A new framework for relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbors*, Commission Communication COM (2003), 104 final, Brussels.

² Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan 3.12.2008 COM (2008) 823 final COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL Eastern Partnership (SEC (2008) 2974)

³ Joint Declaration of the Prague Eastern Partnership Summit Prague, 7 May 2009

There is pronounced antagonism for influence in the Eastern European Neighborhood, and the E.U. has a pivotal role in the geopolitical game between U.S. and Russia. Actually, between 1989 and today, the E.U.'s political and economic influence, through programs and all kinds of bilateral, multilateral, and regional cooperation, has increased significantly, decisively influencing the balance of power in Europe.

Meanwhile, Russia has gradually and carefully regained its lost strength and confidence with Putin as Prime Minister or President, making a comeback as a superpower. In this context, Russia is trying to secure its regional dominance, keep its former satellite countries from joining NATO, and regain its lost strategic depth.

A war to increase influence in countries that gained independence after the U.S.S.R. collapse is still ongoing. In this war waged mostly covertly, the E.U. and the other international actors involved use various strategies and policy tools. Underground warfare takes place on an operational and psychological level. To this end, all possible means are used, technical and development assistance is provided, strategic investments are funded, rules and standards are enforced, diplomatic measures are taken to resolve crises, and propaganda is orchestrated by spreading false news.

Open war, though not preferred, is usually of short duration when conditions dictate. In the power game context, the big players typically blame each other for their agreed zones of influence. However, informal and covert cooperation seems to exist when pursuing specific goals of interest. Despite Trump's allegations, in this sense, there is evidence that he accepted help from Russia in winning the 2016 presidential election. There is no hesitation on Putin's part to fire up trouble in European democracies and America, too, since the old and tested policy "divide and conquer" always brings results. It seems that Putin prefers to return Europe to being a continent dominated by spheres of influence rather than self-determination.

To what extent does EU-Russia affect the enlargement of the E.U. to the East?

2. The Development of EU-Russia Relations after the End of the Cold-War

We distinguish three main phases in developing EU-Russia relations.

1992-1999 Difficult transition in the post-Cold War era and pursuit of closer ties with the E.U.

Since Yeltsin's rise to power (November 1991), Russia has sought to reaffirm its international position by first opening up to international cooperation structures. However, the negotiations with the E.U. continued for 19 months because the two sides pushed in different directions. Russia pushed for more trade concessions, while E.U. pushed for an international agreement that would make changes in Russia irreversible. In addition, the insistence of the E.U. negotiators on the primacy of common values on the partnership's foundation had been a source of problems (Haukkala, 2015, p.27). Finally, a Partnership Cooperation Agreement (P.C.A) between the E.U and Russia was signed in 1994.

During the 90s, President Yeltsin and Foreign Minister Chernomyrdin reiterated that Russia was interested in cooperation and sought to become a member of the E.U in the long run. In this context, the Russian side also proposed signing a Free Trade Agreement. Naturally, the E.U. welcomed this opening of Russia. However, there was always a common belief that Russia was too vast in territory and population and militarily too independent and vital as a global actor to join the club. As such, Russia's membership could alter the balance and nature of the E.U. (Pursiainen, 2008, p.154).

In the late '90s, Russia adopted a more pragmatic and self-confident line vis à vis the E.U. Thus, the Russian Federation Middle Term Strategy toward the European Union (2000-2010) provided that the relations between the E.U. and Russia should be based on the "objective need to establish a multipolar world," with Russia being one of the "poles".

In parallel, Russia tried to contain the further deconstruction of the Commonwealth of Independent States by claiming its presence and influence. Particularly in the North Caucasus, Russia was confronted with the emergence of separatist unrest. However, Russia's actions to quell the unrest impacted the relations with the E.U. The military campaign against Chechnya resulted in the first major crisis between the E.U and Russia. Due to the inappropriate handling of the Chechenian issue, the ratification of the P.C.A was ruptured and was only continued in 1996, after the cessation of hostilities. In 1999 the humanitarian intervention of N.A.T.O against Serbia backed by the E.U annoyed Russia and resulted in distancing Russia from the West.

2000-2014 Gradual Recovery of Russia as a global power

With Putin, gradually, Russia regained its prestige and improved its economic situation. Therefore, Russia openly resumed the well-known practices of handling whatever it considered it's own. In this context, Putin resolutely suppressed the unrest in Northern Caucasus.

Putin's view was that the E.U. as a "pole" could potentially balance with Russia and other great powers against the

United States' hegemony in a multipolar world. In this sense, Putin favored building Russia's relations with the E.U. based on a treaty and a strategic partnership. Prodi's Commission had the same view⁴ ("everything but institutions").

As the C.I.S.'s largest country, Russia could maintain its freedom to determine and implement domestic and foreign policies. Moreover, by using the status and advantages of a Euro-Asian state, Russia could maintain the independence of its position and activities in international organizations. (Russian Federation, 1999, cited in Pursiainen, p.154).

However, gradually Russia became more assertive. Finally, Russia's 2008 military intervention in South Ossetia showed that Russia was ever since willing to openly claim areas it considers rightfully to be within its sphere of influence.

2014-2020 Escalation of tension between Russia and the West. Suspension of E.U. diplomatic and economic relations with Russia

Following the destabilization of Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea (in March 2014), the E.U., aligned with the U.S. and NATO, gradually imposed restrictive measures against Russia. The restrictive measures, still in effect, cover a wide range and include the suspension of diplomatic relations, the seizure of assets and travel restrictions, the imposition of economic sanctions, and restrictions on economic cooperation.

In 2014, the EU-Russia summit was canceled, and E.U. member states decided not to hold a regular bilateral summit. As a result, bilateral talks with Russia on visa issues and the new E.U.-Russia agreement have been suspended. In addition, the G7 summit was convened in Brussels on June 4-5, 2014, without Russia being invited to participate. Since then, Russia has not participated in the meetings of the largest industrialized countries. E.U. countries have also been in favor of suspending negotiations on Russia's accession to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (O.E.C.D.) and the International Energy Agency (I.A.E.A.).

The E.U. has also imposed economic sanctions against Russia in specific financial areas and linked sanctions to the Minsk agreements⁵ full implementation³. As a result, economic sanctions have been extended to July 31, 2020. Economic sanctions apply to a) restricting the access of some Russian banks and companies to the E.U.'s primary and secondary capital markets, b) banning arms exports and imports, c) banning the export of dual-use goods, and d) giving Russia access to certain sensitive technologies and services used for oil research and production. Russia reacted by imposing sanctions against several countries, including a total ban on food imports from the E.U., United States, Norway, Canada & Australia. The sanctions against Russia are still in effect, and it seems that they will be lifted if only Moscow fulfills the Minsk II agreements.

The sanctions caused significant economic damage to some E.U. countries (Greece included) and Russia. At the same time, Putin accused the United States of conspiring with Saudi Arabia to reduce oil prices. Due to the sanctions, Russia's economic losses amounted to some 0.5-1.5% of the G.D.P. growth and, in a way, prevented the continuation of the Russian military activities in Ukraine. Furthermore, although Putin agreed with Merkel to ease tensions and despite Russia's difficult economic situation, Putin hastened funding for the construction in 25 months of the enormous double bridge (road, rail) that connects the Kerch Strait access to the Azov Sea. Thus, Russia created a "fait accompli" to continue to control Crimea and the entire Caucasus region.

3. Perspectives of Joining the E.U. for the Eastern Partnership Countries - Developments & Impediments

The cases of two countries, former members of the U.S.S.R., were investigated to see how things have evolved since 1992 and to assess the perspectives of joining the E.U. These two countries are significant for the geopolitical game between the U.S. and Russia.

Both countries were constituent parts of the U.S.S.R. and became independent after its dissolution. Even though Russia recognized its independence, it did not cease influencing its political life and sought to regain its influence by exacerbating ethnic conflicts. Thus, Russia challenges these countries' sovereignty and geographical integrity and tries to change borders by annexing areas that want to become independent. On the other hand, the E.U. has not stopped financially supporting the two countries to consolidate peace and create modern state structures⁶.

Both countries have made significant progress in their European course and have signed association and cooperation agreements with the EU

⁴ Prodi, R.2002. Speech 02/69. A Wider Europe-A Proximity Policy the key to Stability. Peace, Security, And Stability-International Dialogue and the Role of the EU. Sixth ECSA-World Conference. Jean Monnet Project. Brussels,5-6 December 2002, p.6

⁵ The Minsk Agreements deal with the cessation of the conflict and the restoration of the peace in Ukraine.

⁶ Demsey, J, 2008.A role for Merkel as a Bridge to Russia. New York Times

3.1 Georgia

The case of Georgia is of particular interest because, in this country, there are two minorities, Abkhaz and South Ossetian people, who do not wish to be part of the U.N. recognized state of Georgia. The gravity of this refusal is reflected in the fact that the areas controlled by these two minorities represent 20% of Georgia's geographical space. Moreover, while the E.U. supports Georgia's integrity and European course, Russia provides financial and military protection to South Ossetia and Abkhazia's de facto states.

3.1.1 The de facto State of Abkhazia

Abkhazia suffered immeasurably under Stalin, its people were subjected to cultural discrimination and ethnic cleansing. The policy of "Georgianization" carried on after the Stalin years caused outbursts of violence. However, Abkhazia distanced itself from Georgia by forming a political system that boosted the Abkhaz ethnic group. Abkhazia also formed ethnic coalitions with Armenians and Russians and, more broadly, with north Caucasians. In 1989, the ethnic Abkhaz population represented only 17% of half a million inhabitants of Abkhazia, while Georgians accounted for 45%, Armenians 14 %, and Russians 12%. Nevertheless, autonomous structures, such as the Supreme Soviet of the Abkhaz Autonomous Republic, counterbalanced the Abkhaz weak demographic status (Cornell, 2002, p. 265).

Georgians sought the full incorporation of Abkhazia in Georgia, while the Abkhazians wanted to create their state. The final conflict was at the beginning of the summer of 1992 when the Georgian army invaded Sukhumi. Russia's involvement on the Abkhaz side, especially during the war's initial stages, further worsened the conflict. Although Russia officially endorsed the Republic of Georgia's territorial integrity, Russia armed the Abkhazian fighters with Russian guns, sent aircraft to bomb civilian targets in Georgian-controlled territory and sent warships to protect the Georgian-held Sukhumi. In the meantime, some skilled Russian-trained and paid warriors defended Abkhaz territory in Tkvarcheli. The clashes stopped in July 1993 with Russian mediation. The U.N. set up an observation commission (U.N.O.M.I.G.) to monitor whether the conflicts in the region continued or not. Despite the agreement, clashes continued.

As usual in international politics, on the one hand, Moscow has shown official neutrality, condemned human rights abuses, and imposed sanctions on both Georgia and Abkhazia in response to their misconduct (Human Rights Watch, 1995, Vol.7, No 7, p.7). On the other hand, it gave humanitarian assistance, e.g., evacuating civilians trapped in the fighting and providing emergency supplies, particularly to locales with a significant Russian minority in danger. From the very beginning, Russia instructed diplomats to facilitate the peace process and, in 1994, deployed peacekeeping troops to enforce the ceasefire (Human Rights Watch/ Helsinki, 1995, Vol.7, N° 7, p.7). A ceasefire agreement was signed in May 1994 between Tbilisi and Sukhumi in Moscow. The Moscow Agreement on the separation of forces ended the bloody clashes. According to the Agreement and the United Nations Observer Mission to Georgia (U.N.O.I.M.I.G.), a separate peacekeeping force composed of Commonwealth Independent States (C.I.S.) troops was created.

However, this peace agreement facilitated by the United Nations and Russia and a peacekeeping force of the C.I.S. comprising mostly Russian troops deployed between Georgian and Abkhazian territory froze the situation giving a lease of life to the de facto state of Abkhazia. The de facto state of Abkhazia owes its existence to the Russian military and economic support and the International Community's reluctance to confront Moscow.

The involvement of Abkhazian forces on Russia's side of the Russian-Georgian war (2008) led to Russia's official recognition of Abkhazia, the cancellation of the 1994 ceasefire agreement, and the end of the U.N. mission. Following the recognition of Abkhazia from Russia on August 28, 2008, the Georgian parliament declared Abkhazia a Russian-occupied territory, a position recognized by the International Community's overwhelming majority. Furthermore, after the war, Russia ended the C.I.S. peacekeeping force in Abkhazia and froze Georgia's accession to the C.I.S.

Survival and imitation of statehood have been possible due to a dependent relationship with Russia, which has proceeded to the extent that Abkhazia pursues a common defense and foreign policy to protect its borders, receives Russian pensions, and uses Russian currency and Russian passports. On the other hand, Russia, always out for its interest, is hardly a neutral mediator. This attitude allows Russia to maintain an influential presence while keeping Georgia from creating a stable and fully sovereign state.

3.1.2 The de facto State of South Ossetia

Like the Abkhaz, South Ossetians were a comparatively small minority within Georgia, but they also had ethnic ties to the North Caucasus - the Autonomous Republic of North Ossetia in Russia. Disturbances in 1989 were directly caused by a November law in 1988, strengthening the Georgian language position in South Ossetia. The first shot in the so-called "war of laws" was in earnest in the second half of 1989. In August, Tbilisi made Georgian the only official

language. This development affected South Ossetia, primarily where only 14% of Ossetians knew Georgian rather than Abkhazia. At the same time, a growing movement for unification with North Ossetia was started. The popular front, Ademon Nykhas, petitioned Moscow to support that plan. However, peace in the region was fragile and eventually broke down in 2004, ostensibly due to Georgians' anti-smuggling operation.

South Ossetia's position on the volatile Northern Caucasus region border is essential for Russia. A senior Russian diplomat in Georgia told Crisis Group that North Ossetia was an island of stability. Russia wanted to keep it that way, evidenced by its vigorous reaction to events in South Ossetia. Russia has traditionally relied on the Ossetians, the sole Christians in the region, as trustworthy allies. Individual analysts highlight that it was the Georgia-South Ossetian war that accelerated the outbreak of the 1992 Ossetian-Ingush races in the Russian Federation (I.C.G., 2004, p.8)

After a new fighting escalation in the spring of 1992, a ceasefire agreement was signed in June 1992. The so-called Sochi Accord between Georgia and South Ossetia provided a Joint Control Commission (with representations from Russia, Georgia, North Ossetia, and South Ossetia) and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (O.S.C.E.) to supervise the Peace deal. The intermixture of populations significantly changed due to the vast numbers of casualties and displaced people. Political instability and uncertainty in South Ossetia favored the development of illegal activities such as smuggling, drug trafficking, kidnapping, and arms trading. These activities involved certain social elites or troops and some middle-class people plagued by unemployment and were earning their lives in this way (Jawad, 2006, p.8, footnote 39).

The pro-Western President Saakashvili brought a severe blow to South Ossetia's economy when, in 2004, he closed the Ergneti market with the excuse it was the place of illegal trading and smuggling. However, the market's closure failed to eradicate the smuggling economy as different routes were soon found to transfer goods into Georgia. It was also taken by the Ossetians as an apparent act of provocation and triggered clashes in August 2004 (Tocci, 2007, p.140). Nonetheless, the 2004 events contributed to further polarization and radicalization on all sides, increasing the frequency and intensity of clashes along with the ceasefire lineup until the full-scale war in August 2008. Unintentionally, therefore, the International Community enabled South Ossetia as an entity trying to adopt a semblance of statehood and somehow coped with the lack of international recognition. As a result, Georgia invaded South Ossetia in August 2008, underestimating the prospects of the Russian counteroffensive, which in this event was ruthless, not only defeating. Georgian forces attacked targets in Georgia proper and chased Georgian troops out of Abkhazia.

Within two weeks of an E.U.-mediated peace deal between Georgia and Russia, which did not end Russian troops' control of South Ossetia (and Abkhazia) and made no explicit reference to protecting Georgia's territorial integrity, Moscow declared its formal recognition of Ossetia and Abkhazia statehood. Russia justified its decision to protect "Russian citizens" and prevent "genocide," allegedly intended against Georgia. Just like in Abkhazia, the Russian army stepped in to support Ossetians. Moreover, South Ossetians used the Russian ruble and benefited from Russian pensions following the Russian Army intervention. Georgia has favored asymmetrical federalism, granting Abkhazia a higher level of autonomy than South Ossetia.

3.2 Ukraine

Ukraine is the second-largest country in Europe after Russia. The capital of Ukraine, Kyiv (Kiev), was founded in the 9th century A.D. as a trading post for the eastern Slavic tribes living in the wider area. With the arrival of the Varangians and the flourishing of trade with the Byzantines, the city became a critical commercial and consequently a key-cultural center, culminating in the 10th and 11th centuries, when it became the capital of the Russian state (union of Russian and Belarusian states). In 1240, Kyiv was destroyed by the Mongols and was reduced to a small regional town.

From the 19th century onwards, most of Ukraine was incorporated into the Russian Empire, with the rest falling under Austro-Hungarian control. After a period of uninterrupted war and several attempts at independence (1917-1921), on December 30, 1922, Ukraine emerged as one of the founding democracies of the Soviet Union. However, during the German occupation (1941 - 1944), the German leadership placed Ukraine directly under the German administration (Eastern Sector). In 1944, Ukraine was liberated by Soviet armed forces.

To the West, the Ukrainian territory of the Soviet Socialist Republic expanded shortly before and after World War II, with the annexation of Polish provinces occupied by the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact in 1939, and to the south in 1954 with the transfer of Crimea to the territory of Ukraine. One of the most severe nuclear accidents at the Chornobyl station happened in Ukraine on April 26, 1986. With this precedent and since Ukraine was a country with many nuclear weapons, after the collapse of the U.S.S.R., there was intense concern about the future of Ukraine. Ukraine became independent again after the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991. In a 1993 Security Council resolution, the Great Powers pledged to preserve Ukraine's territorial integrity and guarantee its sovereignty.

Notwithstanding its neutrality declaration, Ukraine established a partnership with NATO (Partnership for Peace) in 1994 while maintaining a military alliance with Russia and other C.I.S. countries. Moreover, Ukraine, Russia, Britain, and the United States signed a memorandum on December 5, 1994, to guarantee Ukraine's accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (N.P.T.) as a non-nuclear weapon state. The memorandum welcomed the accession of Ukraine to the N.P.T. as a non-nuclear-weapon State, as well as Ukraine's commitment to eliminate all nuclear weapons from its territory within a specified period.

Based on the principles of the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, the four signatory parties reaffirmed their commitment to Ukraine to respect its independence, sovereignty, and the existing borders of Ukraine. They also reiterated their commitment to abstain from any economic coercion that might benefit themselves at the expense of circumventing the sovereign rights of Ukraine. Moreover, in exchange for assurances, Ukraine agreed on total nuclear disarmament, giving up the third-largest nuclear weapons stockpile in the world. During the presidency of Leonid Kuchma, a new Constitution was adopted in 1996. Ukraine changed to a semi-presidential republic. Although Kuchma established a stable political system, he was criticized for corruption and excessive power concentration in his office. Nevertheless, Kuchma consistently supported Ukraine's European course and stated that his country wanted to sign an association agreement and join the E.U. by 2011. When the pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovich was declared the winner in the 2004 presidential elections, there was a strong reaction from the opposition representative Viktor Yushchenko. The dispute was referred to the Supreme Court. As expected, the Supreme Court ruled that the result of the presidential election was primarily manipulated.

Moreover, Yushchenko's sudden illness nearly cost him his life was attributed to poisoning by T.C.C.D. Dioxin and raised suspicions of Russian involvement. The events triggered the outbreak of the Orange Revolution. The Orange Revolution brought Viktor Yushchenko and Yuliya Timoshenko to power and sent Viktor Yanukovich in opposition. While an invisible war was waged with great intensity to secure the presidential elections in Ukraine, a considerable effort was orchestrated to discredit Victor Yushchenko and Julia Timoshenko with Russia's help. In this context, sophisticated means were used to apply psychological pressure and guidance to the voters.

On the other hand, Western Governments and N.G.O.s engaged professional consultants to train the Orange Revolution activists in the tactics of political organization and nonviolent resistance⁷. The foreign donors included the U.S State Department and George Soros Open Society Institute⁸. While political instability prevailed with alterations in Yanukovich and Timoshenko's power, disputes with Russia resulted in the cessation of all gas supplies from Russia to Ukraine in 2006 and again in 2009. This blockade had an economic impact on Ukraine and on countries that received gas through Ukraine. In 2010 the situation seemed to normalize with Viktor Yanukovich's re-election as President by a large majority (48% of votes).

In November 2013, President Yanukovich decided to suspend the E.U.- Ukraine Association Agreement preparations, sparking strong Kyiv protests focused on Independence Square (Maidan). The protesters asked for the President and his government's resignation, accusing them of serving Russia's plans and demanding the Treaty with the European Union. After January 16, 2014, the events turned violent on the passing of laws against rallies by the then government. Anti-government protesters stormed government buildings in Kyiv. Ninety-eight people were killed and thousands injured during the riots on February 18-20, 2014. Hundreds of protesters were arrested by the Police and stormed a rally in riot gear. On February 20, 2014, after the end of a short truce, bloody incidents and a war with weapons broke out in Kyiv, the fight against the people. Crowds gathered in Independence (Maidan) Square when armed Police clashed with protesters and searched the area for casualties and escalating tensions. Supporters of the far-right "Right Sector" were among the most militant protesters, resorting to verbal and physical violence and blackmailing government officials into resigning. On February 21, 2014, with the intervention of the E.U., the Foreign Ministers of Poland, Germany, and England agreed with Yanukovich on a four-point transitional agreement. The four points were: a) Restoration of the 2003 Constitution and reduction of the President's responsibilities, b) Elections by the end of the year, c) Formation of a National Unity Government, and d) Detention of Timoshenko. On February 22, the Ukrainian parliament deposed President Yanukovich and called for presidential elections on May 25, 2014. As a result, Viktor Yanukovich fled to Russia, where he was granted asylum.

Russia maintained a cautious stance, while Putin appeared to have "emptied" Yanukovich. There were also typical statements by Russia's Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, which had two readings. Specifically, without directly attributing responsibilities, the person charged with tension (Yanukovich) was removed. After the Winter Olympic

⁷ Siratavicius, V, 2006. Ukraine: The Orange Revolution and its Aftermath. *Lithuanian Strategic Review*, Vol.4, Issue 1, p.153.

⁸ Diplomat interviewed

Games (23/2/2014), which Putin attended uninterruptedly, Russia took action.

On March 1, Russian President Vladimir Putin received the Russian parliament's approval to send Russian troops to Ukraine, specifically to the Crimean Peninsula. In the following days, Russian troops took control of most of Crimea, and the transitional Kyiv government declared a general mobilization, describing Russia's actions as a declaration of war. Crimea's local parliament called a referendum on March 16, 2014, on the region's autonomy or union with Russia. Even though the United Nations considered the referendum illegal, Crimean residents participated "en masse" and voted 97% in favor of the annexation to Russia. Based on the ballot results, Crimea was re-established with celebrations in Russia on 20/3/2014.

Russia's entire operation in Crimea was swift, confident, and, most likely, in executing a pre-existing plan. Russian forces waged a bloody war against Ukrainian forces in eastern Ukraine's Donbas region for more than five years. The conflict claimed more than 13,000 lives, led nearly two million people to flee their homes, and caused extensive property damage. France and Germany worked together to mediate peace but failed to enact a lasting ceasefire - let alone a political settlement.

Moscow's primary goal in Ukraine was to bring the former Soviet democracy back on track. In February 2014, European protesters overthrew Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, who had enjoyed the Kremlin's support. Russian special forces responded by occupying the Ukrainian Peninsula of Crimea. The regional authorities held a hasty and illegal referendum to join Russia, and in March 2014, Russia officially annexed Crimea - a move that most people condemned. The reunification of Crimea in 2014 with Russia (to which it belonged until 1954) is something that, for Ukraine and a significant part of the International Community, is considered an illegal occupation. Nonetheless, the referendum's result legitimized the annexation for the Russian side. A side effect of the annexation of Crimea is that the Azov Sea has become one of the world's hottest zones.

An agreement signed in 2003 by Vladimir Putin with Leonid Kutsma typically regulates the Azov Sea regime. This agreement stipulates that the two countries share Azov and jointly exploit the passage from the Black Sea to the Sea of Azov. Besides, it specifies that there should be a prior notification from the other country whenever there are warships. Since 2014, after the annexation of Crimea to Russia, both sides of the Kerch Strait have belonged to Russia.

Nevertheless, Ukraine continued its European course. On September 1, 2017, the E.U. -Ukraine Association Agreement, part of which is the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area with the European Union, entered into force. Furthermore, on May 11, 2017, the European Union approved visa-free travel for Ukrainian citizens. Therefore, from June 11, 2017, onwards, Ukrainians with valid biometric passports can travel to the Schengen area for tourism, family visits, and business reasons without any other formalities. Finally, on December 9, 2019, French President Emmanuel Macron hosted a summit with his Ukrainian, Russian and German counterparts to end the conflict. However, despite efforts toward a political arrangement, both sides insist on their positions, and the closing of the existing gap remains unbridged.

On February 24, 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine, seeking to repeat what it had done in Crimea through a blitz war. However, the fight continues today despite the initial predictions of an easy victory. The ferocious resistance of the Ukrainians and the full support of the West have put Russia and Europe. to a severe test. This proxy war has already created the most serious energy crisis that Europe has experienced. No one can predict how this war will end and the consequences it will bring

4. Conclusions

The Cold War may seem to have officially ended after the collapse of the U.S.S.R., but in reality, the strategy of halting the Russian threat has never been abandoned. NATO remains the guarantor of the security of Western countries and, in some cases, is taking military action (Haukkala, 2015). The resurgence of the crisis in Ukraine shows that Russia is concerned and claims its presence in the countries of the Eastern Partnership. With this in mind, maintaining Ukraine's neutrality is a matter of paramount importance for Russia for two reasons: on the one hand, Ukraine's accession to the Western bloc will dangerously reduce Russia's strategic depth, and on the other hand, it will shake Russia's confidence in others countries that are allies and satellites. Therefore, Russia believes that Ukraine and other adjacent countries should remain a bulwark to protect it from NATO expansion (Thomas, 2020, p.47).

In principle, Putin's strategy consists of not making the first offensive move and not retreating first. Therefore, if it is for him to make the first move, he usually prefers quick diplomatic victories against the West to avoid a face-to-face conflict, targeting easy regional targets such as the countries of Caucasus. Doing so will undermine the suspension strategy (suspended sovereignty), which was implemented mainly during the Cold War and which the E.U. cannot implement on its own (Yannis, 2002). Meanwhile, the revised U.S. strategy that has shifted its focus to the Pacific Ocean left room for new challenges in the Eastern European Neighborhood

Since the end of the Cold War, the E.U. has sought to integrate Russia into its own economic and political system. However, Russia could not accept the E.U.'s leadership in setting the rules and controlling their implementation, even though the E.U. recognized an increased role in Russia (Sergunin, A, 2008). Nevertheless, Russia maintained closer cooperation in specific spaces of common interest, such as Economic, Freedom, Security and Justice, Cooperation in External Security, and Research and Education, including Culture (Pursainen, 2008).

Nowadays, not only Russia's goal of joining the E.U. has been abandoned, but also strategic partnership has proved problematic. There are explanations for this development. First of all, as a superpower, Russia wants to set the rules and negotiate on its terms (Pursainen, 2008). Moreover, Russia has not stopped pursuing to reunite with its chariot the Eastern Partnership countries or maintain its influence.

Having Russia returned to active pressure and provocations, a broad spectrum of hybrid forms and methods are applied to achieve advantages in the military, political, economic, information and cybersecurity domains. Language and Religion issues also nurture social conflicts. Cyber-militarization is a domain where Russia seems to have a comparative advantage. Russia is blamed for cyber-attacks to secure unauthorized access to information and telecommunications systems and employing social networks to manipulate public opinion and destabilize the sociopolitical situation⁹.

The rivalry between the E.U. and Russia, which is manifested in many ways, divides public opinion and traps the Eastern Partnership countries in the process of an internal challenge to their sovereignty. These countries, which do not have the institutional shield of modern democracy, are particularly vulnerable and in danger of sinking into chaos and anarchy. Thus, the Eastern Partnership countries run the risk of becoming failed states

Thirty years after the dissolution of the U.S.S.R., four de facto states have already been created (Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh), challenging the geographical integrity of Moldova, Georgia, and Azerbaijan, respectively). These four states, which have been recognized by Russia only, have established the Community for the Democracy and the Rights of the People and look forward to having new members to join. Moreover, after the uprising of 2014, Russia annexed Crimea, and the Donetsk and Luhansk regions claimed their autonomy with Russia's support. It is also likely that areas of Belarus where the inhabitants are of Russian origin will also seek their independence and eventually annexation to Russia.

Russia is unequivocally claiming its influence in Eastern Partnership countries and will not stop creating impediments to their cooperation with the E.U.(Thomas,2020). Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that while the internal sovereignty of some of these countries is contested and there are regions claiming independence, there is no tendency for compromises (Finlandization¹⁰, Federalization) to ensure geographical integrity.

As a rule, the Eastern Partnership countries defend their independence, political choices for strategic cooperation (E.U., NATO), and geographical integrity. In this regard, the European Union supports all these efforts of the Eastern Partnership countries and takes initiatives to consolidate peace and resolve conflicts. E.U. works together with partners to establish resilient, fair, and inclusive societies in this scope¹¹.

However, it is not only the antagonism with Russia that affects and hinders the enlargement of the E.U. to the East. Indeed, it is a much more complicated situation. In addition to the big international players (US, Russia, EU) cooperating with the post-Soviet states, other international actors are also intervening and trying to gain a foothold in the Eastern European Neighborhood. For instance, nowadays, Turkey claiming the role of regional power overtly and strenuously supported Azerbaijan in its conflict with Armenia.

Moreover, in the last years, the Eastern Partnership countries also target cooperation with third powers, such as China, Turkey, Iran, and Israel, to offset their dependence on Russia and boost their external trade. However, for the third actors interested in economic penetration in the Eastern Partnership countries, it would be preferable if the Eastern Partnership countries could operate independently and without the commitments of their affiliation with the E.U.

Conclusively, without ruling out the prospect of the E.U. enlargement to the East, what is necessary for the Eastern

⁹RUSSIA USES THE CHURCH TO DESTABILIZE THE SITUATION <http://www.lucorg.com/news.php/news/12753>.

¹⁰ Finlandization: a term used when a small country is driven to abide by the foreign policy of its powerful neighboring country in exchange for maintaining its territorial integrity and independence.

¹¹ European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. Join (2020),7 final Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council, the European Economic, and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. *Reinforcing Resilience-an Eastern Partnership that delivers for all (SWD (2020)56 final*.

Partnership countries is to stand on their own feet economically and politically primarily. And this is the goal to pursue by the E.U.

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