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ABSTRACT. The conflict in Ukraine remains unresolved. The ceasefire can be described as fragile at best, illusive being a more accurate term. With no political solution in sight, the conflict remains an open wound in the continuously deteriorating East-West relationship. While global attention has been shifting elsewhere in recent years, this analysis revisits the now simmering crisis by deconstructing the two prevailing narratives, which depict the Ukrainian crisis as either caused by Russian aggression or as a consequence of Western interference, and instead applying the analytical frame of geopolitics. This allows for placing the conflict in the context of the current dynamic within the global political system, which is increasingly shaped by tensions and power struggles between the West and re-emerging powers such as Russia and China, and thereby leads to a better understanding of both, the conflict in Ukraine and the current dynamic in global politics. It is demonstrated that the escalation of the situation in Ukraine was the direct result of the country’s position as a vital part of the strategic constellation between Russia and the West, and that Ukraine is one of several flashpoints in a much larger, geopolitical, conflict.

Keywords: Conflict in Ukraine, Ukrainian Civil War, East-West Conflict, Geopolitics


Keywords: Ukraine-Konflikt, Ukrainischer Bürgerkrieg, Ost-West-Konflikt, Geopolitik
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1 Introduction

2016 was a very busy year for international politics. For many observers, the distinct scent of a Cold War atmosphere is getting more and more prominent. With Russia heaving succeeded in pushing itself back on to the global playing field, by forcing other major players to interact with it over the conflict in Ukraine as well as other issues, the United States (US) assertively counteracting the resurgent Russian confidence, and Europe once again being caught somewhere in the middle; the Cold War does indeed seem to be experiencing a comeback of sorts. Although the tensions between Russia and the West had been gaining momentum for quite a while before the current crisis in Ukraine unfolded in late 2013, the annexation of Crimea and the ensuing war in the Donbass region, following the Euromaidan revolution, have finally put the East-West relationship back on the mainstream agenda. In the three years since the conflict broke out both, the media and academia alike, have shifted their attention elsewhere. The unexpected Russian intervention in the Syrian civil war, the growing tensions at Europe's eastern borders, and the apparent Russian interference with the recent US presidential election; all pushed the ongoing conflict in Ukraine to the sidelines. In many regards, the conflict in Ukraine has already become history. Today, no one seriously expects Russia to return Crimea to Ukraine, or for the separatists to surrender the control over their territories, anytime soon. Russia is building a bridge to Crimea, representatives from Crimea have been elected into the Russian State Duma, and the Ukrainian government has long ago granted the separatist republics of Donetsk and Luhansk a certain degree of autonomy under the Minsk II agreement. The situation has, in other words, turned into a protracted conflict with no end in sight.

Very much like the peace process itself, the debate over how the Ukrainian crisis unfolded remains locked in a stalemate. Today, as in the early moments of the crisis, the same two narratives are standing their ground in opposition to each other. On the one side there is the Western narrative, depicting the situation as a conflict between Russia as the aggressor and Ukraine as the victim of a Russian neo-imperialistic foreign policy. This is also the view portrayed by the post-Euromaidan government in Kiev. On the other side, the Russian narrative describes the conflict as an internal conflict between an illegitimate pro-Western government and a pro-Russian separatist movement, which was largely facilitated by Western interference in domestic Ukrainian matters, at the expense of Russian security interests. One of the most striking features of the conflict is how deeply entrenched these two narratives have become within the respective sides. They have been the foundation for the rapid deterioration of the relationships between Russia and the Western nations, as well as the primary justification for punitive measures on both sides. Politicians, scholars, and the media have eagerly been building on them. The West has found its new bogeyman in the Russian president and those speaking out against the Western narrative are usually being labeled as Russian
agents. At the same time, the Russian government uses the international tensions to justify a policy of isolation and to further increase its power base. On both sides this trend has been accompanied by a mutual and increasingly integral disrespect for core strategic interests, such as security concerns and economic stability.

This analysis attempts to answer the question of how and why the conflict in Ukraine developed into its current form by applying the framework of geopolitics. As an analytical concept, geopolitics has recently experienced an impressive revival, reflecting the need for a renewed approach to international politics in order to understand the ongoing shifts in the global power dynamic. The international system is currently subject to fundamental changes and a geopolitical perspective facilitates the analysis of contemporary developments by using constant variables, which have demonstrated their analytical value many times throughout history. It is argued here that, in order to establish a comprehensive understanding of the situation in Ukraine, it is necessary to deconstruct the two prevailing narratives in favor of a geopolitical understanding, which places the conflict in a wider context and reveals its connection to the major progressions in global politics. Due to its geographic location, as well as its historical role as a buffer state, Ukraine occupies a key position between Russia and the West. For centuries, it has been an important factor regarding strategic considerations on both sides and, ever since Ukraine gained its independence, Kiev has been the target of increasingly tangible integration efforts from Moscow and Western governments alike. It was the tensions deriving from this critical position that eventually led to the current crisis. Thus, the conflict in Ukraine can only be comprehended by placing it in the context of the East-West relationship, which, in turn, is significantly shaped by a global struggle between established and emerging powers. The Ukrainian flashpoint is one of several hotspots in a geopolitical conflict that goes far beyond the borders of Europe and Russia. As such, it is a cornerstone in understanding the contemporary dynamic of the international system as a whole.

Therefore, the following chapter briefly summarizes the conflict in Ukraine and analyses how the non-violent protests turned into a full-fledged civil war and territorial disintegration. Furthermore, the various stages of the peace process and the current situation are presented. Chapter three offers a short overview on the internal factors behind the current crisis. It demonstrates how unstable the situation in Ukraine has been long before the conflict of 2013 unfolded. This can be attributed mainly to failures in the post-Soviet transformation process, which led the country into a vicious cycle of oligarchic control and deteriorating statehood. The precarious situation of the Ukrainian political system made it vulnerable to external influences. Thus, the internal factors of the crisis, while not being decisive a such, largely contributed to the extent of the conflict. The forth chapter establishes the theoretical framework of this analysis and introduces the concept of geopolitics. It offers an
overview of its historic applications and core assumptions. Furthermore, it is argued here that the current power dynamic within the global political system, including the East-West relationship, is fundamentally shaped by geopolitical thinking, making the frame of geopolitical analysis a vital tool for creating a better understanding of international politics as a whole and the situation in Ukraine in particular. The fifth chapter puts the Ukrainian conflict in a geopolitical perspective. First, the geopolitical value of Ukraine is detailed. Ukraine has a long history as a border region and buffer zone, as well as a transit country for energy transports. Due to the country being geographically positioned between Russia and Europe, several actors continue to have strong strategic interests in the future and political orientation of Ukraine. Further on, this chapter analyzes the position of Ukraine as a state in the midst of a growing conflict between East and West. Finally, a comparison is drawn to Georgia and the war of 2008. This conflict showed many indicators which, if acted upon, may have helped to prevent the current conflict in Ukraine. Chapter six returns to Ukraine and applies the concept of geopolitical analysis to demonstrate that Ukraine is at the centre of a much more comprehensive global conflict with several regional and global powers projecting influence in the development of the crisis. These external forces are what turned the tensions in Ukraine into a conflict of geopolitical proportions. The sixth chapter is divided in three subchapters, each focusing on one of the major outside forces involved. It is demonstrated how the diverging interests of these forces escalated the conflict and continue to prevent a peaceful solution to the conflict. The seventh chapter continues to expand the view beyond Ukraine and completes the analysis of the global geopolitical conflict, which is currently shaping international developments. It includes other hotspots that have developed in recent years, such as the war in Syria and the continuously increasing altercations between Russia and the US. The eighth and final chapter concludes this analysis by summarizing its results and pointing out the prospects emerging from it.
2 Flashpoint Ukraine

2.1 From Euromaidan to Chaos

When in November 2013 Viktor Yanukovych, then Ukrainian president, made a last-minute decision not to sign the association agreement previously negotiated with the European Union (EU), he unknowingly set in motion a chain of events that would lead to his downfall within the following three months. The agreement with the EU would have brought Ukraine closer towards Europe in terms of economic cooperation and trade. Yanukovych chose instead to accept a deal offered by the Russian government, which included a 15 billion US Dollar (USD) loan as well as a significant price reduction for Russian natural gas, a vital resource for the country and a traditional lever used by Moscow. While the EU’s offer would have put Ukraine on the track towards European integration, the Russian deal offered a much-needed short term relief for the country’s critical financial state and would have steered Ukraine into the Eurasian Union, a regional integration project dominated by Russia (Morelli 2017, 2; Stern 2013; Yuhas 2014). In other words, Yanukovych had to choose whether to align his country with the West or with the East, something that he had successfully been avoiding for years. While Yanukovych himself was known for his close ties to Russia and openly proclaimed a pro-Russian redirection of Ukraine upon his election in 2010, he had pursued a policy of counterbalancing Western and Russian influences to get the most out of it from both sides. Russia had supplied Ukraine with cheap natural energy resources, while the US and the EU had provided the cash flow via loans by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (Lauterbach 2014, 71). In the end though, the Kremlin had had enough and threatened Ukraine with punitive measures that would have caused massive trade losses, as well as hundreds of thousands of jobs (Harding 2010; KyivPost 2010; Traynor 2013). Yanukovych had no choice but to cave into the pressure.

The decision to walk out on the association agreement not only surprised European officials, but the people of Ukraine as well. Kiev’s Maidan square filled up with protesters the same day. After initial clashes with the police, the protest only grew and soon developed into the massive Euromaidan movement, which called for European Integration, an end to corruption, and increasingly also for a new president. The Euromaidan was soon taken over by the political opposition, including the parties of Yulia Tymoshenko and Vitali Klitschko as well as the nationalist right-wing Svoboda party. The protests became further radicalized when the Pravy Sector was founded as a merger of several nationalist, right-wing, and paramilitary groupings. Under the new management, the Euromaidan became organized and professionalized. The emerging infrastructure on the Maidan Square soon included stages, field kitchens, and tent cities as well as wireless internet access. The pro-European sentiment had turned into definite demands for Yanukovych’s resignation.
and the situation continued to escalate (Lauterbach 2014, 90-92). Another layer was added to the protests by its growing internationalization. Officials from the US, such as Vice President Joe Biden and Senator John McCain, chairman of the Committee on Armed Services, as well as the German foreign minister Guido Westerwelle and the Polish ex-president Alexander Kwasniewski, came to Kiev and appeared on stage at the Maidan Square, supporting the Euromaidan cause. This is remarkable, considering that Yanukovych was still the legitimate and democratically elected Ukrainian president. It is therefore hard to discount Russian president Vladimir Putin’s accusations regarding the European influence on the protests (Borger 2014, Rozin 2013; Traynor 2013) in their entirety.

In February 2014, Yanukovych met with the protest leaders and agreed to a constitutional reform and early presidential elections (gov.ua 2014) in a attempt to deescalate the situation. However, shortly thereafter unidentified snipers opened fire at protesters and police forces alike, killing over a hundred civilians and several members of the police. This marked the final point of no return. Yanukovych, who was being blamed and condemned for ordering the shootings, fled the country together with several other government officials. Some of his ministers simply disappeared, others stepped down. Yanukovych himself sought refuge in Russia. Meanwhile, the parliament approved the revolutionary interim government under Arseniy Yatsenyuk and called for new presidential elections in May, sidestepping the impeachment process dictated by the Ukrainian constitution. While in Kiev the bloody struggle to oust the president was over at last, the political crisis was now about to develop into an armed conflict that would soon threaten to tear the country apart.

Before the Euromaidan had even culminated in the toppling of Yanukovych, the Moscow had become active in and around Ukraine. The Russian military conducted unannounced drills on the border with Ukraine and at Russia’s military base in Crimea. At the same time, masked soldiers in unmarked Russian uniforms started to appear throughout Crimea, securing Ukrainian military facilities as well as regional government buildings and Simferopol Airport. The unidentified soldiers were using Russian military gear, weapons, and vehicles with Russian license plates, yet the Kremlin denied any affiliation. Putin himself suggested that they were merely local self-defense forces who had privately purchased their own uniforms and equipment. The locals simply called them 'little green men' and the media soon followed (Borger 2014; Shevchenko 2014). These little green men stood guard while the people of Crimea elected a new pro-Russian government and the Crimean parliament voted unanimously to join Russia. This decision was confirmed by a referendum on March 16th, which, according to official numbers, featured a result of close to 97 percent voting in favor of joining Russia, with a voter turnout of over 80 percent (Morelli 2017, 3; Yuhas 2014). Putin signed the treaty to annex Crimea two days later. All these developments were denounced as violations of
international law by the new Ukrainian government as well as the US and Europe. Yet, the facts on the ground had already been established. A few weeks later, Putin admitted that there had indeed been Russian military forces operating in Crimea, tasked with maintaining order and enabling the people of Crimea to decide on their own future (Anischchuk et al. 2014; Lally 2014; Putin 2014).

The new Ukrainian government did not order any military resistance to the annexation of Crimea and instead withdrew its troops from the peninsula the day after it became, at least in practice, part of Russia. The crisis might have ended there. The West had secured Ukraine as part of its sphere of influence and Russia, in turn, had secured Crimea, which holds great strategic significance as well as important historic and cultural value for the Russian Federation. If both sides would have worked together towards preventing any further escalation the crisis may have been contained from spreading further. Unfortunately, it did not end here and the violence was just about to start.

2.2 Territorial Disintegration and Civil War

The question of whether to label the conflict in Ukraine as a civil war is again governed by the entrenched nature of the two dominant narratives surrounding it. Many analysts have stressed that to call the crisis a civil war is nothing less than to directly support Russia's imperialist ambitions. Yet, conflicts such as the ongoing civil war in Syria experience no such firm attempts at relabeling, even though the degree of outside interference is considerably higher and distinctly more visible. Also, despite obvious external influences on the progression of the conflict, there are clearly Ukrainian citizens fighting on both sides and for the control of Ukrainian territory. Thus, the situation justifies its definition as a civil war and will therefore be labeled as such in this analysis.

While Western governments were busy passing criticism on the Russian behavior and started ramping up a package of sanctions against individual Russian politicians and businessmen, another unexpected development unfolded in Eastern Ukraine. Throughout the Euromaidan crisis there had been additional, smaller protests all over the country, most of them in the same spirit as the protests in Kiev, but some of them featuring a pro-Russian sentiment. These took place predominantly in the country's East, a region that is not just historically linked to Russia but one that remains characterized by Russian language and culture, with millions of Eastern Ukrainians working across the border in Russia (Lauterbach 2014, 86). After the toppling of Yanukovych, the pro-Russian unrests intensified and eventually turned into separatist movements. From Odessa to Luhansk, protestors and activists
seized government facilities and weapons. In the Donbass region, the former political backbone of Yanukovych's presidency, the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) were proclaimed by the end of April, following largely disputed referendums (Leonard 2014; Zhurzhenko 2014). The protesters had turned into armed rebels, refusing to accept the legitimacy of the new Ukrainian government.

This time around, however, there was no visible presence of Russian troops on the ground and the Ukrainian government, initially under interim president Aleksandr Turchynov and later under President Petro Poroshenko, reacted as forcefully as it was capable of, by launching the so called anti-terrorist operations (Klein 2014, 1). From April until August, fighting between the separatists and the Ukrainian military broke out in several major cities throughout the Donbass area. Eventually, the pro-Ukrainian forces managed to push back the separatists and pressed forward into DPR and LPR territory. By then, however, the tables had already started to turn. Throughout the summer the separatists demonstrated drastic improvements in military hardware and combat capabilities, proving themselves sufficient to force the Ukrainian military into retreat. In August, Kiev and Western governments started issuing reports on Russia sending heavy weapons and combat troops in Ukraine, as well as supporting the separatists with artillery fire from across the border. The Kremlin was accused of conducting a stealth invasion of Ukraine, to either secure a land bridge down to Crimea or to establish a pro-Russian enclave within Ukrainian territory (Kramer and Gordon 2014; NATO 2014; Nicks 2014; Yuhas 2014). These allegations were categorically denied by the Russian government, which insisted it was only sending humanitarian aid convoys across the border (Luhn and Roberts 2014). On July 17th, the situation was even further complicated when Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17 was shot down over the conflict zone, killing all passengers. This led to new allegations and another round of sanctions against Russia, even though until today it has not been fully clarified who exactly shot down the plane.

While much international attention was given to the extent of the Russian involvement, the motivations of the actual separatists were largely ignored. In the West, the separatist movement was generally portrayed as being organized in its entirety by Russian strategists. Yet, the ethnical and cultural bond between large parts of the Eastern Ukrainian population and Russia is a reality. So is what can be called the 'spirit of the Donbass' (De Cordier 2016, 3). This refers to a mentality that results from the region's very specific historic and cultural identity, a mentality that is constructed by a particular memory of the social justice of the Soviet Union (USSR), by the role in the Great Patriotic War against Nazi Germany and the resistance to the Ukrainian collaboration, and by the importance of the Russian Orthodox faith as a guardian of traditional values. These elements are bound together by the daily use of the Russian language. The spirit of the Donbass stands above nationality or ethnicity, many of the supporters of separatism do indeed have Ukrainian roots, and adds to the
distinct character of the region (ib. 3-5). The prospect that the new post-Maidan government would endanger this identity, by restricting the use of the Russian language, as well the media-hyped idea of a neo-Nazi coup in Kiev, which was entertained in the early stages of the crisis and pushed by the Russian government and media (Crowcroft 2015; Harding 2014), inspired fear within the population of eastern Ukraine. Thus, while the Russian hand in the crisis has long become undeniable, it is important to take into consideration that the pro-Russian sentiment, on which the separatist movement was built upon, is not a mere creation of Russian propaganda but a reality of the conflict.

With the newfound strength on the side of the separatists, an end to the civil war in Eastern Ukraine receded into the distance. When Poroshenko was elected as president on May 25th, the association agreement with the EU had already been signed. The eyes of the West, and the people of Ukraine alike, now laid on the new president, who was tasked with stemming the chaos and aligning the country with Western Europe. On top of the long list of crucial reforms and changes, necessary to move Ukraine forward, was now the ongoing civil war, which devoured enormous resources and had to be ended as soon as possible. Poroshenko was one of the few in Ukraine who realized that the war could not be won. Moreover, the government’s anti-terrorist operations enjoyed increasingly less public support, with a growing number of Ukrainians asking themselves why they should send their soldiers to die in order to reunify with people who did not want to be a part of Ukraine anyway (Mangott 2014; Walker 2015). Thus, it was the Poroshenko administration that developed the first peace initiative, consisting of a fifteen-step peace plan (POU 2014). After several unsuccessful attempts to initiate peace talks, Poroshenko's concept was largely adopted by the Minsk peace process.

2.3 The Minsk Process and Beyond

The peace process surrounding the conflict in Ukraine consists of several agreements, which are all built on each other. The fifteen steps of President Poroshenko became the foundation for the Minsk Protocol, which was negotiated during extensive peace talks in the Belarusian capital and sponsored by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). It was signed on September 5th, 2014, between representatives of Ukraine, Russia, and the People's Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. The developments of the preceding months had demonstrated that, in order to reach peace, Russia had to be invited to the table. The agreement decreed a twelve-step program starting with an immediate ceasefire between the separatists and the Ukrainian forces. The subsequent steps
were the implementation of an OSCE monitoring mission tasked with observing and verifying the ceasefire, a temporary status of autonomy for certain areas of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, a permanent and OSCE-verified monitoring of the Ukrainian-Russian border segments under separatist control, the immediate release of hostages and illegally detained prisoners on both sides, assurances of amnesty for individuals involved into the separatist movement, a continuous national dialog, measures to improve the humanitarian situation in the conflict zone, early elections in the DPR and LPR territories in accordance with Ukrainian law, the removal of all illegal military formations, military hardware, militants and mercenaries, a program for the economic revival of the Donbass region, and security guarantees for the participants of the consultations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2014). These twelve steps are the foundation of the peace process. However, it soon became clear that despite the agreement the fighting would not stop. As the civil war continued unaltered, and none of the conditions were fulfilled by either side, on September 19th the Minsk Protocol was supplemented by the Minsk Memorandum, which specified the details of the ceasefire implementation and added a security zone in which no heavy weapons were allowed (BBC 2014; Morelli 2017, 23). Even so, the ceasefire did not come into effect and the intense battle for the Donetsk airport continued, while the OCSE rated the elections that were held in November in the LPR and DPR as not being in accordance with the Minsk Protocol (OSCE 2014). In January 2015, the Ukrainian army reported that it had lost the Donetsk airport to the separatist (Wearden 2015), marking the final collapse of the Minsk Protocol.

Another peace agreement was negotiated and signed in the Belarusian capital on February 12th. The separatist leaders were no longer present and the Russian and Ukrainian presidents were instead joined by the leaders of Germany and France. The Minsk II agreement added several details and refinements to the previous agenda. Most notably, it included more security zones for heavy weaponry and granted the conflict parties more time to disengage (Financial Times 2015; Morelli 2017, 25). This time around, there were initial signs of success. Prisoner exchanges took place and heavy weapons were reportedly withdrawn. However, the ceasefire itself never really went into effect and was immediately overshadowed by the intense battle over Debaltseve and its strategically valuable railroad junction. After the separatists captured this valuable position, indirect fire continued around key areas such as Mariupol. In June, the separatists launched another offensive and managed to capture multiple strategically important targets by attacking the Ukrainian forces with large numbers of heavy weapons, including tanks and rocket launching systems (Spaulding 2015, 1-2). Since then, the fighting has continued with a varying degree of intensity and both sides violating the ceasefire, the separatists doing so with a much higher frequency (Mangott 2016, Raynova 2016). Follow-up meetings to the Minsk negotiations have not produced a solution to the conflict. The Ukrainian government continues to insist on a complete ceasefire and full control over
the border before granting anything to the separatists. At the same time, Russia insists on a special status and amnesty for the separatist territories, without offering any guarantees in return. The Kremlin does not demonstrate any interest in finding a resolution to the conflict, despite taking part in the peace talks and not recognizing the separatist republics as independent states or showing any inclination to annex them into the Russian Federation (Morelli 2017, 28). Instead, the Russian government appears to be quite content with the current situation. Now that the separatist forces have managed to considerably improve their position, and with the Ukrainian military being unable to take back the lost territory, the conflict has frozen into place. This prevents Ukraine from progressing further in its effort to be integrated into the framework of Western institutions, namely the EU and NATO, and furthermore highlights Kiev's inability to deal with the situation, thus slowly weakening it (Mangott 2014; Raynova 2016; Simon 2015, 3; Tsvetkova 2015).

What is important to point out about the Minsk agreement, and the peace negotiations in general, is that Crimea was never mentioned again in any of the official action plans and, thus, the repatriation of the peninsula into Ukraine was not made a precondition for any future peace settlements, even though the Ukrainian side was negotiating directly with Russia. This underlines that both, the Ukrainian government and the Western leaders, have accepted that Crimea will not be returned to Ukraine. Considering further that lifting the current sanctions regime against Russia has been linked to a complete implementation of the Minsk II agreement, it becomes clear that the West has basically granted Russia its victory over Crimea. Secondly, despite its involvement in the conflict, Russia participated in the peace process not as a conflict party but as a mediator. A third aspect of the peace process that needs to be considered is the fact that the US government remained completely absent throughout the negotiations. This is particularly noteworthy since US representatives had been visibly involved into the Euromaidan movement up to its final escalation.

Today, the situation in Eastern Ukraine is characterized by continuous deadly ceasefire violations, primarily consisting of artillery and missile fire. The conflict zone remains heavily militarized and the potential for renewed escalation is high. Despite all sides officially committing to the Minsk peace process, no bilateral ceasefire has been established so far and, since 2015 alone, the conflict has caused more than 9,000 casualties. Meanwhile, the OSCE monitoring mission reports restricted access to the separatist-controlled areas. The constitutional reforms granting a permanent decentralized status to the separatist republics and elections included in the Minsk II agreement were to be implemented before the end of 2015, the return of the control over the border to Ukraine was in turn linked to the decentralization reforms (Morelli 2017, 24-25; Tomkiw 2016; Walker 2015). However, even if the Ukrainian demands were fulfilled, there is currently no political will in Kiev to go ahead with the reforms either way (Mangott 2016). The peace process is therefore, to put it mildly, at an impasse, with both sides consistently blaming each other for it.
3 Failing State Ukraine

3.1 Post-Soviet Transformation Failures

Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the ongoing civil war in Eastern Ukraine have torn open a bleeding wound on the European continent. The relationship between Ukraine and Russia has deteriorated in a way not many would have thought possible before the crisis ensued. At the same time, relations between Russia and the West are worse than they have been in a very long time, the climate being cooler than during even some of the most precarious Cold War phases. This development is the result of various external influences on Ukraine’s future. Yet, the current crisis would not have been possible without a distinct setting of domestic preconditions, which are a direct consequence of the country’s failure to successfully engage in a post-Soviet transformation process.

After the collapse of the USSR, it was widely assumed within the West that the newly established post-communist states would enter a path of transformation towards a political and economic system following the example of Western liberal democracies. This assumption was the natural consequence of a deeply engrained Eurocentric paradigm, which considers the Western model as the ultimate goal of any transformational process. Some post-communist states did in fact follow this trajectory and are now true members of NATO and the EU. Poland is a prime example for such a success story. However, most of the communist successors do not fit into this category and show instead a combination of formal democratic institutions and undemocratic, often times authoritarian, practices. These hybrid systems reflect the need of post-Soviet leaders to legitimize their regimes with democratic polity and politics as much as they reflect their inability to rely solely on coercion and repression. As Thomas Carothers has pointed out, they are not actually in transition to democracy but rather constitute a new kind of political system, which exists in a gray zone between democracy and authoritarianism (Carothers 2002, 9). Regardless, they are still being analyzed in respect to an eventual transformation into consolidated democracies. Thus, states such as Ukraine and Georgia are currently categorized by Freedom House’s Nations in Transit Index as 'transitional', while Russia and Belarus have been downgraded to 'consolidated authoritarian regimes' (NiT 2016). As the crisis in Ukraine has once more demonstrated, such allocations are misleading.

From 1991 onwards, Ukraine went through a transformational period very similar to that of Russia. The two dominant features in both countries were, first, the simultaneous transformation to a market economy and formal democracy and, secondly, the undermining of the new institutional settings by old elites and practices. Informal, clientelistic networks had been a vital part of the political system of the USSR. Informality was needed to counterbalance the weakness of the system,
and the central Soviet bureaucracy relied heavily on regional elites to enforce its policies. The so-called nomenklatura included elites in key positions throughout government, industry, the military, and all other important domains of the state. In Soviet times, the power of the nomenklatura had been limited by the party apparatus, but when the USSR came to its end all mechanisms of containment ended with it. Parts of the old elite managed to survive the transition and retained their power by occupying the necessary positions in the new executive, and by controlling the interception points between politics and the economy. This survival of the old elite ensured the continuation of informality and clientilism as the primary logic of the political system. The democratic reforms were hollowed out form the beginning and both, Russia and Ukraine, turned into neopatrimonial systems with a distinct culture of corruption (Gallina 2011, 4-5; Malygina 2010, 12; Steinsdorff 2005, 12; Zimmer 2007, 175-179). In the case of Ukraine, there were several other factors that originated form its Soviet heritage and further diminished the chances for a successful democratic transformation. While Russia was the heart of the Soviet empire, Ukraine was merely an 'administrative splinter' (Torbakov 2000, 460) rather than a complete state. This meant that, with the dissolution of the USSR, Ukraine was left with an incomplete political system, as well as an underdeveloped sense of national identity (ib.). Due to the abruptness of the SU’s end, there was no time to gradually foster and segregate a functioning Ukrainian state.

When Leonid Kuchma, a manager turned politician and a representative of the industrial elite, became the second president of independent Ukraine in 1994, he immediately began to expand the power of his office. Against the majority of the parliament, he pushed through the constitution of 1996 and thus turned Ukraine into a presidential system, placing himself in charge of the clientelistic network engulfing politics and business (Kowall 2002, 6; Matuszak 2012, 13; Stykow 2014, 43). Much like his Russian counterpart, Boris Yeltsin, Kuchma was facing the need to implement drastic economic reforms. He failed doing so and, again much like Yeltsin, started to increasingly rely on members of the business elite for support (Puglisi 2003, 100). This circle of business magnates, commonly referred to as oligarchs, became symbolic for the corruption and the undemocratic hold to power under Kuchma (Pleines 2011, 129), who made it possible for them to merge with his government and to become one of the core features of the Ukrainian political system.

The Ukrainian oligarchs all made careers similar to their Russian counterparts, who got hold of great wealth and power under Yeltsin's presidency. Most of them were newcomers without strong ties to the Soviet elite, but with the right sense for business instead (Zimmer 2007, 180). In the final years of the USSR they began making considerable profits by engaging in the financial sector and import-export businesses. In doing so, they operated in a legal gray area while often crossing over into illegality. Government patronage was crucial to success, since all the real profits came from buying highly subsidized resources from the state, such as metals, chemicals, and most notably
natural gas, and reselling them for world market prices. This allowed for a profit margin of up to 90 percent, earning the new business elite billions of USD every year (Matuszak 2012, 13; Pleines 2010, 124; Puglisi 2003, 104). The same principle was applied in the banking sector. Via their newly founded private banks, the oligarchs received cheap loans from the central bank and in turn handed out loans with regular interest rates to their customers (Halling 2014). These shady businesses were nothing less than state-sanctioned corruption, redirecting massive chunks of state revenue into private accounts and rendering any economic reformation efforts meaningless. After Ukraine became an independent state, the oligarchs used their financial resources to purchase parts of the industry during the country’s privatization process (Matuszak 2012, 13; Pleines 2008, 1180). They merged their multiple enterprises into holding corporations and started to incorporate mass media assets as well. This was not done to increase profits but rather to expand their political influence (Pleines 2008b, 3). During Kuchma’s presidency, the oligarchs remained loyal to the government and Kuchma was able to expand his own power with their support (Halling 2014; Zimmer 2005, 60-62). The relationship remained mutually supporting and, unlike Yeltsin, the Ukrainian president was not reduced to being a mere puppet for the oligarchs to use.

However, the Ukrainian oligarchs worked towards expanding their influence over politics as well. During the late 1990s, they started to get directly involved into the political process by developing informal networks with the political elite and securing government offices for themselves, or their trusted representatives. They also founded their own political parties to mobilize voters for Kuchma’s reelection. In the run up to the 1999 electoral process, six parties were dominated by oligarchs with close ties to the president. During the 1998 parliamentary elections, the oligarchs used their media outlets and growing political influence to create a pro-presidential majority in the parliament. Furthermore, Kuchma strategically placed some oligarchs inside the parliament, where they used their money to recruit members from the opposition, and rewarded their support with economic favors. As a result, the increasingly unpopular Kuchma was reaffirmed as president and his capacity to act was expanded. The goal behind this was to break the anti-privatization blockade that previously had been upheld by the communist faction in parliament (Halling 2014; Pleines 2008, 1189; Pleines 2008b, 3; Puglisi 2003, 109-110, 116). While the privatization of the major state-owned corporations, under the infamous loans for shares initiative, led to the rise of the major Russian oligarchs and the reign of the seven bankers over Yeltsin’s regime, the Ukrainian privatization program had, in fact, been very limited up to this point. The most lucrative state assets had remained under the so called red directors, who had stayed in charge after the dissolution of the USSR (Kusznir 2006, 37; Kryshtanovskaya and White 2005, 294, 297; Lopez 2013; Mangott 2009, 45-49; Schröder 2003, 2). With Kuchma’s enhanced position he was now able to break the anti-privatization blockade, and the ensuing auctions strongly benefited the economic
interests of the various oligarchs involved. The oligarchic elite had become a truly substantial part of the Ukrainian political system. Not only were they dominating the economic sector, but they had gained considerable political weight as well, and those oligarchs that had become members of parliament now even enjoyed immunity to legal persecution (Pleines 2010, 131). A very valuable insurance considering the nature of their business practices.

The final parallel between the presidencies of Kuchma and Yeltsin, that deserves being mentioned here, is the issue of succession. Both oligarchic regimes tried to secure their continuation by passing the torch to a predestined successor. In Russia, this strategy succeeded and brought Vladimir Putin to power. However, Putin, who was supposed to uphold the status quo, instead turned against the oligarchs and evoked the dormant powers of the presidential system to retake control of the Russian political and economic system. Those oligarchs who submitted were allowed to play minor roles as long as they maintained loyalty to the regime. Those who put up a fight were made an example of and either imprisoned or pushed into exile (Mangott 2009, 129-133; Schröder 2003, 2-4). The Putin regime was able to consolidate the power of the state and to introduce the concept of a managed democracy (Robinson 2011, 442; Sakwa 2011, 3, 9-10, 33), in which democratic elements were reduced to a minimum in order to guarantee stability. What followed was a drastic improvement of the social and economic situation and a rise in economic performance by 72 percent, prior to the global financial crisis of 2007 (Mangott 2009, 77, 84-95; Rogov 2011, 125-127; Sakwa 2013, 2; Schröder 2011, 3). In Ukraine, Kuchma made Yanukovych his prime minister and strongly supported him in the 2004 presidential elections. Yanukovych won the head to head race against Viktor Yushchenko, but the election results were highly disputed and let to a series of protests that became known as the Orange Revolution. In the subsequent revote Yushchenko won, and the people of Ukraine celebrated their democratic victory. However, the initial euphoria quickly faded as it became increasingly clear that what had taken place was not a democratic revolution by the people, but rather the result of internal power struggles and tensions between the oligarchs, which had been gaining momentum towards the end of Kuchma's presidency. The protests had been organized by the elites out of fear that Yanukovych and his Donetsk clan were becoming too powerful. The Orange Revolution had, thus, been little more than a political maneuver to reverse his electoral victory and, unsurprisingly to many observers, Yushchenko never made good on his promises to fight the endemic corruption or reverse the fraudulent privatization outcomes (Kowal 2013; Matuszak 2012, 21; Zimmer 2009, 1-2). Instead, he protected oligarchic interests and, after a few months, the fight against corruption was even abandoned officially (Simon 2011, 16). The main difference to the old regime was that the oligarchs were no longer united and, instead, followed their own agenda, supporting various political factions (Pleines 2010, 132-134), while the power of the president was
reduced by the constitutional changes following the Orange Revolution. The new coalition
government with Tymoshenko, herself an oligarch who became rich by dealing in natural gas and
who had overseen parts of the controversial privatization process, was weak and divided from the
start.

Meanwhile, the oligarchs began investing millions into philanthropist activities, trying to
counter their image as criminals and thieves by promoting themselves as patriotic and responsible
(Halling 2013, 9-11; Kowal 2013). Moreover, a number of new oligarchs, such as future president
Poroshenko, started to appear on the political playing field. Without Kuchma to control and unite
them, the oligarchs had become the central actors of the political process in Ukraine and continued
to hollow out the democratic facade.

3.2 The Dire State of Ukrainian Statehood

While the Orange Revolution had been praised internationally as a success for democracy, the irony
of Yanukovych returning as prime minister in 2006 was not lost on the people of Ukraine. Since 2004,
the economic situation had continued to deteriorate. The mounting gas debts to Russia could not be
repaid and the currency was in freefall. Yushchenko was punished for further increasing the chaos,
and for his false promises of reform, by getting less than 6 percent of the vote in the 2010
presidential elections. It was again Yanukovych who won the election and, this time, there was no
revolution to remove him from office, nor were there widespread allegations of electoral fraud
(Pradetto 2015, 1; Simon 2011, 22-24). Soon after his election, the oligarchs saw confirmed what
they had feared before the Orange Revolution. Yanukovych recentralized the political power under
the office of the president, by reversing the 2004 amendments to the Ukrainian constitution, and
established his own power base by placing loyal representatives from the Donbass region on nearly
all levels of the administration. At the same time, most oligarchs were pushed out of their political
offices and even the ones who supported Yanukovych, in particular Rinat Akhmetov and Dmytro
Firtash, increasingly had to share their wealth with the emerging ‘family’, a group of loyal supporters
established around Yanukovych’s sons. The members of this group were placed into positions that
enabled them to massively enrich themselves, and the president, within a very short time (Halling
2014; Matuszak 2012, 6, 41; Stykow 2014, 45). Yanukovych also proceeded against his opposition,
most importantly Tymoshenko, who had refused to accept the outcome of the presidential elections
and resigned as prime minister. Tymoshenko was charged with abuse of power and sentenced to
seven years in prison, an act that was internationally condemned as being politically motivated (Matuszak 2012, 40; Müller 2015, 1; Salem and Makarova 2014). While corruption runs deep throughout all levels of the Ukrainian society, Yanukovych was most definitely an especially brazen example. Himself not being a member of the business elite, he amassed an immense personal fortune of 12 billion USD by abusing his position and outright stealing from the state and private businesses alike. It has been estimated that Yanukovych had stolen a total of 37 billion USD during his four years as president, a large part of this sum being used to create new and loyal billionaires out of thin air (Åslund 2014, 65-66). At the same time, he transferred a growing number of businesses from the oligarchs to his own supporters (Matuszak 2012, 42; Schneider-Deters 2013; Steward 2011, 26). It should not have come as a surprise that this insolence created a lot of enemies to the regime in a very short amount of time.

In a state where both, the political opposition and the civil society, were incapable of balancing out the power of the government, the oligarchs were the only counterweight to the president. This had already become clear during the Orange Revolution. The way Yanukovych dealt with the Ukrainian oligarchs may resemble the manner in which Putin took care of the Russian oligarchs, both presidents creating a 'family' of supporters; however, the crucial difference between Russia and Ukraine was that, while Putin either included or terminated the Russian business elite, Yanukovych did neither. According to the concept of Johannes Gerschewski, the stability of a contemporary authoritarian regime is based on three factors: legitimization, repression, and co-optation. Co-optation refers to the ability of the regime to tie strategically relevant actors to the ruling elite (Gerschewski 2013, 13, 22). Unlike Putin, Yanukovych failed to co-opt the oligarchic elite and, while allowing them to remain active, continued to fan the flames of their frustration at the same time.

In late 2013, the Ukrainian oligarchs saw an emerging opportunity to level the playing field and seized it. The Euromaidan movement grew from peaceful protest into a professional political operation, designed to initiate a regime change. In addition to the substantial infrastructure on the Maidan square, many protestors were apparently being paid for their presence during the Euromaidan and were even transported into the capital from around the country by chartered buses. This would explain why, according to a survey conducted by the US Agency for International Development (USAID), only 14 percent of the protesters were concerned by the Ukrainian-Russian relationship, while 34 percent actually preferred a closer cooperation, as compared to 35 percent preferring a closer cooperation with the EU (Müller 2015, 17). The oligarchs are the only ones with the resources to provide that kind of support. While Poroshenko and Ihor Kolomoisky openly supported the Euromaidan via their media outlets from the start (Melnykovska 2014), Yanukovych's
most important supporters, Akhmetov and Firtasch, had been noticeably quiet before they decided to drop him in the crucial moment (Müller 2015, 14; Neef 2014). Yanukovych had finally become a lame duck president (Hale 2006, 308-309) and it was now dangerous to support him. Thus, the elite pact, which had held his power together, had finally crumbled and in the end Yanukovych had no choice but to run for his life.

Perhaps the biggest irony of the entire crisis is that the revolutionary fight against corruption ended with an oligarch being elected as president. After Yanukovych’s toppling, Poroshenko became the face of the new coalition, promising ‘deoligarchisation’ and anti-corruption reforms (Interfax 2015). In reality however, his presidency was most likely decided through a shady deal in a luxury hotel in Vienna, where, together with his competitor Klitschko, he attended a meeting hosted by Firtasch. After this meeting, Klitschko withdrew from the race and instead started to support Poroshenko’s run for office. It is reasonable to assume that Firtasch received security guarantees for his own assets in return for his assistance, while Klitschko was promised the necessary help to be elected as the mayor of Kiev (Konończuk 2015, 3-4; Salem and Makarova 2014). The post-Maidan government soon proved that, while the Euromaidan had removed the Yanukovych clan from power, the oligarchic system itself remained unaltered; confirming once more the fact that the only political change possible in Ukraine is the change of the people in charge (Dempsey 2015; Konończuk 2015, 1; Matuszak 2012, 28; Müller 2015, 14). The oligarchs retained their businesses as well as their political influence, while vital parts of the Euromaidan movement did not make it into government (Konończuk 2015, 1-3; Leshchenko 2015; Melnykovska 2014). Poroshenko himself never fulfilled his campaign promise to sell parts of his companies in order to focus on being the president (Stecklow and Davies 2014). At the same time, the much needed economic and social reforms were subordinated to the defense budget and the growing war effort in the East. The heroes of the revolution came to an understanding with the oligarchs and profited from their political networks and media assets. Akhmetov and Firtasch, the closest supporters of the overthrown regime and representatives of Eastern Ukraine, distanced themselves from Yanukovych and the separatist movements by rebranding themselves as peace activists and reformers, even though any real reforms would endanger their business interests (Burkhardt 2015; Dempsey 2015; Halling 2015, 14-18). In short, the Maidan revolution was basically an internal power reshuffle that only increased the influence of the oligarchic elite within the political system of Ukraine.

Taking advantage of the turmoil in Kiev, Russia surprised not just the Ukrainian interim government but the entire world by annexing the Crimean Peninsula in a matter of days and simultaneously supporting the growing separatist uprising in Eastern Ukraine. Tasked with restoring control over the eastern regions, the Ukrainian military was faced with a challenge that by far surpassed its
capabilities. While the military leadership is known for being incompetent and corrupt, the troops themselves are chronically underfunded, undertrained, and underequipped. The efficiency of the army is further decreased by the fact that many soldiers have personal ties to Russia or Eastern Ukraine. Desertion and defection have been a common phenomenon in the Ukrainian civil war. This situation forced the Ukrainian government to mobilize the newly formed national guard, composed of interior troops as well as militant political groupings such as the Euromaidan self defence units and the right-wing Pravy Sektor, and to support the establishment of over 40 territorial defense battalions, many of which were funded by oligarchs and partially recruited their members form ideologically motivated locals (Klein and Pester 2014, 4-7; Kyivpost 2014; Lauterbach 2014, 125; Müller 2015, 17-18). The new government also appointed several oligarchs as governors in the regions under separatist threat. Immediately after Yanukovych was gone, Kolomoisky became governor of Dnepropetrovsk, a traditionally pro-Russian region that was at risk of falling under separatist control, where he used his money to establish the two Dnipro battalions while financing several other volunteer units such as the Azov, Donbas, and Right Sector battalions (De Cordier 2016, 5; Cullison 2014; Gathmann 2014; Halling 2014; Melnykovska 2014; Konończuk 2015, 4-6). Kolomoisky used his new position to rebrand himself as a Ukrainian patriot, who was ready to fight for his country, and he successfully maintained control over the region until he was dismissed as governor in 2015 (Dempsey 2015; Halling 2015, 14-18). He had used his position and his private army to further his own business interests, going as far as occupying the headquarters of the national oil company Ukrnafta to put pressure on the government, thereby directly challenging the state’s authority (Halling 2015, 15; Olearchyk 2015).

Kolomoisky's removal was part of the effort to centralize control over the territorial defense battalions under the state. Even though the volunteer battalions have now been put under the control of the National Guard, they continue to operate largely autonomously with their own command structures and, in some cases, their own tanks. Their loyalties are likely to remain with those who pay their salaries (Cremin 2015; Konończuk 2015, 6; Müller 2015, 17-18; Weir 2015). In addition to the territorial defense battalions, and the regular army, which became dependent on civil charity in order to continue the fight (Friesen 2016, 2, 5), the war effort of the Ukrainian government included mercenaries and other foreigners that were partially motivated via social media to come and join the fight (Antonova 2015). This highly fractured and unprofessional fighting force, opposed by very similarly composed separatist units, was largely responsible for the repeated failure to implement a ceasefire (Klein 2014, 7-8). This unstable constellation remains in place and, since 2016, foreigners are even officially allowed to join the Ukrainian army (UNIAN 2016). The threat of the Eastern separatism revealed just how hollowed out the Ukrainian state had already become. The regime had to rely on the oligarchs to even put up a fight. By creating oligarch warlords, and allowing
foreigners and right-wing militias to join the fight, the government privatized the state's monopoly of the use of force, and further destabilized the Ukrainian statehood (Pradetto 2015; Stykow 2014, 41).

The post-Maidan regime has demonstrated the tendency to blame the civil war, and particularly Russia, for its failure to conduct reforms and implement change. Yet, the real cause is the inability of the Ukrainian political system to free itself from the grip of oligarchic power. The core of the business elite has not only managed to outlast the regime change, but without its support such a political move would not have been possible in the first place. The oligarchs continued to make profitable business throughout the war. Some, like Akhmetov, proceeded in their trade with Russia while others, such as Kolomoisky, managed to increase their profits by shifting production to military goods and selling fuel to the Ukrainian army (Melykovska 2014). They used their money and their media outlets to divert public attention form their actions, and to improve their image in the West.

Meanwhile, the country is in worse shape than ever before. The East remains in a state of permanent war, heavily militarized and marked by devastation, with landmines and unexploded ordinance everywhere (Losh 2016). The Donbass region, now a conflict zone, had been responsible for up to 25 percent of all Ukrainian exports prior to the war (Melykovska 2014). The standard of living has plunged and poverty is growing, while production has drastically declined and the country's GDP has sunk to around a fifth of the EU average in 2016 (Dempsey 2015; Gatskova 2015, 2-3; Simon 2015, 3). Relations with Russia have rapidly deteriorated throughout the crisis. While the Ukrainian economy remains dependent on Russian commodities and energy resources, even though no longer imported directly from Russia but supplied by the EU via a reverse exchange flow, Russian has banned all Ukrainian imports of agricultural and food products, accounting for 50 percent of Ukrainian exports to Russia. Furthermore, Russian restrictions on Ukrainian transit trade has severely reduced Ukrainian exports and imports to other Eastern European countries. In 2016, trade with the EU surpassed trade with Russia for the first time, however the changes in Ukraine's trade dynamic have cost the country billions of USD in revenue (Deuber and Schwabe 2016, 2, 4; Morelli 2017, 15; Stratievska 2016, 2-4; Zelenska 2016, 3). The Ukrainian-Russian relationship is strained even more by Kiev's cultural war with its Soviet past and historic ties to Russia. The Poroshenko government has torn down over a thousand memorials and renamed fifty times as many streets in an effort to break with its past. In Kiev, the Moskovsky Prospekt has been renamed after Stepan Bandera, a known Nazi collaborator, who is considered to be a national hero by many in the country's western regions (Dyczok 2016, 4; Flood 2016; Hatherley 2016; ORF 2016b). Ukraine and Russia are also engaged in intense legal fights, Moscow insisting on full back payment of a 3 billion USD loan and Ukraine demanding a trillion USD from Russia as compensation for the loss of Crimea and the chaos in the eastern regions (Escritt 2016; Hille, Buckley and Donnan 2015; TASS 2015).
On the European front, the initial euphoria has long been cooling down as well. Regarding the pro-European forces inside Ukraine, there has been a rude awakening. In 2016, around 70 percent of the population expressed distrust towards the Poroshenko government (Bosko 2016, 2), with the majority of Ukrainians believing that the oligarchs had remained in power (Halling 2015, 14). The new regime has failed to send even a single positive signal of change to the population (Pleines 2016, 8; Kuybida 2016, 3; Umland 2016, 10). In Europe itself, a Ukraine-fatigue similar to the one after the Orange Revolution has taken hold (Härtel 2016, 5; Morelli 2017, 7). The lack of progress, and the internal controversies leading to the resignation of Yatsenyuk as prime minister, have evoked an uncomfortable déjà vu. Meanwhile, Ukraine is far from becoming an integrated part of the Western community. The association agreement with the EU is quite limited in comparison to other EU-associated countries and has confronted the Ukrainian government with the need to implement radical reforms to gain access to the European market at all (Batura 2016, 2-4). A NATO membership is outside the realm of realistic probability as well. Even though the government dropped the country’s non-aligned status in 2014, the majority of NATO’s members strongly oppose a Ukrainian accession (MSR 2015, 17). Thus, in many ways Ukraine now stands more alone than ever.

Ukraine is classified by Western institutions as a country in transition to becoming a consolidated democracy (BTI 2016; NiT 2016); however, in reality, matters look much less promising. After over two decades of a gradually expanding oligarchic system, the Ukrainian state is at a point where it has been completely captured by corruption and greed. Constant intra-elite struggles and power reshuffles have denied the country economic prosperity and democratic development. With the military being incapable of restoring order or regaining control over the national border, while at the same time being replaced in many ways by oligarch warlords, Ukraine has rightfully been described as a failing state (Pradetto 2015, 2). At this point, removing the ruling oligarchs by force would only further destabilize the country and may lead to another Maidan, which would have the potential to be much more violent, considering the large number of trained veterans, disillusioned extremists, and weapons produced by the civil war.

The Euromaidan uprising and the ensuing political crisis resulted from the oligarchic nature of Ukraine’s political system. The dire state of Ukraine’s statehood allowed Western actors to support an internal power struggle, disguised as a democratic revolution. The West made use of Ukraine’s weakness to further its own interest. At the same time, Russia seized the moment and took advantage of the chaos to pursue its own goals. By launching the anti-terror operations, the post-Maidan regime turned the conflict with the separatists into a full blown civil war and allowed for the crisis in Ukraine to develop into a conflict of geopolitical proportions. The trajectory of the crisis makes one thing undeniably clear: Ukraine holds a special interest for the Western powers as well as
Russia. Both sides have been responsible for the further escalation of the conflict. As Richard Sakwa has pointed out, the far reaching internal contradictions in the Ukrainian state alone would not have produced such disastrous results if the 'geopolitics of post-Cold War Europe had been sorted out earlier' (2016, 82). The current crisis is multidimensional in nature as it is a combination of several conflicts, internal as well as external. The external component is inseparable from Ukraine's strategic and geographical position between Russia and the West.

4 The Return of Geopolitics

4.1 Geopolitics: An Old Concept Revived

The conception of geopolitics emerged as a subject of academic research as well as political practice and is primarily concerned with the impact of geographical determinants, such as topography, demography, climate, and natural resources on political actions, strategic considerations, and the interests of states. In other words, geopolitics is concerned with the relationship between geography and statecraft (Black 2009, 191). The core assumption of geopolitical thinking is that geographical factors determine the framework of political behavior. As Klaus Dodds notes, 'mountains make people and as such we can explain, even predict, human history' (Dodds 2014, 4). Employing this connection between geography and politics as a prominent way to look at the world became popular in Europe during the late nineteenth century.

The term itself was coined in 1899 by the Swedish political science professor Rudolf Kjellén, who founded the academic discipline on the simple principle that geographical facts are unchangeable and, thus, a realist analytical approach to international politics needs to place a particular emphasis on territory and resources (ib. 20-21). Generally speaking, the geopolitical approach is closely connected to the realist theory of international relations in regard to its basic assumptions, and it is historically linked to the age of European imperialism, offering a way to understand the newfound international competition between the imperial powers (Black 2009, 107). Halford Mackinder, a British geographer and the father of modern-day geopolitics, added a global layer to geopolitical thinking when he published his heartland theory, which depicted the Eurasian continent as the pivot of history and the key to ruling the world. Mackinder thus called for Britain to resist Russian or
German ambitions to control Eastern Europe, to prevent them from gaining control over the entire Eurasian heartland (ib. 111-113).

Geopolitical ideas became particularly important in Germany, where they strongly influenced the ideological foundation of the Nazi regime. It was Karl Haushofer, a high ranking military officer during World War I (WW I) and a professor of geography at the University of Munich, who developed and advocated geopolitik as the German version of geopolitics. In the 1920s, he initiated the publication of the Journal of Geopolitics, or Zeitschrift für Geopolitik (Dodds 2014, 28-29). He defined geopolitik as 'the duty to safeguard the right to the soil, to the land in the widest sense, not only the land within the frontiers of the Reich, but the right to the more extensive Volk and cultural lands' (Jones et al. 2015, 197). Haushofer drew inspiration from the works of Kjellén, Mackinder, and others, most notably the German geographer and ethnographer Friedrich Ratzel, who coined the term Lebensraum, or living space, in the late nineteenth century (Kaplan 2013, 80). Ratzel argued that a state's power and ability to survive the struggles of international politics largely depended on the territory it controlled (Black 2009, 108; Scholvin 2006, 8). Haushofer strongly believed in the necessity of expanding the German living space. He promoted widening German control of the Middle East and Central Asia, while forging agreements with the USSR as well as Japan and Britain, which was largely in control of Africa. He was involved in the German-Japanese negotiations of the 1930s and 1940s. Most importantly however, Haushofer's student and former military aid, Rudolf Hess, was appointed the private secretary of Adolf Hitler. Hess assisted Hitler in writing Mein Kampf and Haushofer visited them both while they were in prison after the failed coup attempt of 1923. It is reasonable to assume that Haushofer had a strong impact on Hitler, who wrote about the ideal of the German Lebensraum in Mein Kampf, while incarcerated, and who later on used geopolitical concepts and ideas to advance and legitimize a policy of aggressive expansionism and ethnic cleansing (Dodds 2014, 26-29; Jones et al. 2015, 197; Kaplan 2013, 81-83; Scholvin 2016, 8). German geopolitik had taken the concept of geopolitics and imprinted it with a particular racist and expansionist agenda. This connection between geopolitical thinking and Nazism tainted geopolitics as a reference point for policy making and led to its exclusion from the scientific discussion after the end of World War II (WW II).

Geopolitics was henceforth largely neglected in favor of political geography, which was designated as scientifically objective and had a much smaller focus on the impact of geographical factors on the behavior of states (Dodds 2014, 31). However, the disappearance of geopolitical analysis stood in sharp contrast to the reality of the Cold War, which was clearly shaped by geopolitical considerations. In the US, the notion of applying geopolitics for the benefits of American interests was pushed by many of the same European immigrants who brought the concept of political realism to the country that had given them refuge during WW II, but which they considered...
to be dangerously naive. These included Robert Strausz-Hupé, Hans Morgenthau, and Henry Kissinger. Their ideas resonated well with American scholars such as Nicholas J. Spykman, whose views showed strong similarities with those expressed by Haushofer. Spykman, one of the founding fathers of classical realism, was strongly influenced by Mackinder as well. He argued against the demilitarization of Germany, fearing a spread of Soviet power, while he had been endorsing an alliance with Japan, directed against Russia and China, years before the long and vicious war with Japan had even been brought to an end (Kaplan 2013, 89-98; Mamadouh and Dijkink 2006, 350). Despite the fact that the Cold War era was filled with geopolitical terminology and rhetoric, the concept itself remained in the shadows until the 1970s (Black 2009, 141; Dodds 2014, 31). It was Kissinger who led the geopolitical approach to its revival in the context of US-China relations and ‘the necessity to curb Moscow’s geopolitical ambitions’ (Dodds 2014, 33-35; Kissinger 1979, 764). He promoted limited war against the USSR as a way to contain its territorial expansion at an acceptable cost (Kaplan 2013, 97-98). While Kissinger did not exactly indulge in geopolitical theory himself, his use of the term re-popularized the theorization and application of the concept in the US. One of the key geopolitical thinkers of the twentieth century is former US National Security Advisor and political scientist Zbigniew Brzezinski, who applied the concept to promote US strategic interests while counteracting Soviet expansionism (Dodds 2014, 36). Geopolitical thought, as it was promoted and put into practice by Brzezinski and others, was behind US foreign policy decisions such as the support of the Afghan insurgency against the Soviet occupiers and the support of Saddam Hussein, as well as the support of numerous military regimes in Latin America. Policy decisions based on geopolitical considerations were particularly common during the Reagan and Bush administrations, and often stood in connection to returning key political figures such as Donald Rumsfeld (ib. 36-37). In both, the German and the US case, it becomes clear that the influence of geopolitical thought on foreign policy is strongly related to political realism, or Realpolitik, and the dismissal of policy choices based on ideology and idealism in favor for national interests as the priority of the political agenda.

The end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall led to a political and academic rethink. The unexpected end of the Soviet empire gave birth to the idea that all human divisions could be overcome and that democracy would spread throughout the world. The East versus West paradigm was replaced by the idea of Eastern Europe and Western Europe. Globalization became the new concept of first choice for describing global developments, not only in economic terms but in regard to politics and culture as well, while the importance of geography, national borders, and even nation states themselves was challenged (Black 2009, 167-168; Dodds 2014, 48; Kaplan 2013, 3-4). Richard O’Brien even went as far as proclaiming the ‘end of geography’ (O’Brien 1992). Today, it has already become clear that, very much like Francis Fukuyama’s predictions on the ‘end of history’ (Fukuyama 1992), the end of geography has not occurred and will not do so in the foreseeable future. If
anything, the years following the dissolution of the East-West constellation, and the balance of power system holding it together, have repeatedly, and with increasing intensity, demonstrated that geography does matter. As Robert Kaplan notes, the end of the Cold War did not bring with it the end of geopolitical reality but rather initiated a new phase, which is still very young and unpredictable (Kaplan 2013, 11). Geopolitical thoughts and actions have already experienced a comeback. Nations that promote the ideals of the United Nations (UN) and international law have repeatedly chosen to violate the very principles they claim to stand for, while at the same time punishing others for doing the same. National security and strategic gains have shown to be as much at the core of the political agenda as they have ever been, and political idealism continues to be undermined by the realism of political actions.

None of this is new. Power politics and geopolitical considerations have always been a core reality of statecraft. Geographical conditions remain predetermining factors for strategy and foreign policy formation. What has changed is the usage of the geopolitical terminology itself. Reflecting the international developments of the past decades, and especially the course of events surrounding the conflict in Ukraine, resorting to the analytical framework of geopolitics has become increasingly popular. This is true for politicians, scholars, and the media alike. While in the USSR the term was considered to be tainted by Nazism (Dodds 2014, 45-46), today geopolitics has made its way back into the minds and vocabulary of leading Russian diplomats. The Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov has labeled the crisis in Ukraine a tragic consequence of 'geopolitical engineering' (Lavrov 2016b), blaming Western interference for the disaster. This, along with countless other examples, demonstrates how deeply the idea of a geopolitically-orientated foreign policy has become engrained into Russian thinking and strategic considerations. Meanwhile, within the West, geopolitical beliefs have long been shaping the policies behind the eastward expansion of NATO and the EU.

Despite its controversial history, geopolitics has endured until today. The reason for this is clear. The geopolitical framework is focused on simple, unchanging facts of nature. Naturally, the concept is not suitable to offer a comprehensive analysis of the vastly complex reality of the current global political system. For such an application it relies too much on simplification, which is exactly why it is compelling to use geopolitical ideas. The complexity of the world is made tangible by using tools such as maps, as well as terms such as pivot and heartland. Simplified models are offered for producing foreign and security policy (Dodds 2014, 5, 45). Binary logics, such as the East-West paradigm, are prime examples of a geopolitical mindset (Klinke 2012, 931). In any case, it is not necessary for geopolitics to offer an all-encompassing approach to politics, since recent history has demonstrated that many sophisticated concepts of the post-Cold War era, such as the idea of an inevitable
transition to democracy and capitalism for every state, or the presumption that the increase of
democratic systems would lead to a drastic decline of conflicts, yielded to the hard truths of reality.

Scholars engaging in geopolitical theorization draw strongly from the ideas of political realism
and therefore geopolitics is subjected to much of the same criticism. It is reproached for neglecting
the results of cooperation, international law, and institutionalism while focusing only on what divides
mankind (Dodds 2014, 38, 46). However, political reality repeatedly underlines the hard fact that
international law and multilateral institutionalism are often limited to rhetoric. Again, this has
become especially notable in the wake of the crisis in Ukraine. Realism describes and predicts how
states actually behave behind their rhetoric, which is usually based on morals and high values (Kaplan
2013, 27). As Robert Kaplan points out, ‘realism is about the recognition of the most blunt,
uncomfortable, and deterministic of truths: those of geography’ (ib. 28). Another potential
argument, questioning the importance of geopolitical considerations, would be the advancements in
technology, and the resulting increase in maneuverability and power projection capabilities. Yet,
while technological progress has led to an increasingly more interconnected world, it has not
diminished the importance of geography and national borders. In contrast, improvements in military
technology have even further increased the ability to enforce geopolitical strategies and globalization
has been outpaced by regionalism throughout the globe.

Considering that the current state of the international political system is marked by a realist
reality, showing distinct features of geopolitical interests, it is argued here that the analytical
framework of geopolitical research is most capable of researching not just the ongoing crisis in
Ukraine, but the current constellation in global politics as well.

4.2 The Impact of Geography on a Multipolar World

The end of the Cold War induced a significant transformation of the global political dynamic. With
the dissolution of the USSR came the end of a bipolar power system, which had maintained an
impressive degree of global stability for nearly half a century. What followed was the formation of a
‘new world order’, as proclaimed by US President George H. W. Bush (1991). The main question was
how global power would be distributed in this new constellation, a question which has continued to
be the subject of debate until today. In order to analyze the current crisis in Ukraine and its
consequences, it is necessary to gain a clear understanding of the framework conditions that made it
possible for the crisis to become a conflict of geopolitical proportions.
When the USSR disintegrated, the US became the sole superpower. To many observers it seemed that dawn had broken for an American century, with the US as the global hegemon in a unipolar system. The West was now the dominant force in politics as well as economics, allowing for a system of Western global governance, while the West itself was controlled by the US (Peterson, Alcaro and Tocci 2016, 2, 47). Others believe that the end of the Cold War led directly into a multipolar constellation, which has endured until today, despite numerous US attempts to establish a unipolar system under American control. When the Cold War ended, the bipolar system had already become much more complicated than the term bipolarity would suggest. The ability of both poles to control their spheres of influence was very much incomplete. After the Soviet enemy was gone, the US was left with a massive military apparatus and no apparent rivals. It subsequently developed unipolar ambitions; this was not acceptable for other major powers, least of all for Russia, which continued to maintain its massive nuclear arsenal and was now promoting a balanced distribution of power in the international system (Bordachev 2009, 61-62). Alternative concepts to multipolarity are the idea of a nonpolar or depolarized world, in which a large number of actors have various types of powers, as well as the notion that poles increasingly form by several weaker states merging together. The EU would be the most advanced example for this in terms of integration. Another concept, promoted by liberal institutionalists and constructivists, is that of interpolarity, which combines the idea of multipolarity with the reality of globally deepening interdependence (Haas 2008; Peterson, Tocci and Alcaro 2012, 5). All of these constructs are based on the growing perception that the current global constellation is increasingly developing towards a distribution of power to several centers around the globe. The most common term for this analytical concept remains multipolarity.

A multipolar order means that no power is strong enough to dominate the global political system by its own in terms of military, economic, and cultural dominance. It does not necessarily equate to a global power equilibrium. History shows that multipolar systems never involved a truly equal distribution of power. Some poles were always stronger and more capable in certain areas than others (Bordachev 2009, 62; Varisco 2013). Thus, even if a power such as the US shows far superior military capabilities than its rivals, it does not necessarily mean that the international system is unipolar. Charles Krauthammer identified the US position, after the Cold War had ended, as a unipolar moment. With the USSR gone, Japan in economic decline, Europe preoccupied with its own regional integration project, and China remaining far behind despite its growing strength, the US managed to expand its power while gathering new allies around the world (Krauthammer 2002, 5-6). Thereby the US managed to temporarily exert considerably more power throughout the globe than any other nation. Another such unipolar moment can be detected following the end of WW II. While Europe was wrecked, exhausted, and out of money, the US had greatly profited, not just from the war’s outcome, but its own war effort as well. Compared to other nations, the number of American
casualties remained small while the US economy moved past its depression due to the money spent on the military. At the same time, mass unemployment had practically been ended by the draft. After the war, Washington ensured its dominant global position economically, via the establishment of the Bretton Woods system, and militarily, via creating NATO. This was the origin of the US as a superpower. The collapse of the Soviet empire gave a renewed boost to the American hegemonial ambitions, but this second unipolar moment was much smaller than the first, and it was focused primarily on the Middle East (Hiro 2010, 16; Varisco 2013; Yglesias 2006). Another, and even smaller unipolar moment, may have occurred after the events of September 11th, 2001, when the US tried to dominate the international agenda over the course of its war on terror. Yet, this attempt ended so badly for the US that it contributed to its decline much more than to its status as a superpower.

Whether the end of the Cold War led directly to a multipolarization of global power, or whether this process started in the years that followed, the predominant characteristic of the current global system remains a continuous power shift, from the established leaders of the world to the emerging powers of the future. Following the end of the Cold War, change was inevitable, but a global transformation towards Western standards was not. China’s rise, the return of Russia, growing global terrorism and the disastrous war against it, the 2008 financial crisis, and many more developments, showed that history had not come to an end and that the world instead had become much more complex. Non-Western powers gained more momentum and influence, while starting to offer viable alternatives to the Western style of governance. The assumption that modernization would equal westernization turned out to be false and the Western civilization, in Samuel Huntington’s terms, did not manage to become the dominant culture of the world (Huntington 1997, 31, 40-44, 68-78). After WW II, the West practically controlled the entire world. After the Cold War, Western forces dominated the international banking system and the global sea lanes, while controlling all hard currencies, the access to space and aerospace industry, as well as the global communications and high-tech weapons productions, and provided the majority of finished goods. At the same time, the West was confronted with slow economic growth, huge government deficits, growing social disintegration and unemployment, as well as stagnating population growth. Economic power had already begun to shift towards East-Asia, with military power slowly following (ib. 81-83, 91). Before WW I, Europe had a higher population than China. In 2050, the combined populations of Europe, the US, and Canada will account for less than 15 percent of the global population (Goldstone 2010; Kaplan 2013, 147). English is now only the third most common global language, after Spanish and Mandarin, Mandarin being spoken by between three and four times as many people as English (Huntington 1997, 59-61; Nationonline 2009). Apart from these global trends, several internal factors contributed to the loss of Western power.
While all empires have fallen eventually, the decline of US dominance was considerably accelerated by the disastrous presidency of George W. Bush, who left the US with a tremendous public debt, thus limiting its options in foreign policy formation, while making the American people weary of further interventionist endeavors, and at the same time alienating not just the Muslim world but core European allies as well (Hiro 2010, 7; Peterson, Tocci and Alcaro 2012, 9). The Bush administration started a new chapter in history, defined by an endless war on terror that ended in a significant destabilization abroad and a massive blow to democracy at home, creating a mass surveillance apparatus along with a substantial list of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by the US. The most devastating decision of all was the invasion of Iraq in 2003, justified by the intentional misinterpretation of falsified evidence and condemned as illegal by the UN Secretary General (Hiro 2010, 43-47; MacAskill 2004; Porter 2007, 98). Bush did not just break the record for being the least popular US president at home, he also gravely tainted the moral stance of the US in the world. The Abu Ghraib prison, Guantanamo bay, CIA black sites and torture programs, permanent mass surveillance, and the lasting presence of armed drones in the sky, have all become synonymous with US foreign policy. At the same time, Iraq turned into breeding ground for terrorism and now has an Islamic constitution. Much like the bombings of Sudan and Afghanistan by the Clinton administration in 1998, the US had not made the world a safer place but instead fueled terrorism around the world (Chomsky 2004, 240-241). In 2006, a multinational survey concluded that people in the West ranked Bush more dangerous to international peace than North Korean dictator Kim-Jong-Il, and only slightly less dangerous than Osama bin Laden (Glover 2006). Instead of learning from its mistakes, the US continued to destabilize Libya, Yemen, and Syria under the administration of Barack Obama, and helped turn these countries into failed states, much like it had done in Somalia (Walt 2016). To put it briefly, the US has simply failed as a hegemon, spreading chaos and mistrust around the globe.

On top of this, the US, as the self-declared leader of the free world and champion for democracy, has also failed to uphold the very standards it supposedly tried to spread throughout the globe. The US is, in fact, ranked only 20th in the 2015 Democracy Index, Italy at 21st place has already been labeled as a flawed democracy (The Economist 2015b, 7). This ranking categorizes the US as bordering on becoming a flawed democracy itself. Things look even worse in terms of freedom of the press, the US being ranked 41st, far behind several African, Latin American, and post-Soviet countries, in the 2016 Press Freedom Index (Reporters Without Borders 2016). In 2010, the US Supreme Court lifted the restrictions on campaign financing by corporations and other organizations (Vandewalker 2014), further increasing the powerful influence of outside interests on the political process. This and other trends are reflected in a Princeton University study which concluded that the preferences of American voters, when not in accordance with the economic elite, have a ‘statistically non-significant impact upon public policy’ (Gilens and Page 2014, 575) or, to put it another way, the
study basically concludes that the US political system fits the definition of an oligarchy more than that of a democracy (Chumley 2014; Cassidy 2014).

On the other side of the Atlantic, things are not looking much better. The European integration project is in deep turmoil. The Eurozone crisis had been barely manageable and has left deep cracks in the European framework, while the current refugee crisis has revealed that the EU remains primarily a trade organization with its members being 'in it for the good times, not in it for the bad times', as noted by George Friedman (2016). Today, EU politics are marked by renationalization, disunity, and a fight for the bare survival of the European cause (Peterson, Tocci and Alcaro 2012, 7-9). The EU holds, in theory, the second most powerful military, but, due to the unwillingness of its members to pool their core security and defense resources, Europe remains incapable of establishing an expedient and deployable European military force. In the end, Europe finds itself left out of contemporary geopolitics (Kaplan 2013, 133). Moreover, the West itself is no longer a truly unipolar force. The transatlantic partnership, as the Western world in general, was never based on internal power equality but was instead dominated by the US. During the late 20th century, and in particular in the wake of the US war in Iraq, the US cultural hegemony began to crumble and, consequently, the West began to split. European societies have developed a European identity that is increasingly diverging from the American way and, despite different believe systems, the European countries are still more aligned with each other than with the US. The EU is anxious to make its mark on history by distancing itself from the US; however, Europe remains dependent on US hardpower and security guarantees (Peterson, Tocci and Alcaro 2012, 11-16; Varisco 2013). Consequently, NATO is facing growing internal imbalances and uncertainty regarding its future purpose.

The world never really loved the US as much as the American people liked to believe. There has always been harsh criticism and a lot of hate directed towards the US government, the backlash for a foreign policy defined by interventionism, exploitation, self-interest, hegemonial ambitions, and hypocrisy (Kagan 2014). Before the Bush administration was even in power, Huntington had observed that the US was perceived as a rogue state and a threat to peaceful societies by much of the world (1999). Kenneth Walz and others have noted that concerns about American power motivated states to acquire WMDs as the only working deterrent against US aggression (Chomsky 2004, 37; Walz 2003). Yet, as long as the US controlled the global economic system and dominated international politics, the voices of open criticism were fewer and could easily be shrugged off. When convertibility of the USD to gold ended in 1971, the first unipolar moment of the US was over for good. Much like the British Empire, which had taken the same step forty years earlier, it was the first sign of a great power's economic decline. Eventually, the US overstretched itself in its Middle East
campaigns and thereby accelerated its downfall as the world's prevailing superpower (Hiro 2010, 13, 19). While it remains the dominant military power for now, in terms of economics the US is already just one of several factors in a multipolar system.

After the Soviet dissolution, US ambitions to establish a unipolar world order were blocked repeatedly by Russian led coalitions. Russia used its UN Security Council (SC) veto powers to thwart American attempts to dictate the global agenda, and forced the US to operate outside of the UN. This way, Moscow managed to rob the NATO campaign in former Yugoslavia of its international legitimacy. When the US tried to reestablish its global supremacy in 2001, its ambitions were obstructed again. This time it was not just Russia who refused the US, but also China and even fragments of the West itself. The rise of countries such as India, Pakistan, and North Korea further undermined the plans for a global US hegemony. The emerging powers no longer accepted unipolarity in international politics and started to demand a rebalancing of power in the network of international institutions controlled by the West, reflecting the redistribution of global power that had been taken place (Bordachev 2009, 63-64; Peterson, Tocci and Alcaro 2012, 2). Today, the primary weight behind these demands is carried by the so-called BRICS countries, most importantly China, Russia, India, and Brazil. The global financial system, in particular the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the IMF, remain under disproportionate control by the US and other Western powers, while global multilateralism continues to be dominated by the UN SC, which is outdated and in dire need of being reformed towards an improved inclusiveness. As predicted by Brzezinski, if not reformed these pillars of the established global order may soon become considered illegitimate by the non-Western world (2012). The status quo is changing however, and solutions to the world’s problems can no longer be found in Washington or European capitals, as global governance based in the West is no longer accepted and the people of the non-Western world are united in the realization that the Western dominated global economic system is working against their best interests (Peterson, Tocci and Alcaro 2012, 8, 11). All the BRICS countries have the potential to become regional hegemons and new poles in a multipolar power system. The most impressive member of the emerging powers is without a doubt The People's Republic of China (PRC).

As John Mearsheimer has pointed out, even if the world was unipolar at one point, this has now changed with the rise of China. Therefore, the international system would at least be defined by a renewed bipolarity, if it were not for India and Russia, which still need to find a way to manage their own problems (Mearsheimer 2007, 85). Due to its size, strength, and its history as a six thousand year old civilization, China has a natural impetus for becoming one of the predominant global powers. After the Sino-Soviet Split in 1960, China started acting as the leader of the third world, which in turn acted as a third party in a system dominated by a bipolar power struggle. Following the end of the Cold War, China had to redefine its place in global affairs and was now
striving to become the dominant force in East Asia, thereby resuming its historical position which had been lost during the 19th century because of Western imperialism (Hiro 2010, 117-124; Huntington 1997, 168, 229). After its communist revolution, China went on the path of recovery. In an unparalleled rise that took less than six decades, post-war China managed to rise from rock bottom to the world’s second largest economy. In 2015, the Chinese GDP had already reached 61 percent of the US GDP, equaling 250 percent of the Japanese GDP which China surpassed for the first time in 2010, and estimates show that until 2020 the Chinese economy will have gained even further on the US, reaching over 76 percent of its GDP (Portyakov 2016; World Bank 2017). In 2006, China became the largest holder of foreign reserves; in terms of domestic investments China outpaced the US in 2010, and in 2014 it did the same regarding intellectual and technological resources. Since October 2016, the Chinese Renminbi (RMB) is now, together with the USD, Euro, British Pound, and Japanese Yen, an IMF reserve currency, the first currency of an emerging market elevated to this status and the first expansion of the IMF currency basket altogether (ORF 2016e; Portyakov 2016; Yi 2006, 3).The fact that all this was achieved, not by introducing Western-style capitalism, but under a socialist market economy, with a state-controlled banking system and state ownership of the vast majority of the most valuable companies, equaled an economic miracle, unparalleled in the West (Hiro 2010, 147-149). This miracle was made possible thanks to China’s advantage in human capital resources, as well as its integration into the global economy without the government surrendering to the free market. China survived the global financial crisis without much harm due to government control of the national banking industry and, in the end, became the key player for pulling the world out of the financial crisis. When China was allowed to join the WTO after 15 years of negotiations, it experienced a trade boom which propelled it to the top in international trade of goods, and closely behind the US in trade of services. While China remains far behind in terms of military power, it is steadily catching up with the US in research and development, as well as military resources (Hiro 2010, 10, 283-84; Portyakov 2016; Saich 2002).

On a global level, China’s influence is growing fast as well. The 2008 financial crisis led to a drastic loss of credibility for the liberal capitalism of the West. Meanwhile, the US-dominated global financial institutions, especially the IMF and its controversial conditionality, have long been criticized for promoting Western economic policies that are not in the interest of the developing world (Lowe 2015, 114; Peterson, Tocci and Alcaro 2012, 7). In the perspective of the non-western world, the West has lost touch with how it is seen by the rest of the world, as blatantly arrogant and ignorant (MSR 2015, 22). In turn, China’s influence is viewed as having a more beneficial impact on the world. The Chinese government follows a policy of noninterference and respect for the sovereignty of states, without forcing its own set of moral standards on it. China started providing loans to developing countries outside the established structures of the West and without attaching Western-
style conditions to it. In its quest for securing new resource markets, the PCR has explored Australia, Latin America, and especially Africa, where China is far ahead of the US in its diplomatic relations. The Chinese industry has established productive trade relations with Angola, the DR Congo, Gabon, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan, South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Oil and minerals are being traded for affordable manufactured goods and extensive assistance in constructing infrastructure projects, quickly filling the void left by Western corporations in countries such as Sudan, which was isolated by the US for supporting terrorism. At the same time, China is providing the African continent with much more financial aid than the US or anyone else (Amusa, Monkm and Viegi 2016; Burke 2017; Hiro 2010, 158, 173-175). China is offering an alternative to the American way and the established order of the West, and the non-Western world is increasingly attracted to it.

The economic success story of non-democratic China demonstrated to Russia, and the rest of the non-Western world, that the approach dictated by the West was not the only path forward (Kasonta 2015, 107). In Russia, the Putin regime adopted a concept very similar to that of Huntington, which is based on the ideas of Russian scholars such as Nikolai Danilevsky and Konstantin Leontiev, who described Russia as a distinct civilization. This civilization is defined as Russia, together with the many Russians living abroad, and those who feel as a part of Russian culture. Connecting the Russian identity to the idea of a Russian civilization, that does not need to adopt Western standards and values, allows the warding off Western criticism regarding the Russian political system with ease (Zevelev 2011, 565-567). Putin managed to reestablish Russia as a cohesive force and, using the wealth of Russian oil and gas exports, initiated the recovery from both, the Soviet mismanagement and the chaos of the 1990s. With increasing internal stability, Moscow’s voice reemerged, carrying renewed weight and starting to request respect for Russian interests once more.

Despite its successful reemergence as one of the major global powers, Russia is not one of the young, dynamic emerging economies. The fact that it outran the other BRICS countries in the first decade of the 21th century was an anomaly, made possible by favorable conditions for Russian energy exports. The Russian system remains heavily burdened by its Soviet legacy of faulty development and misallocation, reinforced by excessive rent seeking and a problematic modernization process. For Russia to become the regional leader it aspires to be, it needs to develop both, significant soft power capabilities and regional or international public goods (Gaddy and Ickes 2011, 182-283; Trenin 2011, 62). The others BRICS nations face similar challenges that hold them back from becoming true poles of power. India, a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual society, is inherently weaker than China and lacks its unity and strength. Brazil’s form of state-led capitalism and economic climate hinders the country's economic development. The cohesion within the BRICS organization itself is very low compared to Western institutions (Hiro 2010, 205; Peterson, Tocci and Alcaro 2012,
10). And yet, the emerging powers have successfully altered the global dynamic and openly challenge the established order of the West (Gilman 2016; Peterson, Tocci and Alcaro 2012, 3). Unlike predicted after the Cold War, Russia and China are now on the rise; and liberal democracies are not.

The world is currently in an advanced stage of a global transformation process, which decreases the ability of the most powerful players to shape global events by themselves. Stable alliances based on shared values and ideology are a disappearing relict of the 20th century. Meanwhile, the 21st century marks a return to normality, a return of geopolitical and geoeconomic interests as the dominant variables behind strategic calculations (Lukyanov 2011, 68-70). As Morgenthau concluded, democracy is not synonymous with morality and thus the foreign policy of a democracy is not inherently ‘better’ or even different than that of an authoritarian regime. Beyond the rhetoric and officially promoted ideals the actions of both, Russia and the US, have been based on classic realist thinking (Bordachev 2009, 62; Kaplan 2013, 24-25; Mearsheimer 2014, 8; Morgenthau 2006, 2-12). It is geography and geopolitical realism that have caused the foreign and military policies of the US to differ strongly from Europe, Russia, or China. Russia has always been an insecure land power, marked by a history of invasions going back to before the Mongols. Under the constant threat of incursion, the only way to Russia’s safety has been a policy of aggressive expansion, producing Soviet satellite states during the Cold War and a focus on regaining control over the near abroad after the SU’s dissolution. For Europe, its geographical situation has provided the ideal preconditions for advancing its own civilization, while being able to take advantage of the weaker African, Middle Eastern, and Eurasian neighbors. However, due to the lack of geographical barriers on the European mainland, the nations of Europe were constantly preoccupied with their own defense and continued to fear the Russian threat after the fall of the USSR. France has historically had to defend itself from the land and two oceans, while Britain enjoyed a much higher level of security and could concentrate on its naval forces. The same is true for the US, which managed to become a global super power, in part, because of its uniquely advantageous geographical position. The land-bound European states never had the opportunity to retreat across the sea. Geographic facts are also what make China such an important power in global politics. Population numbers and economic growth aside, China’s control of the main sea communication lines, its temperate climate, and its access to the oil and gas riches of Central Asia, are all essential factors in its strong global role. China’s isolated position, created by deserts, mountains, and distance, has allowed for its ancient civilization to grow in relative peace. At the same time, the African continent is characterized by very unfavorable conditions for development and cut off from the Mediterranean civilizations, adding a large obstacle to its modernization process (Graham 2011, 5-6; Kaplan 2013, 30-32, 41-45, 79; Scholvin 2016, 9; Varisco 2013). Since the end of history has not occurred, geopolitical considerations continue to shape global politics.
When the bipolar balance of the Cold War came to an end, the global power constellation returned to a state of multipolarity. Much like in previous phases throughout history, the new multipolar system proved to be defined by unpredictability and diverging interests. The US tried to establish a unipolar order, yet ultimately it not only failed to become the global hegemon but, in trying to achieve its goal, accelerated its own decline. Both, Russia and China, have a history of being regional hegemons and continue to work towards regaining their traditional position. As their power grows, they are increasingly capable of opposing the persistent American unipolar ambitions. This is the source of major geopolitical tensions and the power conflict that currently defines the global political system. Other powers, such as the EU, have failed to adapt to the new world order and are consequently struggling to come to terms with it. This further contributes to the destabilization of contemporary politics.

4.3 The Return of Geopolitics as a Core Feature of International Relations

History has shown that great power shifts increase the potential for conflict (Peterson, Tocci and Alcaro 2012, 8). With the US maintaining a foreign policy course characterized by a unipolar understanding of the world, and the emerging powers fighting for a multipolar order in which they are granted the respect and autonomy of regional hegemons by the international community, the international system is now under growing pressure, revealing the fault lines of global stability. These fault lines have been growing since the end of bipolarity and are becoming more and more prominent, the conflict in Ukraine being a prime example. To understand this conflict, it is necessary to reflect upon the primary determinant of international relations: security. International security depends highly on predictability and stability. In a transforming system, such as the world today, the dominant dynamic is one of unpredictability and uncertainty.

Some realist scholars, such as Morgenthau, traditionally answer the question of stability by promoting multipolarity over unipolarity. Others, such as Waltz and Mearsheimer, have argued that bipolarity is more stable, since in multipolar systems competition is much higher and weaker states are more likely to make decisions that destabilize the entire system, and thus a multipolar world is more prone to conflict (Mearsheimer 2007, 80; Peterson, Alaro and Tocci 2016, 4, 47). From a geopolitical perspective, Spykman came to a similar conclusion. He argued that the planet is simply too big to be controlled by a single hegemon, thus implying the preferability of a system based on multiple regional hegemons very similar to the concept of multipolarity (Kaplan 2013, 100). Due to
the size and cultural diversity of the world alone, multipolarity is a necessity, just as a well-
performing balance of power is a necessary precondition for the existence of international law, as
opposed to a set of rules that is enforced by a single hegemon (Muellerson 2016). According to the
balance of power paradigm, security is greater when military power is distributed among several
states, so that no unipolar force can take advantage of weaker states with no one to oppose its
ambitions. As Karl Deutsch and David Singer have pointed out, even though under power balancing
politics multipolar systems are also prone to conflict, the stability in such systems is still deemed to
be substantially greater (Deutsch and Singer 1964, 404-406). The multipolar system of the 17th
century led to the Thirty Years War, and in the 20th century another multipolar system allowed for
two world wars within a time span of 50 years, despite global economic relations showing a level of
interconnectivity equal to or perhaps even stronger than today (Varisco 2013). History has
demonstrated repeatedly just how ungovernable the world truly is. Peace, it appears, can only
come from a well-performing balance of power. Until a new global equilibrium emerges, the world
will remain in a period of great upheaval and uncertainty (Bordachev 2009, 66; Graham 2011, 12).
While unipolarity may be one of the least stable constellations, instability is further augmented
when a single power's unipolar ambitions are being challenged by the rest of the world. Thus, the
US's attempts at creating a global supremacy are a major cause of rising anarchy in global politics.
China, Russia, and the EU will need to invest into bringing their capabilities, most importantly in
regard to military hardpower, to a level matching that of the US in order to create stability. Due to
the stabilizing nature of multipolar systems, or rather the balance of power in general, stability
depends on the inability of one power to dominate the others, forcing it to cooperate. This
underscores the Russian demands for increased cooperation over the last two decades and explains
why the emerging powers object to Western initiatives, such as the enlargement of NATO and the
development of advanced weapon capabilities like the Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) system
(Bordachev 2009, 61, 64). The only alternative to enhanced cooperation is increased conflict.

Instead of increasing cooperation, the international system is currently marked by
fundamental changes regarding the way conflicts operate. The number and diversity of parties
confronting each other is increasing. Power struggles have been unfolding between Russia and
NATO, the US and China, China and its neighbors, Iran and Saudi Arabia, and, perhaps most
surprisingly, between Russia and Turkey. These conflicts are primarily evident through acts of
provocation, such as military exercises, close encounters in the air and on the water, freedom of
navigation operations, and airspace violations. Both, Russia and China, are engaged in massive
military reforms that are aimed at reducing the excessive gap in defense capabilities between
themselves and the US. Similar military build-ups can be observed in Saudi Arabia and other parts
of the Middle East. At the same time, the line between peace and war continues to become more
Indirect warfare, an art already perfected by the US, has become an essential part of Russian and Chinese strategies as well, renamed as hybrid or unrestricted warfare. This is a logical consequence of US military superiority and the need of emerging powers to rely on nonmilitary tools in order to pursue their strategic goals. With each conflict the global situation resembles the years preceding the First World War a little more, even though all-out war and even large-scale battles between superpowers have become very unlikely. The means of waging war have become much more subtle, as they target the enemy's economic and political systems most of all (Kofman and Sushentsov 2016). As recent conflicts have demonstrated, the military option is only attractive if used in a small-scale theater and against a clearly inferior opponent. Today's wars can largely be fought without the general public even taking notice. The new battlefields are space, cyberspace, and the information domain. Even though physical tensions do break out, as for example the downing of a Russian jet by Turkey, they are usually answered with economic sanctions and political backlash rather than military retaliation.

After September 2001, the West started shifting its focus on elusive terrorist networks and fragile states in danger of falling apart. However, the security environment shifted and the decades of crisis management now had to yield to the return of geopolitics and renewed conflict between the world's power centers. Western leaders were forced to realize that the world around them had changed (MSR 2015, 5-6). As the chairman of the Munich Security Conference has pointed out, the traditional guardians of international order are increasingly overwhelmed by the current scale of conflict (Ischinger 2016, 2). Never has this been more obvious than during the crisis in Ukraine.

For the last three centuries, it has been debated whether Russia is a part of the European civilization, or rather an Asian country intruding into European affairs. While the soviet ideology opposed the Western way of life, it was based on European thought. Every time Russian leaders transformed the country based on European example, it elevated Russia to a new level of power. This is as true for the Europeanization efforts of Peter the great as it is for Stalin's industrialization. Likewise, different geopolitical traditions alternate in viewing Russia as a part of Europe in need to accept the Western social and economic standards, as a Eurasian country with its distinct social and political traditions, or as a bridge between Europe and Asia (Dodds 2014, 43; Graham 2011, 5, 9). It appears as if Moscow has finally answered the question. In 2014, Russia forcefully demonstrated that it is not part of the Western world and that it no longer wishes to become part of the Western order. After having its complaints go unheard for decades, it is now pursuing its own ambitions to regain its status as a global player and policy actor, while ceasing to be a mere circumstance for the agendas of the West (Lukyanov 2011, 73). Russia has managed to regain much of its former strength, which it had lost after the Cold War. Moscow is now focused on reestablishing and
solidifying its role as the dominant power in the post-Soviet space, and being recognized as a great power and a partner to all other major states. This includes being accepted as an integral part of the European security system, a leading actor in the management of Arctic resources, a core member of all relevant international organizations, and a key player in global energy issues (Beixi 2016; Graham 2011, 14-18). The current national security strategy of the Russian Federation lists the US and its hegemonic ambitions, as well as the expansion of NATO towards Russia, as key threats to Russian security. In addition to that, Russia is facing several other geopolitical challenges. Beyond the former Soviet space, it is surrounded by countries that are much more dynamic than itself, most notably China with its superior economic growth model. Russia remains a strong military power and, thanks to its nuclear arsenal, no other country would dare to take Russian territory or resources. Yet, the nature of power has changed against Russia's favor, now being centered around economic, financial, and cultural strength (Graham 2011, 10-12, 15; MSR 2016, 28). How far the break between Russia and the West will eventually go remains to be seen. This is especially important for Europe, which is geopolitically bound to Russia. Both, the EU and Russia, can only profit from normalizing their relationship as soon as possible.

A second major power struggle involves the declining American and the emerging Chinese superpowers. China's global footprint has become unmistakably obvious. In addition to large projects in Latin America and Africa, the Chinese leadership introduced the world to its One Belt, One Road strategy in 2013. This is a massive development and infrastructure project that aims at connecting countries from China to Europe by rebuilding the old Silk Road, while at the same time expanding the existing maritime transportation lanes. Meanwhile, the relationship between China and Russia has demonstrated that emerging powers can co-exist and grow with cooperation. Since the end of the Cold War, relations between the two countries have steadily improved, initially in the context of Russian arms sales to the PRC, and later under the Sino-Russian Friendship Treaty signed by Jiang Zemin and Putin in 2001. Russia and China have agreed on multiple major energy deals, most notably the 400 billion USD gas deal of 2014, and coordinated on joint military exercises in both Russian and Chinese territory. While they are not engaged in a formal anti-US alliance, they have established a stable strategic partnership that is built around the principle of multipolarity and stands in opposition to unipolar ambitions, such as the US BMD capabilities. In 2015, Russia allowed for the integration of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and other projects in the region into the Chinese Silk Road concept, even though one of the original goals of the EEU had been to block Chinese economic ambitions in Central Asia. The Chinese government has also established good relationships with several Latin American states, strengthened by the election of leftist leaders in countries such as Bolivia, Brazil, Venezuela, Chile, Ecuador, and Paraguay. The Panama Canal has
been operated by a Chinese company since 1997 (Blank 2015; Hiro 2010, 169-173, 176; MSR 2016, 10; Ngai, Sneader and Ma Zecha 2016; Sarkar 2016; Wan, and Hauslohner 2014). China is increasingly taking the initiative in global affairs.

Meanwhile, the Chinese leadership has proven itself as an international institution builder and rule maker. Whether on its own or within the BRICS framework, China has been the leading force behind establishing new international institutions paralleling the traditional institutions of the West. The best examples for this are the New Development Bank, also known as the BRICS Development Bank, the BRICS Contingency Reserve Arrangement (CRA), the ASEAN Chiang-Mai Initiative (CMI), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and the Silk Road Fund. The BRICS CRA is designed as a competitor for the IMF, just like the AIIB and the BRICS Bank are for the World Bank Group. China has also created its own international banking system, international payment system (CIPS), credit card networks, regional free trade areas and investment agreements, transport and trade corridors such as the Silk Road project, and since 2008 China has its own global financial center in Shanghai. In addition to the BRICS organization, China is advancing the agenda of non-Western international institutions and platforms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which has rejected Washington's application for observer status, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), and the Xianshan Forum. China's economic capabilities have already transformed the country's ability and readiness to articulate its own ambitions and pushed the Chinese leadership to accept a growing responsibility for Asian security (Chunshan 2014; Hiro 2010, 173-175; MSR 2016, 11; Parameswaran 2017; Slav 2016). All these developments demonstrate that China has been shaping up to be the principal competitor for the Western establishment. This puts China on a direct collision course with the US.

China and the US have become rivals on many levels. Much strength of the American superpower is based on its ability to control the global financial and economic system. Not only is China undermining this power by establishing, brick by brick, a parallel global order, but it also directly challenging US dominance. The One Belt, One Road initiative is basically the counterpart to the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and has elevated the economic competition of Washington and Beijing to a new level. At the same time, China is challenging the American dominance of the banking and financial industries. The state-owned Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC) is already the world's biggest bank by assets. China is also catching up in terms of gold reserves. While still amounting for less than a fourth of the US reserves, China has already surpassed Russia. China demonstrates ambitions to become a depository for foreign gold reserves and is working towards diversifying away from US monetary domination (Marketwatch 2016; Portyakov 2016). Aside from economic rivalry, China and the US conduct intelligence operations against each other on a regular
basis and have been engaged in their own cyber war for many years. Multiple successful attacks against the US defense system and economic sector have been attributed to the Chinese government (Hiro 2010, 180-182; Sevastopulo 2007; Thielman 2015). While China is asserting its position as regional hegemon, the US still refused to yield to Chinese interests, in particular in Southeast Asia.

The risk of conflict in the South China Sea is increasingly significant. Multiple regional states are competing for territorial claims, while the US is conducting military operations under its commitment to enforce freedom of navigation within the vast Chinese exclusive economic zone (EEZ), thereby provoking a Chinese response. This situation has already caused multiple close encounters and incidents between the Chinese and US navies (Glaser 2012). In 2010, China became the world's major energy consumer. Its economy is highly dependent on importing energy resources from the Persian Gulf region and raw materials from Africa. This has caused Beijing to invest significantly in securing maritime transportation routes and to counteract the presence of the US navy at strategic chokepoints in Southeast Asia (Scholvin 2016, 10-11). To emphasize its territorial claims, China is not just constructing artificial islands but increasingly militarizes the area. Considering the new US administration under Donald Trump has already made clear that it will continue to protect American interests in the region, and the corresponding warning from the Chinese leadership that the US behavior will harm the peace in the region, the tensions in the South China Sea are likely only to increase in the near future (IISS 2016; Phillips 2017; Stashwick 2016). US interference in regional politics, in particular the China-Taiwan relations and the regional disputes over territorial claims, is no longer tolerated by today's Chinese leadership.

China is continuously building up its military capabilities and therefore the ability to challenge US power projection. Through the procurement and production of submarines, aircraft carriers and strategic naval capabilities, the focus is put specifically on increasing the capability to avert US naval forces. The military budget was increased by 500 percent between 1995 and 2013, a trend that has been continuing until today. Chinese defense spending still amounts for only around one third of US defense expenditures, but Beijing is already outspending Russia and any European power by far. In recent years, Beijing has taken some serious steps to improve its power projection abilities and to demonstrate the results of its military reforms to the world. China is now building its first military base abroad, located in the African state of Djibouti, while continuing negotiations for a second base on the western coast of Namibia. China is not just preparing for national defense and a potential reunification with Taiwan. It is investing greatly into expeditionary capabilities, building up a universal strike force similar to the US Marine Corps and capable of operating in various geographical theatres. At the same time, the Chinese military is developing capabilities to wage informational warfare. Today, China is producing its own high-tech weapon systems and has
become an important arms supplier for Iraq and the Syrian government. The PRC also contributes more troops to UN peacekeeping missions that any other permanent UN SC member (Friedman 2016; Fung 2016; Hiro 2010, 169-173, 179; Kashin 2016; Manson 2016; SIPRI 2015; Varisco 2013; Xinhua 2016). And it does not end with hard power. China has taken large steps in developing its own soft power approach, focused on offering the world an alternative to the American way. Via a growing worldwide network of Confucius institutes and other state-run organizations the PRC is promoting the Chinese culture, language and value system based on a combination of modern Marxism and traditional Confucian ideas. The most important Chinese soft power toll is economic assistance without the Western conditionality, something that is widely appreciated around the world. China is demonstrating that it can afford to be very generous to others thanks to its own, distinctively non-Western way (Sayama 2016, 1, 3-4, 8).

Twenty years ago, Huntington pointed out that China was weary of Washington attempting to weaken it in every possible way, from refusing to accept Tibet as part of the Chinese territory to continuously criticizing its human rights situation, sanctioning its arms deals with countries not approved by the US, and working hard to deny China entry into the WTO and even the 2000 Olympic Games (1997, 222). The only thing that has changed since then is that the Chinese leadership has become a lot more assertive and that the Chinese nation as a whole has become less accepting of US supremacy. A survey by the Pew research center shows that the majority of the Chinese people believe that the Chinese way of life needs to be protected from foreign influence, and that the US is trying to prevent China from becoming an equally strong power (Wike 2016).

Today, it is no longer just third world populists such as Hugo Chavez, and more recently Rodrigo Duterte, who openly speak up against US hegemonial ambitions. At the 2009 Davos forum the Chinese prime minister made it clear that the US is to blame for the current global financial trouble (Wen 2009), joining Putin in denouncing the Western system in favor for a new global order defined by multilateralism and multipolarity.

While the 21st century marks a return to geopolitics and multipolarity, the global system itself is fundamentally different from a hundred years ago. Global players are now restricted by economic interdependence, nuclear weapons, and other factors that force them to maintain discipline (Lukyanov 2011, 72). The reality of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) remains, while Russia and the US continue to dwarf the other seven nuclear powers. Together they hold over 92 percent of the world’s nuclear warheads (Defense News 2016). Yet, despite US attempts to prevent other powers from acquiring such weapon systems, nuclear capabilities continue to spread in Asia and reduce the Eurocentric impact on international politics (Kaplan 2013, 118-119; Kofman and Sushentsov 2016; Lukyanov 2011, 81). Another thing that has changed is the disappearance of
ideology as a main driver of conflict. All the defining ideologies of the 20th century were products of the Western world, including Marxism and Communism. With the end of the Cold War, pragmatism has replaced ideological ambitions (Eitelhuber 2015, 4; Huntington 1997, 52-53). While, in the absence of ideology, religion has also returned as a source of international tension, the primary catalysts of conflict are strategic realism and geopolitical consideration. After all, war has not returned to Europe because of Islamic fundamentalism, but rather due to growing tensions in an unbalanced global system.

5 The Crisis in Ukraine in its Geopolitical Context

5.1 Understanding the Geopolitical Value of Ukraine

Looking at the conflict in Ukraine within the framework of geopolitical analysis reveals that it is not simply a story of failed transformation and internal chaos. Ukraine has historically been an area of decisive geopolitical importance and not only retains this position today, but, ever since the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the USSR, the newly established Ukrainian nation has been at the center of strategic calculations within both, the West and the East. The ethnic, historic, and economic ties with Russia did not simply end with the Cold War; Ukraine remained highly dependent on Russian support and resources, most notably the flow of Russian natural gas. After 1991, many analysts predicted future conflict between Russia and Ukraine, due to a number of factors like the unsettled disputes over Crimea, the Russian Black Sea fleet, and Ukraine's nuclear arsenal, as well as the long and unprotected border between them (Hintington 1997, 31; Mearsheimer 1993). At the same time, the Western powers were now able to exercise political and economic influence on the post-Soviet state, disregarding Russian objections.

Brzezinski, a strong advocate of foreign policy creation based on geopolitical thinking, labeled Ukraine as a most critical geopolitical pivot. Brzezinski characterizes the nations of the post-Cold War global system as either active geostrategic players, which are states that have the ability to exercise and project power beyond their borders, or geopolitical pivots, referring to states that are not important because they are powerful but because of their geographical location. According to Brzezinski, the US, Russia, China, and India are the major international players, while Germany, the
economic engine of the EU, and France are strong enough to consider themselves the rightful representatives of Europe. The United Kingdom (UK), on the other hand, is becoming increasingly irrelevant. As the key pivots he lists Ukraine, Azerbaijan, South Korea, Turkey, and Iran, even though Iran and Turkey are to a lesser extent also active players (Brzezinski 1997, 40-43). In his comprehensive analysis, Brzezinski describes how Eurasia, the world’s largest continent and its ‘geopolitical axial’, with the combined power to put an end to American supremacy (ib. 30), has been at the centre of world power for centuries. Consequently, he directs special attention to Ukraine, which derived its pivotal role from the basic fact that, after the dissolution of the USSR, it became an independent state. Without Ukraine, Russia is a predominantly Asian power, cut off from Europe. Should Russia ever regain control over Ukraine, it would become a major power in Europe as well as Asia, reclaiming its position as the Eurasian hegemon (ib. 46). This is one of the main reasons why the Russian government showed such reluctance to recognize the Ukrainian borders in the first place, and why, in 2014, Russia took it upon itself to choose civil war over Western integration for Ukraine. Brzezinski, a strong supporter of US global hegemony, suggested that Ukraine would be ready to begin a process of Western integration, including accession into NATO and the EU, between 2005 and 2010. He urged the Western institutions to expand towards the Russian border in order to tame Moscow’s ambitions in Eastern Europe (ib. 84). Brzezinski’s policy suggestions mirror the approach taken by the major Western powers starting in the 1990s.

After the disintegration of the USSR and the Warsaw Pact, the fight for influence over the post-Soviet space began. In most cases however, the West did not need to put much of an effort into recruiting new partners and allies. Russia was in a bad place and unappealing to align with. Its influence on the post-Soviet region was drastically declining, together with the number or Russian language speakers and ethnic Russians living abroad. While countries such as Armenia and Belarus remained strong allies, housing strategically important Russian military facilities and even basing their own national security concepts on Russian protection, Georgia, Ukraine, and others soon started a geopolitical drift away from Russia (De Waal 2011, 110-111; Moshes 2011, 95-96). The West had prevailed and was now more attractive to be associated with than ever. Soon, the post-Soviet states began to knock on the doors of NATO and the EU. Poland and Hungary were the first ones to join NATO in 1999. Together with the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, and Slovenia they joined the EU in 2004, the same year that Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia joined NATO. In 2007, Bulgaria and Romania followed into the EU and, in 2009, Albania and Croatia became NATO members. Since 2011, NATO recognizes Georgia, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina as aspiring members, even though Georgia still has no Membership Action Plan. In 2009, the EU extended its vague Neighborhood Policy with the Eastern Partnership, establishing a platform for improving cooperation regarding economic
relations and other key areas with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine (Mearsheimer 2014, 2; Moshes 2011, 101-102). The work on the initiative accelerated after the Georgia War in 2008, and the declared intention was to create a free trade zone, something that Russia had never offered the Soviet successor states.

At the same time as the West expanded throughout Eastern Europe, the relationship with Russia deteriorated. Just as Brzezinski had suggested, Russia was removed from the very top of the agenda and instead placed far down on the priority list (Brzezinski 1997, 200-202). This was not a problem as long as Russia was weak, poor, and disorganized. The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and other Russian-led attempts to initiate post-Soviet integration had generally failed (Kubicek 2009, 237). However, under the rule of Putin Russia managed to get back on its feet and regained some of its former strength. Moscow showed increasingly less tolerance for Western interference in what it considered its natural sphere of influence. Russia's most convenient policy tool for maintaining and expanding its impact on the post-Soviet space has long been money. Moscow has traditionally been buying loyalty, mainly via energy subsidies and discounts as well as granting market access. This was never a long-term solution, especially considering that it led to the target states taking the subsidies for granted while not offering any guarantees of future compliance and cooperation. Furthermore, the economically powerful EU was increasingly threatening the success of this approach, undermining the effectiveness of Russian soft power (Moshes 2011, 99). Thus, under Putin the Russian government accelerated its own integration efforts. Together with China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan it founded the SCO in 2001. In 2010, Russia founded the Eurasian Customs Union (ECU), together with Belarus and Kazakhstan. The ECU was transformed into the EEU in 2015, now also including Armenia and Kyrgyzstan. The EEU is by far the most ambitious Eurasian integration project and features many EU-like elements, albeit in a much less developed stage, as well as its own development bank. Another important regional integration project is the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which was established in 2002 as a military alliance and is now gradually growing into a broader Central Asian security organization with a NATO-like reaction force (Norber 2013, 6, 21-23). The success of these projects naturally depends on the number of participating states. The Russian government worked hard to get Ukraine to join the ECU, the first step towards subordination to Russian interests. After the regime change in Kiev and the outbreak of the current conflict, it is safe to say that the Ukrainian state as a whole will not be part of any Russian integration effort for a very long time. This is a severe blow for Moscow, considering that Ukraine is inherently important for Russia's strategic interests.
As noted by Henry Kissinger (2014), for Russia, Ukraine will never be just a foreign country. Not only had it been a part of Russia for centuries, it is the birthplace of Russian history itself. The Russian religion spread from Ukraine and on its soil many battles were fought for Russian freedom. It was absorbed by the Russian Empire in the 18th century and, until 1991, experienced only a very short-lived period of independence, between the collapse of the czarist rule in 1917 and the re-incorporation into the USSR in 1920. Ukraine has only been a truly independent country for some twenty-five years and large parts of the Russian elite, as well as the general population, have never learned to accept Ukrainian independence. They feel that Russia has a certain 'ownership' right over Ukraine. Putin reportedly told the US president in 2008 that, while Western Ukraine may be part of Eastern Europe, the country's east belonged to Russia (Kissinger 2014; Morelli 2017, 1-2). This view reflects the geopolitical value of Ukraine for Russia's own security interests. As a land power with very limited access to the sea, Russia is inherently vulnerable to attack and forever feels the need to expand in order to avoid being conquered. After the Second World War, Russia managed to expand its sphere of influence by creating a number of Soviet satellite states under Russian control and occupation. With the collapse of the USSR, the Russian-controlled territory was reduced drastically and Russia even lost Ukraine, the original heartland of the Russian people. Russia remained the largest country on earth, but its borders were in many places no longer protected by natural borderlines such as mountains and steppes. In geopolitical terms, it was therefore more vulnerable than it had been in a very long time. It is no coincidence that during this period geopolitical thinking gained more credibility in Russia. From a Russian perspective, there was no alternative to a revisionist policy directed at regaining the control over its near abroad, where there were still 26 million ethnic Russians living (Eitelhuber 2015, 4; Kaplan 2013, 155,166-167,173-176). When Yanukovych was ousted in early 2014, the Russian leadership saw itself confronted with losing its chance of regaining control over Ukraine for good and decided to take the necessary measures to stop this from happening.

Russian strategists have long considered Ukraine to be an artificial state and planned for the contingency of its disintegration as a state, potentially in the wake of a color revolution (Baev 2011, 366). And indeed, Ukraine's history shows it to be less of a sovereign entity and more of a Russian border region. The name Ukraine itself translates to border. Historically speaking, Ukraine was the main part of the buffer zone between Russia and Europe, stretching from the Balkans to the Baltics, which was essential in defeating the invading forces of Napoleon and Hitler among others. Its situation as the gray area between East and West was a main reason why Ukraine failed repeatedly to become its own state and thus move from being a strategic circumstance to becoming a subject of history. After the USSR ceased to exist, Ukraine retained its positions as a strategic no man's land between Russia and the West, without any realistic prospects of joining.
either NATO or the EU, and with Russia being unable to regain full control (Friedman 2016; Mearsheimer 2014, 5; Moshes 2011, 89; Simon 2015, 2). Moreover, Ukraine is a traditionally divided country. Historically, the eastern part of the country was governed from Moscow while the western regions used to be part of Poland, Lithuania, and Austria-Hungary (Huntington 1997, 163-168). Today, the western regions remain largely Catholic and the people there speak Ukrainian, while the East is largely Russian Orthodox and Russian is the most common language. Attempts by one side to dominate the other have always been the source of tensions and posed the potential threat of civil war. The current separatist movements in Eastern Ukraine also directly reflect the country’s demographic situation, being located in areas that contain the majority of ethnic Russians, accounting for around 17 percent of the total population, and ethnic Ukrainians who oppose Ukrainian nationalism and identify themselves as Russian, speaking the Russian language. Crimea, despite it being physically attached only to Ukraine, showed the highest concentration of ethnic Russians, accounting for over 60 percent of the population, compared to 24 percent ethnic Ukrainians. In 1992, the Crimean parliament voted to declare its independence from Ukraine, but revoked the result under pressure from Kiev (Friedman 2016; Huntington 1997, 158, 167; Kissinger 2014; Morelli 2017, 1-2). While the Baltics and other post-Soviet states have successfully reimagined themselves as part of the European community, Ukraine’s geopolitical identity remained defined by its schism between East and West, with western Ukrainians showing considerably more aspirations to nationalism (Dodds 2014, 83; Huntington 1997, 163-168). The lack of a comprehensive and unifying Ukrainian national identity was a precondition for the outbreak of the ongoing crisis and its escalation into a full blown civil war.

Ukraine is a geopolitical pivot on many levels. Ever since the dissolution of the USSR, it has played a key role in the geopolitical competition between Russia and the West. Its geographically sensitive position grew even more precarious after its neighbors Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia became NATO members (Morelli 2017, 1). As the link between Russia and Europe, Ukraine plays another significant role: it is a vital factor for natural gas and crude oil exports. During the 1990s, many legal constraints on the use of gas in power generation were lifted throughout the Western world. The Russian energy industry became a major backbone of the economy and the stability of the Putin regime. It was the foundation of Russia’s return to the global playing field and remains a major foreign policy tool today. Energy exports amount for up to 30 percent of Russia’s total GDP and 68 percent of all Russian exports. Despite the recent rapprochement with China, Russia’s primary export destinations for gas and oil remain the EU, Germany being the biggest importer, and Turkey. While crude oil is relatively easy to transport, natural gas export is highly dependent on pipeline infrastructure and the consequently high transportation costs make it a regional rather
than a global commodity. In 1995, 95 percent of Russian gas deliveries to the EU and Turkey went through the Ukrainian pipeline network (AEI 2013; EIA 2014; EIA 2014b; Heinrich 2015, 4; Stevens 2010, 1-2, 5). During the global financial crisis of 2008 and the fall of oil and gas prices beginning in 2014, it became evident just how dependent Russia has made itself on its energy exports. Unable to modernize and diversify its economy, Russia was hit particularly hard and continues to suffer from the significant drop in revenue. This dependency thus creates a high-risk factor for Russia’s economic security, which is further increased by the need to rely on various transit countries, most importantly Ukraine.

The Russian government tried to solve the problem of transit security by acquiring ownership of the Ukrainian pipeline network. This strategy had worked in Belarus, where President Lukashenko agreed to sell 50 percent of Beltransgaz, the Belarusian gas company, to the Russian state-owned company Gazprom. As a result, the Belarusian gas pipelines became, in practice, property of the Russian state, Beltransgaz being renamed Gazprom Transgaz Belarus. For Lukashenko, this deal was basically the only option, considering that Russia is the only real ally Belarus has. In strategically much more important Ukraine, this approach almost worked out as well during Yanukovych’s time as prime minister. However, in 2006 the Ukrainian parliament passed a law that prohibited the privatization of the national gas pipelines in order to prevent a Russian takeover. Moscow would have definitely preferred a second Belarus over the defiant Ukraine. Since Russia proved unable to directly take ownership of the Ukrainian transit network, it made full use of its most important policy asset. While Russia was depending on Ukraine’s pipelines, Ukraine itself was highly dependent on Russian gas. Moscow used its role as gas supplier to punish Ukraine for taking pro-Western actions, like Yushchenko’s efforts to set the course for a NATO membership in 2005. Gas wars soon became the most distinct feature of Russian-Ukrainian relations. During the disputes of 2005 and 2006, Gazprom stopped supplying Ukraine with gas following unsuccessful price negotiations. Ukraine therefore simply diverted the amount of gas it needed from the transit volume destined to arrive at Russia’s European customers. The same process was repeated in the gas disputes of 2008 and 2009. The Ukrainian gas debt to Russia had accumulated to over 2 billion USD and, since again no agreement on the gas price could be reached, Gazprom stopped sending gas through Ukraine all together, thus forcing the EU to get involved. The West accused Russia of acting politically motivated and discussed the reliability of Russia as an energy supplier, while failing to scrutinize Ukraine’s behavior as a transit country (Mangott 2009, 169-174; Moshes 2011, 97; Steward 2010, 20). This situation caused for increasing hostility between Russia and Ukraine, and incited Moscow to work towards taking Ukraine out of the equation all together.
Since the 1990s, Russia has been working on diversifying its gas transportation capabilities, investing heavily to construct new pipelines in addition to the four routes running through Ukrainian territory. In 1999, the Yamal-Europe pipeline was completed, running from Siberia to Germany via Belarus and Poland. In 2003, the Blue Stream pipeline followed, directly connecting Russia and Turkey. The underlying goal in these projects was to eventually substitute the export volume going through Ukraine in its entirety. However, the two main bypass projects were the Nord Stream pipeline, running along the Baltic seabed and connecting Russia directly to Germany, and the ambitious South Stream route, which would have reached Bulgaria via the Black Sea and continued all the way to Austria. While Nord Stream has been operational since 2011, the South Stream initiative was abandoned by the European Commission in 2014. Russia therefore continues to depend on Ukraine as a major transit country, even though it managed to cut down its Ukraine-bound exports to the EU and Turkey to 50 percent (EIA 2014b; Heinrich 2015, 4; Mangott 2016b). Meanwhile, Moscow is not giving up on its ambition to remove Ukraine as a geopolitically vital transit country. Immediately after South Stream was discontinued, Russia engaged in negotiations with Turkey over TurkStream, a replacement project that will eventually circumvent the European resistance by connecting Russia with Turkey before continuing to Bulgaria. This will elevate Turkey from customer to transit country. After being delayed due to the political crisis over the Russian fighter jet being shot down by Turkey in 2015, the final agreement was signed in 2016 (Bershidsky 2016; Heinrich 2015, 2-3; Mangott 2016b).

Moreover, after being on hold due to the crisis in Ukraine, an agreement to build an extension of the existing Nord Stream pipeline, known as Nord Stream 2, was signed in 2015 between Gazprom and several major European energy companies, including Royal Dutch Shell and OMV. The extension, doubling Nord Stream’s capacity, is still subject of substantial controversy. The prime ministers of the Czech Republic, Croatia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia have urged the president of the European Commission not to go through with the project, warning of geopolitical destabilization. Even greater opposition has risen from the US. Senator McCain, who previously had travelled to Bulgaria where he successfully convinced the authorities to reject the South Stream project, and others have expressed the concern that Nord Stream 2 would undermine the Ukrainian economy, and a special envoy of the US State Department even travelled to Europe to actively lobby against the project. The US has a long history of attempting to undermine the energy partnership between Russia and the EU, because it severely limits US influence on the matter. When West Germany decided in the 1980s to increase the import of Soviet Gas, the US strongly opposed the decision and tried to subvert it by banning the export of equipment, used for pipeline construction, from the US. Today, in order to increase its sales of liquefied natural gas (LNG), which is significantly more expensive than Russian natural gas, it is
important for the US to reduce the role of Russia in Europe's energy supply (EAD 2016; Heinrich 2015, 2-3; Hiro 2010, 113; Rettman 2016b; Reuters 2014; Stevens 2010, 11-12; Zhdannikov and Pinchuk 2015). Within the EU, the expansion project is currently only regarded politically. The European energy industry, however, supports Nord Stream 2, because from an economical perspective it holds many advantages. The expansion itself will be relatively easy and affordable. Even more importantly, it will further decrease the dependency on transit countries and Russia has proven itself as a reliable supplier, past problems being mainly the fault of Ukraine. Furthermore, the Ukrainian transportation network is in dire need of restorations, which would cost billions. At the same time, the EU is lacking the infrastructure necessary to rely more on LNG imports, which have become increasingly popular due to the American shale gas revolution and despite its controversy regarding environmental damage. Most importantly, the EU-Russia relationship is defined by interdependence. Russia needs Europe as a buyer, just as Europe needs Russia as a supplier (Mangott 2016b; Stevens 2010, vi). Once completed the Nord Stream 2 project will, together with the TurkStream pipeline, provide Moscow with considerably more weight vis-à-vis Ukraine and may even enable Russia to stop using the Ukrainian gas transportation network completely in the very near future. This would serve Russian strategic interests more than ever, considering that in the wake of the current crisis Ukraine has stopped buying Russian gas altogether.

Ukraine used to be Russia's most important customer in the post-Soviet area. Even so, since the escalation of the conflict the new government has increasingly weaned itself off Russian gas and in November 2015 the national Ukrainian energy company Naftogaz stopped ordering gas from Russia, following Gazprom's refusal to grant any further price reductions to Kiev. Since then, Ukraine has managed to survive without Russian gas due to a number of factors. First, the Ukrainian economy has experienced a huge drop in performance, its GDP shrinking by 19 percent between 2013 and 2016. Secondly, the warm winter of 2014 greatly reduced the need to import energy resources. Thirdly, and most importantly, Ukraine is now getting its gas from Europe, which itself remains highly dependent on Russian gas imports. A large part of these imports continue to arrive through Ukrainian pipelines before they are resold and sent back to Ukraine. Gazprom has tried to ban these reverse supply sales by European countries, such as Slovakia, but the efforts were rejected by the European Commission as attempts to abuse its power. In 2014, Russia tried to eliminate re-sales by cutting down on its exports to the EU, but after losing billions in lost revenue and compensation payments it resumed its regular exports the following year. In 2016, gas exports to EU member countries increased by over 28 percent, the majority of the additional imports going to Germany and Austria. The extra gas was most likely purchased to supply Ukraine (JBK 2016; Mangott 2014c). However, at the same time, the traditional negotiation rounds continued for the 2016-2017 season (Katona 2016;
Rapoza 2016b; Shiryaevkaya, Krukowska and Krasnolutsk 2016). This backs the question whether Ukraine has really secured its energy independence from Russia, or if this is just a temporary experiment.

In the wake of the conflict in Ukraine, Russia has intensified its economic cooperation with China. The two countries signed a 30-year gas deal, including the construction of a new energy transportation route, the Power of Siberia pipeline, which is currently under construction and may soon be supplemented by the proposed Altai pipeline. Today, 97 percent of Russian gas exports go to Europe and Turkey. In the 2020s, Russia could already be sending 27 percent of its gas exports to China (Heinrich 2015, 3-4). However, this does not change the fact that the currently existing gas transportation infrastructure is primarily built to supply Western Europe. In 2014, 75 percent of Russian gas exports went to the European market. Landmark projects, such as the Nord Stream pipeline, demonstrate that Russia is committed to remain the long-term energy supplier of Europe. The EU, on the other side, is as dependent on Russian gas as ever. Despite economic stagnation, the consumption of natural gas within the EU continues to grow and the EU member states need to import 67 percent of its natural gas consumption. In 2014, Russia supplied 27 percent of the gas consumed in the EU, followed by Norway with 24 percent, while the indigenous production only covered 33 percent. LNG imports remain marginal and 85 percent of all imports still arrive via pipeline. With Russia holding the world’s second largest gas reserves at a convenient distance, and in combination with an increasingly sophisticated transportation network, the European energy security will be linked to imports from Russia for a very long time (Eurogas 2014-2016; Hiro 2010, 114; Mangott 2016b). It remains to be seen what future role Ukraine will play in this strategic partnership. For now, it retains its geopolitical importance as a transit country.

To summarize, Ukraine is at the very center of geopolitics. Its pivotal position has put it on the foreign policy agenda of many geostrategic players. While Ukraine has been of great strategical significance for centuries, it became even more relevant for global politics after the dissolution of the USSR. As Brzezinski pointed out, Ukraine does not need to do anything to be important. Its existence as a buffer zone and the bridge between the West and Russia, as well as its role as a transit country, are what defines its position in the global political system. Pipelines are the veins of contemporary geopolitics and many of them still run through Ukraine. The EU and Russia are permanently linked to Ukraine via geography. They are able to directly affect the developments on the ground and, in turn, are directly affected by the consequences. At the same time, the US shares no direct connection to Ukraine but still projects its interests onto the region, acting like the global hegemonial power it desires to be. The main American integration tool in this regard is still NATO, through which the US has managed to spread its influence across Eastern Europe. For Washington, Ukraine is merely a
strategic variable. For Russia, on the other hand, Ukraine is an integral part of its national security. The EU is the primary economic organization in the region and through its integration efforts it has directly offended its strategic energy partner Russia. All these diverging geopolitical interests have fundamentally shaped the trajectory of the conflict in Ukraine.

5.2 In the Midst of Growing Tensions

The pivotal geopolitical value of Ukraine derives from its geographical location between two of the most powerful forces in global politics, Russia and the US-dominated West. After the end of the Second World War, the relationship between the US and Russia, including the respective allied nations and satellite states, became the defining factor of the international system. With the dissolution of the Soviet empire, Russia's geopolitical significance waned in comparison to the triumphant American superpower. Yet, Russia retained its position as the primary spoiler for US ambitions on multiple levels, most importantly via its seat on the UN SC, and at the same time remained the only nuclear power capable of destroying the entire American nation. While China was already appearing on the horizon, it was still very much self-absorbed and tentative to raise its voice in global affairs. Thus, despite the end of the Cold War hostilities, the East-West relationship remained a major driving force in the dynamic of the international system. How this relationship would eventually develop was initially open. It was only after a series of diplomatic blunders and provocative policy choices that the tensions between Russia and the West started to rise again.

Immediately after the end of the Cold War, the debate surrounding Russia's identity between approaching the West and remaining distinctly Russian re-emerged. During the early 1990s, and again the early 2000s, it was popular to discuss a potential Russian integration into the Western security system by forging a military alliance with the US and possible even joining NATO (Dmitry 2011; Huntington 1997, 139-143). Under Yeltsin's rule, American institutions, public and private alike, arrived in Russia in order to further its transformation into a capitalist market economy and democratic system. Supervised by the US State Department, they urged a radical liberalization process based on the Washington Consensus and focused on minimizing government interference in the economy, abolishing subsidies and the welfare state, inviting foreign investments, and promoting the self-regulation of the market. These abrupt transformations caused great hardships for the Russian people and led millions into poverty, while the social and economic situation deteriorated. When the Russian parliament impeached the highly unpopular Yeltsin for breaking the constitution,
the Clinton administration spoke out against the parliament and backed Yeltsin, who managed to end the crisis by securing the support of the military and ordering tanks to shell the parliament building, resulting in close to two hundred deaths. Clinton and Yeltsin were known for their especially cozy relationship. Yeltsin did not object to NATO’s first enlargement and the Clinton administration put great efforts into getting Yeltsin re-elected, sending in public relations consultants and urging competing candidates to withdraw from the presidential race (Crowley 2016; Hiro 2010, 34-37, 40). At the same time, Washington was never interested in a Russian economic recovery, for this would likely have led to the modernization of its military industrial complex and thus jeopardize US hegemonial ambitions (Fenenko 2016). When Putin became president in 2000, he was initially praised as a reformer by many Western governments. Even though for years he had grudgingly watched his predecessor’s shameful escapades and the US taking advantage of Russia’s weakness, in his first years as president the focus remained on integrating Russia into the Western community. Putin put emphasis on cooperation with NATO and supported the US in its war on terror, even presenting the American people with a massive 9/11 memorial that now stands forgotten on the outskirts of New York City (Crowley 2016; Hiro 2010, 43, 99; Johnson 2014; Lukjanow 2016, 2-3). In 2001, he held a speech in the German Bundestag, addressing the members of parliament in their own language and talking about the importance of EU enlargement and peace in Europe (Putin 2001). Russia was trying hard to fit into the existing world order.

This approach came to an end with a drastic change in policy between 2003 and 2007. The ideological basis for the new Russian course became Putin’s famous first speech in front of the Munich Security Conference in 2007 (Trenin 2011, 46). The Russian president surprised government officials and analysts alike when he harshly criticized the concept of a unipolar world order, calling the idea of a single ‘master’ unacceptable. He denounced the Western governments for their double standards, accusing them of lecturing Moscow about democracy while at the same time using their military power to cause human tragedy throughout the world. Putin also directly attacked the US for imposing its will on the entire globe and destabilising international security by stimulating a new arms race. He accused Washington of undermining international law by outsourcing the right to use force from the UN to purely Western institutions such as NATO and the EU. In his speech, he called for a change in the architecture of global security, promoting the idea of a multipolar world order (Putin 2007b). Putin did not mince his words and brought a ‘breeze of Cold War’ (Rolofs 2007) into the conference. While the change in Russian tone and its newfound resolve came as a surprise, it did not arrive out of nowhere but rather was the consequence of a steadily growing discontent with the global political order.

There were many reasons for Moscow’s radical policy shift. For one, the Russian offer at cooperation had been answered with an increasingly vehement disrespect of Russian security
interests. With the Warsaw Pact gone and the USSR defeated, the task of NATO, a purpose-built collective defense organization with the sole objective to protect its members from the communist threat, had been fulfilled. Yet, NATO not only remained active but it started adding new members, mostly former Soviet republics, thus drawing closer to Russia, while Moscow had to watch its former sphere of influence wane. For Russia, this constituted a breach of trust, referring to informal American assurances not to further expand the alliance after the dissolution of the USSR, and evoking memories of the pledge made in Yalta in 1945, which granted the USSR a buffer zone in Eastern and Central Europe in return for its UN membership. This broken promise, as it has since been referred to on multiple occasions, was the beginning of the deterioration of the relationship between Russia and the West (Dodds 2014, 60; EPRS 2016, 1; Hiro 2010, 41-42; Putin 2007b; Shifrinson 2014). However, while there was tension right from the beginning of US-Russian relations, the real erosion did not occur until the inauguration of the Bush administration in 2001. Under Bush, the American foreign and security policy was marked by a realist turn (Mangott and Eder 2014, 2-3) which was heavily influenced by neoconservative thought, in particular by the Project for the New American Century, a Washington based think tank. Even before the events of September 2001 had occurred, it urged the US government to stop any other nation who challenged US global dominance in the future, maintaining the preeminence of the US military as well as the American nuclear superiority, developing a global missile defense system, establishing control of space and cyberspace, expanding and reinforcing US military presence in Asia, Europe, and the Middle East while maintaining the ability to fight several large-scale wars simultaneously, preserving the Pax Americana and deterring any new powers from rising (Kagan, Schmitt and Donnelly 2000, ii-v, 2-4, 6, 15, 19, 53). These recommendations were underpinned by drawing heavily on geopolitical thought. Half of the think tank’s founders later became key members of the Bush administration, most notably Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and the current president of the World Bank Group Paul Wolfowitz. Other founding members were high ranking representatives of the military and academics such as Robert Kagan. The Project for the New American Century was dissolved in 2006 and in 2009 it was succeeded by the Foreign Policy Initiative, established by the same key figures and promoting a US foreign policy based on the same principles of American global dominance (FPI 2014; Rozen 2009). The Bush Doctrine matched this neoconservative agenda in all major aspects and was based on establishing a unipolar global order under American supremacy. This policy alienated large parts of the world and most of all Russia.

Under the Bush presidency, Washington pushed NATO’s enlargement even further, turned down the Russian attempts at creating a relationship based on mutual respect and acknowledgement, undermined the efforts of Russia and China to formulate an international ban on weaponizing space by declaring that the US had a right to implement space weapons, and even went
as far as cancelling the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM), a cornerstone against the MAD capabilities of the Cold War, claiming that it would limit the American ability to develop its BMD system. The BMD initiative is a particularly controversial subject. It would eventually include facilities in Alaska, the Check Republic, Great Britain, Greenland, Norway, Poland, and the Aleutian Islands. In order to become fully effective the BMD system would also require placing sensors and weapons into space. While Washington claims that it is only a defensive weapon against states such as North Korea and Iran, the Russian government considers it to be an offensive military capability, since it would protect the US and its allies from reprisal, thereby enabling Washington to project its power even more aggressively abroad. Moscow is not the only non-Western government making this assessment (Chomsky 2004, 226-227; EPRS 2016, 1; Hiro 2010, 109; Kagan, Pallin 2013, 144; Schmitt and Donnelly 2000, 54; Mangott and Eder 2014, 10). In 2003, Washington undermined the Russian UN veto against the invasion of Iraq, just like it had done during the Balkan Wars. In 2007, the US military constructed bases in Bulgaria and Romania, the same year a Russian proposal to cooperate in terms of strategic missile defense was turned down. Moreover, Washington began to directly sabotage diplomatic relations with Moscow. It actively pursued the goal of making post-Soviet states independent from Russian energy supplies by constructing plans of alternative pipelines, thus demonstrating clear intentions to undermine Russia’s most important foreign policy tool in the region. Furthermore, the Western responses to the Yukkos affair, including the growing anti-Putin sentiment within the Western media, as well as such incidents as the US and UK offering asylum to Chechen separatist leaders after the Beslan school massacre, increasingly irritated the Russian leadership (Hiro 2010, 43; Mangott 2009, 190-197; Mangott and Eder 2014, 2-3, 5; Pradetto 2015b, 49-50; Trenin 2011, 45-46). Even more importantly, Moscow grew increasingly worried about US attempts to establish its policy of removing the leaders of sovereign states while forcing others to disarm, all under the pretext of international security, and began to suspect that the Russia would soon become the next target. This fear was enhanced by the color revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan between 2003 and 2005. Moscow blamed the West for orchestrating these revolutions, pointing out that in all cases pro-Russian governments were removed and replaced by pro-Western ones, while US politicians and NGOs actively supported the regime changes on the ground (Fenenko 2016; Hiro 2010, 101-102; Laruelle 2009, 19). During all these developments, Russia protested and warned the US and its allies that such behavior would inevitably endanger international security.

In 2007, all talk of partnership disappeared from Moscow’s agenda. The Russian leadership had come to terms with the fact that integration into the Western world had failed. The anti-terror coalition had already broken down over Iraq. Likewise, the nuclear proliferation partnership had increasingly
been overshadowed by disagreements over the nuclear programs in Iran and North Korea. The remaining pro-Western lobbies had disappeared after the US invasion of Iraq, together with any pro-Western sentiments within the public. What remained were tensions and an increasingly assertive Russia that had been able to pay back its entire foreign debt due to its growing economic power. Moscow began to abandon its efforts to become a part of the Western community and instead concentrated its energies on re-establishing itself as a great power. A new focus was put on increasing its cooperation with the non-Western world, most notably within the BRICS framework, which had held its first meeting in 2006 (Fenenko 2016; Hiro 2010, 104-105; Lukjanow 2016, 2-3; Trenin 2011, 45-49). At the same time, Russia stopped tolerating the Western neglect for its security interests. When Washington turned down the Russian offer to cooperate on the issue of missile defense, the Russian government responded by announcing that it would deploy powerful short-range ballistic missiles in Kaliningrad, aiming them at the Polish BMD facilities. Both, Putin and his temporary successor from 2008 to 2012, Dmitry Medvedev, had warned the US that its BMD endeavor would force Russia to expand its own strategic nuclear arsenal. Medvedev stated in his first address to the nation that Russia would counteract the BMD system by using jamming equipment. Furthermore, the Russian arms industry started developing a new intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), the RS-26 Rubezh, which is designed to circumvent the missile defense shield and detonate on US soil (EPRS 2016, 1; Hiro 2010, 108; Mangott and Eder 2014, 10; Trenin 2011, 54). Starting in 2007, the Russian military resumed its long-range air patrols, which had ended with the Cold War, and started carrying nuclear weapon systems. On a diplomatic level, it was now Russia who provoked the West whenever the opportunity presented itself. After the US and the EU had refused to recognize the Palestinian Hamas government, Putin invited its leaders to Moscow, undermining the Washington's efforts to isolate it (Hiro 2010, 107, 110; IISS 2015, Myers 2006). The US-Russian relationship reached a new low point during the Georgia War of 2008, when Moscow first used the military card to enforce its renewed political confidence.

In 2009, the governments of Russia and the US attempted to stop the downward spiral and to restore a functioning working relationship. The global financial crisis of 2008 had affected Russia harder than any other major economic power, threatening its international independence. The Russian leadership, and in particular the new reform-orientated president, recognized the need to modernize the Russian economy. Concurrently, the newly inaugurated Obama administration declared its willingness to reset relations with Russia. This promise was manifested into an actual reset button, presented to Foreign Minister Lavrov by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton as a token for the new start in US-Russia relations. Under Obama, Washington was prepared to downscale on a lot of issues that had been irritating Russia. US plans to create permanent BMD facilities in Poland and the Check Republic were dismissed in favor of a maritime option and the New Start Treaty was
signed in 2010. Putin, in turn, cooperated on issues such as Libya, abstaining on the UN SC resolution in 2011. In 2012, Russia became a WTO member after the US had stopped blocking its accession. Washington and Moscow also managed to approach each other somewhat on the issue of Iran (Fenenko 2016; Mangott and Eder 2014, 6, 9; Trenin 2011, 46-49). However, this period of good will did not manage to bring permanent improvement to the US-Russian relationship and the diplomatic reset proved to be short-lived.

When the Arab Spring started to unfold, Russia blocked the UN SC resolutions against Syria, its old Soviet ally and home to the Russian naval facility in the Mediterranean. Instead of supporting restrictions on Damascus, Moscow continued to supply it with weapons. Since the outbreak of the civil war, Russia has vetoed six UN resolutions on Syria, being joined by China in five cases. In Libya, Russia had abstained from voting on the UN no-fly zone, a decision Putin later openly regretted, comparing the resolution to 'medieval calls for crusades' (Putin 2011). Moscow blamed NATO for overstepping the UN mandate and highlighted the disastrous consequences of the US regime change policy under Obama, drawing parallels to the Bush Doctrine. Washington had hoped for a second term of Medvedev and acted visibly disappointed upon Putin's return, displaying increasing hostility and making it clear that it was no longer prepared to improve relations. The Obama administration refused to acknowledge the outcome of the Russian elections, both parliamentary and presidential, and continued to officially interfere in domestic Russian issues (Fenenko 2016; Mangott and Eder 2014, 13; Pradetto 2015b, 51). Putin, on the other hand, started to directly fuel the anti-American sentiment within the Russian population during the election campaign for his third presidency in 2012. This was done in to increase the stability of the regime by reinforcing the image of the American enemy and, at the same time, justifying the crackdown on the channels of Western influence into Russia. When Washington offered support for 'the aspirations of the Russian people' during the protests in Moscow, surrounding Putin's presidential return, it was definitely crossing a line. Putin responded by developing more authoritarian traits and by focusing his energies on protecting the Russian sovereignty (Crowley 2016; Mangott and Eder 2014, 13; Pradetto 2015b, 51). The general tone towards the West had become much harsher. In 2012, Russia banned US citizens from adopting Russian children. In 2013, Putin dissolved the parliamentary work group tasked with cooperation on BMD and NATO. In the same year, Moscow expressed doubts on Western claims that the Syrian government had used chemical weapons in the civil war and instead blamed it on the rebels. Also in 2013, Edward Snowden was granted asylum in Russia and Moscow announced expanding its anti-air missile batteries in Belarus. While in 2004 Putin had stated that Russia would welcome a Ukrainian membership in the EU, he would soon assign Crimea a sacral status for Russia, comparing its significance with that of the Temple Mount for Islam and Judaism (Mangott and Eder 2014, 17; MSR 2015, 27). The conflict in Ukraine marks the current low point in East-West relations.
It brought the diplomatic deterioration into the global spotlight, but the tensions between Russia and the West go back a long time. They started before anyone in the West had even heard of Putin.

Despite his pro-Western course, Yeltsin stated in 1994 that the Cold War had made way for a cold peace. The world had become less predictable and more dangerous, lacking clear rules and showing a higher risk of confrontation than during global bipolarity (Fenenko 2016; Kempster and Murphy 1994). Early attempts at defying US hegemony were made by Yeltsin’s foreign minister, Yevgeny Primakov, who took over for Yeltsin when he could not fulfill his obligations due to his health problems. Primakov negotiated the Founding Act between NATO and Russia and declared an end to the Cold War hostilities, stressing the need for building a unified and stable Europe together. He also strongly opposed NATO’s expansion and successfully united with China against the US on the issue of Iraq’s WMDs. Russia defied the US by constructing and equipping Iran’s first nuclear power plant, further strengthening the long-lasting strategic partnership which had always been a thorn in the eye of the Pentagon. Russia was also offered the use of naval facilities by Syria and Libya, with Muammar al Qaddafi calling the Russian presence a safety measure against US aggression to his country. In 1997, Russia and China developed a concept for a multipolar world order which angered Washington, directly contradicting its own unipolar ambitions (Fenenko 2016; Hiro 2010, 8, 111, 277; NATO 1997; Quinn-Judge 1998). However, the main point of contention during the 1990s was NATO’s involvement in the Balkan Wars. In 1994, NATO gave the Bosnian Serbs an ultimatum without consulting Russia first. Only when Moscow took the initiative, the Serbs agreed to withdraw their weapons. Two months later NATO began bombing the Serbian positions, again without consulting Russia. In 1999, the Clinton administration suspected a Russian veto on intervening in Kosovo and therefore circumvented the UN SC, pushing NATO to act instead. When NATO started bombing Serbia, a close Russian ally, without a UN resolution, the Russian government froze relations with NATO. Russia had supplied the Serbs with tanks and missiles, Russian mercenaries had fought in the war, and Moscow had blocked UN resolutions condemning the Serbs for ethnic cleansing. Instead, Russia accused NATO of genocide against the Serbs and offered refuge to Ratko Mladic, the commander of the Bosnian-Serbs wanted for war crimes. While NATO’s Balkan operation emboldened Washington to expand eastward, it led to a steep rise in anti-American sentiments within Russia and caused irreparable damage to the US-Russian relationship (Fenenko 2016; Hiro 2010, 38-42; Huntington 1997, 284-285, 295; Koknar 2003; Pradetto 2015b, 48).

In a way, the post-Cold War tensions had already started before the Cold War itself was even over. It was Mikhail Gorbachev who introduced glasnost and perestroika, ended the military campaign in Afghanistan, and called for the demilitarization of international relations. He made the first step by withdrawing large numbers of Soviet troops from Eastern Germany and Eastern Europe in general, thereby enabling the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of Germany. Gorbachev
agreed with President George H. Bush to peacefully end the Cold War without declaring a winner. However, soon after the USSR collapsed Bush proclaimed that the US had won the war (Bush 1992; Hiro 2010, 22-23). Immediately afterwards, Washington started to neglect Gorbachev and Russia's interests. The US started to use the UN SC as a tool to further its own ambitions and expanded its power throughout the world. This became the foundation for a new East-West struggle, long before the international system even had a chance to adapt to the post-Cold War order.

When Yanukovych was removed from power for choosing a pro-Russian course for Ukraine, it was the proverbial tip of the iceberg for Moscow, especially considering that the Kremlin blamed the West, and in particular Washington, for orchestrating this regime change. For Russia, it had already been very difficult to accept the accession of the Baltic States into NATO, bringing the Western alliance directly to the Russian border. Belarus and Ukraine remained the only remnants of the already fractured buffer zone that was considered a vital element of Russia's security. Despite harsh warnings from Moscow, both, the US and the EU, pursued an increasingly blatant expansion policy. Russia's ambitions to become a part of the Western world had been denied and the Kremlin was reduced to being a spoiler for America's unipolar ambitions. While Russia actively promoted a multipolar global order, in which stability and security could only be achieved by taking the security interests of all major countries into account, the US held on to its course of unilateralism and continued to pursue a policy based on US supremacy. This did not change under the Obama administration. Despite temporary improvements, Washington was not prepared to tolerate a self-determined Russia. For the Putin administration, this situation had become unacceptable. After years of growing tensions and increasingly insistent warnings, the struggling dynamic between Russia and the West finally broke down over Ukraine. Such an escalation may have been avoided, if the warning signs would have been taken seriously.

5.3 Georgia: A Final Warning Sign Ignored

When Russian tanks rolled into Georgia in August, 2008, Putin shocked the world. It was the first time the Russian military was sent to protect ethnic Russians in another post-Soviet state and few had anticipated that Moscow would go that far, despite the growing international tensions between Russia and the West. NATO and the EU had already integrated many former satellite states of the USSR. Now the Russian government was no longer prepared to show acceptance for Western interference on its borders. In Georgia, Moscow finally drew the line.
When Georgia became independent in 1991, an internal conflict between the government in Tbilisi and a separatist movement in the region of South Ossetia erupted. A similar struggle had already started in the region of Abkhazia the year before. In 1992, Abkhazia and South Ossetia had gained a semi-independent status, backed by Russia, with some parts of both regions remaining under Georgian control. This situation strained the relationship between Moscow and Tbilisi, while causing growing tensions within the country. Georgia and Russia share a deep historic connection, yet Georgia is traditionally resistant of Russian domination and had tried to avert close association with Moscow ever since the dissolution of the USSR (Huntington 1997, 153). In 2004, following extensive protests over contested parliamentary election, the Rose Revolution brought the pro-Western government of Mikheil Saakashvili to power. This regime change was heavily influenced by Washington. Numerous Western-funded nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), that had received prior training in the US and the EU, were actively involved at all levels of the Rose Revolution and proved to be instrumental for its success, criticizing the incumbent government, encouraging people to protest, and actively creating a public perception of regime vulnerability. Between 2001 and 2003, USAID directed more funds, relative to population size, towards promoting democracy in Georgia than into any other post-Soviet state. Furthermore, the US government itself dedicated a striking degree of attention to the elections, sending in a special envoy and other representatives, as well as a delegation led by Senator McCain. These representatives increased the diplomatic pressure on the regime and threatened to answer non-transparency with cuts in financial aid and other punishments. Washington maintained regular contact with the political opposition; Pentagon officials working with the Georgian defense ministry were tasked with making sure that the Georgian army was politically neutral. The main goal was not to promote free and fair elections, but to make the regime vulnerable by creating and nurturing the perception that the incumbent government would not win, while drastically weakening the readiness of the authorities to proceed with force against protesters. Immediately after the election, the US State Department ensured via multiple media channels that the people of Georgia knew that the US did not support the regime (Welt 2006, 34, 40-41, 43, 45). After the revolution, Saakashvili made it his top priority to repatriate the separatist territories and lead Georgia into NATO (Wetzinger 2016, 2). What followed were several attempts to restore Georgian influence over the two regions. This raised the tensions between Georgia and Russia even further.

In July of 2008, American and Georgian troops held a joint military exercise on Georgian territory, underlining Saakashvili’s commitment to integrating his country into NATO as well as the growing presence of US influence in the region. Moscow responded with its own military drill in the North Caucasus, simulating a penetration of Georgian territory in order to assist Abkhazia and South
Ossetia. In August, the situation within Georgia intensified as violence broke out in South Ossetia after a Georgian checkpoint was blown up. Eventually, the Georgian army intervened and occupied the capital of South Ossetia, underestimating Moscow’s commitment to intervene. Russia responded with a large-scale military operation and cleared not only South Ossetia from Georgian troops, but moved on to take control of half the country. The Russian authorities had been issuing Russian passports to the people of South Ossetia as well as Abkhazia for years. This provided Moscow with a convenient pretext to justify the invasion of Georgia as an operation to protect Russian citizens, even though ethnic Russians accounted only for around two percent of the population in both separatist regions (Allison 2008, 1146; Wetzinger 2016, 2; Zevelev 2011, 553). This strategy has been labeled as 'annexation by passport' or 'passportization' (Artman 2014). The West did not come to Georgia's aid and five days into the Russian invasion the fighting stopped. Moscow withdrew its troops soon after and recognized both, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as sovereign states, while answering the ensuing Western criticism by referring to Kosovo, which had been recognized as an independent state by NATO without a UN resolution, as a precedent (Hiro 2010, 253; Wetzinger 2016, 2). The Russian intervention in Georgia demonstrated that NATO was not the only force capable of projecting its military power abroad and underlined Putin's sincerity in regard to acting according to Russia’s own security interests.

Russia had accomplished the majority of its strategic goals. Georgia remained weak and internally divided, unfit to join a Western defense alliance. Abkhazia and South Ossetia had been de-facto annexed and became a permanent part of Russia’s economic and military space. Saakashvili had been punished for his pro-Western course and Moscow had successfully issued a fierce warning to all governments in the post-Soviet space, not to tread on Russia's interests. This warning was directed most of all towards Ukraine. The message was clear. Russia would no longer hesitate to act in order to maintain control over its special zone of interest in Eurasia. At the same time, Putin signaled to the US that it was no longer the sole superpower capable of military intervention (De Waal 2011, 112-113; Fenenko 2016; Hiro 2010, 276; Mangott 2009, 203-206; Mangott and Eder 2014, 6; Mearsheimer 2014, 3; Steward 2010, 25-26). Some observers have suggested that the war in Georgia would have happened in any case, and that if Tbilisi would not have sent troops into South Ossetia another pretext would have been found sooner or later (Kagan 2008). Indeed, there were signs that Moscow prepared for the conflict before 2008. For instance, the Georgian government accused Russia in 2007 of illegally constructing a military base on the territory of South Ossetia (Saakashvili 2007, 7). In any case, Moscow had seized the opportunity to make its point. However, despite the clear warning, the West did not reconsider its policy of eastward expansions. The plans to accept Georgia into NATO were never officially abandoned. Instead, Albania and Croatia became members the following year. Likewise, the EU revealed its Eastern Partnership project in 2008,
engaging Georgia as well as Ukraine, and welcomed Croatia as the 28th member in 2013. At the same time, states such as Bulgaria, Romania, and Poland were now calling for American security guarantees and a US military presence on their soil (Klein and Richter 2011, 9; Mearsheimer 2014, 3). Thus, the deterioration of Russia’s relationship with the West continued. The only difference was that now Moscow had returned into the realm of active geostrategic players and would not go back to being a circumstance for Western Eastern Europe policy voluntarily.

With the Arab spring, the war on terror, and more recently the conflict in Ukraine, Georgia has long been moving downwards on most Western priority lists. More than eight years ago, during the Bucharest summit, Georgia was promised that it would eventually become a NATO member. Yet, not much has been done to further this process. The Georgia War and the increasing tensions between NATO and Russia have made the alliance considerably more cautious about going one step too far in poking the Russian bear, knowing full well that it could draw the whole of NATO into an actual war with Moscow. For the foreseeable future, no major post-Soviet nation will join the ranks of the alliance, even if they are able to produce such a positive track record as Georgia regarding democratic standards, human rights, transparency, and the rule of law. Georgia can even pride itself with higher defense expenditures and a deeper commitment to international military engagements, such as the Afghanistan mission, than most NATO members (Japaridze 2016; Mearsheimer 2014, 3). Still, Tbilisi cannot count on NATO's support in the case of a future conflict with Russia.

The Russian intervention in Georgia was aimed at weakening the pro-Western support within the Georgian population, while publically punishing Saakashvili for his pro-Western course. This move effectively froze relations between Moscow and Tbilisi for years. While Georgia continues to maintain its Western-orientated course today, beginning in 2012 the relationship with Moscow started to improve. The new Georgian government appointed a special envoy for improving the link to Russia and since then managed to significantly improve economic ties with Moscow, while carefully excluding the topic of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from the discussion. Meanwhile, Russia has even continued to further expand its strategic partnership with the two regions (Steward 2010, 25-26; Wetzinger 2016, 3-4). Linked by geography, Georgia cannot escape being within the special interest zone of Russia. Its geopolitical importance is definitely less prominent than that of Ukraine. Yet, Georgia's role as a strategically significant Russian border region prohibits it from choosing its own path. When the Saakashvili government tried to follow its pro-Western aspirations, Russia rebuked it. The new government demonstrated a willingness to come to terms with its geopolitical situation and arrange a functioning working relationship with Moscow. It remains to be seen if Kiev chooses a similar path in the future.
Due to Western expansionism, the border with NATO had come within less than two hundred kilometers from St. Petersburg. There was nothing that Moscow could do about that. The Russian government instead acted where it could and focused on shaping its near abroad. This meant fighting the Chechen insurgency, sending troops to Armenia, and exerting as much influence over Ukraine and Georgia as possible (Friedman 2016b). There are many parallels between the Georgia War and the conflict in Ukraine. Both scenarios are defined by a harsh Russian reaction to Western interference in its geostrategically vital border regions. In both cases Moscow surprised the world with how far it was willing to go in order to defend its interests. Even more importantly, these two conflicts can only be comprehended by placing them within the framework of geopolitical analysis and by referring to them in the context of the macro-political tensions that are shaping the current international political system. The unforgiving Russian reaction in Georgia had a major symbolic role. It was the indicator of a new era in international relations, a warning to the West, and a precursor of things to come.

6 Superpower Flashpoint Ukraine

6.1 Russian Intervention and the Art of Hybrid Warfare

When the political crisis in Kiev began to unfold in 2013, no one suspected that it would develop into a conflict of geopolitical proportions. Despite Moscow's intervention in Georgia and its increasingly assertive behaviour, both internationally and within the post-Soviet space, the Western engines of expansion had not been curbed. The EU and the US had continued to push their integration efforts and now, finally, they had arrived in Kiev. At the same time, analysts in the West had underestimated Russia's growing ability, and willingness, to respond with a hard power approach in Ukraine (Baev 2001, 367; Gressel 2015, 1; Trenin 2011, 55). The leaders of Europe, engulfed in their efforts to enlarge the world of European values and practices, had either forgotten or neglected the basic rules of geopolitics. As Mearsheimer has pointed out, all great powers are sensitive to potential threats at their borders. The US would never tolerate a military deployment of another major power anywhere in the Western Hemisphere. It is easy to picture how the White House would react to China or Russia inviting Mexico to join a non-Western military alliance (Mearsheimer 2014, 5-6). Washington does not even tolerate a growing Chinese presence in the South China Sea. The privilege of geopolitical
security thus remained the prerogative of the US and its Western allies. This attitude showed that Washington had failed to understand that it was no longer the only international player ready to act. On March 1st, 2014, the Russian parliament approved the president's request to allow the use of military force in Ukraine. Putin had publicly blamed the US for engineering the crisis and now announced that he would use force to protect the people of Eastern Ukraine if necessary (Bērziņš 2014, 3; Lally and Englund 2014; Soldatkin and Anishuk 2014). The Kremlin was gearing up for war, ready to enforce its claims once more, and it came prepared.

Seven years earlier, Putin had used the Munich Security Conference to assert that Russia would no longer accept the unipolar system dictated by the US, and that Moscow would pursue its own foreign policy interests independently from now on. Within the same month of his speech, Putin appointed Anatolyi Serdyukov as Minister of Defense and tasked him to increase the efficiency of the armed forces. This reform effort was extended drastically following Moscow's invasion of Georgia. Despite the decisive victory, the campaign had revealed the dire state of the military apparatus. The operational efficiency of the Russian troops was suffering heavily from numerous operational and tactical problems and was further hindered by poor and inflexible leadership, leading to friendly fire incidents and relatively high numbers of casualties. Even the Georgian army was more technically advanced, and its US-trained forces proved more resilient than expected. The Russian victory was achieved by superior numbers only. This served as a wake-up call for the Russian leadership. For two decades the armed forces had received minimal to no investments and stagnated into decay. Since the Russian military was barely needed for any major operations during that time, the deterioration went on without attracting much attention. Now that the Kremlin had determined to re-emerge as an active geostrategic player, it needed to refurbish its hard power capabilities. Serdyukov started a radical reformation process that included all branches of the military. The main mission was to transform the Russian armed forces from a Cold War style stationary defense forces to a modern and operationally flexible military, something that most European countries have not yet managed to achieve. Since 2008, one of the main focus points was professionalizing the troops from the bottom. This meant fighting corruption and inefficiency throughout the military while streamlining the command structures to increase combat-readiness, modernizing the educational system, drastically reducing the number of officers, introducing better trained non-commissioned officers, reducing the number of conscripts, and hiring more professional soldiers. The prestige of military service was raised by improving social benefits and housing while increasing wages, ensuring the financial security of the military personnel. Updating the personal equipment and uniforms of the individual soldier was a vital step to enhance moral within the troops, another lesson learned from the Georgia campaign. Additionally, large investments were made into updating weaponry and acquiring new
military hardware. Apart from these procurement projects, the technological infrastructure was modernized and extended. A new network of strategic radars was constructed and the global navigation satellite system (GLONASS), a Russian alternative to the US global positioning system (GPS), was developed, enabling Russia to dramatically improve its high-precision targeting capabilities. The overall goal of the reforms was to move away from Soviet-style mass mobilization strategies by reducing the size of the armed forces, while making them more mobile and efficient (Baev 2011, 361, 358; Golts 2011, 387; Gressel 2015, 2-3; Klein and Pester 2013, 6; Snegovaya 2015, 9-10). This transformation process presented a major boost for the Russian military-industrial complex which, until then, had largely been depending on international sales. To modernize the armed forces, the defense industry engaged in partnerships with Western corporations and managed to gain new capabilities in producing next generation aircraft, land vehicles, naval vessels, as well as defensive systems. Additionally, the defense ministry imported high-end technologies such as tactical drones (Gressel 2015, 4; Malmlöf, Roffey and Pallin 2013, 137).

These massive reformation efforts were accompanied by an equally noticeable rise in large-scale military drills and manoeuvres. New exercises showcased where the direction of Russia's strategic planning was going and including scenarios such as: capturing the Baltics and establishing a land bridge to Kaliningrad, launching nuclear strikes against Poland in order to deter NATO from engaging, taking military action against Finland and other countries bordering Russia, including Georgia, and removing 'terrorist' forces from Russia’s near abroad. A strong emphasis was put on the idea of conflict de-escalation via an early limited nuclear strike. In 2013, the most extensive Russian manoeuvre since the end of the Cold War was ordered by the president in order to test the high-readiness level of the military. The snap exercise involved all branches of the armed forces and included 160,000 ground troops, 5,000 tanks, 130 aircraft, and 70 warships. By increasing the scope and frequency of its military drills, Moscow managed to significantly improve its capability to react to a variety of scenarios in its border regions. The nature of the exercises was primarily offensive and served as a preparation for the Russian intervention in Ukraine (Carlsson, Norberg and Westerlund 2013, 64; Gressel 2015, 4, 11-12; Robson 2013). The Kremlin clearly directed its resources at preparing for future military operation with objectives similar to its invasion of Georgia. The most urgent priority was to increase its ability to effectively respond to security threats within its direct neighbourhood.

Moscow has engaged in a long-term commitment to re-establish itself as the regional hegemon in the post-Soviet space. In 2008, military spending was raised by almost a third. Since then the Russian defense spending has hit record levels, reaching 5.4 percent of GDP in 2015, compared to 2.9 percent in 2012. Most NATO countries struggle to reach the 2 percent mark. However, Russia's main security asset remains its nuclear arsenal, which constitutes the only strategic asset able to
directly compete with the US, but which is also extremely expensive to main and modernize. Estimates show that adding these expanses to the cost of the still widespread corruption, only around forty percent of the defense budget remains available for the reform process (EPRS 2016, 2; Malmlöf, Roffey and Vendil Pallin 2013, 137; SIPRI 2014, 2; Snegovaya 2015, 10). Yet, despite the economic turmoil of the last years, Moscow remains committed to further increase the country’s military security by preparing for a large number of strategic scenarios. It is unclear if the modernization of the armed forces is sustainable without a general economic modernization policy, which the Russian leadership has so far failed to implement. In any case, the reformation of the military and defense sector is far from complete. Many next-generation weapon systems have just started being introduced. Key strategic capabilities, such as air-to-air refuelling, are insufficiently developed, limiting the range of Moscow’s power projection (Gressel 2015, 5, 13; Pallin 2013, 155).

Another obstacle to the reform efforts came from within. The Kremlin's changes caused widespread protest from the officer corps and politicians. This eventually prompted Putin to replace Serdyukov with Sergey Shoygu in 2012. Shoygu offered a less controversial approach and was able to appease the oppositions, but when he came to office most key elements of the structural reforms had already been implemented and would not be reversed. Shoygu made only minor concessions to the reform critics and generally remained on the path his predecessor had set (Malmlöf, Roffey and Pallin 2013, 137; Pallin 2013, 143; Snegovaya 2015, 10). Thus, the transformation of Russia's armed forces towards a modern strike force, capable of changing the facts on the ground in Moscow's favor, was pushed on despite challenges on multiple levels. The most important aim of the reforms was to increase Russia’s flexibility in its border regions and beyond. In this respect, substantial success has been achieved already. The first test for the newly obtained military capabilities took place in Ukraine.

The nature of Russia's involvement in Ukraine since early 2014 is typically being referred to as hybrid warfare, a term previously used mainly by military experts (MSR 2015, 34; Shirreff 2016, 6; Siegert 2016, 21). As the name suggests, this approach is defined by a combination of both, conventional and unconventional strategies. Subversive operations, asymmetric warfare techniques such as the use of irregular forces and 'little green men', criminal acts, terrorism, destabilizing disinformation and propaganda campaigns, economic and financial warfare, diplomatic coercion, electronic warfare operations, cyber attacks, and regular military operations are all within the scope of hybrid conflict, just as coordinated operations via the media and government officials designed to mislead the enemy, for instance by leaking false data. The intimidation, deception, and bribery of the opposing government and military command are also part of hybrid tactics. In short, everything that works and
is available will be used to pursue the objective at hand. In doing so, non-military aspects play a more decisive role than actual combat operations. Open use of military force only occurs in later conflict stages and only under the labels of humanitarian intervention, such as allocating aid convoys, and crisis management. Direct military confrontation is only used to support the ongoing subversion efforts and is mainly focused around special operation forces (SOF) and other deployments that provide a minimal footprint. In particular, SOF reconnaissance is used to guide high precision missile and artillery attacks (Bērziņš 2014, 6; MSR 2015, 34-35; Shirreff 2016, 5; Siegert 2016, 21; Snegovaya 2015, 12). By granting the necessary hard power support to one of the opposing factions, the conflict can be prolonged indefinitely and the development of the hostilities can be controlled. This includes the ability to decrease the violence or to further escalate the situation (Snegovaya 2015, 12). It is very hard, or even impossible, for outside observers to detect the true extent of a hybrid conflict, including the actual scale of ongoing military deployments. Intelligence operations and a carefully executed disinformation campaign are used to spread confusion within the enemy in order to achieve strategic goals at a minimal cost. In the case of Ukraine, a sophisticated cyber war was launched, attacking government servers by using techniques similar to those used in the campaign against Georgia. The attacks were orchestrated in such a way that allowed Moscow to maintain plausible deniability (Morelli 2017, 19-20; Snegovaya 2015, 9). Hybrid warfare is a comprehensive approach, designed to subvert and subdue an opposing society. Whereas in traditional warfare military action starts after declaring war, new modes of engagement, such as hybrid conflicts, feature military action that starts with smaller operations during peace time, or by launching short-term high-intensity precision strikes against military targets or the economic infrastructure (Gressel 2015, 6; Bērziņš 2014, 4). The hybrid strategy applied by Russia shows many parallels to the political warfare conducted by the US. Most recently, Washington’s efforts to spoil China’s assertions in the South China Sea have been answered with semi-covert operations, falling within the concept of hybrid warfare. The US military is increasingly using underwater drones, void of national identification indicators, to infiltrate waters claimed by China. The main purpose of this asymmetric strategy is to demonstrate opposition to Chinese ambitions (Burgers and Romaniuk 2016). However, for the Kremlin, hybrid warfare is currently a much more vital part of its overall military strategy than it is for the Pentagon.

The strategy was conceptualized by Russian general Valery Gerasimov, who was appointed first Deputy Defense Minister in 2012. The ‘Gerasimov Doctrine’ became the foundation of Moscow’s new hybrid war approach, which was first applied in Ukraine. Gerasimov realized that the rules of war had changed drastically and that non-military tools had become considerably more effective than conventional striking forces. Future wars would be fought without immediate military confrontation. The new generation of conflicts would focus on elements such as the ‘protest
potential of the population’, they would include mostly covert military actions and they would be much more affordable. Most importantly, the wars of the future would no longer be declared, they would simply begin after troops had already been deployed. According to Gerasimov, who is very much in line with the core Russian leadership, conducting hybrid warfare was not an invention of the Kremlin but rather an attempt at adjusting to the US and its own long-standing political war against Russia, which included orchestrated color revolutions and subversive actions in Russia’s neighborhood (Gerasimov 2013; McKew 2017; MSR 2015, 34; Persson 2013, 82; Siegert 2016, 22; Snegovaya 2015, 10-11). In any case, the idea of hybrid warfare is not as new as the current degree of attention directed at it would suggest. Most of its core features are directly related to Soviet tactics. The contemporary approach combines techniques, developed by the Soviet military and intelligence apparatus, with the global strategic environment of today. Even the 'little green men' approach has been borrowed from old KGB toolkits (Snegovaya 2015, 9, 21). Meanwhile, the most obvious Soviet inspiration for Moscow’s new strategy concerns disinformation and the denial of facts.

One of the main achievements of Russia’s engagement in Ukraine was the widespread confusion about its actual role in the conflict. Moscow has repeatedly denied any military involvement until today. Thanks to a successful disinformation campaign, the exact extant of the Russian military presence remains unknown. Furthermore, the Kremlin managed to keep its true objectives concealed. Understanding Moscow’s end game continues to be difficult even now, three years after the outbreak of the conflict. Confronted with uncertainty on all levels, the tactical planning of the Ukrainian government was eminently complicated and had to rely on guessing Russia's intentions. Moscow’s denial of involvement was accompanied by deploying irregular troops that offered a certain degree of plausible deniability, while at the same time a large number of regular forces was assembled at the border. This raised the tension and put additional pressure on Kiev. Yet, at the same time, Moscow engaged in diplomacy and conveyed an interest to solve the crisis peacefully (MSR 2015, 34; Snegovaya 2015, 15). From the Russian perspective, the main battlefield in modern wars had become the mind, resulting in a focus on next-generation information and psychological warfare directed at the opposing armed forces and the civilian population (Bērziņš 2014, 5). In Ukraine, information was turned into a powerful weapon.

The Russian government had been building a state-controlled network of international media outlets for years, capable of conveying the Russian perspective to audiences throughout the world and, most importantly, throughout the Western nations. While these channels had always been biased, the level of published misinformation increased drastically in the wake of the conflict. After the Yanukovych regime was removed from power, the Russian state-owned media unleashed an information war against Ukraine, the West, and even the Russian people. Russia Today (RT) and
others started to fuel speculations about the US involvement in the regime change and distributed a massive amount of falsified stories, including reports on US mercenaries working for the new government in Kiev and unsupported claims about atrocities committed by the pro-Ukrainian troops. This information-based warfare was especially effective during the early stages of the conflict, when disinformation was used to cover up the military infiltration of Ukrainian territory and to create uncertainty as to how far the separatist movements were influenced by Moscow. Concurrently, the constant propaganda reports regarding the new government in Kiev, which according to the Russian media consisted mainly of fascist bandits, and the cruelty of the government forces, motivated many Russian citizens and foreigners to fight on the side of the separatists. Internationally, the main goal was to weaken the global image of the US and to drive a wedge between NATO and Europe, while making the people in the West uncomfortable (Antonova 2015; Jackson 2014; Sengupta 2016; Snegovaya 2015, 14, 17-19; Walker 2015b; Yuhas 2014). The rhetorical escalation of Russian officials and state-media widely surpassed that of disinformation campaigns during Soviet times. Increases in fighting were usually accompanied by a surge in Russian propaganda, with reports claiming, among other things, that Ukrainian soldiers had to sell their fuel in order to buy clothes, or that a Ukrainian tank hit a civilian car. Stories like these served to distract from the progression of the actual conflict. This is again a strategy derived from an old Soviet approach, based on the 4D concept: dismiss, distort, distract, and dismay. The Kremlin first dismissed accusations on Russian involvement, later it distorted the global perception of the conflict using the Russian state-owned media and government representatives in order to misrepresent the events on the ground, at the same time Moscow started to distract from the actual occurrences by diverting the attention towards conspiracy theories regarding the MH 17 shoot-down and other propaganda campaigns, while the Russian government increasingly dismayed NATO members close to the Russian border by increasing the pressure on them and issuing threats against countries such as Denmark and Sweden not to join NATO (Morelli 2017, 19-20; Snegovaya 2015, 13, 15, 17). All in all, the Russian leadership has used the conflict in Ukraine to put itself in the spotlight of world-wide attention. Putin and other high ranking government officials have been a constant sight, not just in Russian state-owned media outlets, but throughout the global mass media. In this regard, Russia has achieved its goal to put itself back on top of the international agenda.

One of the most prominent figures of the Kremlin, and a cornerstone of Russia’s misinformation campaign, currently is Foreign Minister Lavrov, who has leisurely denied all accusations against Russia’s involvement in Ukraine for years. Lavrov has on many occasions dismissed claims of a Russian military engagement within Ukraine and invited Western governments to back up their accusations with evidence. When the US and others came forward with satellite images showing Russian troop movements, he described them as images derived from computer
games and continued to insist that no concrete evidence was being provided. The nature of Russia's military involvement made it difficult to find irrefutable proof, which played into the hands of Moscow's denial of facts strategy. In turn, the Russian leadership used its public attention to convey the Kremlin's message. Lavrov outspokenly blamed Kiev for the failing cease fire, pointing out that Ukraine had not fulfilled its commitments to the process, and expressed his wish to end the crisis as soon as possible, while insisting that Kiev needed to make the next step (Czuperski et al. 2015, 7; Lavrov 2016; Lavrov 2015; Schröder 2016, 17-19; Snegovaya 2015, 15). Lavrov and Putin have become the figureheads for Russia's information warfare, an integral part of the hybrid approach to the conflict in Ukraine. This approach has enabled Moscow to achieve considerable success in Crimea, as well as in Eastern Ukraine.

Moscow's campaign in Crimea constitutes a remarkable example of effectively conducting a hybrid warfare operation. It shows many similarities with the 2008 operation in Georgia, while at the same time successfully implementing the new military doctrine. Immediately after Yanukovych had been removed from power, Putin ordered the Russian military to secure the Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine and to ensure a smooth incorporation procedure. Within three weeks the morale of the Ukrainian troops on Crimea was broken and all 190 military installations were surrendered. This was achieved without sending in major conventional forces. Most of the Russian troops involved had already been stationed there. Due to the lack of an official invasion or occupation, the Russian forces managed to gain enough time to take control of the situation on the ground. After the Ukrainian soldiers had been cut off, their morale was undermined by a psychological warfare and propaganda campaign, which was complemented by intimidation and bribery (Bērziņš 2014, 4; Mearsheimer 2014, 5; Snegovaya 2015, 12). When the Russian involvement became obvious to the international community, Moscow repeatedly denied any Russian involvement, insisting that the 'little green men' were Crimean defense forces who had acquired their Russian uniforms and gear in local shops. It was not until over a year later that Putin admitted the involvement of Russian special forces on the ground, as well as the fact that the Kremlin had started to plan the annexation weeks before the Crimean referendum had taken place. A year prior, he had stated that the decision to 'return Crimea' had only been made after its citizens had expressed their wish to join the Russian Federation (BBC 2015; Snegovaya 2015, 17). By building the argument of a legal annexation on a national referendum, protected by local defense forces, Moscow maintained plausible deniability until the repatriation efforts were in full swing.

Today, the likelihood of Crimea's return to Ukraine has long faded beyond reasonable expectation. Aside from a few Ukrainian provocations and the corresponding Russian counter provocations, the situation at the Crimean-Ukrainian border has remained relatively stable. The
Kremlin has recently stationed advanced anti-aircraft missile systems on the peninsula, which are capable not only of defending the Crimean airspace but can reach deep into Ukrainian territory and deliver attacks against air and ground targets, making them a powerful asset in any potential future advances against cities such as Mariupol. This deployment is part of the massively increased Russian military presence on Crimea. The Kremlin has reanimated facilities from Soviet times and continues to rebuild structures of the Ukrainian army into new military bases. Aside from its military presence, Russia is currently building a bridge across the Kerch Strait, connecting the Crimean Peninsula to the Russian mainland. An extensive energy grid has already been built in an effort to increase Crimea’s energy independence. Two power plants are also under construction and will be supplied with Russian gas via a new pipeline. Furthermore, Moscow has announced that it will boost the Crimean economy with massive subsidies in 2017, accounting to almost 600 million USD. The financial assets of Ukrainian oligarchs on Crimea have been seized, their industrial holdings nationalized. Politically speaking, in 2016, the first State Duma elections with Crimean participation were held and, despite being condemned as illegitimate by the US and Europe, Crimean representatives now sit in the Russian parliament (Kusznir 2015, 2-4; Majumdar 2017; Morelli 2017, 21; Robinson and Woods 2016). In 2015, the power lines from Ukraine to Crimea were blown up. Likewise, Kiev has ceased its water supplies to the lost territory. The annexation of Crimea is now a fait accompli (Healy 2015). Anyone demanding the return of the peninsula clearly underestimates Moscow’s determination to make this geopolitically vital asset an integral part of the Russian Federation.

While the hybrid campaign in Crimea was a landmark success for the Kremlin, the ensuing civil war in Ukraine’s east proved to be a far more complex challenge for Moscow’s strategic planning. After the fall of Yanukovych, Moscow replaced its policy of directly exerting influence with a more indirect approach. The goal was to undermine European support for the new Ukrainian regime. Pro-Russian loyalists were rewarded with favorable business deals and loans, while supporters of the new regime were punished with hostile propaganda and economic sanctioning. Moscow’s new action plan was aimed at actively sabotaging Kiev by combining political pressure, intelligence operations, and economic campaigns conducted through Russian businesses. The success of this approach was dependent on years of preparation in which the Russian government had expanded its connections to pro-Russian nationalists and infiltrated Ukrainian economic and administrative structures as well as intelligence services and the military sector. The armed intervention that would soon follow was only the climax of a wide-ranging hybrid assault on the post-Yanukovych government (Gressel 2015, 6; Morelli 2017, 19-20). After repatriating Crimea, Moscow started to increase the pressure on Kiev much further by gathering a large army at the border to Ukraine, raising the price for natural gas, and demanding repayment of the existing debts. The Russian foreign military intelligence agency (GRU) started to operate in the Donbass region,
organizing the flow of weapons and ‘volunteers’ coming into Ukraine across the border, while training separatist units such as the Vostok Battalion for combat. The Russian government used its diplomatic channels along with a state-media that was now fully committed to its propaganda campaign against Kiev. Furthermore, cyber assaults against the Ukrainian state were being launched. The new government had become the target of a massive hybrid attack from all directions. The primary objective was not to take more territory, but to prevent Ukraine from becoming a member of NATO or the EU. The message was not to side with the West and that Ukraine would be broken apart before it was allowed to join a Western military alliance (Mearsheimer 2014, 5; Snegovaya 2015, 12, 15). The best way to achieve Moscow’s goal was to splinter the country and create a protracted conflict that would consume Ukraine’s attention and resources, fracturing its sovereignty and tying its geopolitical future to Russia.

When the separatist movements unfolded in Eastern Ukraine, Russian tactical leadership was vital from the beginning. Moscow’s first step on the ground was to try and expand its political influence. This did not work as well as the Kremlin had hoped, because the support from the local people was less pronounced than expected. Thus, the political support for the separatist cause was soon supported by deploying once more ‘little green men’, this time in the form of irregular military units (Czuperski et al. 2015, 4; Gressel 2015, 6; Siegert 2016, 22-23). When fighting between the separatists and pro-Kiev forces erupted, the Russian units came up short in defeating the Ukrainian army and defense battalions. Realizing this, the Kremlin decided to send in the big guns. In June of 2014, conventional Russian forces started getting involved on the battlefield. Initially the involvement was limited to cross-border artillery fire, targeting Ukrainian troops. From July onwards, Russian infantry units joined the fight and became a permanent feature of the conflict. By the end of 2014, the number of Russian troops in Ukraine had roughly reached the 10,000 mark, while 42,000 more were rotating near the border on the Russian side. The hybrid warfare campaign in Eastern Ukraine was already relying considerably more on conventional elements than the campaign in Crimea (Gressel 2015, 6; Siegert 2016, 22-23; Sutyagin 2015, 1, 4). The pro-Ukrainian forces had outnumbered and out-equipped the separatists, but they were no match for conventional Russian combat troops. The Russian military turned the tide in favor of the separatists. Within weeks, Kiev was defeated and ready to negotiate a truce. Despite the ceasefire dictated by the first Minsk agreement, Moscow continued to send in heavy weaponry and launched major operations such as the capture of Donetsk Airport, further improving the strategic position of the separatists. In February of 2015, the second Minsk agreement was negotiated in a way much more favorable to the Kremlin’s ambitions. And yet, it was again broken immediately by the Russian-backed separatist forces, this time taking the Debaltseve railway hub. After that, the hostilities decreased in intensity. However, in the summer of the same year, Russia sent thousands of additional combat troops over
the border, including heavy weapon systems such as tanks, artillery, and surface-to-air missile launchers, to further change the facts on the ground. Analysts have estimated that in 2015 the total number of Russian soldiers on the ground had risen to 12,000, with an additional 50,000 soldiers maintaining pressure at the border, ready to intervene in case of a severe setback on the side of the separatists. Another 30,000 to 50,000 troops remained stationed in Crimea. In addition to the rise in troops, the Russian-separatist forces were now using around 400 tanks, and 700 artillery and missile launching systems (Clark 2015; Czuperski et al. 2015, 5, 6, 15; Morelli 2017, 22; Siebold, Copley and Jones 2015). What had started as a hybrid approach, similar to the one in Crimea, was now basically a stealth war, largely based on regular military tactics and yet accompanied by a massive misinformation and denial campaign, directed at distorting the international perception and distracting form the magnitude of Russia's military operation.

Throughout the conflict, Moscow has vehemently and categorically denied any military involvement. Putin himself has stated on numerous occasions that not a single Russian soldier was fighting in Ukraine. Arguments offered to explain the presence of Russian citizens on the Donbass battlefields ranged from soldiers volunteering to join the separatists during their vacation time to active units accidently crossing the border (BBC 2014b; BBC 2014c; Czuperski et al. 2015, 26-27; Gregory 2016; Walker 2015c). The Kremlin has kept up this denial of facts despite a growing amount of evidence showing, beyond doubt, that Russia's military engagement has become a defining feature of the conflict. Thanks to satellite images, analysts have been able to identify Russian military infrastructure and training sites appearing before the infiltration of Crimea and the war in Donbass, as well as the military build-ups in preparation for moving into Ukraine and extensive military exercises at the border, practicing large-scale invasions (AAAS 2014, 5-7, 9, 11, 15; Czuperski et al. 2015, 3, 13). Another effective way to identify Russian units operating in Ukraine has been the use of geolocation. Mobile devices with network capability, such as phones and computers, use GPS signals which provide a 'geotag' on pictures being uploaded to social media platforms. Despite Moscow's efforts to maintain deniability, a large number of Russian soldiers have posted such pictures on social media platforms. This technique has been applied to recognize several specific units, vehicles, and individuals from the Russian armed forces operating in the Donbass war (Czuperski et al. 2015, 8; Shevchenko 2014). Yet another way to discern Russian involvement in Eastern Ukraine is taking a closer look at the Russian casualties. In 2015, it was estimated that over 270 Russian soldiers had died in the conflict. Moscow never publicly acknowledged the death of the servicemen and their funerals were held in secret. Units killed in action were officially kept alive. Other casualties were connected to training exercises, their causes of death being kept vague. At the same time, however, combat service medals were rewarded and returning bodies were designated as killed in action (Czuperski et al. 2015, 6, 17). Furthermore, several reports have undermined the official narrative.
Multiple Russian soldiers are known to have ended their military service to avoid being sent to Ukraine. Others have spoken out on being encouraged to ‘volunteer’. One injured soldier told journalists how his tank brigade had officially been sent to a training exercise only to enter the Donbass region after removing all forms of identification (Czuperski et al. 2015, 15; Kostyuchenko 2015; Urban 2015). Finally, the pro-Russian forces in Ukraine have been using a growing amount of Russian-made weapon systems and vehicles which are not available to the Ukrainian military. Thus, they could not have been simply acquired by seizing Ukrainian arms depots. Instead, they could have only been supplied by Russia (Czuperski et al. 2015, 3, 11).

Russian agents and soldiers have been essential for the tactical success of the separatist forces. It is highly unlikely that the civil war would have lasted anywhere near this long without a decisive and substantial military operation being planned and executed by Moscow. The Kremlin has supplied the separatist cause with everything it needed to prevail. The first prime minister of the DPR, Aleksadnder Borodai, is a former political consultant from Moscow. Other high ranking officials in the two people’s republics are veterans of the Russian army and security services (Czuperski et al. 2015, 4). In 2016, leaked emails between Russia and the leaderships of the DPR and LPR revealed a tight strategic coordination on all levels and down to details on every-day dealings. The Kremlin even supplied a manual on information warfare and media manipulation, providing a main narrative for the separatists that was in accordance with the official position in Moscow (Bittner, Ginzel und Hock 2016, 1, 3). In Eastern Ukraine, the hybrid approach to warfare has been taken to a new level. It showed that even extensive military operations could be integrated into, and concealed by, a combined attack using financial, economic, and political tools as well as a comprehensive misinformation campaign. By denying the obvious, Moscow has gone further than any Western government would have dared to and successfully changed the rules of the game. The Russian government will most likely uphold this strategy and continue to dispute any involvement, as the main objective has been accomplished. The two separatist republics prevail under political and tactical support from Moscow and Kiev will remain unable to do anything about it. Similar to Crimea, Russia is constructing large military facilities at the border to Eastern Ukraine (Zverev 2015), preparing itself for a long-term commitment to a protracted conflict.

According to Western military experts, the Kremlin is preparing for the contingency of global war between the years 2025 to 2030, investing vast resources into re-establishing itself as a major military power. Despite the considerable progression already made, the Russian military is still far from where it wants to be and its efficiency is reduced by capability shortcomings on all levels. The hybrid approach to warfare seen in Ukraine could therefore be considered as a compensation
mechanism for these deficiencies. The indirect approach, even if it involved conventional forces, is much cheaper and easier to implement (Snegovaya 2015, 11). However, the irregularity of Russian hybrid campaign has also offered Moscow a number of advantages over a regular military engagement. Since, officially, there are no Russian troops in Ukrainian territory, it is easy to withdraw the military and focus more on non-military strategies such as economic warfare. As one of the signatory countries of the Minsk agreement, Russia carries no formal obligations in regard to the peace settlement. The responsibility lies between the separatist republics and Kiev. War has not officially been declared and combat operations have been conducted as surprise attacks, which were over before the international community was fully aware of the situation on the ground. Even more importantly, Moscow has successfully managed to avoid major confrontations with the West. Despite all the talk about a new Cold War and evident violations of international law by Russia, the war in Donbass is not officially recognized as an international conflict. Many Western leaders are likely to prefer this situation over an open Russian invasion. Should the Putin administration stop denying its hand in the conflict, a point of no return would be reached. The West would be forced to react while Russia could be compelled to go all in and ensure a clear military victory against Ukraine. This would cause tremendous suffering for the Ukrainian people and make a resolution to the conflict even more unlikely. Moreover, a Russian acknowledgement would likely increase international tensions further by forcing Western institutions to enact a higher level of punishment against Moscow. Thus, it is very likely that the Kremlin chose the hybrid approach not to harm the international order but to protect its stability (ib. 16-17). Additionally, admitting to violating Ukraine's sovereignty would undermine Moscow's ability to use international law to its advantage.

The Russian leadership has developed a tendency to justify its foreign policy action with the simple argument that 'America did it first'. Russia claims the status of a great power for itself and, as such, it considers itself to have the same rights as the US and any Western nation. Since Washington is known for bending international rules to its advantage, past the breaking point if necessary, Moscow considers itself entitled to do the same. The invasion of Iraq and the recognition of Kosovo provide the Kremlin with precedents for its own legal argumentation. The Kosovo precedent was used earlier to justify the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Now it has been used to defend the annexation of Crimea, insisting that it fell within the right of self-determination protected under Article I of the UN Charter, while omitting the part where Russian troops had violated Ukraine's sovereignty. Yet, by making sure the referendum took place, Moscow created a legal basis for justifying its actions. Concurrently, the Russian government vehemently denied any involvement in Eastern Ukraine. Under a legal perspective, it is clear why the Kremlin went through so much trouble to conceal its presence instead of attempting to justify it. Unlike Crimea, there simply was no legal precedent (Bērziņš 2014, 3; Frear and Kulesa 2016, 10-11). Moscow is trying hard not to look like the
bad guy, even though the Western media has long acquired a taste for feeding the narrative of Putin as the new global villain. This is also the reason why Russia has put a lot of effort into its misinformation campaign surrounding the downing of flight MH17. The Russian state-owned arms producer Almaz-Antey has conducted elaborate simulations to prove that the plane was shot down by an older version of its Buk surface-to-air missile system, thereby negating the dominant Western narrative that the missile in question was of a newer generation than the Ukrainian armed forces are using, and thus, must have been supplied to the separatists by Russia. Moscow has long been working on its own narrative concerning the incident. Over the years, the Russian media has provided a number of theories, including the suggestions that Ukrainian fighter jets shot the airliner down on purpose and that it was targeted by pro-Ukrainian forces who had mistaken it for the plane of the Russian president. The focus was later redirected at blaming Ukraine for allowing the plane to enter the air space of the conflict zone in the first place, as well as discrediting the reports of the joint investigation team, which never accused Russia or the separatists directly but concluded that the plane was shot down with a missile fired from separatist-held territory, by accusing it to exclude the data gathered by Russian radar surveillance (Bush 2014; Harding and Luhn 2016; Hunt 2016; Litovkin 2016; ORF 2016d; RT 2015; Szoldra2014; TASS 2016; TASS 2016b; TASS 2014; Walker and Borger 2015). In short, everything was done to redirect the blame from Russia and the separatists it supported. Of course, neither Moscow nor the separatist leaderships had anything to gain from downing a civilian aircraft, making an accidental shoot-down the most logical scenario. In either case, the Putin regime maintained its policy of denial.

Western observers have long insisted that the Russian military reforms had only provided very limited results and that the efficiency of the armed forces remained thwarted by its Soviet legacy. The focus was put primarily on the state of equipment and hardware procurements. However, the reformation process was directed at all levels of the military. The crucial first step was to transform the education system and personnel setup. The second phase was centered on increasing combat-readiness by streamlining the command structures and introducing advanced training exercises. Regarding these two steps, the reformation effort has produces significant results. The third phase, purchasing new equipment and updating the existing hardware, is a long-term process which is currently ongoing. With its swift and precise intervention in Ukraine, the Kremlin has demonstrated the highly improved combat-readiness, professionalism, and deployability of its military arm. The West had misunderstood the nature of the Russian reformation process and was unprepared for Moscow’s expertise in non-conventional warfare. The Russian hybrid tactics are the culmination of substantive reformation and preparation. Russia is now a military power capable of subverting and overwhelming any of its neighbours within a very short timespan (Carlsson, Norberg and Westerlund
This puts it ahead of most European countries in terms of power projection capabilities and the ability to maintain a conventional war campaign by itself.

Countries such as France, Germany, and the UK have armed forces that are technologically superior to Russia’s, especially in regard to naval power. However, their effectiveness is strongly reduced by a low combat-readiness level and longstanding shortfalls in funding. European armies lack key capabilities and equipment needed to deploy their forces abroad, making them strongly dependent on US support. In addition, they are scattered and lack coordination between each other. Military experience is largely based on peacekeeping operations. Essentially, the real combat strength of Europe is significantly lower than it looks on paper. At the same time, Russia and other non-Western powers, such as China, are making massive investments into their military capabilities, including large-scale modernization and expansion of naval power. The Russian armed forces show a unified command structure and are able to cover many tasks, especially concerning air power, that the EU’s major military powers are unable to fulfil on their own, despite their technological advantage. Furthermore, Moscow has launched ambitious procurement projects while Europe’s capitals have continuously cut back on their defense spending. Russia is catching up in quantity, already outnumbering the US in the number of tanks and artillery units, as well as in quality. The Russian defense industry is developing its own high tech weapon systems and is closing the gap on missile and drone technology as well as the ability to wage cyber warfare. These areas have traditionally been the foundation of NATO’s global military superiority. Russia already holds one of the world’s most powerful military forces, second only to the US (GFP 2016; Gressel 2015, 2, 7-9; Prüfer 2016; Karpova 2016). Moscow is slowly cementing its great power ambitions by creating the hard power capabilities needed to assert its role as a regional hegemon.

In the Budapest Memorandum of 1994, Moscow confirmed its commitment to respect the sovereignty of Ukraine and agreed not to use force against its territorial integrity. When the Russian leadership decided to break this arrangement by launching an irregular war effort against the Ukrainian state, it knew right from the start that it most likely would have to pay a high price for its intervention. It did so anyway (Eitelhuber 2015, 4; MSR 2015, 27). Numerous analysts have pointed out the clear signs of an imperial Russian behaviour. Yet, the Kremlin has not pursued any imperial ambitions in Ukraine. Instead, the Putin government was aiming for three major strategic goals. First, the main objective was to stop Ukraine from joining NATO and thereby potentially bringing US military forces into Eastern Ukraine while endangering the Russian black sea base in Crimea. Second, Russia was motivated by its long-term striving for the status of a great power and the associated international respect. By intervening in Ukraine, the Kremlin demonstrated its will to reshape the post-Cold War order according to Russian aspirations and at the same time showed to the world that
it was prepared to and capable of using military force to do so. Third, the regime used the opportunity to further its anti-Western propaganda efforts within Russia. The conflict and the ensuing international crisis were successfully used to increase internal stability and to unite the Russian people behind their president in the struggle against the US and NATO. Despite the dire economic situation, the somewhat fading support for the regime obtained a new boost and Putin reached public approval ratings of 88 percent in 2014, 72 percent in 2015, and 83 percent in 2016. The Western sanctions have played into the hands of the Russian leadership, allowing it to push through an isolationist policy without offering a corresponding ideology. Instead, a renewed enemy stereotype was provided and a large part of the population actually supports Moscow’s actions to prevent Ukraine from becoming a part of the West (Bērziņš 2014, 3; Birnbaum 2016; Eitelhuber 2015, 2-3; Fenenko 2016; Fischer 2015, 7; Gressel 2015, 2; Leonhard and Krastev 2015, 46; LI. 2014; LI. 2015; Simon 2015, 2). Considering that all of Moscow’s goals have been accomplished, the Russian intervention in Ukraine must be rated a strategic success.

Similar scenarios in the future are as feasible as they are likely. The Russian approach to international politics has been enshrined in the current National Security Strategy of 2009, which was strongly informed by geopolitical thought. The document lists the expansion of NATO, along with the Western missile defense project, as top threats to Russia’s national security, while underscoring the need to consolidate Russia’s status in the world and to continue strengthening the national defenses. Moscow’s importance in finding solutions to international problems is also highlighted. Follow-up documents have directly listed the US’s ambitions to maintain its global dominance as a major security concern and emphasized the importance of a full spectrum, hybrid approached for the modern-day battlespace (EEES 2015; Oliker 2016; Persson 2013, 72-74). The concept of Russia’s cultural independence was further developed by Foreign Minister Lavrov, who detailed the historic mission of his country as a link between the East and the West while making it clear that Russia would continue to modernize without adapting Western culture. Lavrov went further by describing the current international order as an Orwellian system in which some states are more equal than others, and by expressing the Russian wish to cooperate with the West within the framework of plurality rather than uniformity (Lavrov 2016c). Ukraine became the anvil on which the Kremlin forged its new approach to international politics.

For Russia, the hybrid war in Ukraine was fought both, out of geostrategic considerations and historic-cultural reasons. Moscow has nothing to gain from bringing an end to the hostilities. On the contrary, it would lose a major bargaining chip. Thus, the separatist cause it being kept alive and the Kremlin maintains the ability to re-escalate the simmering tensions whenever it is useful. Estimates show that Russia has kept around 700 tanks and 1.200 artillery systems on the ground (Morelli 2017, 25-26, 28; Simon 2015, 3), making any future victory of Ukrainian troops impossible without massive
Western assistance. This would mean open war, something everyone wants to avoid. The Russian government has not recognized the DPR and LPR as independent countries, nor has it shown any ambitions to annex them to Russia. This way the conflict keeps going and the country remains destabilized, which is currently the most useful parameter for Moscow's further planning.

6.2 US Involvement and the Policy of Double Standards

History has shown that intrastate conflicts are rarely purely internal in nature. Instead, they usually feature a substantial international dimension and are prone to draw in external support from neighboring states or turn into proxy wars all together (Zartmann 1995, 4). This assessment is as true for the conflict in Ukraine as it is for most current flashpoints. While most of the international attention has been allocated to Russia's involvement into the conflict, other geostrategic players have been an essential part of its progression from the start. The most elusive role is that of the US. Washington's influence was mainly apparent as a spoiler for Moscow's ambitions; however, the US did not just intervene by punishing the Putin regime after it had taken over Crimea. The White House has been active in Ukraine for a long time and was pursuing its own geopolitical goals when the crisis erupted. Throughout the progression of the conflict, Washington has always been there and, albeit from a distance, worked towards moving the pieces in a way most suitable to American unipolar aspirations. The US approach was concealed behind the growingly aggressive and biased coverage of the Western mass media which, in unison with most Western governments, directed its attention almost exclusively on Moscow's engagement and portrayed the Russian president as the world's new super villain. A very similar development had been observed during the Georgia War (Mangott 2009, 198-199). Meanwhile, some realist scholars, such as Mearsheimer, have countered this imbalanced way of analyzing by highlighting the US role in the developments leading up to the conflict, arguing that Washington and its European allies share most of the responsibility for the escalation due to their aggressive expansion policies (Mearsheimer 2014). Geopolitical power politics were as instrumental for the Western efforts to move Ukraine away from Russia's sphere of influence, as they were decisive for Washington's actions during and after the regime change in Kiev.

American initiatives, directed at expanding Washington's influence in Eastern Europe, go back until the immediate post-World War II era. In 1950, the US government founded Radio Free Europe (RFE),
tasked with sending news as well as Western views and propaganda beyond the Iron Curtain. RFE was initially broadcasting in Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, and Romania. In 1953 Radio Liberty (RL) followed and expanded the reach of Western broadcasts deep into the USSR. The Baltic States and other socialist countries were also targeted over the years. The two broadcasting stations merged in 1976 and became RFE/RL. While they have always been financed by US Congress, until 1971 both were funded via the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). After the dissolution of the USSR and the fall of Eastern Europe’s Communist regimes, the RFE/RL initiative was not abandoned but instead continued to broadcast in order to support the democratic transition within the region and to develop local media cultures. When Bulgaria, Slovakia, and other former socialist states joined NATO and the EU, RFE/RL ceased its broadcasts there and closed its local offices. However, Washington maintained the organization and its focus on Eastern Europe, moving its headquarters from Munich to Prague, where it was eventually equipped with a state of the art broadcasting facility. In 1998, it created a subsidiary, Radio Free Iraq, which was used to supplement the US bombing of Iraq with a propaganda campaign. In 2014, RFE/RL started broadcasting special programs for Russian citizens living at home and abroad. Also in the same year, RFE/RL started reaching out to Crimea, after it had become part of Russia, and later spread its coverage to the Donbass region. Today, RFE/RL continues to broadcast in 28 languages, covering 20 countries, and its focus regions include no longer just Eastern Europe but the Middle East and Central Asia as well (Geran Pilon 2008; Johnson and Zvaners 2016; Marshall 1998). The current president of RFE/RF, Jeffrey Gedmin, is also the former head of US think tanks such as the Aspen Institute and the New Atlantic Institute, which used to be a part of the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative Washington-based think tank committed to 'American strength and global leadership' (AEI 2017). RFE/RL is just one of many organizations that were established during the Cold War in order to undermine Communism and spread US soft power. Numerous other think tanks and NGOs have been active in Eastern Europe, including Ukraine, since long before the Iron Curtain fell. Prominent examples include USAID (2017), a highly controversial institution and an active US foreign policy tool used many times to undermine foreign governments in countries such as Bolivia, Venezuela, and more recently Cuba (Perkins 2004, 37-42, 51; Roig-Franzia 2014; Weiss 2014). The National Endowment for Democracy (NED 2015) and National Democratic Institute (NDI 2016), both created by the Reagan administration, continue to actively and openly influence the political process in several ways as well. These institutions were created to combat communism, now they are just foreign policy instruments of Washington. All of them were present during the recent regime change in Kiev and beyond.

The conflict in Ukraine developed the first visible geopolitical features during its very early stages, back when it was still confined within the frame of political protest. The Euromaidan soon attracted
important international visitors, coming to help the pro-Western cause. The most noteworthy supports were high-ranking US officials, including the vice president, Senator McCain, and even CIA director John Brennan. McCain participated in the anti-government demonstrations, shaking hands, handing out groceries, and telling the protesters that America was with them. When Yanukovych had finally fled the country, the US ambassador to Ukraine, Geoffrey Pyatt, went on social media to praise it as a 'day for the history books' (Booth 2014; Kaylan 2014; Mearsheimer 2014, 4-5 Milne 2014). It is hard to imagine a more blatant way in which Washington could have made its point. Kiev had chosen the wrong side and now the US was here to the watch the old regime fall.

However, the most important US figure on the ground was Victoria Nuland, US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affaires from September 2013 until early 2017 and the key representative for American interests in Ukraine. Nuland became known for her part in an infamous phone conversation that was leaked to the public. In this conversation Pyatt and herself discussed the details of how the post-Yanukovych government should look and which opposition leader would be suited best for the role of prime minister. In the end, they decided against Klitschko and instead favoured Yatsenyuk, who became the new prime minister a few weeks later. Instead of covering the implications of this revealing phone call, the Western media focused on Nuland’s disparaging comments regarding the EU. The authenticity of the conversation has never been confirmed or denied by the US government. However, Nuland later officially apologized for her remarks concerning the EU, which she had made during the same phone call (BBC 2014d; Hudson and Standish 2016; Mearsheimer 2014, 5), thereby authenticating it. The incident was soon forgotten and the focus shifted to Washington accusing Moscow of tapping the conversation. Other statements by Nuland allow further insight into the US approach to Ukraine. She made the position of the White House clear by stating that the US stands ‘with the people of Ukraine who see their future in Europe’ (Nuland 2013b). No mention was made about the people who did not see their future in Europe. At the same time, she and McCain were photographed repeatedly with the leaders of the Ukrainian opposition leaders, including Oleh Tyahnybok, head of the right-wing Svoboda party, providing the Kremlin with ample material for its propaganda campaign (Milne 2014). After the Yanukovych regime was dismantled, Nuland described the violent Euromaidan protests, which had cost over a hundred lives, as peaceful and stated that the State Department and USAID were reviewing how to further support ‘Ukrainian civil society and media’ (Nuland 2014). It appeared that Washington had finally arrived in Kiev for good, just like Moscow would soon arrive in Eastern Ukraine.

The US did not wait long before it expanded its focus on the supporters of the old regime. Dmytro Firtasch was arrested on an US warrant, four days after the toppling of the old regime, while sitting the crisis out in Vienna. However, an Austrian judge refused to extradite him and instead ordered his release. Firtasch had claimed that the federal bribery case against him was a politically
motivated move to remove him from the political scene, and the judge agreed with him. The US Justice Department denied any political connection to the events in Ukraine, but failed to offer any substantial evidence and even refused to provide the testimonies of the two anonymous witnesses on which the case was built. According to Firtasch's legal team, the US had requested his arrest before, when in 2013 the US State Department, represented by Nuland, came to Kiev in order to convince Yanukovych to sign the association agreement with the EU (Cullison and Lundeen 2015; Herszenhorn 2015; The Economist 2015). Ever since the pro-Western regime change in Kiev, the new government has been working closely with Washington. Vice President Biden became particularly important for the US-Ukrainian connection and watched closely over the anticipated post-Yanukovych transformation process. He urged the government to put its internal differences aside and focus on implementing the reforms that had been recommended by the EU and the IMF. When the government failed and Yantsenyuk was replaced by Volodymyr Groysman, Biden immediately established contact with the new prime minister as well. He even gave a passionate speech in front of the Ukrainian parliament, imploring the government to work together (Baker 2015; Hudson and Standish 2016; Morelli 2017, 9; Prentice and Balmforth 2015; Roberts 2015). Although the full extent of Washington's involvement in Ukraine is not known, it is clear that the regime change was supported by the US. In an interview, President Obama mentioned a 'deal to transition power in Ukraine' that the US had brokered (Mearsheimer 2014, 4; Obama 2015). It is unclear what deal he was referring to, since the only official agreement had been made between Yanukovych and the leaders of the opposition, with the foreign ministers of Germany, France, and Poland as well as a Russian representative being present. This agreement was reached mere hours before the situation escalated and Yanukovych saw himself forced to leave the country. There was no representative from the US present, just as there was no US participation during the peace negotiations. It is reasonable to assume that Washington's role behind the scenes has been significantly higher than publicly known.

While US representatives busily engaged into establishing a close relationship with the post-Maidan government, Russia lost no time asserting its own interests in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. Washington reacted with increasingly harsh and condescending rhetoric against the Putin regime, calling the president a thug and Russia a rogue state (Mangott and Eder 2014, 22). Considering that one of the Kremlin's main ambitions in Ukraine was to counter what it perceived as disrespectful Western behavior towards Russia, Washington's new approach to US-Russian relations only deteriorated the relationship faster. The Western mainstream media has happily amplified this change in tone. Putin has become the new bogeyman, having been compared to Hitler and Stalin on numerous occasions (Beard 2016; Johnson 2014; Kelley 2014; Mangott and Eder 2014; Mason 2014; 22; Milne 2014). At the same time, during the 'Panama Paper' revelations, the media focus shifted
immediately to the Russian president, even though his name did not even appear in the leaked files. The documents did however show that Ukrainian oligarch president Poroshenko had used illegal offshore accounts to avoid paying taxes in Ukraine (Harding 2016; Hudson and Standish 2016; ICIJ 2016; Neate and Smith 2016). Western backlash from the media and governments was minimal though, despite the fact that Poroshenko was supposed to be the president of the Euromaidan, a reformer and leader in the fight against corruption.

Of course, no one was really surprised to see Poroshenko's name in the files. Ukraine's oligarchs may have worked hard to sell the chaos in their country as the consequence of Russian imperialism, but most of them still maintain substantial businesses and investments in Russia. This includes Poroshenko, who made new investments in Russia while at the same time joining Our Ukraine, a party dedicated to bringing Ukraine into NATO (Matuszak 2012, 64). Poroshenko and others have long been working together with Western states but they never promoted any real change. That would hurt their business interests, which have always been their top priority. It is unlikely that Washington was truly committed to Ukrainian progress, given that Poroshenko was their choice as president. From a geopolitical perspective on the other hand, he served US interests well, focusing Kiev's energies on combating the spread of pro-Russian separatism in the country's east.

Apart from Washington's efforts to establish itself within the new political set-up in Kiev, the US has been an integral part of the international dimension of the conflict in Ukraine. The primary American policy tool was the Western sanction campaign against Moscow. After the regime change in Kiev and the following Crimean referendum on joining Russia, the Obama administration launched its first round of punitive measures, together with the EU and Canada. Other Western countries such as Australia, Norway, Switzerland, and also Japan soon followed. Initially, the sanctions consisted of travel bans and the freezing of assets. They were directed against Russian government officials and companies. The scope of the sanctions was later extended to cover a larger number of individuals and legal entities, as well as major Russian banks and the two energy corporations Rosneft and Novatek, while not targeting Gazprom. In July 2014, a second round of sanctions followed, now including embargos on arms and military related materials and goods, as well as restrictions on the export of equipment used by the oil industry. Again, the initiative was launched by the US and the EU followed after being pressured by Washington. The last expansion of punitive measures followed in September of the same year, and targeted parts of the Russian energy, defense, and financial sectors. The Western sanction regime was intensified primarily in response to the escalation of the war in Donbass and the increased Russian involvement into the conflict. Specific sanctions have also been implemented against Crimea, covering a wide range of objectives. Yet, the measures were
mainly aimed at restricting the access to Western financial markets and introducing embargos on military goods and equipment needed for oil-exploration programs, targeting major Russian businesses with close ties to Moscow. While the US sanctions are open ended, the EU’s had to be extended several times, leading to increasing controversy within Europe regarding the future extent and duration of the punitive effort. Currently, EU sanctions have been prolonged until July 2017 (Baczynska 2016; Croft 2015; European Council 2016; Hudson 2016; Kasonta 2015, 5-6; Macdonald 2016; Mangott and Eder 2014, 22; Marchak and Donahue 2014; NATO 2015; RFERL 2016; Wilson 2014). As soon as Russia started to intervene in Ukraine, Washington abandoned the last remnants of the US-Russian reset policy as well as any cooperation with Moscow, including negotiations over a bilateral trade agreement and military coordination (Mangott and Eder 2014, 21). The ensuing Western sanction campaign was pushed hard by the White House, especially in the beginning. Vice President Biden himself admitted that US insistence was instrumental in convincing the European governments to go through with the economic punishment measures (Biden 2014). The US has remained adamant on maintaining the sanctions, despite increasing offers from Moscow to cooperate on global issues such as the war in Syria and the Iran nuclear deal.

Russia was quick to respond to the Western sanctions with its own package of punitive measures. Moscow’s counter sanctions largely mirrored those of Washington and imposed similar restrictions on US government officials. In August 2014, the Russian government added a ban on food imports, covering most agricultural products from those nations participating in the Western sanction campaign. The Kremlin has also banned Ukraine from using Russia’s airspace and prohibited several European government officials to enter Russia, including Polish and Latvian parliamentarians who tried to attend the funeral of Russian opposition politician Boris Nemtsov (BBC 2015b; Lowe and Macdonald 2015; NATO 2015; Kasonta 2015, 5-6). Just like the Western countries, Russia has not altered its sanctions and, due to the nature of the conflict in Ukraine, it remains highly unlikely that either side will end its economic punishments unless the political situation is altered. The new US administration has hinted at wanting to lift the US measures, thereby contradicting earlier assurances that the sanctions would continue until Russia had withdrawn completely from Ukraine. However, this development has been met with strong resistance from US Congress. Several Senators have made it clear that they will fight for a continuation of the sanctions, including McCain, who is himself one of the individuals targeted by the Russian counter sanctions (Borger and Rankin 2017; Choi 2017; ORF 2017). From a geopolitical point of view, it seems unlikely that the White House will abandon its current approach, considering that it is currently the most convenient way to answer Moscow’s assertiveness in Ukraine.

The effectiveness of the current sanction regime against Russia is subject to much debate, the central question being how the conflict would have progressed without the Western sanctions.
Would the separatist forces, backed by the Russian military, have advanced as far as Mariupol and Odessa? Would they have reached Kiev? The sanctions may have altered Russia’s tactics but they have not stopped Moscow from pursuing its goals. The Kremlin has continued to send heavy weapons and troops over the border, long after the punitive measures were in full swing. Russia’s engagement in Eastern Ukraine was not reduced, but instead, intensified. Neither did the sanctions coerce Moscow to return Crimea. European officials tried to sell the Minsk agreements as a result of its punitive responses. However, it is highly unlikely that the sanctions had any influence over the Kremlin’s tactical decision making. The West has made a Russian compliance with the Minsk accord its precondition for ending the sanction regime. Yet, Moscow denies any military involvement and, therefore, cannot and will not comply with the Western demands. Furthermore, it appears that there is some sort of unspoken agreement between Russia and the West. It seems that Crimea's annexation is tacitly tolerated, in turn for Moscow’s refusal to recognize the separatist republics of Luhansk and Donetsk as independent states, or to integrate them into the Russian Federation, thus maintaining the possibility of a future restoration of Ukraine’s territorial integrity (Emmott and Baczynska 2016; Graham 2014; Kyselchuk 2015, 11; Mangott 2014; Shevtsova 2016). Realistically, no advantageous political results can be expected from the Western sanctioning campaign.

While the sanctions have not averted Russian aggression, their punitive accomplishments have also been exaggerated. The damage done to the Russian economy has been minimal. Russia’s troubles have not been caused by the current sanctions, but are rather the result of an economy in dire need of modernization, deeply rooted corruption, a massive dependency on export revenue from natural energy sales, and, most importantly, the global decline of oil and gas prices. Even official NATO documents have admitted that the Western sanctions have only aggravated existing challenges (Brenton 2014; Kottasova 2015; NATO 2015; ORF 2016j; Shevtsova 2016). It is unclear how high the economic loss for Russia has been. In 2014, it was close to 27 billion USD, a number that has most likely been surpassed in the years that followed. The sanction war is definitely affecting Russia more severely than the EU or other Western powers (Kottasova 2015; Kyselchuk 2015, 11). And yet, the West has also suffered from its own sanctions in addition to Moscow’s counter measures. The combined total costs for the states participating in the Western sanction regime could run as high as 700 billion USD, including cuts in exports and business deals, job losses, and a potential default on Russian debts. The lion's share of this burden is carried by the members of the EU, which account for 73 percent of the lost exports to Russia. Agricultural and food exports alone fell by 43 percent between August 2014 and July 2015. European countries have been hit in varying degrees by the economic backlash. Many have been able to balance out the losses by finding alternative markets. Others, such as the Baltics and Finland, are not doing so well. At the same time, a 2015 study estimated that, in the worst-case scenario, the sanctions would cost 2 million jobs in the EU.
and Switzerland. Germany is in danger of being effected the most, with 45,000 jobs being in danger (De Galbert 2015, 9-11; Eigendorf et al. 2015; Kasonta 2015c; NATO 2015; Schatz 2015; Sharkov 2015). Meanwhile, the US is only suffering from very minor economic consequences. Before the economic punishments were set in motion, US trade with Russia amounted to only 40 billion USD a year, compared to 400 billion in EU-Russian trade (Schatz 2015; Rumer 2014). While Washington has been the main driver behind the Western sanction campaign, it has managed to outsource most of the economic costs to Europe. This has caused increasing internal divisions within the EU. Some member states, such as the Poland and the UK, have been pushing for even harder sanctions, while at the same time the number of governments speaking up against continuing the sanctions has been growing. Many of the states now opposing the economic punishment of Russia had to be convinced to go through with it in the first place, swayed by EU subsidies and assurances from Germany and the US. European leaders are also increasingly unsettled by the political side effects of their campaign against Russia. The Western sanctions have led Moscow to embark on a geopolitical shift towards China, the BRICS framework, and the post-Soviet space. Not only does this development decrease the effectiveness of the sanctions even further, but it stands against European business interests (Kasonta 2015c; Schatz 2015). It remains to be seen how long Brussels can keep its economic punishment up. The EU is, after all, primarily an economic organization and its members will not support a policy that hurts their own economic progression indefinitely. The US, on the other hand, is again profiting from its geographically advanced position, being least affected from the developments in Europe and able to focus on its strategic goals instead of worrying about trade relations with Europe’s most important neighbor.

Sanctions are a common approach to deal with adversary countries that show an undesirable behavior, while at the same time avoiding direct military confrontation and unwanted wars. Sanctions are created to cause pain in order to motivate the opposing nation to change its behavior. If sanctions are too painful, however, they force their target into a corner and may produce unpredictable results. For example, US sanctions against Japan caused it to lose 90 percent of its oil imports and as a consequence pushed Tokyo to attack Pearl Harbor. At the same time, sanctions rarely produce the behavioral changes that are intended, as the sanctioned country knows that giving into economic pressure once makes future coercive measures only more likely. Thus, sanctions are almost never an effective policy tool. This is especially true for Russia, which, unlike such states as Iran, has the capability to retaliate. Moscow has many potential responses to Western economic aggression, ranging from seizing the assets of companies operating within Russia to punishing Europe by cutting off its energy supply. Ultimately, the Kremlin is also capable of military retaliation. Isolating Russia, the world’s largest country and an important G20 member, is also not realistic, nor is it economically desirable. Since the end of World War II, the West has launched sanctions against the
USSR, and later Russia, six times. They have never worked in changing Moscow's course (Biersteker and Bergeijk 2015, 17; Brenton 2014; Friedman 2014; Platzeck 2015, 70; Rumer 2014).

While sanctions against weaker countries have been more successful at times, the approach is mainly just a substitute for a real foreign policy. As visible forms of punishment, they are an attractive policy instrument that aims to please the 'don't just stand there, bomb something' crowd (Pose 2014; Rumer 2014) by demonstrating resolve (Biersteker and Bergeijk 2015, 18-19; Brenton 2014). In the case of Russia, it has been pointed out that the Western strategy is not aimed at changing Russia's course on Ukraine. Instead, the sanctioning approach is designed to look like an attempt to change Moscow's course of action, while the truth is that there is nothing that can be done by the West to change the current situation (Friedman 2014). Accordingly, the punitive measures are not designed to be especially painful. The Russian elite is compensated for its lost assets with a rise in popularity at home. Also, the scope of the sanctions is very restricted. They only include a relatively small number of individuals and companies, and are not designed to cause widespread pain within the population, as this may cause internal instability and force the Kremlin to act in order to demonstrate strength. Moscow's counter sanctions were essentially a way to prove the Russian leadership's assertiveness to the West, as well as to the Russian people. As for the European governments, the main point of the sanctions was simply to do something, and not to really achieve anything. Any true attempt at creating instability in Russia, the world's second largest military power and one of the two major nuclear powers, would be completely against the interests of Europe and also the US. Likewise, no one wants to push Moscow over the edge, provoking it to change its hybrid approach into a conventional invasion and thereby forcing the West to either retreat or to engage in a war with Russia (Friedman 2014; Kramer 2015; Platzeck 2015, 70; Schatz 2015). Just like President Putin, Gazprom is not directly affected by the sanctions. This makes a lot of sense, considering that Russian gas is vital for Europe and that Gazprom is currently working towards ensuring a long lasting business partnership with the EU, improving its pipeline transportation capacity and reliability.

The most significant result of the Western sanction regime has been a geopolitical shift in Moscow's foreign policy. It has accelerated Russia's readiness to look for economic and strategic partners outside the Western world and spurred the rapprochement between Moscow and Beijing. At the same time, it has empowered Russian nationalism and the rise of anti-Western forces within the society, as well as the security services and military. The Sino-Russian partnership has been heavily used for propaganda purposes by the Putin regime, selling the vague 400 billion gas deals as a landmark success for Russia's future (Graham 2014; Moshes 2011, 98; Platzeck 2015, 70). Meanwhile, it has become a sign of patriotism to be on the list of individuals sanctioned by the West. The US-led sanctioning campaign was designed to isolate Russia from the Western-dominated global
financial system. Thereby, the West has shut itself out of Russia, making the spread of a political culture and civil society, orientated on Western examples, even less likely. The sanctions are also blocking financial assistance to small private companies, which are considered as vital elements in modernizing Russia and aligning it more with the West (Brenton 2014). In short, the sanctions have primarily pushed Russia away from the Western sphere of influence. They have not served to resolve the situation in Ukraine, but instead bolstered Moscow’s ambitions to reduce its cultural affiliation with the West and establish itself as an independent Eurasian power.

In the context of the Western outrage over Russia’s involvement in Ukraine, and the apparent need to punish Moscow’s ambitions with a morally justified sanctions campaign, the conflict and the geopolitical struggle surrounding it have highlighted another facet of the changes that currently shape the global political system. The meaning of international law has become less unambiguous in a world that is torn between an increasingly multipolar order and ongoing unilateral ambitions towards global hegemony.

International law, in its current form, was developed as a normative framework for international relations under the bipolar global order of the Cold War era. Its primary function is to secure the coexistence of sovereign states. Since sovereign nations are not subject to any binding authority, all relations with other states require consent and agreement. Human civilization is held together by a ‘fragile web of interdependence’ (Lowe 2015, 1-4). During Cold War bipolarity, international law and order was maintained by counterbalancing between the two major power poles of the global political system. After the dissolution of the USSR, it was unclear whether international law would develop into a set of rules dictated and enforced by a unipolar center, or if other powers strong enough to ensure a multilateral implementation would rise up to the task. Initially, it seemed that the US would assume the role of a self-proclaimed global police force, responsible for scrutinizing others as well as bringing punishment to rule breakers. Such a scenario would have severely limited the nature of international law, since under unipolar conditions there is no need for international law as such. Instead, a global hegemon would be capable of enforcing whatever rules it considers appropriate. However, the 21th century showed that Washington’s ambitions to assume this rule would not lead to a unipolar normality. China and Russia, as well as other powers within the non-Western world, started to counterbalance the US (Muellerson 2016). This development will eventually lead to a new form of international law, which is not shaped by one or two but several powers.

The conflict in Ukraine has illustrated the current state of the transformation process towards a multipolar implementation of international law. While the US and its Western allies continue to perpetuate their claim on being the sole warrantable keeper of law and order within the
international system, Russia is now challenging the Western monopoly on providing answers to some of the most essential questions of international law. There are fundamental disagreements over what sovereignty means in today's world and over what legitimizes interference into national matters by external forces. This debate does not just include the crisis in Ukraine but also the interventions in Georgia, Kosovo, and Libya (Frear and Kulesa 2016, 1). Furthermore, there is an increasing controversy regarding the interpretation of potential law breaches. The US in particular has come under growing scrutiny regarding the legality of its military aggression against countries such as Iraq (Lowe 2015, 41-42). However, the case of Iraq also demonstrated that any law is only as strong as the ability to enforce it. Punishment options for violations of international law are very limited to begin with. In the case of the US, it is even more difficult to enact punitive measures, considering its strong global position and the lack of powers able to successfully enact punishment against it. As Noam Chomsky notes, 'victors do not investigate their own crimes' (2004, 20). When a future US breach of international law is being confronted by a multilateral sanction regime, it will be a clear sign that the global political order has truly been transformed into a multipolar system.

The legal implications of the conflict in Ukraine are also closely connected to another fundamental and longstanding controversy; the Western-centric perception that the political, economical, and social systems and values of Europe and its offshoots are superior to any other form of government and society. This has been used to justify the open interference into the political process of sovereign countries by representatives of Western governments. Similar actions, carried out by governments that are not an accepted part of the Western realm, are condemned as violations of sovereignty. This perception has led to the establishment of heavily engrained double standards within the foundation of international political conduct. The much-quoted statement of US Secretary of State John Kerry, regarding the Russian actions over Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, that 'you don't just in the 21st century behave in 19th century fashion by invading another country on completely trumped up pre-text' (Kerry 2014) has been emphasized for its ironic connotation and is symbolic for the reality of international double standards. Whether Kerry missed the irony of his statement intentionally or out of ignorance, large parts of the non-Western world are sure to agree that an American official should not lecture anyone on invading foreign countries under fabricated pretexts (Mearsheimer 2014, 7; Muellerson 2016). With the rise of non-Western powers, the voices pointing out Western hypocrisy have become more difficult to brush aside. The world has realized long ago that Washington and its allies only tend to live by the values they preach to the rest of the world as long as it serves their foreign policy goals. The West is known for lecturing others about democracy, yet it is also known for supporting dictatorships and sabotaging democratically elected governments.
Since the end of World War II, Washington has fought far more wars than any other single power or alliance, including; the war in Afghanistan, the invasions of Iraq, the war against the Islamic State (IS), the War on Terror, the intervention in Libya, the drone war in Pakistan, the Bosnia and Kosovo campaigns, as well as interventions in Haiti, Somalia, Panama, Grenada, Lebanon, Vietnam, Cuba, and Korea. There is an even longer list of regime changes and engineered coups, such as in Chile, Guatemala, and Iran, as well as intelligence operations designed to undermine official governments, for example in Nicaragua, where the US funded an trained opposition forces. The US has often supported dictators under the banner of fighting communism or more recently terrorism, and engaged into policies that were hostile to democratic development throughout Asia, Africa, Latin America, and especially the Middle East, where numerous authoritarian governments have been, and continue to be, supported by the US in economic and military aid (Kagan 2015, 25-26). In the Middle East alone, the US has launched over forty operations in the last seventy years. Both, Washington and the capitals of Europe, have a long history of relying on allies like Saudi Arabia, which is known for its precarious human rights situation. America’s long-term partner Israel has been permitted to defy UN resolutions for decades, with the US vetoing those resolutions condemning the illegal occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, while stockpiling WMDs. In contrast, Iraq has been hit with trade embargos, bombing campaigns, and military invasions. It should be noted that, unlike Israel, Iraq had signed the Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Moreover, Islamic fundamentalists have been supported as long as they proved useful to Western foreign policy. Meanwhile, sanctions were imposed against the democratically elected Hamas government. Washington is known for supporting, removing, and bombing dictators around the world, many of whom were former allies. At the same time, the West claims the prerogative to bomb Arab nations (Bowcott 2002; Friedman 2016c; Hiro 2010, 59; Huntington 1997, 184; Jeffrey, Eisenstadt and Rose, 2016; Karmi 2015; Simonyi and Morningstar 2002). Despite contending that the extensive oil and gas reserves in the region are not the motivation for its consistent engagement there, the connection is obvious.

In Iran, the democratically elected leader was overthrown by a CIA engineered coup after nationalizing the oil industry. When the US-supported regime was overthrown during the Iranian Revolution, Washington responded by imposing harsh sanctions that remained in force until 2016 (Hiro 2010, 117-124). During the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the oil ministry was the one building that US forces protected in the growing chaos. While both, the US and UK governments, adamantly insisted that the Iraqi oil reserves, the second largest in the world, played no role in their strategic considerations, this has long been exposed as untruthful. The previously nationalized oily industry is now largely privatized and under foreign control, while numerous government officials and members of the military leadership have been agreeing that securing the oil reserves was one of the major reasons for the war (Ahmet 2014; Bignell 2011; Juhasz 2013; Gökay 2016). The alleged link between
Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden had never been based on any credible evidence. When no WMDs were found, the Bush administration tried to justify the invasion by claiming that the threat had been Iraq’s potential ability to produce WMDs. This argument can, of course, be used against most countries (Chomsky 2004, 12-13, 19). More importantly, the US invasion of Iraq was a clear breach of international law. According to the UN Charter, only the UN SC can authorize war. The UN Secretary General himself described the invasion as not being in conformity with international law.

After the UN SC had refused to approve the invasion, Washington went through with it anyways, proving that it no longer felt bound by the restrictions of the UN, and tried to market the war as preemptive when, in fact, it was a preventive campaign. The US attempt to legalize its misinterpretation of the right to self-defense constituted a serious danger for the concept of international law itself, considering that preventive wars can be justified about any state with military capabilities strong enough to potentially harm the US, and do not require preceding provocation (CFR 2004; Chomsky 2004, 12-13; Currie 2003, 21; Friedman 2016c; Gonzalez 2008; Lind 2015). The US has repeatedly undermined, denounced, sanctioned, and attacked sovereign states that posed a threat to its global ambitions or strategic goals. While engulfing the world in its war on terror, Washington has failed to admit that its actions in the Middle East and beyond have caused great human tragedies and only accelerated the growth of world-wide terrorism, which affects the non-Western world far more extensively than the US and its allies.

During the 2014 Munich Security Conference, Foreign Minister Lavrov asked the assembled Western officials how the EU would react if the Russian government had openly supported the riots in London and Paris, sending its representatives to encourage the protesters (Lavrov 2014). It was of course meant as a rhetorical question, since it is obvious that this would be considered an unthinkable act and a direct assault on European and Western values. The current global power struggle has revealed the unsustainability of Western double standards in international relations. Moscow has committed its own share of international law violations and was actively engaged in multiply proxy conflicts with the West, as well other shady Cold War operations. Yet, besides the recent Syria campaign, modern-day Russia has focused its attention mainly on its own neighborhood. The Russian leadership is no longer accepting that the US uses international law as a foreign policy tool against it, and it is not alone. China has also started to speak up against American hypocrisy, telling the US that it is not fit to judge other countries for their human rights issues and that Washington should limit itself to giving friendly advice (Phillips 2014). The US has undermine its own ability to use the human rights arguments against others. Since the early 21st century, Washington has managed to institutionalize mass surveillance and human rights violations at home, legally killing its own citizens in the name of national security, and discrediting American values by establishing torture programs and a global
network of illegal detention facilities (Friedman 2016c; Huntington 1997, 184). In 2002, the Bush administration welcomed an attempted military coup against the democratically elected president of Venezuela, Hugo Chavez, who had greatly improved the social situation in his country and outspent the US on foreign aid in the region. Chavez afterwards became one of the most outspoken and popular critics of Washington, receiving a massive applause when calling President Bush the devil in front of the UN General Assembly in 2006 (Hiro 2010, 137-140,143; Pilkington 2006; Stout 2006). When the Obama administration came into office, the change in tone was not mirrored by a respective change in foreign policy, and, while the White House managed to ameliorate the relationship with its Western partners, it did not manage to significantly change America's image in the eyes of India and China, even less so in the Arab World, and least of all in Russia (Baker 2009; Hiro 2010, 290; Pew 2009). The new US president has already made some remarks that, while causing widespread controversy within the US, hint at a better understanding of how the US is perceived in the rest of the world (Trump 2017). In any case, Western governments eventually will have to come to terms with the fact that their ability to use international law as an exclusively Western foreign policy tool is slowly coming to an end.

When the conflict in Ukraine made it clear that Russia was no longer just a weak regional force, the US government started to counterbalance the Kremlin. However, Washington's response to the Russian intervention in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine was not limited to punishing Moscow economically and diplomatically. The US also redirected some of its geopolitical attention from Asia to Europe. Most importantly, the crisis was used to renew the commitment to NATO within the Western community.

NATO was born out of the need for a credible defense mechanism against the Soviet threat. This was achieved by linking the US to Europe, creating a transatlantic community able to watch over West Germany while presenting a unified front against the USSR. With the dissolution of the USSR, and the spread of democracy throughout Eastern Europe, NATO's mission was completed. Unlike unions, alliances are meant to dissolve after their purpose is fulfilled. However, multinational institutions tend to take on a life of their own. They continue irrespectively from their original task, or strive to find a new reason for existence. Dissolving NATO was never really on the table, and the alliance continued to exist and hold conferences, acting as though it still had a defined purpose. It had become an alliance of habit and convenience that was increasingly suffering from a lack of clear mutual interests. NATO tried to justify its existence by refocusing on its original target, Moscow. At the same time, it was used as a way to expand the West, integrating new members from Eastern Europe. However, becoming members of NATO and the EU did not change the fact that these countries were torn between Central and Western Europe on the one side, and Russia on the other.
This led to an increasing fragmentation within both institutions. Meanwhile, the transatlantic link itself was increasingly dysfunctional, being eroded by internal contradictions and a continental drift between the US and Europe (Friedman 2017; Medcalf 2012, 2-23, 87). The importance of the transatlantic security commitment was confirmed via several summits and the Berlin Plus agreement of 2002, which determined NATO as the predominant framework for European security cooperation, but NATO became increasingly geopoliticized and used outside its original defensive role (Pradetto 2015b, 52). With the US being the primary contributor of military power to the alliance, NATO's engagements became very selective and dominated by US interests. At the same time, the European members were sidelined, or sidelined themselves, and refused to make the necessary defense investments to meet the NATO's minimum requirement.

The crisis in Ukraine was used as a 'wake-up call', as NATO's Secretary General has put it (Rasmussen 2014). Moscow's hybrid warfare campaign, and the Russian hints at future interventions under the pretext of protecting ethnic Russians abroad, were used to justify a resurgence of the transatlantic alliance. Many European governments have expressed their concerns over a potential Russian aggression on their territory. At the Wales Summit in September 2014, NATO's members reaffirmed their commitment to collective defense and crisis management, while agreeing on a readiness action plan aimed at increasing the alliance's preparedness to face new threats and challenges. NATO was reaffirmed as the backbone of European security. The main focus of the summit was Russia. The first article of the summit declaration reads 'Russia's aggressive actions against Ukraine have fundamentally challenged our vision of a Europe whole, free, and at peace' (MSR 2015, 18; NATO 2014b). Since then, NATO has become more active in terms of multinational military exercises and troop deployments within Europe. Defense spending has gone up and in 2016 NATO pledged to deter Russia in the post-Soviet space. Furthermore, despite heavy protest from Moscow, Montenegro has been formally invited to join NATO and is supposed to become a full member in 2017 (Chuter 2016; Emmott and Stewart 2016; Shankar 2015). Meanwhile, the US has reinforced its military presence in Europe, which had been reduced under the Bush and Obama administrations. In January of this year, 300 US marines arrived in Norway, marking the first time since World War II that foreign troops have been allowed to be stationed there. The US Air Force has deployed its most advanced fighter jets, the F-22, to Romania. Other combat aircraft have been sent to Iceland and the Netherlands. Also in early 2017, 3,000 US troops arrived in Eastern Europe where they received a warm welcome by the Polish government. Future deployments will include another 1,000 soldiers, additional tank brigades, attack helicopters, reconnaissance planes, SOF units, as well as information and psychological warfare experts. The US has also allocated a multimillion USD budget to oppose hostile influence and provide counter propaganda efforts. The focus of the US deployment lies on the Baltics, Poland, Bulgaria, and Romania. Yet, the main forces and heavy
equipment will, for the moment, remain in Central Europe, since under the Russia-NATO Founding Act of 2004, a permanent NATO presence in Eastern Europe is prohibited. Washington is partially circumventing this restriction by deploying its troops on a rotational basis (Adomaitis et al. 2017; Greber 2016; Pawlyk 2016; Khodarenok 2016; ORF 2017b; Streihammer, Greber and Raabe 2016; Thompson 2016). Thus, the recent US deployments mainly serve as a symbolic gesture, aimed at reassuring the European NATO members of Washington's resolve. In any case, the NATO countries bordering Russia are still heavily outnumbered and outgunned by the massive presence of Russian forces just across the border.

The US has made itself out to be an external and reactive factor of the conflict in Ukraine, a factor that only came into play after Russia had violated the territorial integrity of the country. This perception of a Russian-Ukrainian conflict, with Washington coming to the rescue and punishing the Kremlin for its imperial ambitions, is inaccurate. The US is heavily involved in the crisis and must be considered as a conflict party. According to the US State Department, the US invested 5 billion USD into assisting Ukraine in developing its democratic skills and institutions in addition to 'other goals' (Nuland 2013). Washington has been active in and around Kiev ever since it became an independent country, trying to bring this geopolitical pivot within the sphere of Western influence. Thereby, the US and its European allies have demonstrated historic ignorance and a strong neglect for Ukraine's interests. The Ukrainian economy depends on close cooperation with Russia and is not ready to be integrated into the EU. Russia had always been the most important economic partner for Ukraine, and if the Western governments were truly motivated by the desire to help the people of Ukraine on their path to modernization and prosperity, they would have respected this (Matuszak 2012, 69; Müller 2015, 19). Moreover, in ignoring Moscow's long-standing warnings on actively expanding Western institutions to Russia's border region, Washington has pushed the Kremlin to enforce its security interests by tearing Ukraine in half. Washington has an extensive record of projecting its influence throughout the world, the primary American ambition having been to assert its aspirations towards global power. The case of Ukraine is not different.
6.3 Europe: Unity for Unity's Sake

Throughout the Ukrainian crisis, European leaders have actively supported the US in condemning Moscow's actions and by joining in the American sanction campaign. Yet, Europe's relationship with Russia is fundamentally different from Washington. The economic interdependence between Russia and the US is minimal, allowing both parties to pursue an aggressive foreign policy against each other without facing substantial risks. While it is true that Washington still has the upper hand in terms of economic punishment, the Russian government is more than capable of retaliating by acting as a spoiler to global US interests and in particular its Easter Europe policy. Thus, the US-Russian relationship is primarily geopolitical in nature, defined by long-lasting tensions over global power politics and international competition. Europe's relationship with Russia, on the other hand, is much more complex and multidimensional. For one, Europe is a crucial economic partner for Moscow. Economic ties between Russia and the EU had shown impressive growth rates in trade and investments until the financial crisis of 2008, and then again from 2010 onwards, reaching unprecedented levels in 2012. In 2013, the EU was still responsible for half of Russia's trade volume (EC 2014; Klein 2012; Marioni 2015, 17; Szabo 2015, 115-116). The economic relationship is mutually important, with Europe continuing to rely on Russian energy. Its geographic proximity makes hostilities with Moscow highly undesirable. European leaders simply cannot afford to provoke the Russian bear the way Washington does. Despite European efforts to diversify its energy imports, many EU members continue to rely on Russian gas completely (Peterson, Tocci and Alcaro 2012, 14; Marioni 2015, 17, 19-20). At the moment, Russia needs Europe and Europe needs Russia.

From a geopolitical perspective, Europe has been crucial for both, the US and Russia. Moscow depends on it, not just economically, but also in order to continue its modernization and avoid isolation. Europe has also historically been the only true ally of the US (Brzezinski 1997, 118). While both, the US and Russia, continue to use hard power in order to pursue their foreign policy goals and geostrategic ambitions, the EU prefers to think of itself as the embodiment of soft power and the center of a postmodern order that stands in direct opposition to the geopolitical nature of global power politics. The belief in the universality of European values and the conviction that economic interdependence is the most effective drive for peace, result from the fact that Europe's postmodern world has been developed in a protected environment, shielded from the reality of the modern world in which everyone else is living. Russia's refusal to play according to Brussels' rules has confronted the European community, which has failed to understand the consequences of expanding NATO and the EU, with a distinctively non-European world (Klinke 2012, 929-939; Leonhard 2015, 43; Szeptycki 2014, 24-25). The conflict in Ukraine has highlighted the growing realization that the European project of postmodern integration is facing a deep internal crisis and is in the process of
declining into geopolitical insignificance. The EU is suffering from an identity crisis and growing renationalization. This has already become obvious during the Eurozone crisis. By showing great reluctance to support Greece in its financial turmoil, Germany delivered a deep blow to the European cause, revealing a lack of internal commitment within the union. The enthusiasm inside the EU had started to disappear long before the financial problems started. Brussels' ambitious enlargement initiatives have drained the life out of the union and reduced the commitment of the original core states to cooperate with, and help, the new members. At the same time, the new EU members only have a very short history of independence and are reluctant to surrender their political freedom so soon. Growing discontent over excessive EU involvement into national matters is slowly eroding the support of the European people. The lack of a compelling common vision, and the relative economic decline in global comparison, further undermine the commitment to European integration, while the crucial policy area of security and defense had always been kept outside the grasp of EU decision making. Meanwhile, the constitutional treaty was rejected by the people of Europe and had to be repackaged in order to somehow push it through. This illustrated that the new generation of European citizens no longer shares the post-World War II understanding for the European commitment. The EU has, in other words, slowly run out of life and is now in desperate need for renewed ambition and justification of its existence (Kupchan 2010). The crisis in Ukraine offered exactly that.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and to a lesser extent French President François Hollande, have been at the vanguard of the European sanction campaign and the unified Western approach to counter Russian aggression in Ukraine. They have also represented the EU throughout the Minsk peace process and signed the Minsk II agreement as guarantors. Germany and France, the main driving forces behind European integration from the very beginning, used the crisis to emphasize the political relevance of the EU and to demonstrate internal unity. In their effort to gain geopolitical significance, Europe's leaders even went as far as endangering their relationship with Moscow.

When the crisis in Kiev started to unfold, Ukraine had already been in the focus of the EU for a long time. The association agreement itself had been negotiated for four years, during a time in which the geopolitical competition over Ukraine's allegiance was still encouraged by Kiev. When Yanukovych announced that he would put Ukraine's efforts to work towards a closer integration with the EU on hold, European diplomats were shocked to say the least. Before the announcement, Kiev had already failed to release opposition leader Tymoshenko from jail and allow her to leave the country in order to seek medical treatment in Germany. This had been a precondition on the side of the EU, which considered Tymoshenko to be a political prisoner. Yanukovych did not just put the association agreement on hold, but at the same time declared his intentions to pursue a more active relationship
with Moscow, hinting at a future Ukrainian accession to the ECU. Just like the Russian offer of joining the ECU, the invitation to sign the association agreement was designed as a zero-sum decision, since a membership in either one of the economic frameworks would have been incompatible with the other. This announcement was as much a surprise as it was a major blow for the EU’s Eastern Partnership program (Gotev 2013; Steinsdorff 2015, 3; Szeptycki 2014, 5). Catherine Ashton, then the EU’s High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, called the decision a disappointment for the Ukrainian people, stating that ‘we believe that the future for Ukraine lies in a strong relationship with the EU and stand firm in our commitment to the people of Ukraine’ (2013).

The geopolitical orientation of Kiev had been the main point of argument between Russia and the EU since 2010, as the negotiations on the association agreement started to progress. Moscow increased its pressure on the Ukrainian government by threatening to restrict the economic cooperation with Ukraine, using Russian officials and the state-controlled media to deliver the message and to highlight the benefits of the ECU. In 2013, it appeared as though Moscow had won (Szeptycki 2014, 20-21). When the consequences of Yanukovych’s decision became clear, the EU grasped the moment and encouraged the Ukrainian people to fight for the European values. Jose Manuel Barroso, president of the European Commission, called the protests a demonstration of the EU’s role as ‘a beacon of hope and values, a guarantee of human rights and liberties’ (2013). While European officials were less blatant in their support for the protests, the EU was still omnipresent. The name of the Euromaidan itself left no doubts about the ultimate objective of the political revolution. At the same time, the EU flag was hoisted up on all sides of the Maidan square. Once the situation started to escalate, Brussels also became directly involved. The various institutions of the EU condemned Russia’s actions and, while carefully highlighting the intention to maintain good relations with Russia, eventually launched diplomatic and economic sanctions against Moscow. Ashton tasked the foreign ministers of Germany, France, and Poland to represent her in Kiev and facilitate the arrangement between Yanukovych and the protest leaders (Szeptycki 2014, 22, 26). This turned out to be a fruitless effort once unidentified snipers escalated the situation beyond rehabilitation shortly after the agreement was negotiated. It is unknown how much more influence European representatives executed behind the scenes. However, a leaked phone call between Ashton and Urmas Paet, the Estonian foreign minister, revealed that the EU was actively involved on the ground. In the conversation, Paet informed Ashton about the likelihood that the snipers had been part of the protest movement, charged with changing the facts on the ground by killing members of the police force as well protestor (MacAskill 2014). Whoever arranged the Maidan bloodshed, the provocation worked, and when Yanukovych had fled the country it was as much a victory for Europe as it was for Washington.
Despite widespread solidarity throughout the crisis, and substantial economic and political support since, the EU is not offering Kiev any perspective regarding a future membership. The membership question was thoroughly discussed during the negotiations before the regime change. The EU eventually concluded that it was not ready to offer any prospects other than the association agreement. Due to several factors, this decision has not been altered since the pro-Western revolution managed to get rid of the Yanukovych administration. First of all, Ukraine is internally weak and not an attractive new member. Secondly, the EU's own growing problems have made many within the union wary of further enlargement. Lastly, Brussels does not want to antagonize Moscow any further. Europe continues to rely on Russian energy and, even more importantly, many of its members are located very close to the Russian border. A Ukrainian membership in either NATO or the EU could put the West on a direct collision course with the Kremlin, a scenario that would seriously destabilize European security. The post-Maidan leadership, on the other hand, clearly has counted on a membership perspective. In December of 2014, the Ukrainian parliament renounced Ukraine's neutral status, unmistakably implying that it was ready to join the Western world. The president described the association agreement as a first step towards becoming a full member and many people in Ukraine believe that they have paid the price for becoming a EU member with their own blood during the Euromaidan (Mearsheimer 2014, 12; Morelli 2017, 18; Peterson, Tocci and Alcaro 2012, 14; Simon 2015, 3; Szeptycki 2014, 15-16). The European Commission has described the association treaty as the EU's most ambitious agreement with a partner country ever produced. However, despite the umbrella of common values, for Western Europe the post-Soviet states are mainly interesting as markets for goods, investment targets, and sources of raw materials (Lukyanov 2011, 78; Szeptycki 2014, 12). Europe's leaders have made it clear that Ukraine is not worth going to war over and, despite calling the regime change in Kiev a victory for European values, the EU does not want Ukraine to become its next member.

Beyond that, even the association agreement itself, the ultimate trigger of the entire crisis, has not yet been finalized. While it is already active on a provisional basis, in 2016 the Dutch rejected its ratification in a referendum. To salvage the agreement, the EU had to offer the Netherlands written guarantees, stating that the association agreement will not give Ukraine any concrete promises regarding a future EU membership or the help of Europe's armies in the event of an invasion. The ratification is now pending approval by the Dutch Senate (Langbein 2016, 8; ORF 2016c; Rankin 2016). Meanwhile, the EU is increasingly criticizing the Ukrainian government for the lack of progress regarding the much needed reforms, the failure to proceed against corruption, and the inability to reduce the political influence of the oligarchs. The European Court of Auditors has been questioning the effectiveness of the EU's financial aid programs and suggested to raise the pressure on Kiev (ORF 2016a). These developments have left Ukraine with growing uncertainty. By turning its
back on Russia, Kiev has put all its eggs in one basket. Without substantial and long-term support from the West and in particular the EU, from which Kiev expects more of an open-door policy, Ukraine will not be able to get back on its feet. Kiev is further being irritated by the growing difficulties within the EU to maintain a collective position against Russia's aggression and to uphold its punitive measures.

After the regime change in Kiev, and Russia's unexpected response, the foreign policy of the EU became less coordinated and coherent. The leaders of France and Germany took the lead in Europe's diplomatic involvement, yet their engagement happened mainly outside the framework of the EU. The so-called Normandy group, formed by France, Germany, Russia, and Ukraine during the 2014 D-Day celebrations, became the foundation for any negotiations regarding the conflict in Ukraine and its consequences. This development highlighted the inability of the EU to create a credible and coordinated foreign policy approach. The EU remains primarily an economic union in nature, and it is not prepared to participate in geopolitical disputes. Instead, it relies on economic and legal measures, generally following a soft power approach while leaving power politics to NATO (MSR 2016, 5; Szeptycki 2014, 24-27). Issuing sanctions against Russia was therefore the most logical response from a European perspective. In order to cause minimal economic pain to either Russia or the West, the sanctions were designed in a very limited way, while the real value of the penalty measures lied in their potential to create unity within the West and especially Europe (Shevtsova 2016). However, maintaining unity on the sanction regime was a challenge from the very beginning and it has become increasingly difficult to present a joint approach against Russia (Raynova 2016; Schatz 2015). The crisis has underscored the fact that Russia is a key issue for the economic and security policies of many EU member states, and that among them there is a strong divergence regarding the priorities in the relationship with Moscow. While it was possible to reconcile these conflicting interests in the heat of the moment, the situation in Ukraine has now become old news and Europe's economies disagree on what the new normal should look like.

EU member countries can be placed into three categories according to their relationship with Russia. The first category consideres Russia to be a top security threat, in need of containment, and comprises those nations that are located closest to the Russian border: Poland, the Baltics, and the Scandinavian countries, including Norway, which is not a member of the EU but has adapted similar sanctions on its own, as well as the UK, which is pursuing a hard line against Moscow out of old diplomatic tensions and despite the lack of a geographical connection. Ever since the escalation of the situation in Ukraine, the governments of these countries have been standing out due to their particularly harsh rhetoric vis-à-vis the Kremlin. They were the first ones to demand a strong EU reaction and continue to provide the main incentive behind the continuation of the sanctions,
insisting that the Western punishment remains a necessary reaction to Russia's ongoing aggression (Croft 2015; Emmott and Baczynska 2016; Szabo 2015, 120-121; Szeptycki 2014, 24-25). Warsaw in particular has a lot of history with Russia, including more recent disputes such as the Smolensk plane crash, and the Polish attempts to reduce its energy dependency from Russia by constructing a LNG terminal. The Polish security strategy is shaped by a growing fear of Russian aggression and attempts from Moscow to spread disunity within NATO, which is considered a vital deterrent against Moscow. Since the beginning of the war in Eastern Ukraine, the Polish government has pushed for a stronger presence of NATO forces on its territory, a request that so far has been turned down in order to uphold the NATO-Russian Founding Act and to refrain from further provoking Russia. The Polish president has openly complained about NATO treating his country as a buffer zone, expressing the wish to become the alliance's true eastern flank (Foy 2015). Warsaw has been suspiciously watching as Moscow expanded its military presence in Kaliningrad and Belarus, being especially concerned about a potential Russian hybrid attack designed to threaten its independence. According to some assessments, the Russian military is already capable of launching simultaneous attacks against Poland and the Baltics, while maintaining its presence in Ukraine (Rettman 2016; Szabo 2015, 122-125; Szatkowski 2016, 23-25; Tran 2016). The Polish government has already authorized plans to upgrade the country’s defense forces by purchasing new air defense systems, helicopters, drones, and submarines, while at the same time engaging Kiev in discussing joint military production projects (Adamowski 2016; Defense News 2016b). The situation is very similar in Norway, where a credible deterrence through NATO is considered to be crucial for national security. For Oslo, the defining security concern is also Russia. Despite successful cooperation on multiple issues, the relationship between Norway and Russia is strained by unresolved territorial disputes in the Arctic and Oslo is increasingly concerned about the growing long-range and underwater capabilities of the Russian armed forces. Like Poland, Norway is one of the few NATO members that has been increasing its defense budget while also expressing a wish to hold a greater NATO presence (Tamnes 2016, 31-35). Uncertainty has spread throughout all of Scandinavia. Even in traditionally neutral Sweden the concern about Russian is now increasingly influencing the political debate. While the government has already decided to reintroduce conscription, the topic of joining NATO has also re-emerged on the public agenda.

At the other end of the spectrum, a second group of European states has been very critical about the sanctions against Russia. The governments of Cyprus, Greece, Hungary, and Italy, have expressed support to Moscow and criticized the automatic extensions of the economic penalty measures. Hungary's Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, is among the most outspoken critics in this regard, accusing Brussels of only harming itself and demanding compensation for European producers. Hungary relies heavily on Russian energy imports and is Moscow's largest trading partner
outside the EU. When the conflict started, the two countries had just made a deal to expand Hungary’s nuclear power plant (Kasonta 2015c; Schatz 2015; Szakacs 2014; Szeptycki 2014, 24-25). Besides Hungary, Italy is Moscow’s closest ally within Europe. In 2015, the Italian prime minister criticized Berlin for its double standards, pointing out that, while Germany continued to cooperate with Russia on the Nord Stream expansion project, Italy’s economy was suffering under the European sanction effort (Emmott and Baczynska 2016; Gebauer et al. 2016). Further complaints came from the Greek prime minister, who highlighted the risk of a new Cold War, as well as the Czech president, who contradicted his own government by labelling the conflict in Ukraine as a civil war (Foy and Oliver 2015; Monaghan 2015). Calls to end the sanctions, in particular the economic and financial restrictions, have also increasingly arrived from various parts of the economy, most notably the banking, defense, and energy sectors. In 2016, European farmers held protests in Brussels, demanding an end to the sanctions and blaming the EU for the Russian counter measures (Emmott and Baczynska 2016; Hovet and Fenton 2014; Schnechner and Marson 2014). Russia is an important business partner for many European enterprises. Rosneft, the largest Russian oil company and one of the targets of the Western sanctions, is partly owned by BP. Other European energy corporations share joint ventures and exploration projects with Russian companies (Marioni 2015, 21). The German conglomerate Siemens has been accused of bypassing the sanctions by delivering gas turbines for one of the power plants on Crimea, later claiming that the turbines would be used elsewhere in Russia and thus were not affected by the sanctions (Zverev and Stolyarov 2016). All in all, the discontent with the European economic sanctions has been growing inside Moscow’s loyal European friends, while the pressure from beyond the realm of politics is rising. Still, so far even the most outspoken critics in Brussels have refrained from sabotaging the common approach by vetoing it.

The third category consists of Moscow’s European friends and partners. This group includes member states such as Bulgaria and Slovakia who, like Hungary, are heavily dependent on Russian energy and were reluctant to go along with the sanctions in the first place (Croft 2014; Santa and Fioretti 2014). The Slovakian prime minister labelled them as ‘meaningless and counterproductive’ (Fico 2014). Austria has also been voicing its support for ending the sanctions and has continued to focus on maintaining bilateral relations with Moscow (ORF 2016j; ORF 2016k; Szeptycki 2014, 24-25). The most notable members of this group are France and Germany. As a nuclear power, France is far less dependent on Russian energy imports than Germany or the EU’s Easter European members. As Paris does not have a deep economic relationship with Moscow, tensions between Russia and France grew over Syria and Ukraine under the Hollande presidency. For the most part though, the French government has held its focus on the Mediterranean area and does not have a real Russia policy. Recently, voices within the government have also started to question the ongoing punishment of
Moscow. Internal trends indicate that the French will vote for a president that is less critical of Russia in the upcoming election, thus making it likely that France’s focus on Russia will be even further reduced this spring (Gebauer et al. 2016; RFERF 2016; Szabo 2015, 120-121). Germany is now leading the sanction campaign against Russia. Initially, however, Berlin was reluctant to launch punitive measure as well. It was only after flight MH17 was shot down that the German government changed its tone. The incident had forced Berlin’s hand to condemn the Russian involvement (Croft 2015; Kirschbaum 2014; Pancevski 2014). Yet, both, France and Germany, remained very careful not to go too far in their efforts to demonstrate European resolve and punish Moscow. Harsh rhetoric was followed up with relatively soft consequences (Szeptycki 2014, 24-25).

These three groups have been the basis for Europe’s internal division throughout the conflict in Ukraine. Sanctions are rarely a useful way to alter the foreign policy behavior of a rivalling state, and they have not managed to change Moscow’s course in Eastern Ukraine to date, nor were they intended to. Any sanctions that would have truly hurt Russia would also have caused a significantly more severe backlash for Europe, while straining the strategically and economically important relationship with Moscow even further. Yet, despite the decreasing internal support, the sanction regime lingers on. History has shown that ending unsuccessful sanctions is always difficult. Since the behavior that triggered them has not been altered, there is no logical justification to end the approach. Often, a solution to this problem is only provided by a renewal of government, either in the country that is maintaining the sanctions, or in the target nation, or both (Biersteker and Bergeijk 2015, 28). In the case of the EU, the punitive approach is mostly a fill-in for an actual common Russia policy. Removing it would reveal that there is no common approach on how to treat with Moscow. The relationship between Europe and Russia is both complex and multidimensional. Russia is not just any neighbor, but a vital provider for the EU’s energy security and at the same time a major security threat for many EU member states. The relationship between each European country and Russia is shaped by the unchangeable realities of geography and geopolitical considerations. For the UK, much like for the US, geostrategic rivalry is the primary point of consideration. For the Baltic States and Scandinavia, Russia is the most substantial threat to national security. Western Europe is seeking a balance of economic cooperation and security guarantees. Meanwhile, the most important and most diverse relationship is arguably the one between Germany and Russia, from both, a historical and a contemporary perspective.

While Moscow and Washington are engulfed in geopolitical strategy, Germany is a geoeconomic power. Berlin maintains considerable military forces, its defense budget being among the top ten globally, but its history has compelled it to maintain the image of a civilian power and to promote morality in international politics. Germany has become the most successful export economy in the
world, its export volume being only outmatched by the US and China despite the relatively small German population size. In the post-Cold War era, geoeconomics has replaced geopolitics in many areas, a trend that has been accelerated by globalization. While the conflict in Ukraine has once more demonstrated that military power still matters, the global competition between great powers has long been fought with economic performance and trade relations. The US tried to assert its superpower status by fighting an overly aggressive and militaristic campaign against global terrorism and its supposed enablers, but this has only caused Washington to start falling behind faster. Germany has been using its economic force to project influence instead of the traditional means of power for some time now (Evans 2011; Michaels and Blackstone 2013; Szabo 2015, 4-5, 8-9, 83-85). The characteristics of geoeconomic powers include; the definition of national interests in economic terms, a dominant role of business interests in the generation of foreign policy, favoring the promotion of economic relations over promoting human rights and democracy, and the use of economic power as a primary foreign policy tool (Baru 2012; Blackwill 2016; Szabo 2015, 137-138). Germany matches this definition very well.

Berlin may talk about human rights violations, but at the same time the German arms industry has provided tanks and other military hardware to Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, and Libya. German corporations apparently even enabled the chemical weapons program of Syria by providing the necessary materials. German companies have been selling water cannons and additional anti riot equipment to the Middle East and, while criticizing the American gun culture, Germany is a major exporter of firearms to the US. For a geoeconomic power, democratic standards, human rights, and social conditions are all secondary to economic interest. Geoeconomics is thus a form of economic realism. In Germany, defense cutbacks have forced the arms industry to explore new markets. In 2010, Germany was the third biggest arms exporter, behind only the US and Russia. Since then, China and France have caught up, but Germany remains within the top five (Latsch, Schmid and Wiegrefe 2015; Norton-Taylor 2016; Szabo 2015, 8-9, 93-95, 102-103). The German business sector is thinking globally and, in doing so, pushes German foreign policy accordingly. Exports within the EU have been falling while exports to China are on the rise, and on many occasions business interest have seemed more important to Berlin than its Western alliances. Merkel is known for preferring the company of China and, at least before the escalation in Ukraine, Russia over that of the US at UN meetings (Stephens 2011; Szabo 2015, 3, 6). Germany may have become a major pillar of the European cause, yet, historically speaking, it is not a traditional Western country, but rather a nation that it is situated between East and West. This fact still reflects upon the German identity of today. Due to the globalization of economics, the German export focus is even less limited. Hence, Western observers have been wondering whether Germany is really as much of an integrated Western power as is commonly assumed (Cogan 2014; MSR 2015, 10). While Germany’s role as a geoeconomic force can
be a cause for irritation among its Western allies, it makes it a more attractive partner for Russia, which much prefers bilateral economic relations over dealing with the EU in the first place, and especially with countries that show no ambition to challenge it on a geopolitical level.

The post-Cold War relationship between Russia and Germany has generally been positive and mutually reinforcing. Economically speaking, Russia, being rich in resources but poor in technology, perfectly complements the highly technologized German economy, which in turn is dependent on resource imports. Russia's large and untapped natural resources presented many lucrative business opportunities for Germany's industries and Russia became a highly valuable export market for German manufactured goods. The same pattern worked during Soviet times and it has continued to work afterwards. Instead of pressuring Moscow to address its democratic deficit, Berlin chose to engage in a modernization partnership with Russia, designed to modernize the country through trade and economic interdependence. With over six thousand German companies operating in Russia, economic ties became a much more important link to Russia than Berlin's diplomatic channels (Szabo 2015, 15-16, 25, 61-62). On a cultural and political level, the fact that the German people mostly credited Gorbachev, rather than Reagan, for ending the Cold War strongly benefitted Russia's image within Germany, making cooperation much easier and publically accepted. German democracy is more open and flexible towards other political systems, even those that feature traits of authoritarianism. The American idea of promoting democracy is not part of the German society. Berlin has put its emphasis on positive freedom, i.e. the fact that the Russian people enjoy today much more freedoms than ever before. US attempts to spread its own political template, using violence when necessary, has pushed the German people away from the US and further confirmed them in their distinctively non-American way. When Germany supported the initial NATO enlargement, it insisted on the foundation of a NATO-Russia Council in order to include Moscow. Likewise, when President Bush surprised the NATO Bucharest Summit of 2008 by proposing to invite Albania, Croatia, and Macedonia to join the alliance, at the same time suggesting to offer a Membership Action Plan to Ukraine and Georgia, Germany strongly resisted and criticized the US approach as an unnecessary provocation towards Moscow. In the wake of the war in Iraq, former Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, who had strongly supported the arms buildup against the USSR during his time in office, stated that the US has become a greater threat to world peace than Russia (Erlanger 2008; BBC 2008; Szabo 2015, 11-15, 31-32, 45; Wolf 2007). The aggressive foreign policy of the Bush administration managed to bring Berlin and Moscow closer together than ever before and marked the high point in their post-Soviet relations.

Ties between Germany and Russia profited from the close personal friendship between Putin and former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder. The two were known for exchanging valuable gifts and celebrating their birthdays together, something they have continued to do despite the conflict in
Ukraine. Thanks to Putin, Schröder was allowed to adopt two Russian girls. After his political career ended, Schröder took over a key executive position in a Gazprom dominated consortium and later became the chairman of the supervisory committee of the Nord Stream AG, as well as the chairman of the board of the Nord Stream 2 AG. In 2004, Schröder famously stated that Putin was a ‘flawless democrat’. He defended the statement on multiple occasions, even after the harshly criticized 2012 presidential elections that concluded the Putin-Medvedev charade. Concurrently, Schröder was openly critical of President Bush and formed a coalition against the war in Iraq with France and Russia (FAZ 2012, Spiegel 2006; Szabo 2015, 2, 26-37, 71-76; Tass 2016c; Welt 2012; Zeit 2014). Thus, under Schröder, Germany clearly shifted away from the transatlantic alliance and towards a close partnership with Moscow.

After Schröder lost his re-election in 2005, Frank Steinmeier, his chief aid, became foreign minister under the new Merkel government and largely continued the politics of the Schröder administration. Yet, since the change in Berlin the German approach to Russia has become more sober on both sides. In Moscow, Putin no longer offered warm embraces and instead brought his Labradors with him when meeting Merkel, knowing that she is afraid of dogs. Merkel, being a realist who understands the high importance of Russia for Germany, did not fail to build on the strong partnership developed under her predecessor. In 2010, she travelled to Russia with a delegation of the most influential German businessmen and representatives of key corporations. Human rights were discussed only on the sidelines. The declared goal was to do business (Evans 2014; Hounshell 2007; Shevtsova 2015; Szabo 2015, 1-2, 37-39). Even though the special relationship between Berlin and Moscow took some blows during the Russian-Ukrainian gas wars, the war in Georgia, and Putin’s return to presidency, there was no prominent shift in Germany’s Russia policy. After the murder of Russian activist Natalia Estemirova, Berlin announced that it would not disturb the Russian investigations. When Washington condemned the Russian parliamentary elections of 2011, Berlin instead stressed the need for patience. In 2013, there was still talk about a strategic partnership (Szabo 2015, 29-30, 39-42; Westerwelle 2013; Westerwelle 2013b). Even when Russia started violating the territorial integrity of Ukraine, the German government tried to maintain its geoeconomically driven soft approach. Berlin’s rhetoric only became decisively more hostile after the MH17 incident. This forced the German government to demonstrate resolve, and Berlin reacted by uniting the EU behind its own sanctioning campaign.

During the crisis in Ukraine, Berlin emerged as the key actor in shaping the Western approach. Merkel stood at the helm of the mediation process and the White House left the diplomatic efforts in her hands. Without Germany backing the sanctions, the entire penalty regime would not carry much weight, and the US would not have been able to go very far on its own. However, the change in tone
towards Moscow was answered with upheaval from within the government, Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel calling the measures destabilizing and part of a Western effort to weaken the Russian rival, think tanks, and most notably the business sector, which underscored the importance of Russia as a vital partner (Szabo 2015, 47, 55-58, 129; Tanquintic-Misa 2015). There are several pro-Russian lobbies operating in Germany, the Ost-Ausschuss der Deutschen Wirtschaft (OA) being the most important one. Klaus Mangold, former OA chairman and a key figure in German-Russian relations, expresses the position of the OA by calling for the continuous integration of Russia into the economic and financial networks of the West as well as a continuation of a close modernization partnership and the expansion of the strategic partnership between Berlin and Moscow (IWB 2016; Szabo 2015, 50). Likewise, the current OA chairman expressed his hopes that a new US presidency would re-establish dialogue with Moscow and return to a trustful working relationship (Büchele 2016). The German business world clearly has a decisively more positive perception of Russia than the general population.

When Yanukovych announced his decision not to sign the association agreement, because he could not risk Moscow's consequences for his country, it was met with disbelieve in Germany. No one had considered that Russia might not go along, even though the Russian government had voiced its outrage over the integration efforts repeatedly. The developments in Eastern Ukraine caused a split within the German society. On the one side, the majority of the media and politicians had expressed their support for the Euromaidan movement and now accused Russia of violating Ukraine’s sovereignty. The other side, which included many voices from the German industry and business sector, understood the conflict as a reaction of Moscow to Western violations of its core security interests. Due to a lack of professionalism among observers of Eastern European politics, this second group was soon labelled as 'Russlandversteher' or 'Putinversteher', a pejorative term for members of the media and the elite who expressed understanding for Russia’s motivations, while Putin himself was increasingly demonized. This highlighted the disturbing level of prejudice and one-sidedness throughout the media (Belov 2015, 6,9-10; Cohen 2016; Steinsdorff 2015, 3-4). The German society was shocked by Russia’s actions and the majority of Germans now considers Russia to be main aggressor behind the crisis in Ukraine. At the same time, Moscow was irritated at the German reaction. It had expected a better understanding of Russia’s perspective, as opposed to the sharp condemnation and the sanction regime. This signaled a lack of respect for the deep partnership between Germany and Russia (Belov 2015, 7; Petersen 2016, 3). However, the damage to the closely tied partnership should not be overstated. In 2016, an OA delegation went to Moscow to meet Putin personally and discuss business. Political rapprochement will have to wait until Berlin can count on public support to abandon its current course (Dempsey 2016). The Kremlin knows that economic interests will eventually prevail over moral dilemmas and political criticism (Szabo 2015, 43). Both,
geopolitics and geoeconomics, dictate the importance of a well-performing German-Russian partnership.

In summary, the European approach to the crisis in Ukraine was primarily designed to create unity, not for the sake of Ukraine but to fill in for the lack of a common Russia policy and to conceal the inability of the EU to work together on key issues, such as crisis management and security policy. Due to the largely divergent national interests of the various European states, unity had to be created artificially. This artificial construct is now in serious danger of breaking apart, Germany being the only thing holding the common approach together. The nature of Germany, being an economic power, makes it unlikely that internal support for the punitive measures will be upheld for long. Normality is likely to return to the German-Russian relationship sooner rather than later. As Mearsheimer has pointed out, Ukraine is not considered by the EU to be of major geopolitical interest (2014, 12). Kiev is becoming less of an attractive partner, now that the initial euphoria for the Euromaidan, as well as the hope to revitalize the European cause, have made way for a protracted military conflict that continuous to strain the relationship between Europe and Russia. It is highly questionable whether the EU would have pursued a similar approach to the association agreement if Brussels would have fully realized the potential level of retaliation from Moscow. The EU is, after all, first and foremost and economic organization, incapable of dealing with the geopolitical reality of global politics.

7 Beyond Ukraine

7.1 New Frontlines in a Global Conflict

The crisis in Ukraine is the direct consequence of a global power struggle that has become the defining feature of contemporary international politics. This geopolitical conflict is being fought on multiple fronts throughout the globe. In order to gain an understanding of its full scale, it is therefore necessary to move beyond the borders of Ukraine and even Europe. It has now been over three years since the Euromaidan revolution and the ensuing chaos have upset the global order of the post-Cold War era. In that time, the geopolitical power constellation has experienced several new changes. The uniting factor is an even more assertive Russia, which has taken up the initiative and has concluded its transformation from a passive geopolitical circumstance to a proactive geostrategic player.
After the war in Ukraine shook the European security order to its basic foundations, the Russian government did no wait long to startle international politics again. In September 2015, President Putin ordered a Russian military intervention in Syria, consisting mainly of air strikes and designed to support the struggling regime of Bashar al-Assad against Western-backed rebels and terrorist factions. The US had already started to proceed against the Syrian government in early 2011, denouncing its legitimacy and launching covert CIA operations designed to arm and train various rebel groups from the Syrian-Turkish border (Hosenball 2012; Londoño and Miller 2013; Schmitt 2012; Solomon and Malas 2012). From 2014 onwards, Washington began actively combating IS forces on Syrian territory, later being joined by France, the UK, and several regional forces, using air strikes and SOF units. This was condemned by the Assad regime as violating Syria's sovereignty (AFP-JIJ 2016; Irish and Vidalon 2015; Rawlinson 2016). Meanwhile, Moscow had been following a diplomatic approach. Together with China, it had been vetoing every UN resolution that could have been interpreted as allowing an external military intervention in Syria (Casula 2016, 6; Mangott 2016d). The Russian government had become very weary since the Western destabilization of Libya. Putin himself stated that 'No one should be allowed to employ the Libyan scenario in Syria' (2012). In 2015, the civil war in Syria had long become the next major geopolitical flashpoint. Yet, Moscow's engagement changed the game. Unlike the US, Russia had been formally requested to assist Syria by the Assad regime, supplying the Kremlin with the upper hands in terms of legal justification.

Thanks to Russian support, the struggling Syrian government managed to turn the tide in its favor and eventually forced Washington to give up on its own approach. The initially declared goal was to destroy IS-related targets, however, the Russian government soon admitted that it was targeting all anti-Assad forces, including rebels backed by the US, Turkey, and, more indirectly, also Saudi Arabia and Qatar. This did not come as a surprise, considering that Moscow had long been dismissing the Western idea of a 'moderate opposition' in the civil war (Arkhipov, Kravchenko and Meyer 2015; Shaheen et al. 2015). Moscow and Damascus are linked by a long-term military cooperation that dates back far into the Cold War era. However, the fate of the Assad regime, which is considered to be a friendly partner instead of a true ally, is not the primary objective in Russia's Syria policy (Klein 2016, 2; Mangott 2016d). Instead, the Kremlin has been following its own agenda, comprising a series of regional and geopolitical goals. The Syria campaign has surprised Western observers once more with the deployable strength of the Russian military, demonstrating to the world that the ongoing reformation process has already increased the effectiveness of Russia's armed forces considerably. Syria marked the first time that post-Soviet Russia had sent its military beyond the borders of the former USSR, proving that Moscow was capable of conducting out-of-area operations, despite its ongoing military commitments in Ukraine and at the Russian border to Europe. The intervention in Syria offered an opportunity to test the new military hardware and
command structures in the field. This test was a success and further increased the proficiency of the armed forces. Moreover, Moscow has furthered its strategic interests in the region, expanding its military presence in Tartus, where Russia has been operating a naval base since 1971, and the air force base in Latika, underlining its return to the Middle East as a global player. The operation has strongly improved the bargaining positions of Damascus as well as Moscow. As in Ukraine, Russia has changed the facts on the ground and thereby forced the West to accept it as an integral part of any future solution (Casula 2016, 6, 9-10; Klein 2016, 2-4; Mangott 2016d). The Kremlin has again forced the West to recognize its great power status. Aside from security concerns regarding the stability of a post-Assad regime, as well as its position towards Russia, Moscow's main ambition was to prevent another Libya scenario by creating a military footprint on the ground before Washington and its allies could beat Russia to it. This was possible since Russia's presence was welcomed by Syrian regime, while the West was not. By acting decisively, and successfully, Moscow thwarted the US ambitions in the region and at the same time made the US government look weak and indecisive.

In March 2016, Putin surprised the West again by announcing the withdrawal of the main Russian military forces in Syria, stating that the strategic objectives had been accomplished. This was a political maneuver that demonstrated the increasing dexterity of Russian foreign policy. No deadline was given and at the same time it was announced that both of Russia's military bases in Syria would remain fully operational, as well as heavily protected. Russia would continue to provide Damascus with equipment, training, and military support, leaving considerable air strike capabilities in Syria. Moscow turned its military success into a diplomatic victory, signaling to the West that Russia was capable of toning down its military campaign and focus on a more political approach. This also meant that the infrastructure, necessary to redeploy large Russian forces, remained in place. The initial partial withdrawal was soon reversed when fighting re-intensified. In December, following a ceasefire agreement brokered by Russia and Turkey, the Kremlin again announced a reduction of its forces in Syria. This time, the situation seems to be stable enough for Moscow to go through with it (Dyomkin 2016; Kozhanov 2016; Mangott 2016d; McDermott 2016; Slim 2016; Wintour 2017). Russia's military adventure in Syria has been a definite geopolitical success. Not only did Moscow manage to beat Washington in its own playing field, but its did so without alienating any allies or breaking international law. Thereby, the Russian government put into question the image it gained in the wake of the conflict in Ukraine, now presenting itself as morally superior to the US, and the West in general. Syria has been used to demonstrate Moscow's military and diplomatic capabilities. This approach complements the Kremlin's much more extensive unconventional efforts.

When Russia's actions in Ukraine had been met with outrage and punishment by the West, the Kremlin decided to move the newly inflamed East-West conflict to a new level. Moscow took many
components of its hybrid warfare approach in Ukraine and used them to open a second front, aimed directly at Europe and the US. Russia’s weapons of choice were once more propaganda, misinformation, and cyber warfare. The goal has been to directly affect the Western population and to erode trust in the EU, NATO, Western mainstream media, and even democracy itself. The overarching strategy is to negate the accusations made against Moscow by turning the tables and highlighting the fact that Western governments also violate their core values of democracy, freedom, transparency, and justice, thereby undermining their credibility (Crowle 2016; MacFarquhar 2016; Nelson, Orttung and Livshen 2016, 7, 13; Spahn 2016, 3). In this context, the term active measures has made a reappearance. Originally conceptualized by the Soviet intelligence apparatus, active measures are tools of political warfare that are designed to subvert a target country’s ability to generate public support (Kragh and Åsberg 2017; Polyakova 2016, 3). During the Cold War, the USSR would target Western countries with disinformation by directing leaked or falsified information to foreign newspapers, in the expectation that the stories would eventually spread and be picked up by Western media outlets (MacFarquhar 2016). Contemporary Russia has developed far more efficient ways of sabotaging its adversaries.

The Euromaidan movement demonstrated to the Kremlin that its ability to spread its own voice abroad was very limited. Therefore, in December 2013, President Putin signed a decree to increase the efficiency of the Russian state media. This meant rebuilding the international news agency RIA Novosti, which had been founded during the Second World War and, until then, was the most independent state-owned outlet, into the more controllable Rossiya Segodnya. In 2014, Rossiya Segodnya launched the multi-lingual news platform Sputnik. Additionally, the Russian government had already started to invest into additional foreign language media projects long before the conflict in Ukraine. In 2005, the international television network RT started broadcasting in English, and has since been supplemented with several sub-channels in German, Arabic, French, and Spanish. RT has become the most important international news outlet for the Russian government, receiving the largest financial backing (Benyumov 2016; Nelson, Orttung and Livshen 2016, 5-6; Spahn 2016, 2; Stratievski 2016, 14). RT and Sputnik are both known for their heavy pro-Kremlin bias. In the case of RT, a series of incidents have demonstrated that its main purpose is that of a propaganda tool. Several journalists have spoken out about being ordered to support Russian foreign policy in their reports while discrediting the West, in particular over the conflict in Ukraine (Gray 2014; Krishnan 2014; Martin 2014; Plunkett 2014). The obvious bias in RT’s reporting over the crisis has made it clear that the promoted self-image as an alternative media outlet does not correspond with its practices.

The appeal of RT, and the Russian international media in general, has been the fact that it confronts issues that are being ignored by the Western mainstream media. Due to the heavy use of the internet, partnerships with iconic figures such as WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, and the
discussion of popular conspiracy theories, RT has managed to establish itself as a credible alternative media source. Despite being funded by the Kremlin, it managed to present itself as an independent media outlet that was not afraid to talk about the things that the Western media blocked out (Nelson, Orttung and Livshen 2016, 10, 13; Snegovaya 2015, 18; Spahn 2016, 3; Stratievski 2016, 14). This image has been damaged considerably since the Russian interference in Ukraine started. During the crisis, the rising degree of misinformation and one-sided coverage became obvious, even though a lot of it was repeated by the Western mainstream media. RT’s message was that the West is the aggressor and Russia the victim (Nelson, Orttung and Livshen 2016, 5; Snegovaya 2015, 19). This message was conveyed to the Western public via ‘strategic messaging’ for the Russian government, as labelled by the US intelligence community (ICA 2017, 7). The same approach has been applied ever since, even though the message has slightly changed.

Today, selective coverage of news and discussion topics is used to sustain the narrative that the West is disunited and failing. Broadcasts are focused on stories that underline Western double standards and inconsistencies with Western values. Prominent examples include; the protests against the European Central Bank, ethnic tensions and police violence in the US, the European refugee crisis, and the EU’s inability to cope with the current challenges of the international system. Credibility and impact are increased by frequent appearances of interview partners in support of Russian foreign policy, such as OA representatives in Germany, and by targeting Russian speaking diasporas (Nelson, Orttung and Livshen 2016, 10; Spahn 2016, 3; Stratievski 2016, 15). Another major objective of Moscow’s international media platforms is to promote the idea of a globally reasserted Russia. For example, when President Obama labelled Russia as a major military power, while strongly condemning its behaviour in Ukraine and Syria, RT build its news coverage around the fact that the US president had admitted to the strength of Russia’s military, promoting the idea that Russia had become more respected globally (RT 2016; Shinkman 2016). In general, Russia’s superiority to the US is a common topic which is constantly being promoted via reports and social media posts like 'US "shocked" by Russian military might in Syria' and 'Wake up, Europe: Russia is not the enemy' (Cunningham 2015). Aside from targeting Western governments, RT has been used to rally support for the Assad regime in Syria and to launch a media war against Ankara after the shoot-down of a Russian fighter jet at the Syrian-Turkish border, focusing on the Turkish support for terrorism and accusing Ankara of having downed the Russian plane in order to protect its oil trading business with the IS (Butter 2015; Nelson, Orttung and Livshen 2016, 9). Regardless the topic, Moscow’s international media outlets are always aligned with the Russian government. Moscow’s political elite is also an essential part of the effort to further disunity within the West, routinely criticizing US hegemonial ambitions and pointing out that, while NATO has long outlived its purpose, it is now actively creating new enemies (Lavrov 2015b; Patrushev 2016).
Another core feature of Moscow’s strategy in the West, and primarily in Europe, is creating national elite networks of experts and partners, as well as political parties and individuals, that act in support of the Russian leadership. In 2016, the Atlantic Council, a Washington-based think tank, released a report titled ‘The Kremlin's Trojan Horses’, analyzing the influence of these networks within major EU member countries. The use of 'Trojan Horses' follows the same agenda as Moscow's increasing use of propaganda and misinformation. It is aimed at destabilizing European politics, while creating support for Russia's foreign policy goals from within, and makes use of individual national weaknesses, such as Germany's historic connection to Russia, and the anti-EU sentiments in France (Atlantic Council 2016, 24; Sikorski 2016, 1; Spahn 2016, 2). Moscow's efforts to establish these networks go back to long before the Euromaidan and have encountered increasingly fertile soil since the 2008 financial crisis. In light of growing euroscepticism, the Kremlin has managed to build strong relationships with anti-EU and far-right political parties, most notably the Front Nationale (FN) in France. In 2014, the Russian government granted a 11,7 million USD loan to the FN and its president, Marine Le Pen, was invited to Moscow in 2011, where she was welcomed with high political honors. The FN has become one of Russia's most outspoken supporters and Putin has in turn publicly supported Le Pen (Laruelle 2016, 7, 9-10; MacFarquhar 2016; Polyakova 2016, 5). In Germany, the center of Moscow's efforts to create a public pro-Russian sentiment, recruitment of elites is focused on integrating former politicians into joint energy projects such as Nord Stream on the one hand, and on maintaining close ties with the business sector on the other. Key lobbying institutions such as the OA, the German-Russian Forum, and the Petersburg Dialog, are all strongly connected to the Russian elite and have been active far longer than the recently extended presence of Russian state-controlled media (Meister 2016, 13-14; Spahn 2016, 2-4; Stratievski 2016, 13). While the Atlantic Council's assessment of Moscow's influence in Europe is showing clear signs of political motivation, comparing Russian influence to a cancer that is slowly metastasizing (Polyakova 2016, 6), it is clear that the Kremlin has expanded its efforts to create a pro-Russian support base beyond its near abroad, and into countries were more sophisticated measures than bribery and coercion are required.

While the level of Russian interference still remains relatively low in France and Germany, other countries have been attacked by Moscow's active measures more directly. In Sweden, the national debate on a potential military partnership with NATO was sabotaged by an intense misinformation campaign. Falsified news reports surfaced, claiming that such a partnership would lead to secret nuclear weapons being placed on Swedish soil, that NATO soldiers could commit crimes against the Swedish population without being prosecuted, and that NATO could use Sweden to attack Russia without even needing the approval of the Swedish government. Additionally, a forged letter from the ministry of defense appeared, encouraging a Swedish arms produces to illegally sell weapons to
Ukraine. Russia is the prime suspect in both cases, as well as in a series of cyber operations, mainly in the form of social media troll attacks. The country's ambitions to move closer to NATO have also drawn pro-Russian NGOs to start operating in the country and motivated Sputnik to launch a Swedish language version of itself. Misinformation and propaganda are growing, all spreading a familiar message. The goal is to undermine public support for the E as well as for the US, while presenting NATO as an American instrument for war (Henley 2017; Kragh and Åsberg 2017, 9-12, 17; MacFarquhar 2016). The nature of Moscow's strategy makes it nearly impossible to identify the full extent of its active measures in Sweden, as well as the rest of Europe. Especially in regard to cyber attacks, the true magnitude can only be estimated.

The Russian cyber operation with the most far-reaching consequences is potentially the 2016 US presidential election. According to the US intelligence apparatus, the Russian government ordered an influence campaign on the elections, aimed at undermining the faith of the American people in the democratic process and interfering in the election's outcome in favor for the victorious Trump campaign (ICA 2017, ii). Moscow is accused of being behind the coordinated cyber-attacks against the campaign and email account of Hillary Clinton, as well as the Democratic National Committee, in order to leak information that would hurt her public image and thus reduce her chances of getting elected. This was done while maintaining plausible deniability by using assets that are not directly connected to the Kremlin. The information was leaked during strategic moments, in order to hurt the Clinton campaign the most, and was accompanied by a large scale internet-troll attack. Trump had been endorsed by Russian state-media outlets long before he became a serious candidate and was also the obvious first choice of the Putin administration (Entous, Nakashima and Miller 2016; Lee, Nicholas and Harris 2016). According to Assange, WikiLeaks had not been provided with the stolen emails by the Russian government (Assange 2016; Assange 2017). However, Assange's credibility on the matter is strongly diminished by the fact that he is a well known guest, and even short-time host, at RT.

The US intelligence community has not been able to provide any proof of a Russian involvement, being only able to accuse Moscow with 'high confidence' (ICA 2017, ii). However, findings by a private security company indicate that the same attackers who hacked the Clinton campaign have also been an integral part of the Russian cyber warfare against Ukraine. Apparently, they were able to hack an application used by the Ukrainian military for its artillery targeting to gain the location of Ukrainian artillery units and relay the coordinates to the Russian military. This is supposed to have strongly contributed to the Ukrainian forces losing over 80 percent of their artillery within the first two years of the conflict (Tait 2016). In any case, the public attention was soon diverted from the content of the leaked information and redirected towards the Obama administration condemning Moscow for its interference on the US elections, and retaliating by
issuing sanctions on Russian intelligence services in the US (Gambino, Siddiqui and Walker 2016; Shinkman 2016b). Despite the gravity of the incident, the situation is likely not to deteriorate US-Russian relations further, considering that the current president has shown no ambitions to investigate.

Similar conjectures have surfaced about a Russian involvement behind the referendum that led to the British decision to leave the EU. In both cases, the division within the population was relatively even and thus highly susceptible to external influences and sabotage operations (Watts 2016). The US scandal has caused a large stir within the West and especially Germany, where some of the social media bots, automated and remote controlled accounts on social media platforms, previously used to support the Trump campaign, have already been used in a coordinated attack against Chancellor Merkel. The government has expressed its fears over a potential repetition of the US scenario in the 2017 German elections (Connolly 2016; Knaup and Traufetter 2016; Nicola 2016; Olson 2016). This shows how the Russian leadership has successfully managed to create chaos and fear within Europe and the West. The strategy of active measures has shown many results and, assuming that the assessment of the US intelligence services is correct, has penetrated deeper than any efforts of the USSR, directly affecting the course of Washington according to Moscow’s preferences.

Many aspects of the current Russian approach are of course not new. Propaganda and misinformation have been an essential part of the Soviet political culture, as they have been in American policy. The US governments used false truths to justify the wars in Vietnam and Iraq, among others. However, there still is some considerable novelty in current developments. What has changed is that, where lies were used to contradict the truth, now, truth is simply being created by government leaderships, the media, and political campaigns. The dominant narratives in both, global and national politics, have become disconnected from facts. It is the idea, that a true version of events even exists, that is being challenged. This development has been termed post-truth politics (Dodds 2014, 127-129, 135; Flood 2016b; Hiro 2010, 237; MacFarquhar 2016; Oxford 2016; Roberts 2010; The Economist 2016; Watts and Weisburd 2016). It can partially be attributed to the drastic changes in the way that media is now operating and affecting societies. Yet, it is strongly related to the current power struggles in the global political system. The weaponization of information has shaped the global dynamic between the old power centers and those, emerging and re-emerging forces, that are fighting to change the status quo.
7.2 Permanent Belligerency

The relationship between Russia and the West is at a definite low point, being defined by a level of confrontation and alienation reminiscent of the Cold War era (Frear and Kulesa 2016, 2; Mangott 2016c). Ukraine was the eruption of tensions that had been accumulating since the 1990s, while at the same time it represents a turning point in the dynamic of the East-West relationship. Talks about a new Cold War have been growing on both sites and, although they serve to underline the gravity of current developments, they are misleading. First of all, the geopolitical situation is fundamentally different than it was during the Cold War. The global political system is no longer bipolar, it is fractured and strained by power struggles. Secondly, Russia is considerably weaker than during the Soviet era. And yet, Moscow has learned how to deal with its Western adversaries in a way that is compliant to its strengths as well as the nature of international politics in the 21st century. The current East-West conflict is not ideologically motivated. Instead, it is the symptom of a new global dynamic, defined by geopolitical ambition. Both, the East and the West, refuse to come towards each other. This situation has created a state of permanent belligerency.

By returning to the global stage as an assertive geostrategical player, Moscow has undermined its own efforts to create disunity within the Western world. At the Wales summit, NATO reassumed its mission of Cold War-style containment (Lukjanow 2016, 5). The alliance's leadership has adapted a particularly hostile position towards the Putin administration and is pushing for resolve and unity against Russia. The recently signed accession agreement with Montenegro demonstrated that its doors would remain open. Meanwhile, the US has begun to deploy additional military units to Europe. In early 2015, hundreds of American tanks rolled through Europe, moving along the borders with Russia, and underscoring Washington's security commitment to those states that fear Russian aggression the most. In 2016, this was followed up by another 'tactical march' from Germany to Estonia. This display of force, however, was a purely psychological move, as the American reinforcements were far too small in number to provide any security guarantees. The same is true for NATO's increased high readiness forces, consisting of 5.000 troops that are deployable within two to five days and can be backed up by 40.000 additional soldiers. Russia, on the other hand, is assumed to be able to mobilize 150.000 troops within one day (Agence France Presse 2016g; Benitez 2016, 3; Khodarenok 2016; Mangott and Eder 2014, 22; RFERL 2016; Streihammer 2016). NATO is going as far as it can in deterring Russia without further provoking Moscow too much. While it considers the NATO-Russia Founding Act to be violated by Russia's actions in Ukraine, the alliance is still refraining from stationing permanent forces in Eastern Europe and has not granted any concrete membership prospects to countries such as Georgia and Ukraine (EPRS 2016, 1). This fragile balance may soon
change. All that is needed to upset it is a situation in which one of the two sides goes too far, and there are many opportunities for this to happen.

The resurgence of hostilities between Russia and the West has brought with it some changes in procurements and arms development projects. Moscow has been building new and highly capable stealth submarines as well as next generation multirole stealth jets. A main focus of the ongoing military reforms remains on modernizing the Russian naval forces (Bodner 2016; Majumdar 2017b). All of these capabilities are highly useful in the new hotspots between Russia and Europe, most notably the Baltic Sea. At the same time, the Kremlin has been developing a new nuclear missile, the RS-28 Sarmat, carrying multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicles (MIRV). Each of these features twelve warheads capable of destroying an area the size of France or Texas. The RS-28 is specifically designed to penetrate NATO’s BMD system and can strike anywhere in the US. It is mainly a symbolic project, since no missile defense system would currently, or in the near foreseeable future, be able to repel a full-scale nuclear attack from Russia in the first place. The new missile has been going through a successful testing process and is supposed to become operational within the next few years (Gady 2016; Lockie 2016; Peck 2016; SOFREP 2016). In a related matter, Moscow has threatened to deploy nuclear weapons in Crimea, while it already has nuclear-capable short-range Iscander missiles positioned in Kalinigrad, where they would be able to reach as far as Berlin (EPRS 2016, 2; Solovyov and Sytas 2016). The growing focus on nuclear weapons is a direct consequence of, and counter-provocation to, NATO’s BMD capabilities.

Despite strong protests from Russia, the US and NATO have continued to set up their missile defense capabilities using the Aegis system, capable of destroying ballistic missiles in the earth’s atmosphere. In May 2016, the first BMD facility in Romania became operational. It will be handed over to NATO at the 2017 Warsaw summit. Construction on a second installation began the next day. Further components are the command center in Ramstein, Germany, a radar station in Turkey, and naval based assets in southern Spain. The construction of a facility in Poland is part of the final establishment stage. Meanwhile, Denmark has also offered one of its naval vessels for the European BMD system (O’Dwyer 2016; ORF 2016i; Rodina 2016; US Navy 2016). The Kremlin has responded to this progress by stating that ‘we will be forced to consider putting an end to the threats emerging in relation to Russia's security’ (Putin 2016, Agence France-Presse 2016c). The Russian government has warned on multiple occasions that the BMD project would lead to a renewed arms race. In the end however, the Western BMD capabilities, as well as Russian super nukes, remain symbolic deterrents.

The real confrontation has been taking place via close encounters between Russian and Western military units. Between 2014 and 2016, the number of incidents in Russia’s border regions, and especially around Kalinigrad, has become dangerously high, reaching 1980s levels. Russian long-range bombers and fighter jets have become a common sight over the Baltic Sea and have executed
simulated attacks on NATO countries such as Denmark, as well as US warships. In the Black Sea, Russian aircraft have harassed a US naval vessel. There have also been a number of incidents between Russian jets and civilian airliners of Scandinavian origin, the latter being forced to evade in order to avoid collision. The Russian air force has repeatedly violated the air space of Finland and Estonia, chasing NATO surveillance planes. Civilian ships have been disturbed in Lithuanian waters. Concurrently, Sweden and Finland have conducted hunts against suspected Russian submarines. What reads like a Cold War script has become a precarious new reality (Frear and Raynova 2016; Greber 2015; Lukjanow 2016, 5; MSR 2016, 24, 27). The US military has described Russia's maneuvers and simulated attacks as dangerous, aggressive, and unprofessional (Borger 2016; Holcomb 2016). The possibility of unintentional casualties and consequential escalation is high. Russian aircraft turn off their transponders and thus risk accidental collision with both, military and civilian planes (Cavas 2016; Emmott 2016; Tilghman 2016). The goal of the increasingly hostile Russian military presence is clear. The Russian military is intimidating NATO countries and potential future members, while at the same time Russia's forces are practicing direct military confrontation with NATO forces.

Meanwhile, NATO has been boosting its own training efforts as well. In 2015, the alliance conducted its largest military drill in a decade, involving 36,000 troops and taking place across Italy, Portugal, and Spain (NATO 2015b). A much smaller sized exercise took place in Georgia in 2016, involving troops from the US and UK, and being labelled as an act of destabilization by Moscow, despite its small footprint (Agence FrancePresse 2016e; Army News Service 2016). In the same year, over 30,000 troops were engaged in a military drill in Poland, serving as a prelude to the NATO Warsaw summit. A similar-sized exercise is being planned for 2018. Bulgaria and Romania have also hosted a large-scale NATO maneuver (Khodarenok 2016; Smith 2016). With these new training efforts the alliance has demonstrated resolve, yet NATO’s troop movements are dwarfed by Moscow’s war games. In 2016, the Russian military demonstrated in a series of maneuvers that it could overrun the Baltic States within just three days. This caused Washington to quadruple its military budget for Europe shortly afterwards (EPRS 2016, 2). The Russian military has been exercising in South Ossetia and Abkhazia as well, while the Baltics and Black Sea fleets have been conducting maneuvers near Kaliningrad and Crimea. Additionally, between 2013 and 2015 alone Russia conducted close to twenty large-scale snap exercises, in some cases involving up to 100,000 troops. Many of the exercises simulated nuclear attacks on NATO countries (EPRS 2016, 2; Holcomb 2016). The growing tensions have rocked the most engrained perceptions of security throughout Europe.

Even traditionally non-aligned and neutral states, such as Sweden and Finland, which is known for its good relations with Moscow, are now talking about joining NATO. Together with the rest of Scandinavia, and the Baltics, they have gratefully accepted Washington’s offer on establishing
deeper defense cooperation, and have ask for a stronger NATO presence on their soil (MSR 2016, 24; O'Dwyer 2016b). Many indicators point to the Baltic States as the most likely scene for the next geopolitical flashpoint between Russia and the West. Moscow considers the three countries, which hold a significant Russian-speaking population, to be part of its natural sphere of influence and has already started using active measures to sabotage internal unity and support for the alignment with the West. Future Russian operations to recover more 'lost ground' seem likely according to several assessments, suggesting that the US military has five years or less to prepare for a military confrontation with Russia (Bērziņš 2014, 7; Shirreff 2016, 6; Thompson 2016). Moscow is actively fueling this fear by criticizing the violation of minority rights, indicating a build-up to eventually use the protection of ethnic Russians as a pretext. Foreign Minister Lavrov has accused Lithuania of being Russophobic. Furthermore, there have been cyber attacks and intelligence operations against the Lithuanian government. Latvia has banned Russian-state media from broadcasting, accusing it of provoking ethnic hatred. The government of Estonia has also accused Russia of expanding its destabilization efforts (Holcomb 2106; Mangott 2014b). At the same time, the Kremlin has issued threats against Sweden. Lavrov underscored that, from Moscow’s perspective, there is a fundamental difference between heaving a neutral state or a NATO member as a neighbor and made it clear that if Sweden would join NATO, Russia would be forced to react accordingly (Lavrov 2016). There is already growing talk about the danger of a new Iron Curtain forming up. However, many experts doubt that NATO could react adequately to Russia’s next hybrid war, or even defend the Baltics effectively. The question is how the alliance would respond to a scenario where there is not direct military confrontation or armed attack. Moscow could, again, show support for an act of democratic self-determination, while waiting to see whether the economic interests of major European powers would prevail over their commitment to protect the territorial integrity of a smaller rim state. And even if the West would decide to intervene, geopolitically speaking, Russia has the upper hand in the region and would be able to deny US forces entry into the Baltic waters via its bases in Kalinigrad, while seriously limiting US air superiority with its extensive anti-air capabilities (Bērziņš 2014, 8-12; MSR 2016, 24; Thompson 2016). The fear of an impending Russian invasion is omnipresent in the region. Lithuania reintroduced conscriptions in 2015, while Latvia is considering doing the same. In Lithuania, the defense ministry has distributed 30,000 copies of an instruction manual titled 'Guide to Active Resistance' to the population. The manual contains information on how to engage in civil disobedience, strikes, blockades, disinformation operations, as well as cyber attacks, and how to identify Russian weapons and military vehicles in order to spy and report on the enemy after the country is under Russian occupation. Estonia has even gone further in preparing its citizens against Russian aggression, encouraging them to keep firearms at home and establishing a national defense league, which offers training programs and 'military sport' events to volunteers,
teaching them how to become insurgents and make improvised explosives (Adamowski 2016; East 2016; Kramer 2016). Yet, the NATO membership of the Baltic States is very likely to deter Moscow from creating another Ukrainian scenario in the Baltic region (Bērziņš 2014, 8-12; Mangott 2014b). This may change in the course of further deterioration of the relationship between Moscow and the West.

The current security situation in Europe is unrecognizable from only a few years ago. Cold War-style snap exercises, military incidents, and close encounters between Russia and NATO, submarine hunts, and nuclear threat have become the new reality. After two decades of uncertainty, it has now become clear that Russia’s future lies not within the West, but as an independent force that is adamant in pursuing its own geopolitical ambitions. Russia has become a revisionist power, malcontent with its position in the global political system (Mangott 2016c). In 2016, Moscow adopted a new symbol for the defense ministry and the armed forces. The five-pointed star bears an unmistakable resemblance to the red star of the USSR. According to the defense ministry, the new symbol is ‘strongly associated with the traditions and the victories of the Red army’ (TMT 2016). A main ambition of the Russian elite is to return their country to the respected position of great power. The dominant narrative in Moscow’s foreign policy is that global order cannot be maintained without Russia sitting at the same table as the US and all other major representatives of international power. In this view, the Putin regime is backed up by the Russian population. In late 2016, surveys showed 76 percent of the population believe that Russia needs to maintain its position as a superpower, while 56 percent expressed regret for the dissolution of the USSR (Levada 2016; Levada 2016b). Anti-Western, and in particular anti-American sentiments, are growing within the Russian society, a trend that is being strongly encouraged by the Kremlin (Tavernise 2015). For example, a 2016 anti-smoking campaign in Moscow used Obama posters reading ‘Smoking kills more people than Obama, and he kills lots and lots of people’ (Luhn 2016). Small samples like this become important when they represent a larger narrative. After all, geopolitics is just as much about the high politics of war and diplomacy as it is about the effects on everyday life and ordinary people (Dodds 2014, 2). The Kremlin enforces its narrative by isolating the Russian people from outside influences. In 2012, a series of laws were passed that label every organization operating in Russia, while receiving funding from abroad, as foreign agents. This acts as a stigma within Russian society and adds serious bureaucratic challenges, designed to make the work of foreign NGOs difficult if not impossible. Members of Amnesty International found their offices locked one day, heaving been evicted due to alleged rent arrears. Meanwhile, USAID had been expelled from Russia before the law had even come into effect (Kentish 2016; Skibo 2016, 2-3, 6-7; Szabo 2015, 27-28). Internal stability and widespread approval for the Putin regime are likely to continue. Despite the economic modernization
efforts remaining superficial at best, and the clear intention of the regime to maintain the status quo, Russia is gradually recovering from the financial crisis (Deuber and Schwabe 2016, 2, 7). This allows Moscow to focus on international politics and to maintain its geopolitical course.

Thus, the saber-rattling on NATO’s eastern flank will continue. Europe has become captivated by its own narrative of an evil Russian aggressor that will stop at nothing to rob the former Soviet states of their newfound freedom. For the first time in years, military budgets in Europe are rising, boosted by wary governments in Poland, Scandinavia, and the Baltics (Adamowski 2016; O’Dwyer 2016c; Streihammer 2016). When the NATO-Russia Council met in 2016, for the first time after the crisis in Ukraine had taken its course, no agreements were reached, no future meetings scheduled. For the foreseeable future, the permanent tensions between Russia and the West will remain a defining and decisive feature of geopolitics in Europe, as well as the global power dynamic.

8 Conclusions

The conflict in Ukraine remains a cornerstone of contemporary international politics and, most importantly, the relationship between Russia and the West. This analysis has readdressed the core questions of how and why the political crisis turned into a civil war, and a military confrontation with severe international implications, by arguing against the prevailing narratives and in favor of a geopolitical perspective. Applying the analytical concept of geopolitics allows for the conflict to be placed in a broader context and to gain a better understanding regarding its role in larger trends within the global political system. This viewpoint has become increasingly relevant throughout the last decades, as the political reality of the post-Cold War era has made it clear that neither history, nor the importance of geography, have come to an end. The Western model has not developed into mankind’s universal form of social order and government. Instead, after an uncharacteristic period of bipolar order and peace on the European continent, the 21th century marks a return to normality in the dynamic of international politics. This reemerging constellation is shaped by realist practices and geopolitics, as well as geoeconomics, as the determining forces in a system that is defined by a struggle between the established powers and their emerging rivals.

The current situation in Ukraine is the result of a multidimensional crisis. The initial phase of the conflict, the Euromaidan uprising, was a direct consequence of internal power struggles and the
oligarchic nature of the Ukrainian political system. Disguised as a democratic revolution, aimed at aligning Ukraine with Western Europe, it was in fact a political maneuver that constituted the culminating point of a power reshuffle among the divergent elite factions. The Euromaidan demonstrated just how internally fragmented and hollowed out the Ukrainian state had already become, partly because of its unsuccessful transformation into a functioning state after the collapse of the USSR, and partly because of its historic role as a buffer zone between Russia and Europe. During most of its territorial existence, Ukraine has been less of a state and more of a border region. After the Cold War, it gained independence and thereby became a central geopolitical pivot in the post-Soviet space, holding significant strategic interests for both, Russia and the West.

In the second phase of the crisis, external influences turned the chaos within Ukraine into a conflict of geopolitical proportions. Much like the US and Western Europe, Moscow had invested significant efforts into gaining control over Ukraine's future. When, in the end, pro-Western forces had triumphed in the fight over Kiev, Russia seized the moment and intervened on its own behalf. By using a combination of conventional military involvement and elaborate disinformation and propaganda campaigns, as well as other unconventional tactics, Moscow managed to outsmart the new government in Kiev, and its Western supporters, and gained the upper hand on the ground, annexing Crimea and furthering the creation of a protracted conflict in the Donbass region. Meanwhile, the US and its European allies have been heavily involved in the progression of the conflict as well. While Ukraine is a vital factor for Russia's national security, the US has been following its own ambitions there purely out of geostrategic interests. Washington's primary goal has been to spoil Moscow's attempts to enforce its position as the regional hegemon, thereby counteracting its return as a major global power. The EU has been using the crisis to demonstrate resolve and unite the nations of Europe behind a common stand against Russian aggression. Yet, the Western sanction regime has not been able to hide the fact that the EU is unable to produce a real Russia policy, its members following their own goals when dealing with Moscow, while Brussels' sanctions are not intended to seriously hurt Russia or European-Russian relations. Ukraine remains in the midst of this intricate conflict, which has become the defining feature in East-West relations, and is slowly crumbling under the external pressure.

Furthermore, this analysis has looked beyond the crisis in Ukraine in order to complete its contextual placement into the contemporary dynamic of international politics. The escalation in Ukraine is merely one of several current geopolitical flashpoints, which are all part of a larger progression and the transition towards a global system defined by multipolarity. Yet, while being only a single piece in this wide-reaching development, the Ukrainian conflict marks a turning point in global politics. It introduced the world to the return of great power politics and has served as a wake-up call for
Europe, confronting it with the geopolitical reality of the 21st century. The resurgence of geopolitical analysis is relatively new. It reflects the transition from a comparably simple world under the Cold-War bipolarity to the emergence of a considerably more complex multipolar order. In order to recognize the fault lines of global stability, which have been growing since the end of the Cold War, it is crucial for future research to maintain an adequate understanding of the core assumptions and fundamental principles of geopolitics as a reality of international politics.
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