

CONNECTIONS

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Russia vs. EU/US through Georgia and Ukraine

*David Matsaberidze**

Abstract: This paper analyzes the construction and transformation of Georgia and Ukraine's post-Soviet security strategy in the context of post-Soviet Russian foreign policy in the "near abroad," or what is often termed the "legitimate sphere" of Russian influence. After the Rose Revolution of Georgia and the Orange Revolution of Ukraine the independent/pro-Western orientation of these two countries became the main issue securitized by the Russian Federation. Therefore, maintaining territorial integrity became the top security priority for Georgia (since the early 1990s) and most likely will become the main issue for Ukraine after the Russian Federation's occupation of Crimea (March 2014) and the subsequent developments in Eastern Ukraine. 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 essence, these are the maintenance tools of Russian influence on the one hand, and on the other hand an exercise in Western power values across the Former Soviet Union (FSU), supported with the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) and the Eastern Partnership (EP) projects. The military actions of Russia in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014) were a response to the soft power applied by the West and aimed at creating buffer zones in the shape of "frozen conflicts." These could be used as indirect leverage in the hands of the Russian Federation to block Western aspirations in Georgia and Ukraine.

Introduction

This paper aims to analyze the construction and transformation of the post-Soviet security perspectives of Georgia and Ukraine in the context of the post-Soviet Russian foreign policy in the "near abroad," quite often termed the "legitimate sphere" of Russian influence by high-ranking Russian officials. This inquiry covers the panorama of the foreign policy in post-Soviet Russia across the FSU, from the early 1990s through to the present, where Georgia and Ukraine's independent and pro-Western orientation are the main issues securitized for the Russian Federation. Accordingly, the maintenance of territorial integrity has become a security priority for Georgia since the early 1990s and will most likely be Ukraine's top concern after the Crimean occupation by the Russian Federation in March 2014 and the subsequent developments in Eastern Ukraine. Therefore, it could be claimed that post-Soviet Russian and Georgian/Ukrainian security strategy (following peaceful revolutions) represent a zero-sum game.

The article will explore the main topics of Russian foreign policy since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. On the one hand based on orthodox geopolitics, as a legitimizing narrative for its sphere of influence across the FSU area, and on the other, the narrative of victimization of Russia and Russians by the West after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. I will show Russia is fighting against its status as a second rate country, and

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the evident clash of Western liberal democracy and Russian orthodoxy in the Russian Federation's foreign policy drive. The Rose and Orange revolutions of Georgia and Ukraine are considered to be major security problems by the Russian Federation, which in turn gives Georgia and Ukraine reason to leave the Russian geo-political axis.

The paper will reflect on Russia's reactions to emerging changes in the near abroad since the early 1990s through the peaceful revolutions until the crises of 2008 and 2014. The second part of the study will contextualize the main transformation strategies of Russian foreign policy towards the near abroad in the process of Georgia's and Ukraine's aspirations towards EU and NATO membership. In this respect the paper will point to the main tools Russia used to successfully block this process. And last, but not least, the paper will place Russian-Georgian and Russian-Ukrainian conflicts within the wider prism of the post-Soviet contradiction between Russia and the West. For each aforementioned interaction, I will examine the security strategy and motivation of each party involved and highlight important elements.

Russian Reaction to Changes in Neighboring Countries

The rise to power of the national-liberation movement in Georgia (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 deemed by Moscow to be a triumph of nationalists in Tbilisi and Kiev. Consequentially, Moscow securitized national minorities in Georgia (Abkhazians and South Ossetians) and the Russian population of Eastern Ukraine with the aim to intervene in the internal and external affairs of these countries.¹ 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 Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in exchange for stabilizing the country and freezing conflicts over twenty percent of the country's territory. Unlike Georgia, although Ukraine managed to avoid a "bloody start" of the post-Soviet transition in the 1990s (a range of explanations could be found for this), the Maidan Revolution of 2014 and the full-fledged Russian occupation of Crimea, followed by the Russian-supported secessionist seizure of Lugansk and Donetsk, brought Eastern Ukraine into chaos and war. The price for stopping the bloodshed could be that Ukraine opt to join the Eurasian Union, which Putin has promoted across the FSU area. Although both Georgia and Ukraine insist on their desire to join the EU and NATO, the real destination for each of them so far has been the Association Agreement (now signed) and different types of cooperation frameworks with NATO, which are emerging as additional media towards

¹ The concept of "securitization" goes back to the Copenhagen School and refers to a process of extreme politicization enabling state actors to transform subjects into matters of "security." Cf. Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), 25.

the Membership Action Plan (MAP). Nevertheless, external constraints leading to caution on the part of the EU and NATO in their ascension policy can hardly be denied.

So, what is the main problem for Russia? 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.”² The Rose and Orange Revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine alarmed Moscow. These were the very first signals of the future eastward expansion of EU and U.S. interests. The term “sovereign democracy” entered the political lexicon as Moscow’s response to the pro-democracy “color revolutions” in the post-Soviet states.³ The man behind the term, “sovereign democracy,” former deputy prime minister and close adviser to Putin, Vladislav Surkov, outlined his thinking in *The Nationalization of the Future: Paragraphs pro Sovereign Democracy*, which may 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.”⁴ Thus, the clash between the two ideologies—the liberal democracy of the West, promoted in the near abroad of Russia through the velvet revolutions, and “sovereign democracy” of Russia—is quite apparent.

There is no doubt that the velvet revolutions, starting in Serbia and stretching across the FSU area, including Kyrgyzstan in Central Asia, were an alarm signal for Moscow. Russia was further irritated by the recognition 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, stressing that “for 20 years the narrative of the alleged ‘broken promise’ of not enlarging NATO eastward is part and parcel of Russia’s post-Soviet identity.”⁵ As Bruce Riedel,

² Christopher Leigh, “Back to the Future? Pre-Soviet History and Political Thought in the Putin Era,” *Post-Soviet Politics: Politics, Foreign Policy and Strategic Competition*, 3 October 2013, available at <https://postsovietpolitics.wordpress.com/2013/10/03/back-to-the-future-pre-soviet-history-and-political-thought-in-the-putin-era/> (accessed September 2014).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Michael Rühle, “NATO Enlargement and Russia: Myths and Realities,” *NATO Review Magazine*, available at [www.nato.int/docu/review/2014/Russia-Ukraine-Nato-crisis/Nato-enlargement-Russia/EN/index.htm?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=NATO_Update_201428&utm_content=NATO_Update_201428+CID_d7f1ec1c9fbc29cc74da6e18a05c8a00&utm_source=Email marketing software&utm_term=More](http://www.nato.int/docu/review/2014/Russia-Ukraine-Nato-crisis/Nato-enlargement-Russia/EN/index.htm?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=NATO_Update_201428&utm_content=NATO_Update_201428+CID_d7f1ec1c9fbc29cc74da6e18a05c8a00&utm_source=Email%20marketing%20software&utm_term=More) (accessed September, 2014).

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.’”⁶ Similarly, in 2009 Gorbachev himself recalled that “the United States [...] pledged that after Germany’s reunification in 1990 ‘NATO would not move a centimeter to the east,’”⁷ 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.”⁸ 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 was an act of revenge, by Putin himself, for past humiliation.

Russian Revenge: Blocking Georgia and Ukraine from the EU and 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,”⁹ whereas the latter is succinctly summarized by Aleksandr Dugin, who writes about the clash of religious civilizations and the danger that Russian orthodoxy faces in the modern age, linking 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, nor 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.”¹⁰

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 Russia’s eyes in terms of threat perception and acceptability) and due to U.S. support of pro-Western governments in countries such as Georgia and Ukraine.¹¹ The Orange Revolution in Ukraine and the Rose Revolution in Georgia culminated with

⁶ Justin Lynch, “Putin’s Machiavellian Moment,” *The Weekly Wonk*, 24 July 2014, available at <http://weeklywonk.newamerica.net/articles/putins-machiavellian-moment> (accessed September 2014).

⁷ Andreas M. Bock, “Too Blind to See the Threat We Pose to Russia,” *European Union Foreign Affairs Journal* 3 (2014): 50.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁰ Leigh, “Back to the Future.”

¹¹ Thanos Dokos, “How the EU got it so Wrong in Ukraine,” *Europe’s World*, 24 April 2014, available at <http://europesworld.org/2014/04/24/how-the-eu-got-it-so-wrong-in-ukraine/> (accessed September 2014).

two 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—bound to be perceived by Russia as a permanent assault on its status and influence.¹² This is the main security threats to the Russian state: with the incorporation of Georgia and Ukraine into the EU and NATO, the so called “buffer zone” 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 to join NATO and the EU, or at least to transform it into a more vague promise for the future, the Ukrainian Crisis reveals Putin's true desire, with broader intentions. It could be seen as “a reunification of Russian lands and Russian souls, mirroring the process of German re-unification in 1990 and [...] a national reconstruction entailing some sort of revisionism of the post-Soviet geopolitical settlement.”¹³ The two cases of military drive of the post-Soviet Russian foreign policy in Georgia (2008) and in Ukraine (2014) can be seen as revenge for the humiliation of Russia in early 2000s. Considering the fact that the NATO bombing campaign on 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.¹⁴ There is no argument against the claim that in 2008 Russia attempted to use Kosovo's de facto independence after the NATO intervention as 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 policy objectives.¹⁵ Obviously, the occupation of Crimea, Abkhazia and 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 western countries to withstand the Russian Federation's new military policy towards its near abroad.

The main goal for Russia—to create buffer zones between the Russian Federation and the EU/NATO structures—can be reached by creating frozen, or what would be frozen, conflicts in Georgia and Ukraine respectively. For the time being, Georgian and Ukrainian efforts to seek effective membership in the EU and NATO are blocked in light of the August War of 2008 and the Ukrainian Crisis of 2014. 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 competi-

¹² Rühle, “NATO Enlargement and Russia.”

¹³ Roberto Orsi, “The Irreversible Crisis of the Ukrainian Experiment,” *Security Studies Unit (SSU)/Policy Alternatives Research Institute (PARI)*, available at <http://pari.u-tokyo.ac.jp/eng/unit/ssu/articles/orsi20140507.html> (accessed September 2014).

¹⁴ Leigh, “Back to the Future.”

¹⁵ Dokos, “How the EU got it so Wrong.”

tion)—both military and economic—between the two major powers – the United States and Russia.”¹⁶

The Case of Georgia

I would argue that it was not the developments of pre-August 2008 in particular that brought 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.¹⁷ Ronald D. Asmus adds, “Moscow had little interest in a resolution of these conflicts which could have allowed Georgia to go to the West even faster,”¹⁸ 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. Russia could not tolerate encirclement by NATO member states. According to Asmus, the August War was the start of a long chain that was not only directed against Georgia or at a regime change in the country, but also 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.”¹⁹ The August War was a test ground for 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.”²⁰

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.”²¹ This is an indirect testament to

¹⁶ Vicken Cheterian, “The Big Re-Freeze – Has the Regional Balance of Power Merely Cooled into a Different Configuration?” *The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS)*, available at <http://www.iiss.org/programmes/russia-and-eurasia/about/georgian-russian-dialogue/caucasus-security-insight/vicken-cheterian/the-big-re-freeze> (accessed May 2011).

¹⁷ Thomas de Waal, *The Caucasus – An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 166.

¹⁸ Ronald D. Asmus, *A Little War that Shook the World – Georgia, Russia and the Future of the West* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 4.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁰ Ronald G. Suny, “Russia has Taken on Its Powerful Competitors for the First Time Since 1991,” *The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS)*, available at <http://www.iiss.org/programmes/russia-and-eurasia/about/georgian-russian-dialogue/caucasus-security-insight/ronald-suny/a-watershed-in-east-west-relations> (accessed May 2011).

²¹ 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 Frederick S. Starr (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2009), 125.

the claim that Russia was comfortable with the status of the frozen conflicts as there were no real aspirations towards 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, the need for immediate action in the conflict zones against the Georgian government became clear to 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 Georgia's pro-western, anti-Russian aspirations. Military intervention was the final measure undertaken by the Russian Federation against Georgia.

The Case of Ukraine

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."²² It could be argued that the quick action of Russia, first in Crimea and later in eastern Ukraine, was due to the surprising success of the Maidan and advancement of the Eastern Partnership Program to the Association Agreement, which was seen by Russia as a stepping stone to organizations such as NATO, whose eastward expansion was seen by Russian security officials as a major threat.²³ 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 Vyborg directly to the German gas hub in Greifswald, which effectively bypassed Ukraine, and its possible geopolitical instability, which materialized with great punctuality.²⁴ 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 across the FSU countries, Georgia and Ukraine? And if so, how will the EU/U.S. projects promoting liberal democracy withstand Russian energy and military policy?

Different Timing, Similar Outcomes

What problems have resulted for Georgia and Ukraine locally, and for 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 CIS in December 1993. Afraid that

²² Timothy Frye, "A Tale of Two Russian Narratives," *Perspectives on Peace & Security*, August 2014, available at <http://perspectives.carnegie.org/us-russia/a-tale-of-two-russian-narratives/> (accessed September 2014).

²³ Robert McMahon, "Ukraine in Crisis," Council on Foreign Relations, 25 August 2014, available at <http://www.cfr.org/ukraine/ukraine-crisis/p32540> (accessed September 2014).

²⁴ Orsi, "Irreversible Crisis."

Russia would recognize the independence of secessionist regions, Georgia more or less paid tribute to Moscow until 2008 in the management and direction of its domestic and foreign policies. Similarly, Ukraine is currently ready to consider the option of joining the Eurasian Union, if it can secure peace in Eastern Ukraine. Although, having had negative experiences in the past, Ukraine and European countries do not trust Russia, but similarly to Georgia in the 1990s, they are currently stuck between a rock and a hard place – a deep-frozen conflict at the border of Europe or a total erosion of the European security system, whereas Russia successfully managed 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 country, Georgia—were cemented into the national security concept upon being given passports: Russia will defend its citizens all over the world by any means necessary. The same policy was devised vis-à-vis Ukraine in respect to Crimea. To this end, Putin initiated changes to the security concept note of the Russian Federation. Thus, Russia's actions in its near abroad bring some constraints to the EU's choices to lend a hand to its partners in the FSU area.

Collision of Russian and 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, 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 Russia's tools to maintain its influence on the one hand, and an exertion of Western values and power across the FSU area, on the other. Russia is successful in transferring "ethnic" problems to outside its borders, for instance to Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the 1990s and Chechnya in the early 2000s. However, the August War of 2008 signaled a shift in Russia's foreign policy approach – a direct intervention where it was deemed necessary, which is proved by the case of Ukraine in 2014.

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 gaps. Namely, they do not provide new partners and would-be members with protection from Russian aggression, as demonstrated in 2008 and in 2014 in the cases of Georgia and Ukraine, respectively. In addition, if this drive for detachment from Russia became a "mental revolution" for Georgia, as declared by Saakashvili, this kind of separation would be difficult for Ukraine due to its ethnic diversity. Nevertheless, one overall conclusion can be made: through its wars in Georgia and Ukraine, Russia broke down the foundations of the Russian Orthodox camp, meaning that relations between Russia

and Ukraine would never be the same again. Nevertheless, it presented a serious challenge to the modern system of European security.

Still, this is not only an ideological and political problem. Russia's intervention in Georgia and Ukraine demonstrates that Russia could easily shift from applying soft power to hard power when it deems it necessary for the protection of its foreign policy interests. Russia will not tolerate the possibility of losing influence over the FSU area and will use soft or hard power to maintain it. It has demonstrated this in the gas war with Georgia and Ukraine following the velvet revolutions of 2003 and 2004 (soft power) and through the military interventions in Georgia and Ukraine in 2008 and 2014 (hard power). It could be claimed that these are not only problems for Georgia and Ukraine, as Russia staged these crises across the European periphery, which proved to be quite vulnerable. In turn, the EU found itself unable to foresee the real desires of Russia in the August War, thereby allowing for the Ukrainian Crisis, which were the first military inter-state conflicts in Europe after the Balkan Wars of the 1990s.

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 radical similarities. These are mainly issues that became represented, and later on securitized, both in 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 and in 2014, when the division or partition of Ukraine became a real problem for the country.

In this context, the erosion of the Russian Orthodox paradigm is apparent: after the events of 2008 in Georgia and 2014 in Ukraine, Russia could not hope for the success of the Orthodox camp, but it is questionable as to 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 the near abroad. As for the domestic market, the Kremlin proposed the concept of sovereign democracy as an alternative paradigm to the liberal democracy promoted by the West. In addition, the aforementioned wars were not revenge for the velvet revolutions—a sign of the rude interference of the West in Russia's near abroad—but the reaction 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 soft power applied by the West was countered by military means by the Russian Federation. 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 and no longer tolerates Western expansion into former Soviet states. Russia's use of military action to exercise its interests became visible through emerging security challenges at the borders of the EU, where the "termination of the eastward expansion of NATO may serve as a bargaining chip."²⁵ Whatever the final outcome, it is evident that solving these geopolitical and security challenges are at the top of the EU's current agenda.

²⁵ Bock, "Too Blind to See," 53.

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