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Historical Roots of the Russo-Ukrainian War

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Introduction

On 24 February 2022, Putin launched the "special military operation" (Putin 2022), presented as "self-defence against the threats" (*ibid.*).

In the speech broadcast on Rossija-24, the Russian president reported Moscow's goals: the protection of "people who have been subjected to bullying and genocide by the Kiev regime for eight years" (*ibid.*) and "the demilitarisation and denazification of Ukraine" (*ibid.*). Putin also reiterated that Russia could not allow Kiev to acquire nuclear weapons and mentioned the "unacceptable […] expansion of the NATO bloc to the East" (*ibid.*).

Since that moment, a local war with global impacts kicks off and diplomatic solutions seem unobtainable.

In general, the reason for this diplomatic standoff lies in the unwillingness of the Russian elite to face a negotiation and the lack of a common ground on which to start working. Peace proposals are also difficult to elaborate given both the absence of clarity of Russian objectives and some Ukrainian needs that go beyond the defence of its territory and its citizens. Moreover, US and Europe (intended both geographically and as the European Union – EU) are linked with different intensity to Moscow and express various political positions, albeit unanimously condemning the aggression.

In addition to contingent problems[1], the deep reasons for the conflict reside in a complex and long-standing intertwining of ethnic, territorial, geopolitical and economic problems, which have increased in the area over the course of history. Explaining and understanding them means providing a diagnosis not only of war, the last violent symptom of a more serious disease, but also and above all of the arcane causes that underlie it. Only the correct diagnosis will allow for adequate therapy. Indeed, the risk is that of not finding the right medicine, but just a palliative that will be able to stop the hostilities temporarily and to return them to the condition of a "frozen conflict" ready to explode again in the near future.

To determine the causes of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, we must therefore return to the long-term history of an area that has always been the victim of its powerful neighbours: Poland, which intends Ukraine as the last frontier of Catholicism, and Russia, which considers the territory the ancestral homeland. Like a barometer,

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[1] Among these problems there are the pro-European positions of Ukraine and its hypothesized annexation to NATO, unwelcome in Moscow, the Donbas, the annexation of Crimea, the question of energy supplies and gas pipelines, as well as broader international scenarios, which also involve Washington, Beijing, and others.

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Ukraine always registered the changing balance of power between its neighbours and, when Poland first joined NATO and then the EU, Kiev found itself in the middle of the West and Moscow.

The following pages reconstruct four salient moments in Ukrainian history, which represent as many fundamental turning points for determining the deep reasons for this war:

1. the birth of the Kievan *Rus'* and Ukrainian entrance in the Tsarist Empire;
2. the creation of various Ukrainian republics at the beginning of 20th century;
3. some problems of the independent Ukraine born with the dissolution of the USSR;
4. finally, the emergence of the reasons for the Euromaidan crisis in 2013-2014.

Each of these phases reveals, with varying intensity, how Ukraine is subject to incessant change in its dimensions, how fragile its identity is and how its independence has always been precarious.

1. Ethnic Groups and Powerful Neighbours: Ukraine from Kievan *Rus'* to the Tsarist Empire

Already inhabited by Sarmatians, Scythians and Goths, the territory of present-day Ukraine was populated in the 6th and 7th centuries a.C. by Slavic populations of the Eastern branch, *i.e.* Ukrainians and Ruthenians, called "little Russians". Their history is closely intertwined with that of the Russians properly so called, or "Great Russians": the first Slavic political structure, the Kievan *Rus'*, took its name from what would become the historical capital of Ukraine. Destined to be the subject of historiographical speculation (Velychenko 1992), Kievan *Rus'* gave rise to an exploited and politicized historical memory, which is still today disputed between the heir nations of that first Slavic State.

The sources of the time describe the Slavs as a heterogeneous group, unable to self-determination. This political disunity, in addition to the flat territory crossed by many rivers, allowed several incursions by foreign populations. According to the *Russian Primary Chronicle* by Nestor, a monk, in 859 the Norsemen conquered the Sarmatian plain. Three years later, the Slavs defeated them but, being unable to create a political and administrative unity, asked the Vikings for the management of the territory. Three noble Varangian[2] brothers, Rurik, Sineus and Truvor, accepted the invitation and settled in the Eastern territory. Upon the death of the last two, Rurik reunited the lands under his control, identifying the city of Novgorod as his capital and giving life to the Nordic dynasty of the Rurikids. A different interpretation of Nestor's writings reports that the Varangian brothers did not arrive in present-day Ukraine, Russia and Belarus called by the local populations, but simply as leaders, who conquered the area taking advantage of the political instability. These two versions have always fuelled the historiographical debate on the ethnicity of the founders of Kievan *Rus'*.

[2] The Scandinavians were known in Europe as Vikings, Normans, Norsemen, or Varangians.

Russian historiography, for example, has always highlighted the importance of the autochthonous Slavic role in the formation of *Rus'*, using it for the nationalization of the myth and for the Pan-Slavism often evoked by the Tsarist Empire.

The life of Kievan *Rus'*, which included the territory of Kiev, Chernigov, Pereiaslav, ended in the 13th century, with the Tatar-Mongol invasion. Several principalities were established, all stemming from what had been a large Slavic state entity and distilling their own distinct histories and cultures over the centuries to come.

Indeed, the decline of the *Rus'* as a unitary State caused the emergence of other centres of local power. Galicia and Volhynia in the Southwest, the territory of Novgorod in the Northwest, and the principality of Vladimir-Suzdal in the Northeast acquired particular political weight. Thus began the process of differentiation, which would lead to the birth of today's three Eastern Slavic ethnic groups: Ukrainians (or Ruthenians or Little Russians) in the Southwest; Belarusians (or White Russians) in the Northwest; Russians (or Great Russians) in the Northeast. The geographical location led the first two groups to have, in the following centuries, deep contacts with Lithuanians and Poles, which the great Russians lacked entirely; the latter instead had relations with Asian peoples, such as the Mongols and their Tatar allies and, later, with the autochthonous populations of Siberia.

Leaving aside the history of the principalities of Novgorod and Vladimir-Suzdal, it is here briefly interesting to recall that after the birth, around 1137, of the two principalities of Volhynia and of Galicia, the prince Roman unified them in 1199. Roman gave life to a dynasty that ruled the principality until 1323, when a Polish prince, Bolesław I of Masovia, ascended the throne.

In 1340, the king of Lithuania, Casimir the Great, took possession of Galicia and Volhynia. This was the first step for a further advance in the Ukraine of the Lithuanians, who drove the Tatars away and granted a certain autonomy to the local lords. The situation changed in 1386 following the dynastic union between Lithuania and Poland. Large landholdings were created and serfdom was introduced. The influence of Polish culture became increasingly strong: it is not a case if the term "Ukrayina" with the meaning of "border region" dates back to this Polish period. The peasants were enslaved to the landowners, so many of them fled to no man's lands, becoming "Cossacks", *i.e.* "adventurers".

During the 16th century, the Dnieper Cossacks colonized the newly occupied lands by organizing themselves into military communities; they placed their centre on the islands of the river and constituted the "Zaporozian Sich" (*i.e.* Cossack society), headed by the "hetman", a sort of sovereign leader elected by the Cossack "Rada" (Council).

In 1569, with the Lublin Agreement, the territory of the Middle Dnieper was incorporated into Poland. To tame the Cossacks, the Poles hired some armed departments at their service, expecting that the others were reduced to peasants subjected to the Polish magnates who conquered the area. The population also found itself divided into three groups of different religious denominations: Catholics of the Latin rite mainly Poles; Uniate Catholics, the Ruthenians; and Orthodox, mostly Cossacks. This sharpened the contrast between Poles and Cossacks.

Between 1635 and 1648, the Cossacks were the protagonists of great revolts, then placing themselves under the protection of Tsarist Russia, to which they were united by the Orthodox faith. In 1648, the Poles were defeated by the hetman Bohdan Khmelnytsky, but the latter, defeated in his turn in June 1651, had to cede the provinces of Chernigov and Braclav. The Cossack Rada, however, did not accept these assignments and continued the fight with the protection of Tsar Alexius I: the Treaty of Pereyaslav, which also recognized the hetmanate on the left bank of the Dnieper, ratified Russian support on 18 June 1654.

However, within a few years, the Russian presence began to seem cumbersome and so, in 1657, Cossacks tried to remove Ukraine from Russian influence, associating Ruthenia with Poland and Lithuania in a political union. The consequence was a Russian-Polish conflict that lasted seven years and ended in January 1667 with the truce of Andrusovo, which divided Ukraine between Poland and Russia: the first received the territories to the right of the Dnieper, the second those on the left, besides the city of Kiev.

The Cossacks of the right bank then asked help to the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, Mehmed IV, who, in 1672, imposed on Poland the Bucaş Treaty: Polish Ukraine came under Turkish influence and the passed to Poland, albeit not in the whole, in 1676, when the Sultan signed the Treaty of Żurawno.

On the left side of the Dnieper, discontent began to spread as well. The modernization of the State undertaken by Peter the Great generated a strong political centralization, which threatened the traditional autonomy of the Cossack hetmanate guaranteed by Pereyaslav Treaty. When, finally, the tsar denied help to Ukraine to fight the Poles, hetman Ivan Mazepa abandoned his devotion to Russia and openly sided with the Swedish ruler Charles XII. On 29 June 1709, in Poltava, the two were defeated. If for Sweden, it was a nefarious stage in the Great Northern War, which would lead to the final defeat in 1718, for Eastern Ukraine, it marked the end of any independence ambitions: it was annexed to the Russian Empire and Catherine the Great abolished the Cossack society in 1775.

Ukraine then came under the rule of St. Petersburg when Poland underwent the second partition in 1793. The elite of the population continued to cultivate a sense of a Ukrainian identity kept alive by underground societies, papers published abroad and cultural activities in the historical and literary field that the tsarist regime strove to eradicate: in 1876, the use of the Ukrainian language was prohibited in teaching and in the press. This measure failed to serve its purpose and, on the contrary, strengthened Ukrainian nationalist pride, subjugated but not defeated by the so-called "Russification".

2. The Lack of Independence: From the February Revolution to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic

A second fundamental historical turning point took place at the beginning of the 20th century. Although the years immediately preceding WWI saw the start of Ukrainian political mobilization, only the collapse of the Russian and Austro-Hungarian em-

pires in 1917-1918 created the conditions for nationalist activism by a part of Ukrainians and brought to light several subjects aspiring to be independent Ukrainian States. This period, however, was extremely chaotic, characterized by revolutions, international and civil wars, and the lack of a strong central authority. Many factions vied for power in what is now Ukraine, and not all factions wanted a separate Ukrainian State. While independence was short-lived, with most of the territory incorporated into the USSR and the rest divided among Poland, Czechoslovakia and Romania, it should also be noted that Ukraine was finally established as a geopolitical and cultural unit, developing a strong collective memory of what might have been experienced and allowing some Ukrainians to claim in 1991 that post-Soviet Ukraine was getting what was taken from it seventy years earlier.

Recalled in national historiography as the "Ukrainian revolution", the events of the period 1917-1920 find their genesis in the broader framework of the Russian Revolutions of February and October.

As known, with the February Revolution the Tsarist Empire found itself with a dual power, divided between the Provisional Government and the Soviets. The territorial unity of the kingdom was opposed by groups and associations of workers and soldiers representing the national interests of individual ethnic groups, who demanded the formation of self-governing and independent States, such as the Ukrainian State and the Crimean Tatar State (Magocsi 2014: 83).

In Ukraine, there was even a "triple power" because Ukrainian nationalists also aspired to leadership. Already on 7 March 1917, activists of the Society of Ukrainian Progressives founded their own institution, the Central Rada. All major Ukrainian political parties sent representatives. They expressed different positions: the League of Ukrainian Autonomists-Federalists advocated strong Ukrainian autonomy throughout within a Russian State, but refused requests to seize large landed estates; the Socialist Revolutionary Party of Ukraine wanted more radical land reform, thus finding strong support among the peasants and managing to become the largest Ukrainian party, only nominally allied with similar revolutionary socialist parties of the Russian Empire; finally, the Social Democratic Labour Party of Ukraine targeted the working class and included younger radicals.

A new season therefore opened for the Ukrainian national movement: it pursued the objectives of national-territorial autonomy and the reorganization of the State in a federalist sense and rejected any solicitation of subordination to the priorities imposed by the war emergency.

Meanwhile, the Central Rada had to begin to reflect on its legitimacy: it was in fact an unelected and unrepresentative body of Ukrainian society. To increase its base, the Assembly organized a First Ukrainian Congress from 17 to 21 April (Reshetar 1952: 49). The assembly adopted a resolution declaring that only national and territorial autonomy would satisfy Ukrainian needs. It was therefore not a question of a declaration of independence and, on 23 June 1917, an expanded Central Rada proclaimed the *First Universal*, so to announce Ukraine national autonomy as part of a federated Russian Republic.

Noting that the Rada was not an elected body, the Provisional Government rejected the Assembly's appeal, which did not clarify the meaning of "autonomy", nor the territorial boundaries. Meanwhile, representatives of national minorities, including Russians, Poles and Jews, received over a quarter of the seats in another expansion of the Central Rada. On 16 July 1917, it styled itself the "supreme organ of revolutionary democracy" (Reshetar 1952: 52-53) and promulgated the *Second Universal*, stating that the final form of Ukrainian "autonomy" would be decided by the Russian Constituent Assembly (Cigliano 2017:417).

In July 1917, the elections for Ukrainian municipal councils brought out the full disruptive force of Russian and Russian-speaking minorities: Russified Eastern Ukraine, with its relatively large working class, gravitated more towards Marxist-oriented parties; in Kiev, anti-Ukrainian groups strongly opposed the introduction of the Ukrainian language in schools (Reshetar 1952: 137).

Increasing the dissatisfaction and intolerance of the population, on 20 November 1917 the Rada promulgated the *Third Universal*, which proclaimed the Ukrainian People's Republic (UPR), made up of the nine provinces of Kiev, Podolia, Volhynia, Chernigov, Kharkiv, Poltava, Yekaterinoslav, Kherson and Taurida (excluding Crimea), and referred the partial annexation of the territories of Kursk, Kholm and Voronezh to future negotiations.

However, the *Third Universal* unleashed the civil war. The Bolsheviks, who had strong support in Eastern Ukraine, refused to accept any idea of a separate Ukraine. In December, they organized a Ukrainian Congress of Soviets, which tried unsuccessfully to overthrow the Central Rada. On 25 December, in Kharkiv, they proclaimed the creation of the Ukrainian Socialist Republic (USR), which would be loyal to Lenin's government. Russian Bolshevik forces, together with pro-Bolshevik Ukrainian forces, marched on Kiev. The Bolshevik detachments, while not large, were well organized and won the support of many Ukrainians because they endorsed a more radical social program.

Meanwhile, on 16 December 1917, the Council of People's Commissars ratified a *Manifesto to the Ukrainian People* with final requests to the Ukrainian Rada: the ultimatum asked, among other things, to renounce any independence aspirations and to stop the disarmament of the Bolshevik regiments in Ukraine.

On 20 December 1917, the Ukrainian General Secretariat, established by the Rada, stressed that the Russian Council of People's Commissars had no right to interfere in the internal affairs of Ukraine, stating that Russian Bolshevik units should realize their national aspirations in Russia, not in Ukraine, and that Ukraine would oppose Bolshevik methods of establishing power.

On 22 January 1918, the Rada hastened to ratify the *Fourth universal*, which declared the country's independence, providing that the UPR would become an independent, free and sovereign State of the Ukrainian people. It expressed his willingness to live in harmony and friendship with all neighbouring countries, but reiterated that none of them could interfere in the life of the independent republic.

On 9 February, the UPR signed a peace treaty with Germans and Austrians. The document recognized Kiev's authority over the nine Ukrainian provinces. The at-

tached secret protocols, however, stipulated that Ukraine would deliver food to the German and Austrian armies. In return, Berlin forced the Bolshevik government engaged in peace talks to recognize the UPR, withdraw from Ukrainian territory, and cease efforts to establish a Ukrainian Soviet government. The Ukrainian Bolsheviks, who had presided over the executions of thousands of "class enemies" in Kiev and elsewhere, withdrew from Ukrainian territory in April 1918. Many of their leaders fled to Russia, where they created the Communist Party (Bolsheviks) of Ukraine.

With German and Austrian assistance, the UPR returned to rule on Ukraine. Despite its struggles against the Bolsheviks, the UPR remained socialist in orientation.

This leftward direction alienated the conservative German military administration in Ukraine, an important patron of the UPR. By April 1918, the Germans took control of the railways, revoked the land tenure decree and introduced martial law. At the same time, the Central Rada signed an agreement with Berlin to supply Germany and Austria-Hungary with, among other things, 1 million tons of grain by the end of July (Reshetar 1952: 119).

It was clear, however, that the Central Rada lacked the means to comply with this agreement. As a backup plan, the Germans made contact with Pavlo Skoropadskyi, a Russian-speaking former tsarist general descended from an 18th-century Cossack hetman. Berlin diplomats discussed with him the possibility of creating a Ukrainian monarchy and offered him the throne. Skoropadskyi accepted and on 29 April 1918, while the Central Rada was adopting the Constitution, the *coup d'état* took place: the conservative Congress of Ukrainian landowners proclaimed Skoropadskyi hetman of Ukraine, without any resistance.

However, the new rule of the hetman was short-lived. German expeditions to seize grain led to peasant rebellions in the countryside; the political opposition consolidated into the Ukrainian National Union, whose leaders formed a Directory with the aim of overthrowing Skoropadskyi. Thousands of peasants volunteered to fight for the Directory, and many of the Hetmanate units, feeling that the situation had changed, deserted. On 14 December 1918, the Germans left Kiev and Skoropadskyi, disguised as a German officer, fled with them.

Meanwhile, parts of Western Ukraine remained spectators of the events just described, because they were still part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Only towards the end of 1918, the authorities offered concessions to the various minority groups of the Empire, pledging, for example, in October 1918, to create a free federation of peoples. On 18 October, Ukrainian deputies of the imperial and provincial parliament, together with representatives of the main political parties, established the Ukrainian National Council in Lviv. On 1 November, few days before the end of the conflict, the National Council of Ukraine declared the establishment of an independent Ukrainian State, the West Ukrainian People's Republic (WUPR).

Poland, which had its own territorial and national aspirations, opposed. The Poles claimed all of Galicia because they were the largest group in major cities, including Lviv. Clashes and riots broke out between Poles and Ukrainians in November, and the Poles forced the fledgling government of Western Ukraine out of Lviv. This conflict

escalated into a full-blown Ukrainian-Polish war, which later developed into the Soviet-Polish war. During the same period, the Ukrainian-populated regions of Bukovina and Transcarpathia were transferred respectively to an enlarged Romanian State and to a new country, Czechoslovakia.

Thanks largely to a relatively liberal political environment under the Austrians, Ukrainian civil society was well organized and unified in the fight against long-time rival Poles. The WUPR had its own national army, the Ukrainian Galician Army, which included former German and Austrian officers and, interestingly, its two commanders-in-chief were former Russian generals.

The WUPR sought support in the East, attempting to join the emerging Ukrainian State in the former tsarist Russian lands. On 22 January 1919, the two Ukrainian States formally united, making the WUPR the Western province of the larger UPR.

Given the violent and complex premises linked to its birth, this State did not immediately have a good chance of survival. In the West, the Ukrainian Galician Army mounted an anti-Polish counter-offensive, but it was unsuccessful.

After all, Poland born in Versailles decided to take advantage of the Russian chaos to settle the old scores of the past: on 14 February 1919, it invaded Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine to recreate a "great Poland".

In this new war phase, the two different geopolitical orientations emerged corresponding to the two main Ukrainian souls, that of the UPR and the WURP. While Western Ukrainians hoped that their compatriots in the East would help them against the Poles, the leaders of the Directory considered the Poles as allies in their battles against the Russian Bolsheviks. The Ukrainian Galician Army engaged alongside the Directory forces for most of 1919, even occupying Kiev in late August. However, haunted by heavy fighting with the Red and White Armies as part of the wider Russian civil war and decimated by deadly typhus epidemics, the Galician army surrendered to the White forces in November. Meanwhile, the Poles, who signed a separate peace with the Ukrainian Directory, advanced further into Western Ukraine, occupied the provinces of Volhynia and Podolia and entered Kiev on 7 May.

Since Kiev had proved incapable of acting effectively on its own, Bolshevik Russia decided to intervene on Ukraine's behalf as well. The Red Army reorganized itself and went on the counteroffensive inflicting heavy defeats on the Polish army, liberating the occupied territories and entering the heart of Poland in the direction of Warsaw. When the fall of the Polish capital seemed imminent and the advance of the Bolshevik troops unstoppable, a Polish counter-offensive led to the defeat of the Soviets at the gates of Warsaw and allowed Poland to regain part of the lost ground. The war ended with a compromise between the parties, negotiated with the support of the League of Nations and sanctioned by on 18 March 1921 the Treaty of Riga, which led to a partition of Belarus and Ukraine between Soviet Russia and Poland.

Ukraine passed to Russia became the Soviet Socialist Republic of Ukraine (SSRU) within the broader structure of the nascent USSR: the independence parenthesis was closed, but it left the ambition to create a new Ukrainian State.

However, the USSR lacked seven million Ukrainians, one of the largest stateless minorities in Europe, who found themselves scattered across a reconstituted Polish State, the new Czechoslovakia and an enlarged Romania.

Meanwhile, in the USSR, Lenin recognized that Russification was not an effective measure and drafted a policy on nationalities that allowed the non-Russian parts of the old tsarist empire under Bolshevik control to be "national in form, socialist in content". The USSR was initially composed of four separate and ethnically defined republics: Russia, Belarus (White Russia), the Transcaucasian Federative Republic (which included Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan), and the Ukrainian Soviet Republic. The latter had its own government (communist, of course) based, until 1934, in Kharkiv, closer to the Russian border than Kiev, and controlled some economic enterprises and cultural and scientific institutions for the development of language and culture Ukrainians. Furthermore, Ukrainian nationality (albeit Soviet citizenship) was recognized and retained the right to secede from the USSR. For a long time this had no consequences, as secession was politically impossible and, at least according to Soviet ideology, unnecessary, as the USSR was a fraternal union of various peoples and pre-existing national differences would gradually disappear under communism. This development, of course, did not happen and Soviet Ukraine was finally able to act on its right to secede in 1991.

3. Independent Ukraine after Soviet Collapse

A third historical turning point is represented by the events linked to Soviet collapse, which had its final phase with the election of Gorbachev.

While engaged in the revival of pure communist ideology with perestroika and glasnost (Gorbaciov 1987: 30), the last Soviet leader had to deal with the first crack in the Soviet system. Perestroika, indeed, also allowing greater autonomy for the Soviet republics, created the conditions for the birth in Vilnius, in October 1988, of the nationalist movement "Sajudis", led by Vytautas Landsbergis, who on 16 February 1989 pronounced himself for the self-determination of the Republic of Lithuania. The elections of the following 26 March led the nationalists to victory, even inducing the Central Committee to accept after a few months a programmatic document, which ratified the "right to economic sovereignty" of the Baltic Republics.

The new course initiated by Gorbachev was emblematically reawakening nationalist sentiments suffocated by the previous Soviet leaders and would soon have a boomerang effect against its creator.

On 8 September 1989, a movement in favour of reforms and perestroika, the "Rukh", was born in Kiev, and on the following 17, about 100,000 Uniates demonstrated in Lviv for the recognition of their Catholic Church, protesting against the forced integration within the orthodox one decided by Stalin in 1946. In the local elections of 4 March 1990, which took place under the new rules of multi-party system, only 239 out of 450 deputies of the *Verchovna Rada* (the Ukrainian Parliament) belonged to the Communist Party: the others were members of the movement for perestroika and other opposition parties.

On 16 July 1990, with 355 votes in favour and 4 against, the Rada approved a declaration ambiguously called "of sovereignty", which claimed the right of Ukraine to have its own army and police and proclaimed the supremacy over its entire territory. The enigmatic nature of the term "sovereignty" used in the document was aggravated by the fact that the thoughts of the Ukrainian government regarding the institutional future of the USSR were not known. Shortly thereafter, on 23 July, Leonid Kravchuk, former Secretary-General of the local Communist Party, was elected president of Ukraine.

Precisely on the institutional question, the Soviet people would have been called with the referendum of the spring 1991: the consultation handed over the favour of the voters to the maintenance of the USSR on condition of its reformation. From that moment, events escalated throughout the USSR.

During the Soviet coup of 19 August 1991, Kiev proclaimed its independence from Moscow and dissolved the Communist Party five days later. At the same time, on 29 August, Ukraine signed an agreement with Russia to maintain the borders of the USSR.

In November, a session of the Council of State addresses the node on the new Soviet State architecture:

> [Yeltsin, president of the Russian republic] Without Ukraine there can be no Union. [Gorbachev, president of the USSR] But the opposite is also true. If we repudiate the Union, we will give the [Ukrainian] separatists a gift. [Yeltsin] Let's wait (Chosroevič 1993: 301; Dunlop 2003).

Time was running out and it was not possible to resolve the issue of the new reformed USSR, an ambiguous term that lent itself to various currents of thought: a sort of "common market" on the model of the first European Economic Community; a British Commonwealth; a real confederation of independent and sovereign States.

In this equivocal context, the referendum was held in Ukraine on 1 December 1991. It was an opportunity to confirm the separatist will: 90% of the voters declared themselves in favour of a divorce from Moscow and elected Kravchuk as president of the Republic. Then, on 8 December, with the presidents of Russia, Yeltsin, and Belarus, Stanislav Shushkevich, Kravchuk himself announced the death of the USSR and the creation of a Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The transition was less painful than in the past, but the future remained uncertain.

Right from the start, serious financial problems afflicted Ukraine: the difficult transition to a market economy, inflation and corruption undermined the economic and, consequently, political foundations of the new State. On 8 October 1992 the Prime Minister, Vitold Fokin, in office since the previous August, was forced to resign, accused of being too cautious in liberalizing the market and of having caused hyperinflation. He was replaced by the pro-Russian Leonid Kuchma, who also resigned the following September. The president then assumed the interim head of government; the parliament fixed in 1994 the calling of the elections for the renewal of both the parliament and the presidency. The communists and their allies (socialists and peasants), especially in the Eastern part of the country, won a third of the seats; the pro-

Western nationalists got about a third, mostly in the Western regions, and the other third went to the independent moderates.

In July 1994, Kuchma won the presidential elections and immediately afterwards, with a decree, granted himself broad executive powers, recognized by the Constitution approved on 28 June 1996. Three years later, he was re-elected.

In November 2000, the "Kuchmagate", or "Tapegate", broke out: a video began to circulate showing Kuchma ordering the kidnapping – which took place months earlier – of the journalist Georgy Gongadze. While not seriously damaging the president's political career, the scandal paved the way for the "Orange Revolution" and brought out with explosive force the division between pro-Western and pro-Russian that would be consumed in the subsequent presidential elections and street demonstrations.

The "Ukraine without Kuchma" movement, which organized large protests, gained new momentum: the opposition clustered around Kuchma's former Prime Minister, Viktor Yushchenko.

Kuchma did not give up, repressed demonstrations and held office until 2005. In April 2003, he identified Viktor Yanukovych, the then Prime Minister, as his potential successor, and introduced a constitutional reform that would have severely curtailed the powers of a future president. Surprisingly, the measure did not pass the scrutiny of the Supreme Council of Ukraine and the 2004 presidential elections resulted in a contest between the authorities and the opposition over the balance of power.

In his electoral campaign, Yushchenko emphasized his role as a "candidate of the people", in opposition to that of the government, counting on a mass mobilization of support through organized public demonstrations, especially in Kiev. On the other hand, Yanukovych relied mainly on a pension increase carried out on the eve of the elections. Funding for this measure came from Russia, which pushed for the creation of a near-monopoly of television coverage for Yanukovych at Yushchenko's expense and the propagation of a false image of the latter as a Western Ukrainian, Nazi sympathizer and NATO supporter. Furthermore, after a secret dinner on 5 September 2004 with the heads of the Security Service of Ukraine, Yushchenko fell seriously ill and moved to Austria for treatment: it was dioxin poisoning, even though government-sponsored media in Kiev reported a self-inflicted disease.

The first electoral round of 31 October 2004 therefore took place in a very tense climate. The second round followed on 21 November: at its end, anticipating a fraud in favour of his opponent, Yushchenko asked his supporters to gather on Independence Square, the well known Maidan Nezalezhnosti. Thus, the "Orange Revolution" began.

Yanukovych's counter-protesters also gathered in Kiev, but they had been brought by train from the East. Meanwhile, the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) published the outcome of the second round vote, in favour of Yanukovych. While Putin congratulated the latter twice, as the first congratulations were sent before the results were announced by the CEC, pro-Yushchenko protesters blocked government buildings.

On the initiative of Polish President Alexander Kwaśniewski, an official EU mission initiated a series of roundtables that brought together the candidates and President Kuchma to negotiate a way out of the deadlock. On 3 December, the Supreme Court of Ukraine recognized the validity of Yushchenko's complaints, stating that the violations committed made impossible to determine the true results, and setting 26 December as the date for the re-run of the second round of the presidential elections. The decision was not appealable.

On 7 December, Kuchma signed the decree removing Yanukovych as Prime Minister and appointed Mykola Azarov as his replacement. The next day, the Supreme Council of Ukraine revoked the CEC and voted a new package of laws with constitutional changes that strengthened the parliament at the expense of the president, introduced the approval of ministers by the Supreme Council of Ukraine, and entrusted responsibility of the Prime Minister and his cabinet to the parliamentary majority rather than exclusively to the president. Unsurprisingly, the agreement was a compromise: such was the extent of the success of the Orange Revolution.

Meanwhile, in the repeat of the second round, on 26 December Yushchenko won.

Yanukovych would arrived at the helm of the country in 2010, in time for the Euromaidan.

Although Ukraine seemed to have finally reached the longed-for independence, it struggled like perhaps no other country born from the dissolution of the USSR to find a satisfactory political, economic and social order. The division between political forces striving for a liberal renewal of the country and those more linked to the collectivist past weighed above all. Such a division had in part also a geographical nature and differentiated a more nostalgic and pro-Russian East from a more reformist and westernizing West. The uncertainties of orientation played in the direction of a social fragmentation and of territorial communities. The formal governing bodies, governed by a largely incompetent or corrupt political class, had little grip on them, with disastrous consequences for the overall trend of the economy, which had been steadily worsening since 1989. Ukraine received some but unequal support from international financial institutions and Western powers, including in recognition of the Ukrainian commitment to decommissioning former Soviet nuclear warheads on its territory.

The disputes with Russia over the possession of the Crimea and the division of the Black Sea fleet also weighed. Already with a referendum held on 21 January 1991, the peninsula obtained the status of "Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of Crimea". In February of the following year, after the dissolution of the USSR and the birth of independent Ukraine, the Rada of Simferopol (*i.e.* the Crimean Rada) declared the birth of the Republic of Crimea, still included in the Ukrainian State but with a strong autonomy. The city of Sevastopol was located within the Republic, but enjoyed the status of a special municipality: this was because the city hosted the Russian Black Sea Fleet. On 5 May 1992, the Crimean Rada approved a new Constitution, as well as a declaration of independence which should have been accepted through a referendum to be held on the following 21 August. In the session of 15 May, the Ukrainian Rada,

based on art.135 of the Constitution – which establishes that the Constitution of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea must be approved by the Ukrainian Parliament – annulled the declaration of the Parliament of Simferopol ordering the cancelation, within a week, of the calling of the referendum. In June 1992, the parties reached a compromise, under which Crimea would remain within Ukraine, but with the status of autonomous republic. Nonetheless, the "Crimean node" was far from a solution.

In May 1994, the Crimean Rada restored the 1992 Constitution. In September 1994, the Parliament and the President of Crimea, Yuri Meshkov, decided to draft a new charter. On 17 March of the following year, the Ukrainian Rada again abolished the May 1992 constitution and suppressed the post of president of Crimea. For this reason, from June to September 1995, President Kuchma ruled Crimea through a presidential decree of direct administration.

In October 1995, the Crimean Parliament adopted a new constitution, which was not recognized by Kiev until April 1996, when significant amendments relating to Crimea's belonging to Ukraine were passed. This generated a further bill for the revision of the October 1995 Constitution, which was ratified in the new version by the Simferopol Rada on 21 October 1998. The text finally found approval, on the following 12 December, by the Verkhovna Rada and it entered into force on 12 January 1999. Crimea was thus able to see its requests partially satisfied: while still included in Ukrainian sovereignty, the republic confirmed its autonomous status, the right to draw up its own budget and direct management of its properties.

Meanwhile, in 1997 Ukraine entered into a twenty-year agreement that allowed the presence of the Russian fleet in Crimea. In 2010, the Russian and Ukrainian parliaments ratified a new agreement that extended the fleet's stay by another 25 years in exchange for a 30% discount on supplies of Russian gas. Conditions radically changed after the fall of Yanukovych and his replacement, following the elections of 25 May 2014, with Petro Poroshenko.

4. Between Russia and the EU: Ukraine and the Euromaidan

The last dramatic stage of the path towards the Russo-Ukrainian war was the Euromaidan. To understand it, the relations between Russia and the EU that developed since 1991 cannot be ignored.

Indeed, with the birth of a new Russia on the ruins of the former USSR, a new and more intense period of contact between Moscow and Brussels began. These relations confirmed the importance attributed by the Kremlin to its relationship with Europe.

It should be reiterated that under the presidency of Yeltsin, Moscow continued to assign relations with Brussels a subordinate role in respect to its relationship with Washington: this orientation was based on the perpetuation of the idea that Russia, despite its serious economic difficulties, remained a superpower and therefore could negotiate on the same level as the US. During those years, the Russian-European dialogue proved that it was able to overcome recurring tensions, mainly due to initiatives by the Russian government, both international and internal, that violated stand-

ards of democratic and responsible behaviour that were formally sanctioned by both parties (violations of human rights, limitations on freedom of the press, repression of minorities). Even the expansion of the EU towards Eastern Europe, the subject of lively debate in Moscow (Dundovich 2004), did not create any obstacles that could compromise the reciprocal relationship (Pons 2003). For their part, Russian leaders also openly showed their desire to accelerate the construction of a "Greater Europe" (*Bolshaya Evropa*) from Lisbon to Vladivostok, an idea also taken up by Vladimir Putin himself at the 2005 EU-Russia summit.

This political line of thought would define an organic and articulated system of relations, meeting the demands of Russians and Europeans to form a strategic partnership. On the Russian side, the awareness that Moscow was dealing with an EU looking for liberation from the condition of being an "economic giant, political dwarf" (Eyskens 1991) contributed to the commitment to Western Europe.

The enhancement of the political and economic relationship also met the aspiration of Brussels, providing a significant contribution to the efforts to cover an important role in the realm of intercontinental relations: Russia, even though in terms not comparable to the type of privileged relations with the US, represented the other "superpower" that could offer the EU significant international collaboration.

In December 1990, during the Rome European Council, some members of the Community expressed their recognition for the importance of initiatives aimed at political and economic reforms in the USSR for the promotion of peace and stability in the continent and in the rest of the world.

To support and facilitate the new political path initiated by Moscow, in July 1991, the 12 EC Member States (MS) founded a program of technical-financial assistance TACIS (*Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States*). It was conceived taking into consideration only one partner, the USSR, but soon afterwards, it collapsed, resulting in the independence of the Baltic States and the creation of twelve independent republics.

It was on that occasion that the EU acknowledged the importance of supporting the drive for reforms following the creation of the new States: their decision to opt for democracy and an economic system leaning towards the free market would mean breaking away from structures and traditions that had consolidated over decades and introducing new legal and administrative mechanisms, as well as new autonomous States.

The TACIS program therefore opened to Russia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan, Moldavia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan and Mongolia, becoming a key instrument for political cooperation between the EU and its partner countries. The first phase concluded on 31 December 1999, but a second body of regulations adopted by the Council on 29 December 1999 renewed the program for the period 2000-2006.

Despite the role played by the TACIS program in supporting the transition of Russia to a legal state and free market economy, the true cornerstone of the Russian-European relations was the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA).

The agreement was signed at the Corfu European Council on 24-25 June 1994 and subsequently ratified by the parties, including Austria, Finland, Sweden, the three EU members that would be joining in 1995. The PCA was implemented on 1 December 1997, upon conclusion of the conflict in Chechnya. The agreement was based on the principles of promoting international peace, security and support for a democratic society founded on political and economic freedom. It also intended to create "economic cooperation of wide scope" (PCA 1997: 18) as part of a political and institution dialogue, which operated based on and was inspired by recommendations for an institutional approach, but concrete commitment by both parties would be necessary to produce results and not just empty declarations based on principles.

In 1997, the Treaty of Amsterdam introduced another instrument used in Russian-European relations: the common strategy. This was not a document with a mere generalised aim, but a precise, binding decision for the EU Council, which mandated its definition to the European Council (Treaty of Amsterdam: 10).

The common strategy was adopted for the first time at the Cologne European Council (2-3 June 1999), to delineate the general framework for the common actions to be taken with regard to the Kremlin.

The specific initiatives pursued by the EU as part of the strategy involved political and security-related dialogue, a dialogue on economic issues, trade and investments, dialogue on energy, the fight against organized crime, and the twinning program. Nevertheless, these actions would have to conform to the PCA framework and to be realized within that agreement.

The PCA would last for 10 years. Upon its expiry in 2007, the new Russian President, Putin, no longer had the intention to proceed with stipulation of a new agreement, and the EU also did not seem capable of offering concrete, shared counterproposals.

Defining an accounting of this agreement, it should be highlighted how, even though the interviews were held regularly, it seems that the instrument was unable to meet its established objectives. An example would be the slaughter occurring between 1-3 September 2004 in the Number 1 School in Beslan, North Ossetia, an autonomous republic in the Caucasia Region of Russia, where a group of rebel fundamental Islamists occupied the school building and kidnapped approximately 1,200 adults and children. Three days later, the Russian special forces raided the building, causing the deaths of about 100 people. A wide range of international observers criticized the management of the crisis by Putin's administration. Initially the EU also debated the Russia response, but it retracted discussion later, affirming that it had been misinterpreted. On the basis of the PCA, which established the possibility to interrogate partners about *domestic jurisdiction*, the Dutch Prime Minster, Jan Peter Balkenende, who was also the President of the European Council at the time, asked Putin to explain what happened and what his actions meant. The other European leaders disassociated themselves from his statement, demonstrating solidarity with Putin and distancing from Brussels.

In the meantime, the EU tried to provide more impulse to the collaboration with Moscow, activating another instrument destined for "foreign policy". During the

European Parliament assembly on 18 December 2002, then President of the European Commission, Romano Prodi, launched the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), developed starting in 2003 to establish privileged relations with countries neighbouring the EU (Alcaro, Comelli 2005), those "sharing everything with the Union but institutions" (Prodi 2004). The ENP was designed on the concept of promoting democracy, liberty, prosperity, security and stability, even though it was conditioned by reciprocal interests in respect to common values, notably democracy, the legal state, human rights, good government, in addition to principles of a market economy and sustainable development.

Evolving after the last expansion of the EU towards the more far-reaching formulation of a *Wider Europe Neighbourhood Policy* (WENP), the new neighbourhood policy presented several significant new items. In the first place, the intent of the Commission to design a single strategic framework for relations outside of the EU with its neighbours should be judged on a positive note: this was the only way to create "a ring of friends" (*ibid.*) and to define the scope of external action of the Union more clearly. According to this concept, the politics of proximity rendered the boundaries inside of which Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) could be carried out more visible.

The construction of peaceful and cooperative relations around the EU therefore corresponded to a project by Brussels that aimed to create an area of commercial integration and close institutional cooperation, capable of rendering the old concept of the border as a "limit" obsolete, and forming a new idea of it as a "bond".

However, this aspect seems to be more of a moral philosophy than a political practice. An example can be found in the Russia-Georgia conflict in the summer of 2008. Putin was the Prime Minster that year: he was elected President for two consecutive terms (2000-2004; 2004-2008) and could not serve a third term. His right-hand man was elected, Medvedev, President until 4 March 2012, when Putin returned to the highest Russian office.

The Georgian army entered Ossetian territory on the night between 7-8 August 2008. Ossetia declared its independence. The next day, Russia, which had already stationed its military in southern Ossetia and Abkhazia in the role of UN peacekeeper, massively intervened, defeating the Georgians and occupying a large portion of the territory.

On 15 August, a preliminary agreement was signed between Russia and Georgia for a ceasefire, with mediation by the EU guided by the French President, Nicolas Sarkozy: based on this agreement, the troops reciprocally agreed to withdraw to their former positions before the start of the conflict, and Georgia committed not to use force against the two secessionist republics. After the initial withdrawal of the foremost positions, Russia then decided to continue its military occupation of the two buffer zones in Georgia to prevent possible attacks on South Ossetia and Abkhazia. These occupied areas initially also included the Poti port on the Black Sea, in addition to the presence of Russian blockades on the main national routes, which were kept in place for about two months. Starting on 1 October 2008, 200 EU military observers stationed in the two buffer zones, as agreed during talks in September between Moscow and Brussels, while the withdrawal of the Russian troops from the buffer zone near South Ossetia finished on 8 October 2008.

Russia recognized the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia on 26 August 2008, subsequently signing a military agreement with the two republics.

It should be noted that also in this case, the EU measures used to prevent the crisis did not produce any effect, and the EU found itself not facing a crisis, but a war, a situation for which it was unprepared. The discordant behaviours of the MS also served to demonstrate the weakness that is typical of foreign policy that is not "shared", but "traditional" in nature.

In an attempt to respond to the Russia-Georgia war and draft better forms of prevention, in May 2009 the EU launched six partnership agreements (PAs) with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldavia and Ukraine. For Europe, the PAs signified better security and stability along its Eastern borders, in light of the fact that this region had become a centre of crisis and was even then still plagued by unresolved conflicts, the known "frozen conflicts".

It was the request to ratify the PA that spurred the complex Ukrainian crisis (Di Rienzo 2015). In November 2013, pressured by the Kremlin, especially with regard to the energy issue, President Yanukovych suspended negotiations with the EU. Therefore, peaceful protests began in Kiev's Independence Square, taking the name "Euromaidan". Yanukovych, elected in 2010 thanks to the strong support of the electorate in Crimea and Southern/Eastern Ukraine, condemned the protests, and at the end of the month decided to intervene with the Ukrainian special forces, the *Berkut*. The protest transformed into urban guerrilla warfare, and dissent began to focus on Yanukovych, forcing him to flee Kiev after he was delegitimized by the Parliament on 22 February 2014. This was followed by the liberation of the former Prime Minister, Yulia Tymoshenko, but as this new course of events began to unfold, protests in other cities with Russian majorities also began, who condemned the events a true *coup d'état* and a threat for their communities.

This generated other political crises in several Ukrainian regions, the first of which was Crimea. Here, on 27 February 2014, unidentified troops (suspected to be under the direct control of Moscow) occupied the Crimean Supreme Council building and the Council of Ministers building in Simferopol, where they hoisted the Russian flag. In this situation marked by growing chaos, the Crimean Rada designated Sergey Aksyonov, a representative of the minority Russian party Russian Unity, as the Prime Minster of Crimea. The nomination was censured as illegal by the government in Kiev, which declared Aksyonov a criminal according to art.109 of the Ukrainian criminal code – the article governing violent acts to change or overthrow constitutional order – and condemned his acts. On the same day, the Crimean *Berkut* set up controlled access to the Perekop isthmus and the Chongar Peninsula, which separated Crimea from the mainland: in a few hours, Ukraine and Crimea were *de facto* divided.

Two days later, on 1 March 2014, Aksyonov announced that the new Crimean authorities had control over all the Ukrainian military institutions on the peninsula, and asked Putin to guarantee peace and public order in Crimea. This request resulted in Russia immediately entering the field, with the Duma on the very same day ratifying

the military intervention and sending troops and weapons to Sevastopol, sparking protest by the entire international community.

In the meantime, the Crimean Supreme Council called a referendum vote for annexation to Russia. Initially scheduled for 25 May 2014, on 6 March the Simferopol Assembly moved the date up to 16 March, emphasizing that the vote would only be open to Crimean citizens.

Despite firm opposition from Kiev, where the parliament issued an act of dissolution of the Crimean Rada and the Constitutional Court declared illegal the referendum, the voting took place on the scheduled date, with a nearly unanimous result for annexation to Russia. Approximately 96% of voters in Crimea gave an affirmative response to the question "Are you in favour of reunification of Crimea with Russia as a constitutional entity?" (Rizzi 2014).

On the same day, the United Nations Security Council voted on a Resolution with a wide majority to declare the referendum invalid. The result was inevitable, demonstrating the international isolation of Russia. Two principles of international law clashed within the referendum: the right of "self-determination of people", sanctioned for the first time in the 14 points by Wilson on 8 January 1918 and invoked by the Crimean Republic and Russia, and the "inviolability of frontiers", proclaimed in 1975 in the Helsinki Accords from the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), invoked by Ukraine. Both principles are equally valid, and international law has yet to express in favour of one or the other.

On 17 March, after the official announcement of the referendum results, the Supreme Council of Crimea, renamed the State Council of Crimea, formally declared independence of the Crimean Republic, including the territories of the autonomous Crimean Republic and the city of Sevastopol, which was assigned a special status within the legal order of the separatist republic. The Crimean Rada announced partial abrogation of Ukrainian laws, the adoption of the Russian rouble as its official currency alongside the hryvnia, started nationalization of Ukrainian state-owned properties and churches, and formally requested annexation from the Russian government (Deliagin 2015).

The annexation was granted on 18 March, with the signing of the treaty by Putin, Aksyonov, and Aleksei Chaly, Mayor of Sevastopol. The treaty was implemented on the following 21 March, with approval of the Russian federal constitutional law n.6, *Adhesion to the Russian Federation of the Crimean Republic and formation of a new entity within the Russian Federation – the Crimean Republic and the federal city of Sevastopol*.

The international community did not recognize the annexation. The US and EU applied so-called "intelligent sanctions", which selectively penalized those at the apex of power, but which were not capable of inducing a change in the Russian positions on Crimea, positions that remained for unaltered.

While the Ukrainian question was still *in fieri*, on 27 June 2014 the governments of Ukraine, Moldavia and Georgia signed free trade agreements with the EU, provoking a harsh reaction from Moscow.

On 30 June, ANSA reported statements by the Russian vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, Grigory Karasin, commenting on the agreements: "The free trade agreements

will have serious consequences" (ANSA 2014). Indeed, Moscow considered the signed agreements with Brussels to be incompatible with the free trade areas that it had already established with the countries in question and threatened higher tariffs and more severe border controls.

Russia reacted to the Eastern Partnership with the creation of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), founded in January 2012 and composed of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia, and then expanded to include Armenia in October 2014 and Kirghizstan the following May. Inspired by the integration of EU countries, the idea was announced in October 2011 by Putin, who launched a proposal originally formulated by the Kazakhstani President Nursultan Nazarbaev in 1994 (Kilner 2011). It was not solely an economic project, but also a geopolitical project for an alternative to the proposals of Brussels for former Soviet countries.

It must be underlined that the progressive worsening of relations between Russia and the West made the prospect of "Greater Europe" increasingly less realistic. Parallel to the deterioration of the *zapadny vektor* ("Western vector"), Russia turned its gaze increasingly to the East, starting with ever-greater determination to establish pragmatic and mutually beneficial relations with Beijing. Strongly opposing the unipolarity imposed by the United States in the aftermath of the Cold War, Moscow and Beijing showed their willingness to implement a radical transformation of the international order, aiming to reduce the overall weight of the West and the United States through the creation of a multipolar world order.

In this sense, instead of that "Greater Europe" from Lisbon to Vladivostok promoted by Mikhail Gorbachev and Western leaders, the idea of a "Greater Eurasia" (*Bolshaya Evrazija*) from St. Petersburg to Shanghai emerged. It was an ambitious project to counter the geopolitical weight of the United States through the association of the Eurasian Economic Union with the Belt and Road Initiative.

Specifically, the Greater Eurasia project aimed to unite Russia, China and the post-Soviet States of Central Asia, potentially together with Mongolia, Iran, Pakistan and India, in a new geopolitical space that, in fact, could pose a fundamental challenge to the US-led liberal international order.

In February 2013, Vladimir Putin presented his foreign policy program (*The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation*), which represented a precise turning point compared to the policies pursued in the international field until then. The document stated that Russia intended to assume the role of a new "centre of gravity" on the international scene and that the guiding idea of the action would be "Eurasianism"[3]. Dmitri Medvedev's project of creating a common Euro-Atlantic security space and inviting the European Union to join Russia's modernization process was therefore abandoned.

[3] The most significant representative of Russian neo-Eurasianism is, from an ideological point of view, Alexander Dugin. First of all, he adopts and develops the central nucleus of the thought of the first Eurasianists of the 1920s: Russia is not a European country as it is characterized by a distinct civilisation, whose structure associates European values, such as Christianity, to values typical of Asian cultures, such as the sense of hierarchy, religiosity based on faith and not on reason, a certain tendency towards collectivism. In this vision, the West is perceived as a danger to humanity due to its universalism, its progressivism and its colonialism, the latter comparable to that of unification, of a totalitarian nature compared to the organic and natural diversity of the country, implemented by Bolshevism in the Soviet experience (Dugin 2014).

Why did Putin pass from the guise of "American" (immediately after September 11, in alliance with the United States against terrorism) and "European" (on the same line as France and Germany against the United States invading Iraq) to the guise of "Eurasian"? Putin believed that the world had changed profoundly compared to his two previous mandates and, pragmatically, that Moscow had to adapt its strategy to these changes, while maintaining the underlying objective: the return of Russia among the great powers after the geopolitical "disaster" of 1991.

From the analysis contained in *The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation*, it appears that all the references to the basis of the old international order have been called into question: the West is no longer the undisputed centre of the world, as demonstrated by the defeats in Iraq and in Afghanistan; and furthermore the Western economic model is fragile and is causing widespread systemic crises. At the same time, other poles of development and influence are arising, especially in Asia, and a shift in the global economic centre of gravity towards the East is taking place. The result is a global geostrategic rebalancing, which requires Russia to radically review its foreign policy and redefine its relative priority. In this new international context, Russia can enhance its intermediate geographical position between East and West. According to Putin's analysis, Russia, to the extent that it can have a stabilized economy, a strong internal consensus and with the end of the post-Soviet transition crisis, can enjoy some advantages. In particular, the geographical position and the abundance of raw materials allow Russia, which also maintains the status of atomic power, to become also an energy superpower, presenting itself as an ideal supplier of oil and natural gas to both Europe and the Far East (China, India) through a complex network of oil pipelines. In concrete terms, Russia can exert significant pressure on Europe by making it clear that its economy is not the only outlet for the hydrocarbons extracted on Russian territory. Furthermore, its international position is favoured by the fact that, on the one hand, it is an active participant, as founder, of the old international order (member of the Security Council, the first G8 and the G20), on the other it is included in the group of emerging powers (BRICS, APEC and Islamic Conference), elements that broaden its diplomatic horizon at a global level. Finally, the perception that the West, through NATO, intends to expand to the Russian borders allows Putin to accentuate patriotic mobilization with anti-Western connotations and to shift the priority vector of Russian foreign policy from the West towards Asia.

Therefore, in the new Eurasian game, Russia's project is to constitute, in the post-Soviet space, not only an economic but also an autonomous political pole with the role of "central axis" of the new international architecture. Therefore, as expressly stated, neither an ancillary role as a supplier of raw materials for the benefit of Asian economic development, nor a transit corridor between the "old" West and the "new" East, but the centre of the new polycentric world.

For Putin – in accordance with Russian Eurasian thought – the formation of the Eurasian Economic Union is the first instrument of this ambitious strategy. Obviously, this also has the aim of avoiding NATO's shift to the East.

This new position was influenced by the failure of the "reset" of Obama and Medvedev and the new American foreign policy, and also by the fact that a clear strategy by the EU for relations with Moscow seemed non-existent.

The diverse intensities with which the community MS are economically linked to Russia is one of the defining factors at the base of the lacking cohesive strategy of Brussels towards the East. The EU is once again divided when facing the explosion of the crisis in Ukraine and forming a position to respond to the annexation of Crimea by Moscow. The Baltic republics and former Soviet satellites would have liked to see the West react more forcefully and with authority at the return of an authoritarian stance by Moscow in the post-Soviet area.

The countries that have important economic relations in strategic sectors like energy, including Italy, France and Germany, condemned Russian revanchism, while at the same time mediated in the EU to prevent exacerbating tension and excessively isolating Russia.

A reflection on the EU with regard to the significantly growing consent around Putin after the annexation of Crimea and the effects on policy in the neighbouring areas is overdue: if on Russia's part, a change in foreign policy is evident, traced back to the "new doctrine" (Putin 2007) of Putin's administration, on the part of the EU an ambiguous foreign policy is evident with regard to Russia. The lack of a clear long-term strategy and scarce cohesion and linearity in foreign policy, united with the recent initiative promoted in the post-Soviet bloc and perceived by Moscow as harmful to its interests there, have all contributed to creating the current state of tension.

The countries in the post-Soviet bloc are the object of offers coming from players that represent colliding models of economic and political integration, putting these countries in a fragile position. Their oscillations from one extreme to the other, according to a logic dictated by pragmatism, has the effect of destabilizing internal politics and negatively impacting democratic consolidation and good governance. In a world that has become multipolar, the players in the field are no longer the two old hegemonic super-powers, because the scenarios have changed. This would explain the European position, weakened by the lack of real community policy. It seems clear that once the EU signed a free trade agreement with Kiev, a reaction from the Kremlin was a given.

The EU may have overestimated its "transformative" power and underestimated the importance of traditional geopolitics, contributing to inciting a latent crisis "in the interregnum between *no more* and *not yet*" (Bauman-Mauro 2015).

5. Conclusions

The continuous swings in Ukrainian history left the marks of a clear ambiguity on the ground. This is evident in the language, which changes as one crosses the country from East to West: it is a variant of Russian in the Eastern provinces, but is strongly influenced by Polish in the Western part. Even the architecture reveals a wide fluctuation between Central European models very close to eighteenth-century Baroque

Poland, such as Lviv, and the Russian villages of Eastern Ukraine. The greatest symbol of Ukrainian ambiguity is probably represented by one of its major religious groups, the Uniates: they are Catholics, they obey the Roman Pope, but they celebrate their rites with the Greek liturgy.

In light of all this, it is legitimate to ask whether a country like this can be both united and sovereign at the same time. Certainly, there is an ancient Ukrainian aspiration for independence, but it was only realized for short periods, as in the first post-war period, when the most powerful neighbours were on their knees. Then, as soon as one of them raised his head, Ukraine fell, in whole or in part, under its rule and appeared to the other, inevitably, as a potential threat.

Today, the entry into the scene of the EU changed the rules of the game. Brussels could have acted as an arbiter capable of suggesting and supporting a solution different from those imposed by history. However, what the EU lacked was the ability to assure Putin, afflicted with schizophrenic Soviet superpower nostalgia, that Ukraine would no longer be a Polish and Western thorn in Russia's side.

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