

European issues

n°379

26<sup>th</sup> January 2016

# Russia and the West: ten disputes and inevitable escalation?

Maxime Lefebvre [1]

**Abstract:**

At the end of the Cold War one might have thought that the collapse of the communist bloc and the disintegration of the USSR, concomitant to the defeat in 1991 of Saddam Hussein to the then unanimous "international community", indeed heralded the coming of a "new world order" (George Bush Sr), the triumph of western values of democracy and the liberal economy (Fukuyama's end of History), and the unification of the European continent (Gorbachev's "common home"). The wars which went with the collapse of Yugoslavia rapidly brought us back to reality and to the "return of history" (Guillaume Parmentier).

In this context the mainly peaceful achievement of independence on the part of the former Soviet republics might in retrospect seem surprising: conflicts were extremely limited and confined to the periphery of the former USSR (Transnistria in Moldova; the secessionist regions of Abkhazia, Ajaria and South Ossetia in Georgia; Nagorno Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan) and the "Community of Independent States" (succeeding the USSR) maintained links between the new independent republics, which facilitated the management of the disintegration of the USSR. But antagonism has progressively re-emerged between the West and Russia. With the Ukrainian crisis it has reached a pitch not seen since the end of the Cold War, placing all players before an extremely complicated situation.

The Ukrainian conflict did not just appear from nowhere. It is rather the expression of the paroxysmal exasperation of an increasingly fierce confrontation between Russia and the West. It highlights how the geopolitical tectonic plates have been at work since the redefinition of the borders at the end of the Cold War. A true process of confrontation has developed over a quarter of century, in which international power struggles have interacted with motivating forces in Russia, as well as in Western societies. In the same way that historians have asked themselves who, between Stalinian expansionism and American containment, bore the primary responsibility for the Cold War, we must let the historians of the future discuss the share that the West and the Russians respectively held in the return of confrontation. Explaining

the causal sequence is not justified the Russian policy, but helps us understand, and understanding is vital if we are to act and define a strategy. For convenience sake let us describe a series of ten disputes, starting with Chechnya ending with Russia's intervention in Syria.

**CHECHNYA**

The two Chechnya wars (1994-1996, then 1999-2000) shocked the West. Driven by fear of central power vis-à-vis the centrifugal trends within the Russian Federation, the brutality of the Russian army, as they callously exterminated Muslim Chechens in order to bring them to submission (at least 100,000 casualties), in the pure tradition of Czarist, then Soviet repression, was seen by most Western elites as proof that post-communist Russia had not adopted western values and that undoubtedly, it would never share them, and also that we should continue to treat it as an adversary. Russia was an especially convenient adversary in the eyes of the Occidentalists, in that it reunited the West, thereby overturning Alexander Arbatov's [2] prophecy of "Schadenfreude": "we shall render you the worst possible service, we shall deprive you of an enemy."

Russia's repression of Chechnya came at a time when the Serb nationalists, (brandishing the flag of Slav, Orthodox culture) were attempting to crush the Bosnians, followed by the Kosovar Muslims. It is no coincidence that it was in this context of disillusion after the end of the Cold War that Samuel Huntington drafted his theory of

1. The opinions contained within this article are that of the author and he alone.

2. Mikhail Gorbachev's diplomatic advisor

the “Clash of Civilisations”, since the war in Yugoslavia quite correctly witnessed the confrontation of Western, Orthodox and Muslim civilisations. It was also a time in which asymmetry developed between the area of the former USSR, in which Russia was in a position to impose itself by force, and that of the Balkans, where the Westerners were able to assert their law, and also force Russia’s hand as it did in Kosovo.

### NATO’S ENLARGEMENT

Since the Cold War led to the creation of NATO and the Warsaw Pact, the end of the said war might have brought military alliances in Europe to an end. The major agreements concluded under the OSCE in 1990 (Paris Charter for a New Europe, Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe, organising the massive disarmament of the two former blocs) were not followed by the disappearance of NATO, whilst the Warsaw Pact – rendered meaningless by the democratisation of Eastern Europe – was dissolved in 1991, just before the collapse of the USSR.

Far from disappearing NATO became a major pillar in the structure of European security. Under the Clinton presidency (1992-2000), it committed to an enlargement policy towards the new democracies of Eastern Europe, starting with Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic (Madrid Summit of 1997, which decided an enlargement that entered into force in 1999). NATO then increased from 19 to 26 members in 2004 (covering all of the other countries in Central and Eastern Europe, including the three Baltic countries, which had been part of Russia prior to 1914 and again of the USSR from 1940 to 1991), then the 26 became 28 in 2009 (Albania and Croatia). At the same time NATO asserted itself as the main military tool to settle the crises in former Yugoslavia in the 1990’s (Bosnia then Kosovo), after the misfortunes of the UN’s “Blue Berets” in Bosnia.

Due to NATO’s continued prevalence, the latter’s relations with Russia became central to the architecture of European security, more so than the agreements concluded under the OSCE, which have gradually lost their structuring, innovative nature. A NATO-Russia Founding Act was concluded in 1997, at a time when the West still had trust in Boris Yeltsin and wanted to offer him compensation for its extension to the new democracies of Central Europe. After the controversy

caused by the Kosovo war, a new NATO-Russia Charter was concluded in 2002, at a time when the second NATO enlargement towards the east was decided and when Russia and the West were cooperating in the fight to counter terrorism and in operations in Afghanistan, following the terrorist attacks of 11th September 2001. These agreements aimed to establish a partnership and cooperation between NATO and Russia (occasional meeting of a NATO-Russia Council) and to reassure Russia that NATO’s enlargement was not directed against it (with guarantees that “substantial combat forces” would not be stationed in the new NATO member states). But they were not void of ulterior motives: for the West it meant depriving Russia of its right to veto (the reason why NATO membership was never offered to Russia) and consolidating the new democracies (enlargement strategy of the Community of Democracies with a market economy under the Clinton administration); for the Russians NATO’s expansion to the east was seen to be happening to the detriment of Russia’s interests and security (the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad, for example, the former part of the east German Prussia, found itself encircled by NATO countries, and the Russian speaking minorities in the Baltic countries found themselves under NATO’s protection).

Although it was backed by negotiated agreements, NATO’s unilateral enlargement is amongst the grievances Russia has against the West. Undoubtedly it is not a coincidence if the most recent and most violent crises and confrontation (Georgian conflict in 2008, Ukrainian conflict of 2014) occurred after the NATO summit in Bucharest (April 2008) promised Georgia and Ukraine NATO membership – and in spite of the slowing of this policy by the Obama administration and its European partners since 2009.

### KOSOVO

Kosovo might be perceived as one of the starting points of American and Western military unilateralism. Unlike the situation in Bosnia, which gave rise to the joint conflict management with Russia (permission for NATO airstrikes by the UN in 1993, creation of the “contact group” [3] in 1994, the Dayton peace agreements in 1995), the conflict in Kosovo saw the West break with Russia as NATO strikes were launched against Serbia without the

3. Comprising six powers (USA, Russia, France, Germany, UK, Italy)

formal authorisation of the UN's Security Council. Kosovo, which is mainly populated by a large majority of Albanian Muslims, lost its autonomy in 1989 and was oppressed, with the Albanian speaking people starting to rebel in 1998, as they took advantage of the arms trafficking from Albania in the wake of a serious domestic crisis there in 1997. The West was relatively unanimous about this (in all events five of the western powers in the contact group: USA, France, Germany, UK, Italy), and had no confidence in Milosevic and his nationalist hyperbole; after trying to implement a negotiated settlement policy underpinned by successive sanctions, that were decided upon each time by the contact group and approved by the UN, they believed that only the use of force would prevent massive repression and ethnic cleansing, which led to the NATO military strikes between March and June 1999. Russia then withdrew from the contact group (returning later) but accepted to return to work on a plan to end the crisis ratified by the UN, thereby validating Serbia's loss of control over Kosovo and NATO's deployment, but also re-asserting the territorial integrity of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (of which Montenegro was still a part at the time). The return of peace put an end to the Albanian ethnic exodus; it did not prevent retaliation against the Serb minority, leading to flight by a part of this minority and the introduction of measures to protect those remaining (notably in the northern enclave of Mitrovica, where the Serb population still comprised the majority). The conflict deteriorated again when the West tried to push Kosovo towards independence, deeming that this was the only way to consolidate the province and the region's stability (subject to chronic unrest). In 2006 Vladimir Putin warned that Kosovo would set a "precedent" in the settlement of frozen conflicts in the former USSR. After a final bid to find a negotiated solution at the beginning of 2008 with the Serbs and the Russians, the Western members of the contact group decided unilaterally to acknowledge the independence of Kosovo. Kosovo is now acknowledged by around 100 countries in the world and has begun its rapprochement with the European Union (negotiation of a stabilisation and association agreement) as well as a normalisation process with Serbia (with the EU's mediation) It is not acknowledged however by Russia or China (which jeopardizes its membership of the UN), nor by five EU countries which are hostile to separatism (Spain, Greece,

Cyprus, Slovakia, Romania). Serbia is divided between pro-European forces, which would be prepared to relinquish Kosovo as the price to pay for EU membership (which would provide an opportunity to settle the Kosovo issue once and for all) and nationalist forces, which reject this and find support in Russia.

### PUTIN

As he became Prime Minister in 1999, Vladimir Putin, a former KGB officer, was presented by Boris Yeltsin as his successor and was elected President in 2000, then he was re-elected for a second time (and in principle the last) in 2004. Russia's new strongman turned his back on the liberal, anarchic years of the Yeltsin era (the disorder of which led to a financial crisis in 1998), restored authoritarian power ("vertical power"; the role of the "structures of force" or *siloviki*, such as the FSB, the successor the KGB); it found support in Russian nationalist feeling (all the more sensitive since the humiliations of the 1990's) and traditional values (alliance with the Orthodox clergy) and claimed back the energy resources that had been taken over by the "oligarchs", which enabled Putin to re-establish the Russian State's financial power (which rid itself of its debt and accumulated currency reserves). By doing this Putin set a challenge to those in the West and notably in the USA, who hoped that Russia would become Westernised and therefore weakened after the end of the Cold War. In the beginning the relationship with George W Bush (who says that he saw Putin's soul in his eyes) was not bad, due to their cooperation against Islamic terrorism. Then it became tense, notably when the prospect emerged of the Russian president's long term establishment in office. The latter did not challenge the West head on and respected the Constitution, which did not allow him two consecutive mandates, but he found a subterfuge: in 2008 he had his Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev elected as president and took his place as Prime Minister, whilst effectively continuing to control the State (leader of the majority and control over the "structures of force"); then he modified the Constitution so that the mandates would last 6 years and was elected president again in 2012 with D. Medvedev becoming Prime Minister again) for a new round of two mandates, with the prospect of remaining in power until 2024 (if he is re-elected in 2018).

The West wanted to believe that the Medvedev parenthesis would be synonymous to opening: it was at this time that Obama's USA launched the "reset" (2009) and that the European Union concluded a "modernisation partnership" (2010) with Russia, and that the latter entered the World Trade Organisation (2011). But the consolidation and strengthening of Vladimir Putin's power have increasingly turned it into the 'anti-model' of Western democracies, especially since, apart from a strengthening of the State, this has gone together with an increasing restriction of civil liberties and of the physical disappearance of opponents (imprisonment of the oligarch Mr Khodorkovsky, who was finally freed in 2013 and the assassination of the lawyer S. Magnitski; the assassinations of journalist Anna Politkovskaya in 2006 and of the liberal politician Boris Nemtsov in 2015). There is still an opposition movement in Russia, but in a context of nationalist withdrawal and apathy on the part of civil society (which is not unlike the situation in neighbouring Belarus governed by the dictator, A. Lukashenko), the battles for influence within power seem to hold greater sway than democratic debate, as it was in Soviet times [4].

#### THE POLITICO-MILITARY POWER STRUGGLE

After the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the USSR the consolidation of the new territorial order and the establishment of strategic stability on the continent of Europe became major stakes. The conclusion of disarmament agreements under the OSCE, then the political enlargement of NATO, comprised moments of consolidation for Europe's security structure. In the former USSR conflicts were localised and Russia asserted itself as a power of mediation (Transnistria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh), whilst it set out the doctrine of the "near abroad" in 1992-1993 with the aim of conserving its influence in the former constitutive republics of the USSR. The creation of regional organisations, not just the Community of Independent States (which succeeded the USSR), but also the 1992 Tashkent Collective Security Treaty (which became an organisation in 2002), and the upkeep of military infrastructures of the former Soviet army (like the base of Sebastopol in Crimea, the home port of the Russian fleet in the Black Sea), aimed to protect Russian hegemony, which was also supported by very old links of solidarity

(physical, human and cultural) within the former USSR. Today there are only five countries, the most dependent on Russia, which are part of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan), and Russia is trying to create an economic bloc with the same countries (the Eurasian economic union) so as to be on a par with the European Union.

Russia's position regarding the "frozen conflicts" has been ambiguous from the start, appearing as a force for peace and mediation, yet also taking advantage of the non-resolution of these conflicts, to maintain a strategic hold and to impede Western penetration (it is difficult for Georgia, Azerbaijan, Moldova and now Ukraine, which do not control all of their territory, to join NATO, since in principle, the Washington treaty obliges participating States to provide aid against an external aggressor). The West has therefore placed increasing pressure on Russia for it to work toward settling these conflicts, asking it to withdraw its troops from the places where they are stationed (Moldova, Georgia). At the OSCE Summit in Istanbul at the end of 1999, just after the Kosovo affair, Russia committed to withdrawing its troops from Moldova and to reducing its equipment in Georgia: it was the non-respect of this commitment, deemed by the West to be firm and to include all Russian armed forces (whilst the Russians wanted to rule out peacekeeping or munitions depot surveillance forces) which turned the "frozen conflicts" into the leading strategic dispute between the West and Russia, and which has been preventing the adoption of a political declaration at each annual OSCE ministerial meeting since 2002 (the Astana Summit in 2010 only led to a "commemorative" declaration).

In addition to this limited, but serious geo-strategic dispute of frozen or protracted conflicts, there has been a more general escalation in terms of the politico-military power balance, particularly between the USA and Russia. At the end of the Clinton administration (1999) the USA launched their national anti-missile shield plans, which dated back to the Reagan presidency, but which had been abandoned; in 2001 they even went as far as withdrawing from the 1972 Russian-American ABM (anti-ballistic missile) agreement, which limited the number of strategic anti-missile systems on either side, and achieved NATO's acceptance in 2004 of the principle of the deployment of a theatre missile defence system, officially to counter the threat of proliferant countries (radars in the Czech

4. See Arnaud Dubien (<http://www.la-croix.com/Actualite/Monde/Arnaud-Dubien-En-Russie-les-vrais-debats-se-deroulent-en-coulisses-2015-09-11-1354878?ref=yfp>)

Republic, missile defence systems in Poland). In these projects Russia perceived a threat, both against its own overall nuclear deterrent strategy and also regarding the politico-military balance in its neighbourhood, at a time when NATO was extending east. It continued to threaten the deployment of its Iskander missiles (tactical range of under 500 Km) in the enclave of Kaliningrad in spite of NATO's reduction of its missile defence system under the Obama Administration. Above all in 2007, Russia decided to suspend the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) (under the OSCE) since the West refused to ratify its adapted version (agreed in 1999), due to the non-respect of the Istanbul commitments regarding frozen conflicts. NATO then suspended the CFE regarding Russia in 2011.

Hence, the common framework for the control of arms between Russia and the West has weakened significantly: it still exists between Americans and Russians in the area of strategic nuclear arms (new START treaty 2010, which entered into force in 2011 for a ten year period) and intermediate range nuclear forces (the INF treaty of 1987, which is still in force); it doesn't exist in the area of tactical nuclear arms (whilst both Russians and Americans still have thousands of tactical nuclear warheads, a legacy of the Cold War, and that the probability of the use of a tactical nuclear arm by Russia, if it considers that its vital interests are threatened in a conflict, must not be ruled out); the framework has been reduced to confidence building measures in the conventional domain in Europe (the Vienna document, which provides for the notification of military manoeuvres beyond a certain threshold and mutual inspections; "open sky" treaties enabling flights over each other's airspace). Now there has been a kind of military escalation between NATO and Russia, - albeit still limited, which began again with the Ukrainian conflict (commitment by the West to increase their military spending; since Russia has doubled its own over the last ten years; "reassurance" measures taken by NATO - continuous rotation based military presence, enhancement of the rapid reaction force - for the countries bordering Russia, notably the Baltic countries, without bringing into question the commitment taken in 1997 of not deploying permanent and significant combat forces; military posturing by the Russian army including at sea and in the air).

## THE COLOUR REVOLUTIONS

In Georgia (the Rose Revolution of 2003) then in Ukraine (Orange Revolution, 2004) and in Kyrgyzstan (Tulip Revolution 2005), pro-Western leaders came to power challenging elections that were marred by fraud. In Ukraine, the pro-Russian victory by Yanukovich led to a popular uprising in the Maidan, the Square of Independence in Kyiv, and the organisation of a new election, in which Yushchenko clearly emerged as the victor. This crisis led to high tension between Vladimir Putin and the Europeans, which was channelled by Jacques Chirac and Gerhard Schröder's moderating action with the Russian president, whilst Polish President Alexander Kwasniewski and the EU's High Representative Javier Solana, worked towards the organisation of new elections in Kyiv.

The "Colour Revolutions" cannot be considered as "changes in regime" in that they are the consequence of normal but hampered electoral processes. Vladimir Putin could not object to the movement and the American neo-conservatives (notably Robert Kagan) lauded the European Union for its action in the Ukrainian crisis. But for the Russian president these "Colour Revolutions" (financed, it is true, in part by the West and, notably by the Soros Foundation) in the wake of American displays of strength in Afghanistan (2001), then in Iraq (2003) were seen as geopolitical manoeuvres by the USA that aimed to weaken Russia and separate it from the former republics of the USSR.

These geopolitical analyses hold their share of truth, they link up with old theories (MacKinder, Kennan), which inspired the policy of containment. American policy as of the 1990's comprised penetrating the region, accessing hydrocarbons in the Caspian Sea and Central Asia, encouraging energy corridors that crossed the Caucasus towards Turkey (Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline opened in 2005, the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum pipeline opened in 2006), creating alternative regional organisations to those focused on Russia, particularly the GUAM launched in 1996-1997 (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldova) and even of establishing (with Moscow's consent) bases in Central Asia (Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan) to support allied operations in Afghanistan. Zbigniew Brzezinski, former national security advisor to Jimmy Carter, did not hide America's intentions in his book *The Grand Chessboard*

(1997): he explained that the USA had to counter the re-emergence of Russian imperialism, that Russia could not become an empire again without Ukraine, and that Ukraine must align itself with Europe, via the consolidation of the "geostrategic backbone" comprising France, Germany, Poland and Ukraine; more widely he suggested that the USA must use the "geopolitical pivots" of Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan (a member of GUAM for a time) and Ukraine.

With the "Colour Revolutions", geopolitical competition, (American vs Russian empire), goes in tandem with antagonism over values (democracy vs authoritarianism), as during the Cold War. In 2005 Vladimir Putin qualified the disappearance of the USSR as "*the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century*", and as of 2007 (speech at the Munich Security Conference) he questioned the role of the OSCE, deeming it to be an organisation that was serving Western interests (democratic commitments and institutional mandates defined in the 1990's, the role of electoral supervision ensured by the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) in Warsaw and the disarmament agreements). The coherence of Russia's strategy was then clear: geopolitical competition against the West, upkeep of strategic positions (frozen conflicts), to impede the American strategy of "geopolitical pivots", the opposition of values.

The question of values, of democracy and Human Rights, of the legitimacy of governments in office, has become central to the Russian-American relationship. During its second term in office the Bush Administration which became bogged down in Afghanistan and Iraq, no longer had the means to launch any further military operations, but undertook a campaign against the "outposts of tyranny", and without including Russia explicitly, ensured that President Putin really did leave office after his second mandate. The latter organised the transition period, and supported regimes threatened by the USA like Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Iran and Belarus (a country under Russian influence, ostracised due to its authoritarian regime, not a member of the Council of Europe and subject to Western sanctions). Russia's siege mentality has grown with the crisis in Ukraine, the new military doctrine (end of 2014) and the new national security strategy (end of 2015); it has even established the goal of preventing any regime change dictated by the outside. At the OSCE Russia is not alone in its challenge

to Western democratic norms and Human Rights, finding allies in Belarus, several countries of Central Asia and even Azerbaijan.

#### THE ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE ENERGY WEAPON

Encouraged by Germany and the UK the European Union launched its enlargement policy towards the new democracies in Central and Eastern Europe (cf. adoption of the Copenhagen criteria in 1993) even before NATO started its policy. But European Union's enlargement required a great deal of preparation and these countries joined NATO before they did the European Union.

Russia did not challenge the enlargement of the European Union, as it did that of NATO. In 1994 partnership and cooperation agreements were concluded by the Community with Russia and Ukraine, and the one with Russia even entered into force first (1997). In 2002-2003 the European Union launched its "neighbourhood policy" targeting "the new neighbours" in the east and on the shores of the Mediterranean. However Russia wanted to be treated as an equal, as a partner in its own right, and not as one neighbour amongst others; Chirac and Schröder, allied with Putin against Bush in the Iraq affair fostered the conclusion of "four areas" of cooperation between the EU and Russia (economy, domestic and foreign security, education – research – culture), negotiated between 2003 and 2005, at a time when the European Union's grand enlargement was underway in the east (2004). The European Union then planned to negotiate new agreements with Russia and Ukraine, which should have started together in 2007 under the Germany presidency of the Council of the European Union.

But EU-Russia relations ground to a halt because of the new Member States, which gradually raised their own issues with the important, but difficult neighbour in the east. Poland, under the Kaczynski brothers, blocked the EU-Russia negotiations because of a Russian embargo on Polish meat: it was soon joined by Lithuania, which had its own issues (an unrepaired gas pipeline that supplied a refinery in Lithuania). A great deal of diplomatic skill was required for the negotiation of a new EU-Russia agreement finally to start in 2008, one year after Ukraine. But this negotiation was suspended a first time due to

the Georgian conflict, then a again after the Ukrainian conflict (and it has not been taken up again since).

The Russian issue then became a test for European unity and cohesion. A realistic majority (Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Benelux, Austria, Finland, Greece, Cyprus, Slovenia, Hungary and Slovakia ...) faced a more intransigent minority (notably the Baltic countries, Poland, Sweden and the UK). Russia divided Europe in two ways: interests and sensitivities diverged between Member States, and Russia has used these divisions to promote its own interests. The realists emphasise economic and energy interdependence, the hardliners Human Rights and strategic issues. A compromise was achieved by encouraging the neighbourhood policy (the dispatch for example of a customs mission by the Commission to ensure that trade with Transnistria occurred according to Moldovan territorial integrity, as of 2005 – the EUBAM mission) and by maintaining the prospect of cooperation with Moscow.

Energy issues then became a stake in the battle and they are complicated. Russia provides one quarter of the gas and oil used in the European Union, but this dependency varies according to the Member States (low or zero in Sweden and the UK, for example, and of little importance in France); conversely Russia depends on the purchases of its European clients and also the transit countries (in the mid-2000's 80 % of gas imported from Russia by the European Union transited via Ukraine; now it is only half that amount). On leaving office in 2005 Gerhard Schröder launched the construction of the gas pipeline *Nordstream* which facilitates the direct supply of Germany and Western Europe via the Baltic Sea (it entered into service in 2011 and its capacity is about to be doubled). Whilst the USSR never cut its supplies to Europe, Russia cut gas flows twice to Ukraine in the middle of the winter, in January 2006 and then in January 2009, in order to impose its price conditions and it repeated this in 2014 and 2015 after the second Ukrainian conflict. It also cut its oil supplies with Belarus in January 2007 for the same reasons. The confrontation took several turns: Russia tried to build a gas pipeline under the Black Sea in order to circumvent the southern transit countries (*Southstream*); the European Union fostered the Nabucco project, which was to diversify supplies by attracting hydrocarbons from the Caspian Sea via Turkey – both of these projects

have been abandoned for the time being. Moreover the European Union forced Gazprom to adopt its internal market regulations (separation between production and distribution activities) and launched a procedure for abuse of dominant position against the Russian giant in 2012. Hence it has fostered the diversification of energy sources (including via the liquid gas market) and flow reversal systems, enabling escape by Ukraine from Russian pressure in the event of further cuts.

This escalation was severely criticised in some countries. Slovakia's economy for example unhappily suffered the negative effects of the Russian-Ukrainian gas crisis. Claude Mandil, Director of the International Energy Agency, delivered a report on Europe's energy security just before the French presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2008, in which he noted that only three countries (Qatar, Iran and Russia) could guarantee the long term supply of gas to Europe and on this occasion quoted a Russian proverb: *"the bear that was sleeping peacefully in the forest has been woken, and now we are surprised that it is destroying everything within its reach."* Even at the height of the Ukrainian crisis, which saw the European Union break off relations completely with Russia and adopt sanctions against the latter, the Commission (unlike the European External Action Service) has remained a source of mediation regarding energy issues and has helped towards settling Russian-Ukrainian conflicts.

#### THE GEORGIAN CONFLICT

The entry into office of M. Saakashvili in Georgia in 2004 was followed by a growing disconnection from Moscow. Some developments went ahead peacefully, such as the recovery of Ajaria and the closure of a Russian base. But tension increased in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, two separatist regions on the Russian border. The Georgian president was encouraged, in his policy to recover these territories, by the Americans and some Europeans. Under American pressure and in spite of reticence on the part of France and Germany, which prevented authorisation for a "membership action plan", the NATO summit in Bucharest (April 2008), confirmed that both Georgia and Ukraine "would be members of NATO", which for the Russians, undoubtedly meant that a red line had been crossed.

When France took over the presidency of the Council of the European Union in the second half of 2008 military incidents were escalating. The Georgian president launched an attack on South Ossetia (7th August) followed the next day by a previously prepared Russian counter attack. In just a few days the Georgian army was defeated and the Russian army was at the gates of the Georgian capital. As president of the Council of the European Union, President Nicolas Sarkozy took the initiative – alone – to mediate between Moscow and Tbilisi in the night of 12th to 13th August, which was ratified the next day by the European Foreign Affairs ministers, who met in Brussels. He secured Moscow's commitment to withdraw its forces behind the lines that existed prior to hostilities. But the Putin-Medvedev team, under the obvious pressure of the former to exploit its success, acknowledged Abkhazia and South Ossetia's independence at the end of the month, which undoubtedly was a way of taking revenge on the West for Kosovo. This meant that the Russians did not withdraw behind the initial lines, as provided for in the agreement (after the cease-fire of 1992-1993 the Georgians had kept control over a part of Abkhazia and South Ossetia). An EU civilian mission was deployed as of September to ensure Russian withdrawal to the borders of both territories. It was on this incomplete *acquis* that the European Union accepted to normalise relations with Russia and to start negotiations for a new agreement that had been suspended at the end of August.

The Georgian conflict left a bitter taste in the mouth of the Western camp. Some wanted to interpret it as a result of the Georgian president's adventurism, who, having played the role of initial aggressor, was abandoned by the Americans (at the end of the Bush Administration) and ended up paying for his failure, as he was forced out of office (in 2013). Others believed that Russia had used its military force against a neighbouring state for the first time and did not respect the agreement concluded in August and that the European Union had normalised relations too quickly. The republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia are only acknowledged by a handful of minor States (Nicaragua, Venezuela, Nauru), they are now dependent on Moscow more than ever before, which deems them as strategic elements (improved access to the Black Sea thanks to Abkhazia, control of the exit of the strategic Roki tunnel linking North and South Ossetia)

and the prospect of recovering them has been definitively removed from Tbilisi, which faces a terrible dilemma in its rapprochement with NATO (either to move under NATO's protection thereby ruling out the two regions de facto, that NATO cannot commit to recovering; or to privilege its territorial integrity and relinquish NATO's protection). Georgia opted for a strategy of appeasement after the departure of M. Saakashvili.

### THE UKRAINIAN CONFLICT

Whilst relations calmed between Russia and the USA, with the presidents' commitment (Medvedev in Russia, Obama in the USA), they became antagonistic between Russia and the European Union because of economic and trade issues. For a long time the Russian authorities affected magnificent indifference regarding the economic rapprochement between Ukraine and the European Union, even the prospect of the country joining the EU, undoubtedly not without secretly rejoicing at the fact that a majority of EU Member States, the first being France and Germany, did not really want to open membership to a country like Ukraine. But as of 2009 the neighbourhood policy in the east became the, "Eastern Partnership", (notably promoted by Poland and Sweden and accepted by Nicolas Sarkozy, who had just launch his "Union for the Mediterranean" in the south) and gave the impression that it wanted to include its neighbours in the east (the three countries of the Caucasus, Moldova, Ukraine and even Belarus) in the single market (liberalisation of trade, regulatory convergence, association with the Union's policies), but excluding Russia, with whom laborious negotiations for a new partnership agreement were turning into a dialogue of the deaf. The Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius at the end of 2013 should have marked the crowning success of this, but Armenia and Ukraine backed out of the association agreements negotiated with the European Union at the last minute and only Georgia and Moldova signed (Azerbaijan and Belarus distanced themselves).

Some accused the European Union of refusing to listen to Russia's last minute objections. It is true that the EU's free-trade agreements with Ukraine are not incompatible with those between Ukraine and Russia; it is also true that Ukraine cannot be both in a customs union with Russia and in a free- trade zone (including regulatory



convergence) with the European Union and that the latter asked it to choose between the two. Since then Brussels has accepted to renegotiate with Moscow but the association agreement was confirmed unchanged with the new Ukrainian government.

Russia intends to create its own zone of economic integration around itself. Although the initial project, (Russia-Belarus union in 1996, the Eurasian Economic Community, or *Eurasec*, in 2000) were not really implemented, a customs union was formed in 2010 between Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan, and the *Eurasec* transformed into Eurasian Economic Union in 2014. It was with the goal of detaching Ukraine from the European Union that Vladimir Putin tabled a massive aid programme at the end of 2013 (significant reduction in the price of gas, a loan of 15 billion \$) directed at the “pro-Russian” President Yanukovich (elected, conventionally in 2010). He also convinced Armenia and Kyrgyzstan to join his Eurasian union.

But Ukraine is torn between its pro-European aspirations, especially in the west, and its economic and cultural links with Russia, especially in the east and south (since nearly one fifth of the population is ethnically Russian and a major share is Russian speaking). Victor Yanukovich’s U-turn on the association agreement was immediately followed by mass protests on the part of the population in Kyiv and across a large part of the country, which led to the sympathy and encouragement of Western leaders and media. Since the European Union could not mediate in a conflict in which it was involved itself, the three Foreign Ministers of the Weimar Triangle (Germany, France, Poland) negotiated a political solution (reluctantly supported by Russia) providing for early elections (agreement of 21st February 2014). Victor Yanukovich’s government collapsed just the day after under popular pressure. Vladimir Putin responded violently to the prospect of Ukraine toppling into the West’s hands: he orchestrated his own narrative (the legitimate government had been overthrown in a “coup d’Etat” organised by neo-Nazis) and acted with as much determination as he did concealment, using the *faux-pas* of the new authorities (which announced that it was going to do away with Russian as one of the country’s official languages alongside Ukrainian). Organised forces took control of Crimea at the end of

February without encountering any real resistance, (the population is mainly Russian and the peninsula was only re-attached to Ukraine in 1954), called for the help of the Russian armed forces and organised a hasty referendum (17th March); they then ratified the Crimea’s annexation to Russia – whilst the UN’s General Assembly provided its support to Ukraine’s territorial integrity by an overwhelming majority (100 votes against 11). An OSCE observer mission was then dispatched across the country (except in Crimea) as of 21st March with Russia and Ukraine’s agreement granted in Vienna: this was the first step towards de-escalation in the conflict at a time when the EU decided to implement its first sanctions against Moscow. But an armed uprising started at the beginning of April in the Donbass, a region typified by its strong Russian population and its close economic links with Russia (heavy industry). Russia provided indirect aid (secret services, mercenaries or “volunteers”, arms) – its involvement has only recently been acknowledged by the Kremlin. A civilian airplane flying over the Donbass was brought down in July 2014 by a Russian built missile, leading to the deaths of 300 hundred people, who were mainly Dutch.

By pretexting a “coup d’Etat” orchestrated from the outside and by using the “people’s right to self-determination” Russia quite flagrantly infringed the rules of international law: the territorial integrity of Ukraine, the rules governing the non-use of force (even though Moscow acted covertly), and the Memorandum of Budapest (1994), whereby it guaranteed Ukraine’s borders in exchange by Kyiv’s relinquishment of its nuclear heads stationed on its territory. Privately Russian diplomats justified this divergence from standards with the West’s policy that had privileged the *fait accompli* and which did not know how to listen. The European Union (and Angela Merkel in particular, far from sharing the Russophilia of her predecessor) had no other choice but to align with the USA, in a policy of unprecedented sanctions against Russia: breaking off of political dialogue, interruption of ongoing negotiations; targeted sanctions – refusal of entry and stay, assets freezing – against Russian personalities involved in the aggression against Ukraine, but not against Putin or his Foreign Minister; finally economic sanctions as of July 2014 (technological embargos, access bans on Russian banks to European capital markets).

The European Union could no longer assume the role of mediator and others (UN Secretary General and the Council of Europe, the Swiss Presidency of the OSCE) did not have enough political clout to have any effective involvement. France and Germany took the initiative to prevent the escalation of the conflict. François Hollande took advantage of the commemorations of the Normandy Landings (6th June 2014) to invite V. Putin and P. Poroshenko, the newly elected Ukrainian president, which led to a first meeting between the two heads of State and the launch of the Normandy Format, which also included Angela Merkel. Following a counter-offensive by the separatists at the end of August against the Ukrainian "anti-terrorist" operation, Kyiv and Moscow negotiated agreements in Minsk at the end of September providing for a cease-fire in the east of Ukraine and a settlement process. A further escalation in the field again obliged the French President and the German Chancellor to intervene personally in the negotiations at the summit of a new agreement in Minsk (12th February 2015). Under the political supervision of France and Germany (Normandy Format), the diplomatic guidance of the OSCE (trilateral contact group involving Russia, Ukraine and the separatists) and OSCE observers in the field, the conflict has died down. But the odds seem to be heavily against the re-integration of the eastern regions back into Ukraine and there is a danger of a major "frozen conflict" setting in (in reference to other frozen conflicts in Moldova and the Caucasus) due to the difficult question of holding free elections in the Donbass – and also over the status of Crimea. There is a strategic advantage for the Kremlin in the status quo – short of achieving a neutral status for Ukraine – that the West has never wanted to entertain, in virtue of any country's sovereign right to choose its alliances, it makes it impossible – similarly for Georgia – for Ukraine to join NATO and thereby contributes to weakening this country from Moscow's standpoint.

### THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

In the Syrian conflict, which has continued to grow in intensity since Bashar al Assad's regime initially suffered the shockwave of the Arab Spring in 2011, Vladimir Putin seems to have been driven by some fundamental and constant principles: support of "legitimate" regimes in office (not to accept changes of regime via force or

popular pressure); preventing Bashar al Assad from suffering the same fate as Gadhafi, overthrown in 2011 by NATO intervention (which extrapolated the mandate given by the UN Security Council), the fight to counter Islamic Sunni terrorism, (preventing contagion to Muslims in the Caucasus), Russian interests in the Middle East (maintaining it as a regional power) and more globally the status of Russia as a global, political and military power (in order to improve the power balance with the West).

Quite quickly positions grew tense between the West and Russia over Syria, since one wants to see the emergence of a democratic opposition to replace the Assad regime, and the other is defending the government in office. In the summer of 2013, whilst Bashar al Assad started to use his arsenal of chemical weapons as a means of repression and that the West was planning to intervene militarily (the Obama Administration turned it into a "red line" and France said it was ready to act, even though the UK and Germany remained in the background), Vladimir Putin really made a master stroke as he suggested the chemical disarmament of Syria. Hence he prevented Western intervention (that Barack Obama, in his stance of strategic restraint, really did not want) and achieved two goals: to set Russia as the responsible power (in the fight to counter proliferation) and to prolong the life of the Syrian regime.

When in 2014 Islamic State of Iraq in the Levant started to spread significantly, it gradually became a joint threat that has united the West, the Arab monarchies and Russia. The Americans and their allies started to bomb Islamist positions in Iraq and Syria in the summer of 2014 (France only extended its operations to Syria a year later) and the Russians started their strikes in Syria in September 2015. Behind this common threat the Russians and the West are divided over the fate to reserve for Bashar al Assad. But what is at stake in this conflict for Russia is its return to the negotiating table as an inevitable player, just as it was in the Iranian nuclear crisis (agreement of 14th July 2015); it also aims to defend its interests better.

### ESCALATION AND ITS HOLDING ROPES

The escalation in tension between the West and Russia over the last fifteen years, swinging from action and response, comprises a heavy trajectory from which it

will be difficult to deviate. Russia has been seen as the Western anti-model and has progressively become this: due to the nature of Russian power, which is increasingly authoritarian, increasingly repressive, defending "traditional values", in the face of the "decadence" of Western mores, reasoning along Westphalian lines (sovereignism, non-interference, influence sharing, zero sum territorial disputes, military power, action of secret services) against Europeans who are set (but not completely) in a post-national, post-modern, post-Westphalian world (soft-power, economic cooperation, irresistible attraction of Western values).

However we should avoid making a schematic presentation: on more than one occasion the West has turned to the use of military power, and these interventions have not always been necessary, nor well calibrated; it knows how to use "hard power" (as shown in the sanctions adopted against Russia) and it can also reason according to geopolitical lines (which also explains the divergence between the countries of Europe and Moscow); they must also question their policy in the post-Soviet space, which has not always been crowned with success.

Antagonism between the West and Russia is there to stay. It is set in the divergence of values, and has revived a kind of ideological opposition that is reminiscent of the Cold War period, even though this has to be placed in a wider context: the West wants to spread its democratic values, whilst Russia wants to form a coalition with the emerging powers – notably the BRICS – against Western interference. Although the Obama Administration has typified itself by its restraint, there is nothing to say that a new American Administration will not make a greater show of its muscle. In a difficult context, which will remain so, it might be wise to retain the notion of long-time (strategic patience, remembering for example that it took 12 years for the nuclear negotiations with Iran to be concluded and a similar amount of time was required between the Act of Helsinki and the collapse of communism), and to remain realistic about the method to employ, taking on board the constraints which weigh on action by those in charge. We might quote four of these.

The first constraint is Russia's development. A little like Milosevic in Serbia, Putin bases his power on a cocktail of nationalism, authoritarianism and the quest for external

success. He is popular and this might last for a long time to come, the example of Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus (in office since 1994) and other leaders from former countries of the USSR should make us stop and think. The West must not abdicate its values and the long term goal of democratising Russia, nor should it demonize Putin more than any other in the global antagonism between democratic societies and authoritarian regimes (not to mention the problems in some Western countries like Hungary and Poland). The West should rather define a strategy that aims to open up Russian society and help those who are persecuted there – which means dialogue and diplomacy, as with the adoption of the Act of Helsinki (1975) vis-à-vis the Soviet Bloc.

The second constraint is strategic asymmetry. As the two most recent conflicts have shown in Georgia and Ukraine, the West cannot make or encourage war in the post-Soviet space without setting everything ablaze, they cannot enlarge NATO any further without poisoning the situation, they must reckon with a power that deems that this region is part of its vital interests (historical, economic, cultural, strategic), which is in a position of strength to defend them and which is also a nuclear power. The means of exercising pressure, like sanctions for example are effective and probably helped slow Moscow's power politics; but the Russian economy has especially been weakened by the fall in oil prices and it is not certain that these economic sanctions will help achieve strategic advantage (although their removal is conditioned by the EU with the return of the Donbass to Ukraine). It is not obvious either that a policy of military escalation by NATO, with the militarisation of the east flank, will match the reality of a Russian "threat", which is not really anything like it was in the Soviet era (the cumulated military budget of the NATO countries is ten times that of Russia, that we sometimes qualify as a "poor power").

The third constraint is the cost of escalation. This applies to both sides. Sanctions are costing the European economy. They are even more costly for the Russian economy – and Crimea and Donbass have gained nothing from their split from Kyiv. To this we might add the cost of the untapped potential of cooperation with a country which is Europe's leading market (in terms of the number of inhabitants) and a reservoir of raw materials. The European Union has to help Ukraine, but its means (neighbourhood policy – 3

## Russia and the West: ten disputes and inevitable escalation?

---

billion € in macro-financial aid) are not endless. As far as providing membership prospects to the countries in the eastern neighbourhood are concerned – this is a path that the European Union is not in a position to take given its internal difficulties. Military escalation would also be costly even if it is becoming vital for the Europeans to strengthen their means of defence in a world that is distancing itself from the aspirations of the end of the Cold War.

The fourth constraint is the management of world stability. It is rather more the USA's responsibility to weigh this up, whilst China is the only one that can challenge their strategic supremacy in the long term (the Chinese military budget already represents a third of that of America, if we adhere to official figures). Is it in their interest to push Russia into China's arms? Are there common interests with Russia, such as the fight to counter proliferation, terrorism, organised crime, and even the protection of the environment? And Russia, a permanent member of the UN's Security Council, is an inevitable partner in terms of crisis management, as in Iran and Syria.

Has Russia become a threat to European security? The answer has to be weighed carefully, as Europeans

prepare to revise their security strategy that dates back to 2003. We are no longer in the bi-polar world of the Cold War, in a test of strength between two systems and a stabilised situation of "impossible peace, improbable war" as Raymond Aron used to say. We should rather see the Russian-Western conflict for what it is: the after effects of the collapse of the USSR and Russia's aim to repel any further strategic withdrawal – and to defend – including by force – its regional influence. The present situation is complicated: it stands as one of "impossible friends" (due to the opposition over values and principles), of "possible wars" (in Georgia and Ukraine) and of "probable cooperation" (on certain issues). Setting the cursor on the right spot between dialogue (cooperation) and firmness (EU sanctions, reassurance measures by NATO), working towards de-escalation – this is the core of a strategy that needs time and deliberation, combining a balance of power and diplomacy.

---

**Maxime Lefebvre,**

Diplomat, former Ambassador for France at the OSCE and professor at Science Po. He is the author of *La construction de l'Europe et l'avenir des nations* (Armand Colin, 2013).

You can read all of our publications on our site :  
[www.robert-schuman.eu](http://www.robert-schuman.eu)

Publishing Director : Pascale JOANNIN

---

**THE FONDATION ROBERT SCHUMAN**, created in 1991 and acknowledged by State decree in 1992, is the main French research centre on Europe. It develops research on the European Union and its policies and promotes the content of these in France, Europe and abroad. It encourages, enriches and stimulates European debate thanks to its research, publications and the organisation of conferences. The Foundation is presided over by Mr. Jean-Dominique Giuliani.