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**The Ukrainian crisis and its impact on the strategic relations  
between the West and the Russian Federation**

by

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## Abstract

The present Master's thesis seeks to develop a better understanding of the impact of the recent events in Ukraine on the relations between the Russian Federation and the Western countries.

Based on a synthesis of the methodological approaches of traditionalism and positivism and the theoretical school of neorealism, this Master's thesis examines the roots, the causes and the events of the crisis in Ukraine and subsequently focuses on establishing a comprehensive understanding on whether the impact of the crisis has been such, as to deter cooperation in issues where both the West and Russia have common interests and severely inhibit the potentialities of coordination and cooperation in areas where their interests are incompatible or conflicting.

The issues that will be examined are: a) the economic and energy relations between the European Union and the Russian Federation; and b) the cooperation in matters of international security, such as nuclear non-proliferation, the counterterrorism –specifically against the Islamic State- and Syria, between the United States and Russia.

The main conclusion of this Master's thesis is that the West and Russia still have managed to cooperate and coordinate in issues, where their interests are aligned –energy, non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction-; however, the increased tensions and animosity that has resulted from the events in Ukraine are creating additional obstacles and postponing cooperation in issues, where each side is seeking to further its own agenda.

## Keywords:

*Russia, Russian Federation, The United States of America, the European Union, Ukrainian crisis, Ukraine, US-Russia national interests, geography, geopolitics, counter-terrorism, Syrian Civil War*

## Introduction

During the last – almost- two years, the ongoing crisis in Ukraine has been in the spotlight of the international media and the international community, alongside other turbulent events such as the Syrian Civil War, the Iranian nuclear deal, the resurgence of violent radical religious terrorist organizations around the globe in the wake of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

The decision of the, at that moment incumbent, Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich to not sign the association agreement with the European Union in November 2013, sent shockwaves across the post-Cold War European Security architecture. This unforeseen event has created tremendous tension between Russia and the West, while causing a wholesale change in Ukraine – political, economic and territorial-. Despite numerous diplomatic efforts in international, regional and bilateral levels the crisis in Eastern Ukraine remains unresolved and the situation deteriorates on a daily basis.

Moreover, the deterioration in the relations between the West and Russia are impacting their cooperation in other contemporary issues of international security, namely in the fight against the Islamic State and in the Syrian Civil War.

Given the contemporaneous nature of the crisis and the fact that it remains an unresolved, ongoing issue in the international stage, it becomes an imperative that multidimensional research is produced on the subject analyzing its causes, effects and possible solutions, in order to reach to conclusions that can be used by the world leaders and their decision-making advisors, as well as to inform the public over the matter.

Since the events in Ukraine and their impact in other contemporary issues of the international system are changing on a daily basis, previous conclusive and comprehensive research on every possible aspect of the crisis and its effects is non-existent. However, there are several articles, journals, policy and research papers being produced by analysts, scholars and institutions that examine certain aspects of this multidimensional subject of

research. It is impossible to reference them all here for the purpose of this introduction, however several of them are used and referenced during the analysis of this paper's subject.

This Master's thesis is aiming to examine a relatively unexplored dimension of this crisis, by investigating the impact of the Ukrainian Crisis on the ability of the West and Russia to cooperate and coordinate in bilateral and multilateral issues, as well as other ongoing crises that threaten the international security, peace and stability. For this purpose, the economic relations between the European Union and Russia will be examined, while on the level of the US-Russian relations the analysis will focus on matters of international security, mainly nuclear non-proliferation, the war on terror and the Syrian Civil War.

This thesis' argument will be based on the idea that when the subject in question is a matter where Russian and Western vital national interests are aligned, the impact of the Ukrainian Crisis is negligible, while when their interests are different or the subject in question, is not a high priority, the Ukrainian Crisis and the fallout it has created in their relations is impeding their cooperation and coordination.

Based mainly on the traditional methodological approach, while adopting certain elements of the positivist approach, this thesis will examine events, decisions and developments in the discussed aspects of the subject, in order to understand the motives, the objectives and the interests of the actors involved, as well as draw valuable conclusions. On this effort to attain a deeper understanding of the subject and its implications, the theoretical school of Neorealism will provide the necessary theoretical background on which our analysis will be based.

At this point, I would like to briefly, but sincerely thank the members of the Supervising Committee for their guidance and assistance, particularly Prof. Harry Papatiriou; Dr. Constantinos Filis, Director of Research of the Institute of International Relations, for his valuable insight, encouragement and critical thoughts throughout my research endeavors in the Ukrainian Crisis; and my friends and family for their unwavering trust, support and love, as well as their encouragement and tolerance during the research and writing process of this thesis.

## Methodology

The academic discipline of the International Relations has experienced so far several “Great Debates”<sup>1</sup>, which arguably did not result in a clear winner, perhaps only apart from the first “Great Debate”, where the Second World War shattered any hopes for a peaceful and institutionalized way to avert conflict between nations.

In most academic disciplines there are two types of confrontation, the first one refers to issues of ontology and the second one refers to issues of epistemology. Likewise the discipline of International Relations has ontological confrontations between, mainly, Realism and Liberalism regarding the nature and the significance of the pivotal issues of the field; and epistemological confrontations regarding issues of methodology, which scholars should use in their research (Jackson and Sorensen, 2003, pp.334-335).

Positivism became one of the most influential methodological approaches in the field following the domination of Structural Realism during the Cold War. Positivism, drawing much of its principals from Behavioralism, supports that the international scene is characterized by normalcy and one could find constant patterns, which could enable a researcher to comprehend them, explain them and even make predictions for the future (Jackson and Sorensen, 2003, p.349).

Certainly there is validity to this methodological approach, however inherent flaws do exist within it, when one attempts to apply its logic in the field of International Relations. Oversimplifications, generalizations and the omissions of unknown factors do not assist in the efforts of making a universal tool via which a researcher can infallible predict the actions of an international actor or dictate the best course of action (Jackson and Sorensen, 2003, pp.357-358). Undeniably, Positivism does provide us with a viable go-to understanding of a situation from which the researcher can examine the numerous specifics and unique characteristics of a case and delve deeper into the core of the issue at hand and produce a more concrete position on the topic, yet not an infallible one.

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<sup>1</sup> Realism vs Idealism; Traditionalism vs Scientism; Inter-paradigm Debate, Positivism vs Post-positivism; and the case of a potential new debate over critical realism made by C. Brown.

Another influential methodological approach in the field of International Relations is the Traditional or Classical one. The Traditional Approach does neither support a specific methodology, nor proposes hypotheses that are subsequently verified via the scientific research and does not use any scientific tools. The Traditional approach rejects the notion that a single true objective analysis of international politics can exist. Traditionalism emphasizes in the accumulated experience though years of research, scientific curiosity and the usage of critical thought, in order to draw conclusions over the issue at hand. According to Hedley Bull (1969) the International Relations field is multi-disciplinary, with history; political science and international law being the three fundamental sciences of the field. Robert Gilpin (1981, p. 11) –acknowledging the great importance of history- wrote “believing that the past is not merely prologue and that the present does not have a monopoly on the truth, we have drawn on historical experience”.

The value of the Traditional Approach comes from its ability to comprehend the complexity of the nature of the International Relations; and to realize that the consequences of each actor’s actions are so complicated and diverse that predicting the future or dictating the best course of action is such a daunting task.

Jackson and Sorensen (2003, p. 353) argue that there are two alternatives in approaching this methodological confrontation, either to consider them completely incompatible or to attempt to combine them using the valuable aspects of each approach. Most Post-Positivists prefer the former than the latter, but I believe that synthesis of the two approaches would be a more suitable to the subject and the purpose of this paper.

Based on a synthetic methodological approach that will combine aspects of the traditional and the positivist ones, the objective of this thesis paper will be to examine how the strategic relations between the West (the European Union, the US and NATO) and the Russian Federation have been impacted by the ongoing crisis in Ukraine.

I consider it essential to establish a comprehensive understanding over the crisis in Ukraine, before proceeding with the examination of its impact on the relations between the West and Russia. For this reason, I will provide an insight into some of the main causes of



the Ukrainian Crisis, as well as a concise narration of the key events that have taken place in Ukraine since December 2013.

After exploring the causes and the events of the crisis, I will be able to determine to what extent, if any, this crisis has impacted the relations between the Western countries and Russia, mainly focusing on the economic and political/strategic aspects of the relations between the two sides.

The economic aspect should be better explored via examining the impact of the crisis on the EU-Russian economic and energy ties, as the EU and Russia share a significantly deep economic and energy interdependence.

The political/strategic aspect can be better examined through the cooperation between the US/NATO and Russia on issues of utmost importance for the maintenance of international peace, security and stability such as the war on terror –mainly against ISIS-, the nuclear program of Iran and North Korea and the Syrian Civil-War.

## Theory

The academic field of International Relations supposedly exists in order to study, understand and explain how the world works (Snyder, 2004, p.53). But given the complexity, the numerous variables and the very nature of the field; it is evident that one could hardly manage to create a foolproof and all-explaining theory that could appease and satisfy everyone.

Due to the subject of the field, each theory does not represent an undeniable truth that is proven scientifically and can be tested in a science lab, but it is something more personal and unique to each individual, whether that is a scholar or an ordinary person. It is a personal truth, a personal understanding of how the world works and what its basic principles are; more of an ontological journey, a worldview if one might say.

As Walt (1998, p. 30) explains it, *“The study of international affairs is best understood as a protracted competition between the realist, liberal and radical traditions”*, a competition of at least two lasting worldviews –Realism and Liberalism- in their different forms and evolutions and a third group of traditions more radical, more anti-systemic ones, such as Marxism –till the end of the Cold War-, Constructivism and others.

The theory that one chooses, is based on his personal narrative of how the world works and what the world’s nature is. However, none of the theories is perfect since they are not laws of nature but creations of the human intellect. All theories have valuable ideas that if taken into consideration, combined, supplemented in one’s primary worldview; could create a profounder and more thoroughgoing understanding of how and why history unfolded, unfolds and will unfold in the future.

This paper will mostly follow the theoretical footsteps of neorealist school of thought (Waltz, 2011), and more specifically those of the Offensive Realism theory (Mearsheimer, 2014b), supplemented with other ideas and tools –ideas about: the return of geopolitics and the cynical calculus of power politics (Mearsheimer, 1994, 2014c; Posner, 2014; Walt, 2014a, 2015a), the decision-making process (Allison, 1969) and the perceptions, misperceptions, predispositions and biases of the people and of the decision-makers (Jervis, 2015)-, that will provide a better and more comprehensive understanding

on how and why the Ukrainian Crisis unraveled and what its implications have been –if any- on the broader spectrum of West-Russia relations over the course of the last two years.

In order to be able to effectively analyze any potential spillovers from the crisis in Ukraine to other matters of bilateral and multilateral cooperation between the Western countries and the Russian Federation, it is essential to take into consideration the ideas expressed by Walt (1985, 1987) regarding the formation of alliances.

With Professor Walt's theory in mind, it will become more convenient to realize whether any strengthening or disruption of cooperation and competition between the West and Russia is a side-effect of the crisis in Ukraine or whether its influence on the issues are negligible due to other more dominant reasons that would compel the two blocs to behave thusly.

Moreover, the theory of alliance making will provide a valuable insight in the examination of the possibility that potentially other actors or issues of world politics, could or should give a compelling reason to Russia and the West to set aside the grievances caused by the crisis and create a rapprochement in order to effectively tackle the issues or actors that would pose a greater threat to the maintenance of international peace, security and stability.

## Causes of the Ukrainian Crisis

The causes of the crisis in Ukraine can be separated in two broader categories. The first category includes aspects that define the relationship between Ukraine and Russia, while the second category pertains the relationship between Russia and the West. The analysis of this chapter will commence by examining the former and then the latter.

The complex relationship and the common historical origins of the Russian and the Ukrainian people could only have produced two possible results; either the formation of a closer cooperation or that of a conflictual relationship. Ukrainian nationalism has always been blaming the imperialistic Russian policy, while the Russian one the foreign propaganda “that is turning our brothers against us”. Apparently, both of these claims have some points of validity, but are oversimplifying and are lacking the necessary objectivity in order to eliminate the need for a more systematic examination of the nature of the relationship between the two people.

Understanding the complex Russo-Ukrainian relationship –by exploring its historical, social, geographical and geopolitical components- will provide a significant tool via which one could explain the reasons why the ongoing crisis in Eastern Ukraine was not averted and cannot be easily resolved.

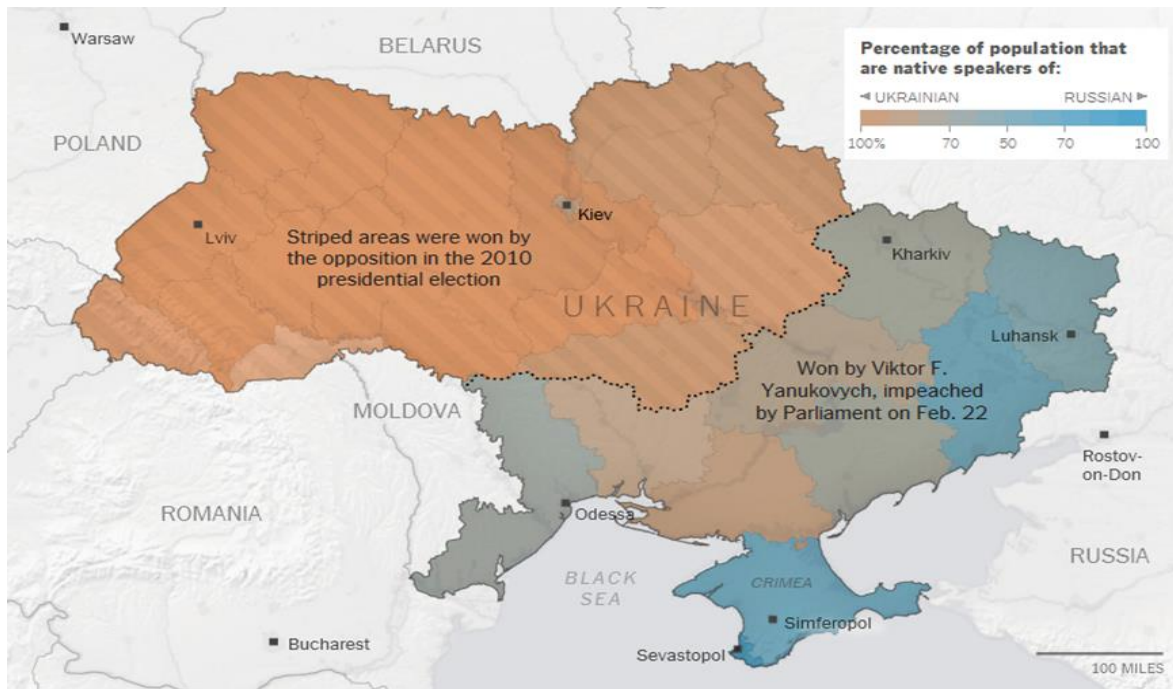
Examining the geographical and the geopolitical aspects of the Russo-Ukrainian relationship, it becomes apparent that the Crimean Peninsula –specifically- and Ukraine as a whole have immense geopolitical value for Moscow. Belarus and Ukraine have always been buffer zones that would protect the Motherland by external enemies coming from the West; and a Ukraine that is a member state of the EU and NATO would present palpable security threats for Russia, as well as would shatter any hope for a viable Eurasian Union (Filis, Dimopoulos and Karagiannopoulos, 2014).

The peninsula and the port city of Sevastopol enable their owner to exert control over the Black Sea, militarily and economically; and by extension enable access and power projection into the Eastern and Southeastern Europe, as well as the Mediterranean. Historically, the peninsula has been part of the Russian Empire since 1783 A.D. and was

transferred to the Soviet Republic of Ukraine by Khrushchev in 1954, an act that was purely administrative and symbolic in its nature, at that time as no one could have foreseen the collapse of the USSR (Buba, 2010).

If one was to seek the social causes of the ongoing crisis, the first subject one ought to examine, would be the identity of the Ukrainian people. The issue of people's identity; is a factor most important. The reference that the people of Ukraine are highly divided has now become a mainstay in any attempt to provide an insight to the causes of the crisis from a social point of view. An external observer could spot many similarities in both Ukrainians and Russians with great ease, but with a closer and deeper examination one could find many differences.

A significant number of the Ukrainian populace, about 17%, were formally Russian nationals, in part due to the Russian policy of providing citizenship to many Russian speaking Ukrainian citizens (Blomfield, 2008). The Russian nationality came along with financial aid of millions of dollars. This twenty-year-old Russian policy was exercised with the objective to block or at least stall the nation-building process in Ukraine and has proven to be a significantly useful leverage during the ongoing crisis, particularly in the case of the Crimea. Furthermore, according to Peisker (2008) there are at least six Christian faith doctrines in the Ukrainian territory and each one of them is actively supporting different sides in the political life of Ukraine. This adds another spin to the fragmentation of Ukraine's social structure.



Sources: State Statistics Service of Ukraine, Ukraine's Central Election Commission

As described by Filis, Dimopoulos and Karagiannopoulos (2014), “..Cultural differences between Russians and Ukrainian can be rooted far back in history; excluding the Kievan Rus, Russians owned their fully independent state at least by 1480, while the first independent Ukrainian state happens only during the 20th century.” The Ukrainian territory was being conquered and reigned by many different rulers, while at the same period Russia was expanding its dominion throughout Eurasia. Russians, as an independent nation, were forming their own unique national identity, when Ukrainians were trying to survive through the wars and implement the changes dictated by each new overlord.

The people of Ukraine were denied by historical circumstances the chance to build a true Ukrainian national identity. Even when the people of Ukraine and the Russians were “on the same side”, Russians were the ones to have the upper hand. During the years of the Soviet Union, relationship between the two former Soviet Republics and their people was further strained by the so called “Stalin’s decade of terror”, when the Soviet Leader was denying the very existence of Ukraine and was eliminating anyone who opposed him. (Filis, Dimopoulos and Karagiannopoulos, 2014)

Molchanov (1997) says that the first years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the western economic policy towards the former Soviet Republics, in fact secluded Ukraine and Russia from the other soviet states, allowing them to preserve their high economic interdependence that was established during the soviet era. The Russian-Ukrainian interdependence has made it abundantly clear that one side is weaker without the other. Politicians from both countries seem to have acquiesced with this complex relationship, although the Kremlin has proved time after time to be more diligent to the needs of such realistic view of international relations.

Although many could hardly predict the crisis that erupted between Kiev and Moscow almost two years ago –and the events that followed-, in 1993 John J. Mearsheimer described the possibility of a Russo-Ukrainian conflict that could even lead to war between two countries.

Due to the impending implementation of the Ukrainian nuclear disarmament deal, Mearsheimer (1993) supported that if one wished to preserve peace in Eastern Europe, or at least prevent a future Russian intervention in Ukraine, Ukraine’s nuclear arsenal should remain intact –based on the nuclear deterrence theorem. He considered that necessary because the Ukrainian conventional military capabilities could never become able to deter a by all means superior Russia.

As stated by Filis, Dimopoulos and Karagiannopoulos (2014), “*..After the end of the Cold War, western powers were now called to fill the power gap created in Eastern Europe. Although the EU’s and USA’s decision to include in their sphere of influence many of the Eastern European countries was the most realistic decision, apparently western allies were not able to comprehend the size of Russia’s growth the last few years of V. Putin’s administration and its ability and willingness to react decisively against what the Russians consider as an attack on their vital national interests and security.*”

The EU’s policy concerning the former members of the Warsaw Pact occurred as three interrelated stages. Initially, right after the collapse of the USSR, the European Union approached the former independent member-states of the Warsaw pact with the aim of

aiding and integrating them into the Union, while offering solely economic and political cooperation to those that were former Soviet Republics. After 1994 the Union attempted to reinforce relations and cooperation with Russia hoping that stability in their bilateral dealings, would provide a safeguard against the increasing energy dependence of the Union's members-states from Russia. Since 2000, the EU's policy towards former Soviet Republics has been more contradictory than before. The adoption of the "*European Neighboring Policy*" and its successor the "*Eastern Partnership*"; the "Color Revolutions" in the post-Soviet area; the natural gas crises of 2006 and 2009; the Russian military intervention in Georgia in 2008; and the ongoing crisis on Ukraine have severely damaged the relations between Brussels and Moscow.

Alongside the EU and Russia, NATO is the other important regional actor involved in the balance of power in Eastern Europe. As a result of its "identity" problem, after the end of the Cold War, NATO found new meaning in expanding the alliance eastwards (Asmus, Kugler and Larrabee, 1993). Several former Warsaw Pact members, are now admitted into the alliance. That never bode well with the Leadership of the Russian Federation, which for more than a decade was unable to do anything but protest and show its discomfort. That changed drastically, after Vladimir Putin took the reins of the Russian Federation, climaxing during the events of 2008 in Georgia and from 2014 to date.

Both categories of factors that were examined above, alongside with the Russian pressuring policy towards Ukraine in times of tension have led to the unfolding of today's crisis in Ukraine. The orientation choices of Ukraine, combined with the EU and NATO policies have raised high level security threats to Russia (Mearsheimer, 2014c). Moscow's reaction against these policies, specifically for "Eastern Partnership" was extensive. Sergey Lavrov, Russia's Foreign Minister, condemned the action-plan and underlined to every CIS state that such kind of agreements with European Union would be contradictory to their obligations towards the Commonwealth, practically informing them that they will have to choose between EU and Russia.

Russia was not only threatened by the "Eastern Partnership" but also from NATO's expansion in Eastern Europe. The Russian Elite considers the expansion eastwards as an



immediate threat to its security and vital national interests (Mearsheimer, 2014c). Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia found itself to be surrounded by NATO members, instead of its initial buffer zone of former allies. The inclusion of Ukraine and Georgia in the alliance, was something Russia could not tolerate for any longer. Under this scope, both the events in Georgia in 2008 and nowadays in Ukraine should not surprise anyone; Russia felt that was running out of options and acted with the sole goal of protecting its national interests and preserving its security.

As Walt (2014) said, Vladimir Putin never had the option to lose control over Ukraine. Not solely because of the security threats and Russian national interests or because of the social and economic interrelation between the two countries, but also because of the fact that Russia's Eurasia Union would be an exclusively Asian project, lowering subsequently any power projection the Union might have in the future towards Europe.

## How the Crisis Unfolded

As examined above, the Ukrainian crisis is based on serious and deep rooted political, economic, historical and geopolitical grievances between the Ukrainian populace, as well as between the West and Russia. Despite these chronic problems, several impactful events, that took place during the last two years, provided tremendous assistance to the downward spiraling of the crisis. There were plenty of opportune moments where both sides could have reached a compromising agreement and finally put an end to this civil war that has threatened to rekindle the doused fires of the Cold War and pit Europe and the US in a dangerous escalation against Russia. However, after almost two years with thousands of dead and injured people, unilateral sanctions, Crimea's ascension to the Russian Federation and continuous animosity between the conflicting sides, everyone appears to be backed into a corner and he who flinches in order to put a definitive end to this crisis will most likely face severe political costs at home and abroad. At the moment, the situation in Ukraine appears to have been stabilized, to what most now consider a "frozen" conflict.

After immense economic and political pressure throughout 2013 by Moscow towards Kiev, on November 21<sup>st</sup> Nicola Azarov, the Prime Minister of Ukraine, signed a decree halting the process of preparing the association agreement between Ukraine and the European Union, a decision which was facilitated by the conditions set by the IMF for its financial aid package to Ukraine (Herszenhorn, 2013).

Following the Government's decision, protestors took the streets in Kiev, the Ukrainian capital, the same night. The peaceful and pro-Western demonstrations were calling the government to sign the treaty and deepen Ukraine's relations with the EU.

On November 29, following the conclusion of the Vilnius Summit, where the Ukrainian Government opted against signing the Association Agreement, the demonstration wave grew in size, as more people took to the streets in order to express their anger and frustration towards the decision of their government (CSIS, 2014). Subsequently riot police clashed violently with protestors, provoking massive outrage (CSIS, 2014).

As the Ukrainian people were in the streets, demonstrating against Viktor Yanukovich, the Ukrainian President attended the planned 6<sup>th</sup> Russian-Ukrainian interstate commission on 16 December in Moscow. The meeting resulted in the signing of the Ukrainian–Russian action plan by President Yanukovich and President Putin that provided Ukraine with major financial assistance from Russia, in the form of a significant discount in gas prices, the purchase of Ukrainian government bonds and commitments for closer economic cooperation between the two states (BBC News, 2013; CSIS, 2014).

Despite the efforts<sup>2</sup> of President Yanukovich to deescalate the situation, the rallies, demanding his resignation and early elections, kept increasing in duration and volume.

On February 21<sup>st</sup> an evanescent peace deal was reached between President Yanukovich and the opposition leaders (CSIS, 2014). As the President Yanukovich left Kiev for a trip to the Eastern Ukraine regions, on the same day, demonstrators overran governmental buildings in Kiev and subsequently the parliament impeached President Yanukovich and voted for the release of Yulia Tymoshenko from prison (CSIS, 2014).

After Yanukovich's ousting, an action which he called illegal and a coup d'état, an interim government was appointed by the Rada and it was announced that Presidential elections would be held on May 25. Meanwhile, the regional authorities in eastern provinces stated their concerns and disapproval of the new developments, while the Regional authorities in Crimea threatened to secede from Ukraine.

On February 27 Crimea's Regional Government and Parliament buildings were seized by armed pro-Russian demonstrators (CSIS, 2014). On the same day, the Crimean Parliament decided to hold a referendum on May 25 –the same day of the Ukrainian Presidential elections-, regarding the status of the region. The following day, February 28, armed militias started seizing infrastructure and key buildings, including airports, TV and telecommunication stations in Sevastopol and Simferopol. The Government of Ukraine and several Western countries claimed that the militiamen were disguised Russian soldiers

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<sup>2</sup> President Yanukovich proposed an extensive cabinet reshuffling, which would include key opposition leaders.

and secret agents; however Russia denied the allegations adamantly (CSIS, 2014; Salem, Walker and Harding, 2014).

By Wednesday 5<sup>th</sup> of March, pro-Russian forces had complete control of the Crimean Peninsula and any military bases of the Ukrainian Army that were not overrun, were blockaded. Later on, Crimea's regional government announced it would hold a referendum on whether it should officially join Russia on 16 March. Meanwhile, the USA decided to impose targeted sanctions against Russian officials and individuals responsible for the Crimean occupation, which prompted a similar response from the Russian Government (CSIS, 2014; Lewis *et al.*, 2014). The European Union began preparations to impose similar sanctions (CSIS, 2014).

On March 11, the Parliament of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea declared Crimea's independence from Ukraine. Five days later, on March 16, the people of Crimea voted in favor of joining the Russian Federation with an overwhelming 97% (CSIS, 2014). On March 18, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a bill, under which the Crimean Peninsula was incorporated in the Russian Federation (CSIS, 2014). The ascension of Crimea into the Russian Federation caused an outcry by Western countries and Kiev, which questioned the validity of the treaty and called the referendum unconstitutional (CSIS, 2014). However, as turmoil, unrest and violence spread to other South and Eastern provinces of Ukraine that demanded their independence from Kiev; quickly the Crimean issue was mulled and the spotlight moved to the battle in Donbass (CSIS, 2014). At the moment, Crimea is de facto part of the Russian Federation, despite the fact that a huge part of the international community does not recognize the ascension, and it is the opinion of the author that this is extremely unlikely to change given the immense strategic importance of the region for Russia.

Following the annexation of Crimea, several pro-Russian rallies took place in several main cities throughout the South and Eastern Ukraine, including Odessa, Khrakiv, Mariupol, Luhansk and Donetsk (CSIS, 2014). The events that unfolded during March and April culminated on the declaration of independence of Donetsk and Luhansk, following the referendums held on May 11, which were considered illegitimate by Kiev and the West,

despite their supposed overwhelming majority in favor of secession from Ukraine (CSIS, 2014).

Petro Poroshenko won the Presidential elections, that took place on May 25, with approximately 56% (CSIS, 2014). Most polling stations in eastern Ukraine were closed (CSIS, 2014). One day after the presidential elections, the Ukrainian authorities intensified their efforts to regain control of the regions of Donetsk and Slovyansk by launching a military offensive against the rebel held positions (CSIS, 2014).

In early June, the rebel forces commenced a systematic offensive against major border control stations at the Eastern Ukraine-Russian borders, succeeding in capturing the Border Guard Headquarters, establishing thusly an unhindered supply corridor from Russia (CSIS, 2014).

On June 7, despite Poroshenko's calls to the separatists to lay down arms and end the fighting during his inaugural address, the clashes intensified (CSIS, 2014). Throughout the rest of the summer, the clashes between the rebels and the governmental forces continued (CSIS, 2014). The skirmishes and the artillery barrages caused extensive damage to the infrastructure of the Donbass area and the death toll kept rising (CSIS, 2014). Death and destruction seemed to cement the growing rifts between the two sides, diminishing thusly any chances of reconciliation and compromise that could end the conflict.

On September 5, Ukraine, the Russian Federation and the two separatist Republics of Eastern Ukraine signed the Minsk Protocol (CSIS, 2014). The Minsk Protocol's objective was to impose an immediate ceasefire and put an end to the ongoing hostilities (CSIS, 2014). Subsequently, the President of Ukraine rescinded the law that bound Ukraine into remaining neutral, enabling Ukraine to actively seek its ascension to NATO (CSIS, 2014). The ceasefire that was put in effect by the Minsk Protocol in reality was violated repeatedly by both sides, despite remaining nominally in effect till late January 2015, when the pro-Russian separatists renewed their attacks on several fronts accomplishing severe blows to the Ukrainian Armies positions by recapturing cities and the Donetsk Airport (CSIS, 2015). The rebels made also advances towards the city of Mariupol and captured the city of Debaltseve, a major railroad hub (CSIS, 2015).

On February 12, the Minsk II Agreement is signed. The agreement alongside a new ceasefire included a long-term plan that would address broader political concerns by the end of 2015 (CSIS, 2015). Seven days after the Minsk II Agreement was signed, and Ukrainian forces withdrew from Debaltseve, the fighting between the Ukrainian Armed Forces and the rebels subsided and the ceasefire has been upheld, despite some minor incidents taking place, for which both sides blame each other (CSIS, 2015).

From late February till late October (2015), the military side of the crisis remained relatively calm (despite some extensive fighting during July-August) while political and diplomatic tensions and grievances continued regarding the implementation of the Minsk II Agreement; the withdrawal of heavy weapons; training of troops, provision of supplies and weapons; gas supplies from Russia to Ukraine; and renewed sanctions between the West and Russia (CSIS, 2015).

One of the most worrisome phenomena that have been unfolding these last eight months since the Minsk II Agreement is the internal political turmoil in Ukraine. The rise of the ultranationalist extreme right groups, which have even mounted attacks on governmental buildings and demand the resignation of President Poroshenko (CSIS, 2015), as well as the preliminary results from the nationwide local elections –held on October 25– have reaffirmed that Ukraine is a deeply divided country, as pro-Western government coalition showed strong electoral results in western and northern Ukraine, while the opposition which is largely pro-Russian, performed well in the south and eastern regions of the country (CSIS, 2015).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The final results will be announced early in November.

## The Impact of the Crisis on the EU-Russian Relations

In this part of the paper, I will examine the impact of the Ukrainian Crisis on the EU-Russian relations, focusing mostly on the economic relations between the Union and Moscow, as I consider the economic relations between the two actors the most prominent ones, especially since the security issues in Europe are more relevant to NATO, and by extent to the US military power, as an opposing force to Russia than the EU itself.

Despite the fact that since 2000 the EU member-states have been divided in two groups regarding the Unions stance towards Russia – a phenomenon known as the “Two Europes”<sup>4</sup>-, the relations between the European Union and Russia have been close. Of course there have been periods of higher tension and non-amical rhetoric by all sides (Color Revolutions, Anti-Ballistic Missile Shield, the Ukrainian gas crises, the Russian military intervention in Georgia, etc.), but both Moscow and the Europeans knew that a stable and functioning relationship was a necessity due to the numerous and close economic ties between them.

Europe has been the biggest trade partner for the Russian Federation for several years and remains so even after the crisis in Ukraine, according to the European Commission’s data (Directorate General for Trade, 2014). Additionally, the trade relations between the Union and Moscow have been steadily increasing for the last ten years – if one excludes a decrease in 2009, which took place due to the global financial crisis-. Since the beginning of the crisis in Ukraine, the sanctions imposed upon Moscow by Brussels and the countermeasures imposed subsequently by Moscow have resulted in a 9.9% drop in total trade between the two (Directorate General for Trade, 2014).

However, it is not only the European Union that is important for Russia, being its biggest trade partner, but the Union is heavily dependent on Russia as well. Firstly, despite the situation in Ukraine and the sanctions regime, Russia remains within the top 5 trade

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<sup>4</sup> The “Two Europes” phenomenon describes the division of EU’s member-states in two camps, the “older” and the “newer” member-states, with the “older” member-states pursued a policy that would seek the formation of stronger economic and commercial ties with Moscow, while the “newer” member-states were expressing concerns over human rights and democratization.

partners of the Union, whether it is the exports and imports of goods or services. Secondly and most importantly, Russia is the biggest energy supplier of the European Union, providing to the Union 28.8% of its solid fuel imports, 33,5% of its crude oil imports and 39% of its natural gas imports, according to Eurostat's data (Eurostat, 2015). Πρώτιστα

Solid fuels											
	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Russia	13.2	18.0	23.7	24.8	24.8	26.1	30.0	26.9	26.2	25.9	28.8
Colombia	11.7	12.0	11.7	11.5	12.7	12.3	17.4	19.9	23.5	23.6	22.4
United States	6.6	7.2	7.6	7.7	9.1	14.0	13.5	16.8	17.8	23.0	21.8
Australia	16.0	14.5	13.1	11.9	13.0	11.7	7.5	10.5	8.7	7.4	7.3
South Africa	29.7	25.2	25.0	23.2	20.1	16.5	15.8	9.6	7.7	6.3	6.8
Indonesia	7.0	6.6	7.2	9.3	7.8	7.3	7.0	5.6	5.0	4.6	3.0
Canada	2.7	2.4	3.2	2.7	3.0	2.6	1.4	2.0	2.2	1.7	1.7
Ukraine	1.9	2.3	2.2	1.6	1.8	2.3	1.7	1.9	2.3	1.6	1.5
Norway	1.1	0.6	0.5	0.3	0.5	0.6	0.8	0.8	0.6	0.3	0.6
Others	10.1	11.3	5.8	7.0	7.2	6.7	4.9	6.0	6.0	5.8	5.9
Crude oil											
	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Russia	31.2	32.5	32.9	33.8	33.7	31.8	33.5	34.7	34.8	33.7	33.5
Norway	19.1	18.7	16.8	15.4	14.9	15.0	15.1	13.7	12.5	11.2	11.7
Saudi Arabia	11.2	11.3	10.5	9.0	7.2	6.8	5.7	5.9	8.0	8.8	8.6
Nigeria	4.2	2.6	3.2	3.6	2.7	4.0	4.5	4.1	6.1	8.2	8.1
Kazakhstan	2.7	3.3	4.4	4.6	4.6	4.8	5.3	5.5	5.7	5.1	5.8
Libya	8.4	8.8	8.7	9.1	9.7	9.9	8.9	10.1	2.8	8.2	5.6
Azerbaijan	1.0	0.9	1.3	2.2	3.0	3.2	4.0	4.4	4.9	3.9	4.8
Algeria	3.0	3.3	3.5	2.5	1.9	2.5	1.6	1.2	2.6	2.9	3.9
Iraq	1.5	2.2	2.1	2.9	3.4	3.3	3.8	3.2	3.6	4.1	3.6
Others	17.7	16.4	16.5	16.8	18.9	18.7	17.6	17.1	19.1	14.0	14.4
Natural gas											
	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Russia	44.1	43.6	40.7	39.3	38.7	37.6	33.0	29.5	31.5	32.0	39.0
Norway	25.5	24.3	23.8	25.9	28.1	28.4	29.3	27.5	27.4	31.2	29.5
Algeria	19.8	18.0	17.6	16.3	15.3	14.7	14.2	14.0	13.0	13.6	12.8
Qatar	0.7	1.4	1.5	1.8	2.2	2.3	5.5	9.7	11.0	8.5	6.7
Nigeria	3.1	3.6	3.4	4.3	4.6	4.0	2.4	4.1	4.3	3.6	1.8
Libya	0.3	0.4	1.6	2.5	3.0	2.9	2.9	2.7	0.7	1.9	1.8
Trinidad and Tobago	0.0	0.0	0.2	1.2	0.8	1.7	2.3	1.5	1.0	0.9	0.8
Peru	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.8	0.5
Turkey	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2
Others	6.5	8.6	11.0	8.8	7.3	8.2	10.1	10.9	10.8	7.5	6.9

Source: Eurostat (online data codes: nrg\_122a, nrg\_123a and nrg\_124a)

## Sanctions

With Mearsheimer's theory in mind in the European region, the Russian Federation and the European Union are the two regional powers aiming to establish their regional hegemony on the region, while the United States of America, alongside NATO, act as the offshore balancer in favor of the European Union and against the Russian Federation.

Even if one perceives Russia's motives in Ukraine as purely defensive, since Moscow considers its influence over Kiev a vital matter prerequisite for its security, the European Union and the United States are compelled to seize any opportunity to weaken their adversary. The problem that lies here though is the mismatch between the objectives



of the European Union –and those of the US by extent-, with the means or lack thereof and sacrifices there are willing to make in order to achieve said objectives.

The West has created a confrontation with Moscow over Ukraine, but is unwilling and unable to provide to their pro-Western friends in Kiev the military power to win the conflict. By any means, this is not a call for a direct or additional indirect military support from the West to Ukraine, as this could certainly lead to the escalation of the crisis with unpredictable consequences.

The austerity stricken European Union does not possess the financial or military power to directly confront Russia, let alone over Ukraine, while the United States –despite them being arguably the most advanced technologically and most powerful military force on the planet at the moment- cannot overcome the stopping power of water. The cost of military conflict against Russia in Ukraine would be unbearable and its feasibility doubtful.

The only other option against Russia was imposing sanctions; and that was what the West did. Since early March 2014, the EU has imposed sanctions on Russia, on the basis that Russia has: a) violated the sovereignty and the territorial integrity of Ukraine; b) illegally annexed Crimea and the city of Sevastopol; and c) allowed an inflow of fighters and weapons from its territory into Ukraine (European External Action Service, 2015; The General Secretariat of the Council, 2015). The first rounds of sanctions affected individuals –whose assets froze and they were banned from travelling to the Union-, canceled the EU-Russia summit and suspended EU-Russia bilateral talks on visa matters, as well as on the New Agreement between the EU and Russia (The General Secretariat of the Council, 2015). Additionally, imports from Crimea and Sevastopol were banned, as well as a full ban on investments on the peninsula (The General Secretariat of the Council, 2015). These measures will remain in effect until 23 June 2016. The Russian Federation replied in kind by imposing similar sanctions on European politicians.

In July and September 2014, economic sector targeted sanctions were imposed following the escalation of the conflict in Donbass (European External Action Service, 2015; The General Secretariat of the Council, 2015). These sectoral sanctions targeted

Russian financial institutions, as well as energy and defense companies, hindering their access to European capital markets, banning the EU exports of dual-use goods for military use to Russia and preventing Russian companies from accessing technologies and services that could be used for oil exploration and production (European External Action Service, 2015; The General Secretariat of the Council, 2015). On 6 August 2014, Moscow imposed a ban on the import of agricultural products –such as fruit, vegetables, meat, fish and dairy products- from countries who had sanctioned Russia.

The public in most Western countries is familiar with the narrative that the sanctions imposed by the US, the EU and other countries have crippled the Russian economy which is in a decline, with the rouble having lost much of its value and the Russia is losing in Ukraine (Christie, 2015; Karatnycky and Motyl, 2015). It is true that the Russian economy is in great peril, however the main cause of its decline is not the sanctions themselves, but the plummeting of the oil prices that dropped from some \$115 per barrel to \$46 per barrel (Reuters, 2015). Many tend to downplay or completely omit the impact of the oil prices, attributing the ordeals of the Russian economy solely to the sanctions, but that is very far from the truth.

Oil accounts for half the revenue of the Federal Government and approximately two-thirds of Russia's total exports, so the collapse of the price of oil is the main reason for Russia's economic decline, while it remains dubious if the sanctions alone could have such effects on the Russian economy in such a short period of time (Weafer, 2015). Evidently, Russia's own economic policy choices over the past decade (unwillingness to uproot corruption; failure to modernize and diversify its economy, as well as its trade partners etc.), alongside with the Western sanctions have enabled the low oil prices to hurt the Russian economy even more (Dreyer and Popescu, 2014; Bond, Odendahl and Rankin, 2015; Wang, 2015; Weafer, 2015).

As Weafer (2015) says that without the steep decline in oil prices, the Russian economy would not have gone into recession; and that without the sanctions the rouble would not have collapsed so dramatically due to the oil prices plummeting, because Russia could have offsetted the lack of local liquidity by accessing foreign debt markets.

Admittedly, if the sectoral sanctions on financing and technology sharing against Russia last for another four to six years, their effects on Russian economy –on their own– could be devastating, but Moscow still has some \$400bn in its Central Bank’s international reserves that can be used to keep the Russian economy afloat for another two to three years (Dreyer and Popescu, 2014; Bond, Odendahl and Rankin, 2015; Wang, 2015).

In my opinion, the most impactful sanctions in place at the moment that are affecting Russia in the short-term, are the sanctions regarding the access of the EU capital markets and the acquisition of military equipment and dual-use goods, which include some rare material that are necessary for the development of sophisticated Russian weapon systems.

The aforementioned two sectoral sanctions and the Russian ban on agricultural imports have forced the Kremlin to adopt import substitution and localization as its recovery strategy. If the Russian Government seriously decides to support the domestic production of agricultural products, medicines and basic machinery, the Russian producers could possibly in five years have a significant impact on the domestic supply of those products (Weafer, 2015).

Similarly, in the defense sector Russia will be forced to develop and manufacture that equipment domestically –since there are no other available manufacturers that could provide alternatives of better or similar quality–, something that will impact delivery times and increase the production cost. On the other hand, if the Russian Defense Industry succeeds in overcoming those short-term hurdles, it will become less dependent on Western companies.

However, it is not only the Russian economy that stands to lose from the sanctions imposed by the EU. The already troubled European economy, as stated above has close economic ties with Russia and if the Russian economy collapses the impact will be severe for several EU member-states. As the situation in Ukraine continues unresolved and tensions between Moscow and Brussels remain high, business will suffer as the environment will remain uncertain. With unemployment numbers still soaring in many

European countries, marginal growth, public weariness from the austerity policies and the increased inflow of refugees from Syria, it remains uncertain if the European Union will remain steadfast on its sanctions policy against Russia for much longer.

The Russian sanctions of agricultural products, although they account for only €5bn a year worth of business, have had their impact on the specific economic sectors of some EU member-states, such as Poland, Lithuania, Greece, Finland and Spain (Giumelli, 2014). However, the Commission has attempted to alleviate the issue by introducing certain measures (Giumelli, 2014).

The question that is yet to be answered, so far, is whether the sanctions have accomplished their goal. Have the sanctions imposed by the EU inflicted such costs to the Russian Federation that would make Vladimir Putin acquiesce defeat and give up on Ukraine? The short answer is no, they have not.

Obviously, one could argue that since Russian tanks have not waltzed through the streets of Kiev, the sanctions have deterred and halted Russian aggression and therefore have worked. Indeed, that could be a valid argument if Moscow had such objectives, which it never did.

Realistically sanctions could have never forced Moscow to capitulate and let Ukraine join the EU and NATO. Ukraine's pro-Russian orientation or at the very least its neutrality is of paramount importance for Russian national security (Brzezinski, 2014; Mearsheimer, 2014c; Walt, 2014a, 2014b, 2015a, 2015c). As stated earlier and as Marshall (2015) says geography has been the curse that has haunted every Russian Leader throughout the course of history. Ukraine and Belarus act as Russia's main buffer zones with Central and Western Europe and by that extension NATO –its main military and political adversary. Russian Leaders have fought bloody wars to capture, secure and defend these valuable buffer zones, so it seems absurd if anyone was seriously considering that sanctions could deter Russia from making sure that Ukraine would never become an EU and NATO member.

Even if geography –as a reason- was not good enough, Russia sees itself as the regional superpower of the post-Soviet space and would do anything to maintain its regional control and influence. No one should act surprised by Moscow’s resolve to maintain and reassert its sphere of influence in that part of the world. After all, that’s exactly what the US did in the 1980s in Nicaragua, as Walt (2015c) points out.

Another reason for which the Kremlin could not be swayed by the sanctions is the high pain thresholds of the Russian people (Friedman, 2014; Walker, 2015). If one was to look back in history before the era of Vladimir Putin in Russia, from the Yeltsin era back to the Czars, the Russian economy in shambles and enduring hardships were the norm for the ordinary Russian citizens (Friedman, 2014). Moreover, the Russian people have learned to support their government when they feel that Russia is threatened by external actors (Friedman, 2014), and this can indeed be witnessed in the unparalleled rise in popularity since the annexation of Crimea and the imposing of sanctions from the West. Respectively, Russian public opinion of the West is extremely low (Pew Research Center, 2015) and their opinion on the events of Ukraine are becoming highly polarized, emboldening the Kremlin to maintain its conflictual relation with the West and not to accept easily any unfavorable solutions.

And indeed this is where the issue with sanctions lie. Sanctions reflect the thresholds of pain of those who impose them and not the thresholds of pain of those who the sanctions are imposed upon (Friedman, 2014).

## Energy

The impact of the Ukrainian crisis in the energy relations between the European Union and the Russian Federation could effortlessly be summarized by the quote attributed to Lord Palmerston that “*In politics, there are no permanent friends or enemies, only permanent interests*”<sup>5</sup>, thusly the need of energy is a permanent fact and as long as Russia is delivering it reliably, the cooperation continues regardless of the events in Ukraine.

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<sup>5</sup> Lord Palmerston’s exact words were: “Therefore I say that it is a narrow policy to suppose that this country or that is to be marked out as the eternal ally or the perpetual enemy of England. We

The European Commission has made efforts, since the very first Ukrainian gas crises in 2006 and 2009, to adopt a common integrated European Energy policy that would decrease the European Union's dependence, diversify its suppliers and create a common European energy market, however, until today the results remain insufficient.

Despite the Commissions efforts, the diversification of Europe's sources of energy has not really reached a point where the European Union finds itself independent from Russia. There are two main reasons that the EU and its Member-States continue to heavily import their energy resources from Russia. The first reason is the lack of alternative suppliers that could cover the share of Russian energy resources and the second reason is that beyond the occasional hostile rhetoric Russia –and its predecessor the USSR- have proven to be a remarkably reliable energy supplier since the late 1960s (Schubert, Pollak and Brutschin, 2014). Additionally, Russia's geographical proximity to the European Union and the already existing infrastructure, further enhance its role and value as an energy supplier.

If indeed the European Union's demands in energy resources and specifically in natural gas increase in the next ten to twenty years, the Union will not only need to find alternatives for the lost Russian gas but also to cover its additional needs. Are there countries able to provide such large gas quantities and moreover are these countries willing to export to the Europe and not to Asia, in the short to mid-term?

Azerbaijan, the United States of America, Iran, Algeria and Nigeria are some of the potential alternate suppliers to Russia. From the above countries, the only one that could produce enough gas quantities to substitute Russia, would only be the US, but with the US being unable to export significant quantities of shale-gas and shale-oil for at least another 5 to 10 years, the United States cannot be considered as a viable alternative for the short to mid-term. Even the US could export the necessary volume, the question of the cost remains.

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have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow.”

Numerous LNG facilities, which are quite expensive and vulnerable, would have to be created and the shipping costs could make the project unfeasible.

Algeria and Azerbaijan are already supplying the European Union with energy resources and even if they indeed could increase their production and supply it to the Union, their numbers are too small to cover the supply gap from Russia. Similarly, Nigeria that is troubled from terrorist activities within its borders cannot be considered as a reliable partner for the time being.

Iran, as well, could possibly provide significant amounts of natural gas and oil to the European Union, but that would entail the lifting of the sanctions, the creation of the necessary infrastructure, the political will of the Iranian Leadership to abandon its cordial relations with Russia and decide not to exports its energy resources to the much more profitable Asian markets.

Evidently, in the short-term it is quite difficult for the European Union to sever its energy ties with Russia and find other suppliers to cover the supply gap. In the mid to long-term it still remains a daunting task that relies on many variables, such as market prices, production levels and whether or not the European energy demand increases.

Similar were the key conclusion of a policy brief paper published by the Brookings Institution last October (Boersma *et al.*, 2014). According to the paper it is unlikely that the European energy gas supply mix will change radically in the near future, Russia natural gas will remain quite competitive in Europe – considering the increase in the supply of Russian LNG- and that barring any drastic policy interventions by the European Union the market development and integration in central and eastern Europe will remain lacking. Other papers on the matter concluded alike (Dickel *et al.*, 2014; Schubert, Pollak and Brutschin, 2014)

In its turn, Russia has taken steps to diversify its energy resources customers and its cooperation in energy resources fields exploration and exploitation by concluding deals with Asian countries, such as China, India and Vietnam (Wang, 2015). However, Russia does not wish to lose its market share in Europe, on the contrary Moscow is extremely keen

to maintain its share and influence on the European energy market. Obviously, Russia wishes to minimize as much as possible Ukraine's role as an energy transit hub to Europe, for that reason it promoted the TurkStream pipeline project, after the South Stream project collapsed, and since early September 2015 a shareholder's agreement has been signed Gazprom and European energy companies for the construction of the Nord Stream-2 pipeline project that will run alongside the existing Nord Stream pipeline and provide another direct gas transit route between Russia and Germany (Hogue, Prodhan and Oatis, 2015).

Without any doubt, the relations between the European Union and the Russian Federation have been polarized to a great extent by the events that have transpired in Ukraine, cooperation and communication in several important areas have been damaged, however both sides are managing to set aside the situation in Ukraine when crucial issues, such as energy, are brought into the fold.



## The Impact of the Crisis on the US-Russian Relations

US-Russian relations since the beginning of the new millennium have been rather cold, if one was to exclude the first two years of Putin's and Medvedev's presidencies respectively, where both Moscow and Washington attempted a rapprochement. Despite, the non-amical or hostile rhetoric, these two old rivals have managed to cooperate in certain matters of mutual interest –as such fields one could identify: North Korea; Iran; the war on terror; disarmament; and non-proliferation- and to prevent a return to a new Cold War. A new Cold War has always been unlikely as Russia –although resurgent the last few years- is nowhere near as powerful as its predecessor. In fact, Putin during the early years of his presidency did not challenge the unipolarity of the international system of the time. Only after Russia started to regain some of its power and influence, Vladimir Putin started to alter his narrative and express his ideas for a multipolar world without a single policeman.

There lies the key difference between the United States of America and the Russian Federation. They both see the same world through remarkably different eyes (Walt, 2015a). As, Ioffe (2015) points out the difference in each countries worldviews can be seen in both Putin's and Obama's speeches at the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the United Nations. According to the United States, UN's primary objective is the prevention of human suffering through the promotion of democracy, human rights and liberal ideas, while Russia sees national sovereignty and the survival of the legitimate states as its core objectives.

The world and by extension the international system are constantly changing and reshaping –change means to become different than what one is at the moment; that does not always mean moving forward to new ideas, it can also mean a return to an older state of things-. The United States and its allies appear to be in denial of that, treasuring and guarding the post-Cold War order, while Russia, China, Iran and others are challenging some of the core ideas of that world order, as they believe that much has changed since 1991 (Walt, 2014b). As Posner notes (2014), while the United States was the world's sole superpower, it was able to enforce its interests and values abroad without much resistance. Now that the might of the United States is in decline and other states are becoming stronger,

the norms established by George H.W. Bush's "new world order" are being challenged (Posner, 2014).

As Sakwa (Sakwa, 2015) states, this is a "geoideological" contestation where both sides are trying not to reason with the other, but simply de-legitimize the very existence of the alternative views.

The reluctance of US officials to accept that the world is moving on and that the US power has its limits, became clearer in a visit to the US Embassy in Athens in 2012, where along with some colleagues I had the opportunity to discuss several issues, that were on the international agenda at that time, with high ranking officials of the Embassy. While discussing about the situation in Syria (that was a few months before the infamous Obama's red-lines were crossed and chemical weapons were used) I was told that the United States – if they really wanted- could and would act in Syria regardless of what Moscow had to say. A few months later that statement was proven untrue.

Another conclusion that I draw from that visit was that despite the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, a great number of US officials still regarded Russia very poorly or as their main adversary, of course while none was downplaying the significant repercussions of China's rise.

However, it is not only the Americans that are suffering from a Cold War era syndrome. Many Russian officials regard the United States and NATO as their main national security threats, despite the legitimate threat the neighboring China could pose against them in the future.

As Jervis (2015) explains, prejudice and history, perceptions and misperceptions – among the political elite and all those individuals that contribute into the decision making and foreign policy formulation processes- influence severely the results of said processes and on several occasions lead to faulty conclusions and mistakes, as it usually hinders, to a great degree, the willingness and the ability of the decision makers to thoroughly examine all the aspects of each situation. The way new information is processed regarding a

hypothetical “adversary” are based on perceptions and beliefs that have been formulated in the past.

Based on all the above, without even factoring in the events in Ukraine, one would understand that the relations between the United States and the Russian Federation –to a great extent- are not ideal, especially when on a significant number of instances their interests are conflictual. Therefore, one must explore where, when and if the crisis in Ukraine aggravated the relations between Washington and Moscow in some of the vital contemporary issues of international affairs.

### Nuclear Proliferation

Both the Russian Federation and the United States share a common interest in preventing the further proliferation of nuclear weapons to other countries. This can be examined in their cooperation in both the cases of the Iranian nuclear program and in the case of North Korea. Both Moscow and Washington have been vital parts in the multilateral efforts to reach an agreement with both countries, as well as in the efforts to dissuade any other country from pursuing military nuclear capabilities.

Despite Waltz’s argument (Waltz, 2011) in favor of the proliferation of nuclear weapons as a means to guarantee peace, since in case of war mutually assured destruction would be certain, both the United States and Russia – wisely, taking in consideration their own interests- prefer to keep the most destructive weapon on earth at the hands of as few other nations as possible.

### North Korea

The cooperation between Russia and the United States on the North Korean nuclear weapons program exists since the early 1980’s, when North Korea was suspected of having a clandestine nuclear weapons program and intensified in 1993 when the Hermit Kingdom first threatened to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

Since 2003, when Pyongyang finally withdrew from the NPT, the United Nations Security Council has passed several Resolutions that imposed sanctions on North Korea,

in an attempt to persuade Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear program. Both the United States and Russia have been members of the Six-party talks on North Korea's nuclear weapons program.

During the 1990's North Korean-Russian relations were, in reality, non-existent. In the first years of Putin's presidency, efforts were made for a rapprochement between the two neighboring countries, however North Korea's persistence to pursue the development of nuclear weapons and its nuclear weapon tests strained the relations between the two.

Following the events in Ukraine, Russia and North Korea have made renewed efforts to improve their bilateral relations (Toloraya, 2014; McCurry, 2015), as a part of the Kremlin's "Look East" policy (Toloraya, 2014).

Moscow's efforts to boost its relations with Pyongyang are serving multiple Russian interests and one could possibly attribute this change in the events of Ukraine. Russia with its "Look East" policy is trying to minimize the effects of the western sanctions and the low oil prices. For the same reasons, it is also pursuing to diversify its trade partners and decrease its dependence on Europe. Additionally, the Kremlin is investing resources in gaining influence with countries that have stakes in or are affected by the contemporary issues on the global agenda, (see: Iran, Syria, Iraq, North Korea) in order to force the West to engage with Russia as an equal and valuable partner that could facilitate solutions and offer its support, hoping thusly to use it as leverage so that the West decides to lift the sanctions and stabilize their relations.

It is unlikely that Russia is interested in further derailing the situation in the Korean peninsula or enable North Korea to fire nuclear weapons against its enemies, as that would endanger its Far East territories, either by the aftermath of a potential nuclear fallout or by simply the increased destabilization and militarization of the area, not including a potentially increased presence of US troops.

## Iran

Despite the fact that Russia has no interest in Iran acquiring nuclear weapons, and has been supporting United Nations Security Council Resolutions against Iran, the relations between the two states have remained very close both under an economic perspective as well as under a military one.

However, it must be underlined that due to their geographic proximity, as well as the position of Iran between the Middle East and Central Asia, the relations between the two could be strained if Iran wished to expand its influence in the Former Soviet Republics of Central Asia. In the Middle East, the two states find themselves having common objectives – the survival of the Syrian Regime of Bashar Al-Assad-.

Following the events of the Ukrainian Crisis and the application of sanctions, Russia moved rapidly to further enhance its cooperation with Iran, however Moscow did not attempt to derail the nuclear program talks. The strengthening of the bilateral ties again aimed at enhancing their cooperation in the Syrian Civil War, deepening its economic relations with Iran and gaining valuable business contracts, especially for its domestic defense sector.

In July, the P5+1 negotiations with Iran on its nuclear weapons program resulted in a historic agreement, that would see sanctions be lifted gradually as Iran complied with the provisions of the deal, while the deal included a snapback mechanism so that the sanctions can be automatically resume without risking a vote by the United Nations Security Council.

That fact that Russia did not derail the Iran nuclear deal talks by agreeing to forfeit its ability to veto, in case the sanctions should be re-imposed as a result of an Iranian non-compliance, was a big concession on the behalf of Moscow especially since its relations with the West are so tense.

Russia's decision to make this concession can be explained by taking a closer look at what the Kremlin perceives as its national geopolitical interests. An Iran, relieved of the sanctions, could further its regional influence in the Middle East and challenge the United States and its vital allies –Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Israel- in the area. A stronger Iran

could provide additional support to the regime of Bashar Al-Assad in Syria, their common ally, and be able to provide much more in their common fight the Syrian rebels and ISIS.

On the other hand, President Barack Obama had invested so much political and diplomatic capital in the deal, that it had become a personal objective. From the US perspective, the Iranian nuclear deal: a) guarantees a nuclear weapons-free Iran for the foreseeable future; b) eliminates the possibility of a US preemptive war on Iran; c) will have a positive impact on the global economy and the international commerce; d) promotion of human rights in Iran; and e) could enhance regional cooperation in fighting Islamic State and a potential decrease in sectarian conflict in the region (Hassibi, 2014).

In conclusion, it is difficult to see how one could claim that the crisis in Ukraine had any significant impact in the agreement for Iran's nuclear deal. Both the United States and the Russian Federation had their own national and regional interests that drove their decisions to back and agree on the deal.

#### War on Terror and the Islamic State

The War on Terror in the early 2000s gave several opportunities for close cooperation between the United States and Russia, both facing severe threats on their national security by the terrorist actions of extreme religious fundamentalists. However, this does not appear to be the case, so far, with the rise of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria where while both acknowledge the threat it poses, they appear reluctant to cooperate and coordinate their efforts against this common foe, as they did against Al-Qaeda.

So how can one explain, without falling victim of conspiracy theories, why in 2001 the United States, Russia and others created an alliance against a common enemy and in 2015 such an alliance remains unfeasible?

As Prof. Walt's suggests in his works on alliance formation and balance of threat theory (Walt, 1985, 1987), states balance against threats based on the threat's geographic proximity, offensive capabilities, and perceived intentions. Although Walt downplays the

role of ideology<sup>6</sup>, I consider it – in the context of this case- another variable that should not be neglected. I refer to ideological rifts –in our case competing worldviews between Russia and the West- as a factor which discourages groups of states, already cooperating within each group, to ally in order to form a much broader coalition to balance against a greater common threat.

Moreover, the case of Islamic State is a much more complicated case than the one of Al-Qaeda in 2001, due to the transpiring events in Syria. The competing interests between the two already existing coalitions against the Islamic State in the Syrian Civil War are perplexing the efforts for cooperation and coordination among the global and regional actors. Since, the Islamic State occupies territories spanning from Syria to Iraq, any decisive action and holistic strategy against it, requires a viable and stable resolution of the Syrian Civil War.

The Islamic State and Al-Qaeda, despite sharing common anti-Western ideology and following an extremist narrative, are distinctively different in the way they operate (Bertrand, 2015; Byman, 2015). They have different approaches to violence and the ways in which they opt to capitalize on the anti-Western sentiment (Bertrand, 2015; Byman, 2015). Moreover, their ultimate goals are distinct.

Al-Qaeda is not particularly interested in establishing an Islamic caliphate immediately, their primary goal was to gain followers in order to form a global Muslim movement, a global jihad against the West. Al-Qaeda is focusing its resources in order to stage large-scale dramatic attacks against the Western countries on their soil (Bertrand, 2015; Byman, 2015). The unprecedented attack on the World Trading Center on 9/11, an attack of massive scale and logistics in the heartland of the American power, brought the ire of the, at the time, most powerful military of the world upon them, fully supported by the whole international community.

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<sup>6</sup> The term ideology is used in the context of referencing in the distinctive worldviews and beliefs over the existing international norms and world order.

The magnitude and the audacity of the attack instilled such fear in governments around the globe, that all governments made it their priority –following the US lead- to share and pool information and resources in order to wage war on terror and destroy Al-Qaeda and its global jihad aspirations. Al-Qaeda managed with one strike to present itself as a global threat *contra omnes*, which led to it being balanced and subsequently severely weakened<sup>7</sup>.

The fact that Al-Qaeda, and by extent all extreme religious terrorist organizations that could be linked to it, became the enemy No. 1 for all states, enabled the formation of a grand coalition of states with diverse goals and interests.

Another reason, that this grand coalition materialized was the timing that these tragic events took place. In 2001, the Western Countries and specifically the US were on the pinnacle of their supremacy in the world stage. Russia, after ten years of economic hardship and internal tensions, had no intentions of challenging the status quo of the world order, it wanted to become a part of it and improve its relations with the West and the world as a whole, ending its isolation and to find allies in its own struggles against the “extreme religious terrorists in Chechnya”.

The Western countries saw a weak, resource rich, Russia willing to be integrated into the western system of values, norms and cooperation under a new leader. Russia’s cooperation and influence with the Former Soviet States in geographical proximity to Afghanistan, could facilitate the operations against Al-Qaeda in the Middle East. Additionally, the United States and its allies desired to have an as broad as possible coalition against terrorism and the cooperation with Russia, the former superpower and rival, bore a symbolic importance as well.

On the other hand, currently Russia and the United States have seen their relations deteriorate over a significant number of spats, including the latest events in Ukraine. The

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<sup>7</sup> Since Al-Qaeda is a terrorist organization, employing asymmetrical warfare tactics, and not a state that can be captured, occupied or destroyed, the only realistic outcome of the War on Terror was an extremely weakened and disorganized Al-Qaeda that would not pose a serious threat globally or regionally and would require much time if it was ever to resurge.



rhetoric and the reluctance to communicate and cooperate in some cases has even surpassed the levels of the Cold War, without supporting the idea that there is a new Cold War undergoing. Sanctions and counter-sanctions; the suspension of the Russia-NATO cooperation and the threats to withdraw from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Force Treaty; the planned and surprise military drills on behalf of the Russian Federation and NATO; airspace violations and dangerous naval maneuvers; and the Syrian Civil War have seriously impacted the ability of the two states to see eye to eye, let alone cooperate, on several subjects where their national interests do not align.

Furthermore, the Islamic State – albeit more violent and brutal than Al-Qaeda- is not as threatening for the Western countries as Al-Qaeda is (Byman, 2015). The Islamic State has as its primary and immediate objective to create an Islamic caliphate in Middle East (Bertrand, 2015; Byman, 2015). Under that scope, the Islamic State is not targeting Western countries –for the time being- but is mounting a territorial expansion against its neighbors, destabilizing the region. For this reason, the Islamic State does not pose yet a direct threat to the United States’ national security, as Al-Qaeda did, but threatens mostly Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, Libya, Lebanon – some of which are vital US allies in the region-.

The fact that the Islamic State is not a direct threat to the US homeland (Byman, 2015), is the reason to why the United States have limited their military operations to bombings and providing assistance to their allies, instead of an on the ground military operation as it was the case in Afghanistan. Another reason for the reluctance of the US Government not to send boots on the ground can be attributed to an increased unwillingness to be drawn in another long and costing war in the Middle East, which marked US foreign policy for the last decade.

Russia and its allies understand in the same way the motives and the goals of the Islamic State, however geography and regional interests create for them a much greater threat. Three threats and one opportunity can be identified behind Russia’s decision to intervene militarily against the Islamic State, after the Syrian Governemnt of Bashar Al-Assad officially requested its help.

The first threat consists in the establishment of an extreme, radical and expansionist Islamic State in the Middle East that could act as a destabilizing force and threaten Moscow's allies and energy interests in the region, noting that the Middle East is much closer to Russia than it is to the United States.

The second threat emanates from the fact a great number of the foreign fighters fighting in the Islamic State's armies are originating from the Caucasus area and when and if the Islamic State prevails, they will return back home to Russia.

The third threat is based on the endangerment of the primary Russian national objective in the area, the preservation of its military bases in Latakia and Tartus, the only military bases outside the post-Soviet space. When earlier this year, the Syrian Government began to lose ground to both the Syrian rebels and the Islamic State, those military facilities came under direct threat. That is the main reason, the Kremlin decided to upgrade its support towards the regime of Al-Assad from political, diplomatic, economic, armament and intelligence to direct military support by intervening in Syria.

The opportunity, itself, can be seen as a bonus added by mobilizing in order to eliminate some credible threats to Moscow's regional interests. The Kremlin believes that by becoming more engaged in the fight against the Islamic State by exhibiting power, will, results and credibility could help Moscow increase its influence and standing among the Arab world, as well as mend its relations with the United States and Europe, be seen as a major and valuable partner, and potentially gain some rewards in the Ukrainian front.

As stated, the difference in the level of threats perceived for the Islamic State, as well as the extreme deterioration of the relations between the West and Russia are preventing for the moment any meaningful cooperation against the Islamic State.

However, one could anticipate that both sides will or will be forced to realize that the existence and expansion of the Islamic State poses a grave threat to the regional and global security. With that in mind, as the situation in Ukraine turns into another frozen

conflict and if positive developments in the Syrian Civil War take place<sup>8</sup>, cooperation and coordination in the fight against the Islamic State could become possible in the future.

## Syria

For a little over four years, Syria has been ravaged by a brutal civil war that has killed thousands of people and has displaced millions. The rippling effects of the Syrian Civil War can be felt throughout the Middle East and have started to affect Europe as well due to the unprecedented influx of refugees, who seek peace, security and stability in order to live, work and raise their families.

Since 2011, when the civil war began, the international community did little to resolve the conflict, put an end to the war crimes –committed by all parties- and stabilize the situation in the region.

The United States of America and the Russian Federation have found, once more, themselves standing in opposite sides. The United States has been advocating for the removal of the Syrian President of Bashar Al-Assad and the beginning of the democratization process in the country. Furthermore, the United States has been trying to support and train moderate rebels, however thus far its results are poor and in fact much of the equipment that it has provided have now been captured by the Islamic State.

The motives of the United States of America can easily be explained, on the one hand, by their ardent commitment towards the protection of human rights, rule of law and democracy, their advocacy in the theory of democratic peace. A common misperception among the US elites is that every single part of the globe is of some strategic importance for the United States and therefore the US must adopt and execute an interventionist policy of global domination in order to make the world safe for America (Mearsheimer, 2014a, pp. 9–10). The core objectives of the United States at the moment in the Syrian Civil War

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<sup>8</sup> As it will be analyzed below resolving the situation of Syria is the first big step in formulating a comprehensive strategy in eliminating the threat posed by the Islamic State.

are: a) controlling and reversing the rise of the Islamic State; b) create a stable opposition to the Islamic State; and c) achieve a favorable regime change in Syria (Miller, 2015).

Russia has been supporting politically, financially and indirectly militarily the Syrian President, who Moscow considers the legitimate government of the Syrian Arab Republic. On late September, Russia decided to become engaged in the Civil War more actively, by commencing air and naval strikes against the rebel and Islamic State held areas. In addition, Moscow has beefed up the presence of its ground forces located in its military bases in Syria. Iran and Hezbollah have also been fighting alongside the forces of the Syrian President for some time now. China has also been providing political, economic and humanitarian assistance to Syria. In addition, together, Russia and China, have been exercising their veto power in several cases in the United Nations Security Council, blocking resolutions against the Syrian Government.

However, the Kremlin has no obsession with keeping Bashar Al-Assad in power. Moscow's motives are much more pragmatic. Six important reasons can be identified that explain and justify –strategically- Russia's first military intervention outside the Soviet space since the end of the Cold War and the implosion of the Soviet Union.

The first reason, which in my opinion is the most important one, is the absolute necessity to defend its last remaining military bases outside the Soviet space. During the last months, the armed forces of the Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad were losing territory to the advances of the Syrian Rebels and of the Islamic State, bringing under imminent threat the Russian air base in Latakia and its naval base in Tartus.

The second reason is that it remains essential for Russia to strengthen the position and prevent the collapse of the Syrian Government. As stated above, Russia's support to Bashar Al-Assad and his faction, is not guided by the interest of Al-Assad's personal survival but for the survival of his pro-Russian orientation and support in the aftermath of the Syrian Civil War. Moscow desires to accumulate as much influence and leverage as possible, so that when a political solution is agreed, its results will be furthering Russia's interests in Syria and in the region as a whole.

The next three reasons, are inextricably intertwined with each other: a) Russia has genuine perceptions of threat from the Islamic State –as it was explained before- and considers itself obliged to take actions against it; b) the unwillingness of the United States to take decisive action and embroil itself in another costly war in the Middle East - especially since its vital strategic interests lie in Europe, the Gulf Region and the Asia-pacific- is creating a vacuum of power in the region and as it is known “*nature abhors a vacuum*”, so Russia has moved to fill it; and c) Russia by assuming leadership in the fight against the Islamic State and showing its support and commitment to its ally, is cultivating an image of an assertive, decisive, capable and reliable actor in the region and globally, increasing thusly its profile and credibility and cement its position as a great power.

The sixth and last reason is that the Kremlin sees in Syria and in the fight against the Islamic State an important opportunity to mend its relations with the Western countries and gain political leverage that could be utilized in the Ukrainian front.

Indeed, that is quite true. The Syrian Civil War and the fight against the Islamic State is a make or break case for the rapprochement between the Western countries and the Russian Federation. Already, the previous cooperation between Russia and the United States in destroying the chemical weapons of the Syrian Government has paved the way of cooperation in Syria, however that is not enough as the events in Ukraine have strained the relations of the two sides, while fomenting mistrust and unwillingness to cooperate with each other. Relations between the US and Russia could become even more strained and potentially completely derailed if an accident was to take place in Syria, where at the moment Russian and American military assets are operating with little to none communication.

If a broad international coalition willing to defeat the Islamic State was created, it would need to either put forces of its own on the ground or find reliable local forces. Neither the Kurds alone are able to be those forces nor the Syrian Rebels, whoever they might be. Stable and reliable Governments in Syria and Iraq, alongside with active support from a broad international coalition cooperating together could be able to tackle the Islamic State. This is why, the fight against the Islamic State hinges on the resolution of the Syrian Civil

War. The Syrian Civil War cannot be won on the battlefield as neither the Rebels nor the Syrian government can achieve a decisive victory over the other – at the moment- and completely control the Syrian territory. Syria's only hope is an inclusive political solution. Assad and his faction need to be a part of this political solution, if another Iraq or Libya is to be avoided.

The differences in objectives and interests in Syria, as well as the break down in the West-Russian relations make it seem a bit farfetched at the moment, that the two sides could work together and bridge their differences. However, the situation on the ground and an escalation there, could force the United States and the Russian Federation to realize that they can achieve much more in Syria and Iraq by cooperating and coordinating together as equal partners.

## Conclusions

The aim of the Master's thesis has been to examine the impact of the Ukrainian crisis in the relations between the Western countries –the European Union and the United States of America- and the Russian Federation –as of December 2013 until October 2015-, by emphasizing in the analysis of the economic and energy relations between the EU and Russia, and by measuring the levels of cooperation between the United States and Russia in vital contemporary issues of international security, such as nuclear non-proliferation, the fight against the Islamic State and the Syrian Civil War.

This thesis, after having set its methodological and theoretical tools, determined the causes that led to the unfortunate events in Ukraine. Attempting to comprehend said causes, two broader categories were identified. The first one referred to the historical, social, geographical and geopolitical components of the complex relationship and the common historical origins of the Russian and the Ukrainian people. While the second category focused on the relationship between Russia and the West, highlighting the perceptions of threat created to Russia by the eastwards expansion of the European Union and NATO.

In the chapter, where the state of the EU-Russian relations was assessed, it was stipulated that sanctions and provocative actions by both sides have meaningfully impacted the relations between the two actors, however in issues of vital strategic importance, such as energy, cooperation is not impossible. It was also stressed, that due to the grave economic situations in both Russia and the Union, the two sides could seek to scale back the tension and consider the normalization of their relations. It is possible that logic and economic necessities will prevail and the business sector can pave the way for a gradual normalization.

When the relations between the United States of America and the Russian Federation were studied, focus was given on matters of international security, outside Europe, as it was felt that the topic of the security dilemmas emanating from the resurgence of Russia and the expansion of NATO have been discussed to a great extent in the literature of the field and since the events of Ukraine are taking place in Europe investigating troop

movements or other relevant events to the crisis itself, would in fact be an examination of the crisis and not of its impact on the greater relations between the two states.

The main conclusion of this Master's thesis is that the West and Russia still have managed to cooperate and coordinate in issues, where their interests are aligned – energy, non-proliferation of nuclear weapons-; however, the increased tensions, mistrust and animosity that has occurred, since the events in Ukraine unfolded, are creating additional obstacles and postponing cooperation in issues, where each side is seeking to further its own agenda. However, there are more observations to be made, not only from what has been examined in this Master's thesis, but from the relevant literature that was used while writing it.

Some general observations

Firstly, the Ukrainian crisis has been the most endangering event after the end of the Cold War in Europe, which could lead to a major confrontation between great powers with unpredictable, possibly catastrophic implications (Sakwa, 2015). Both Russia and the Western countries have shown restraint and caution, by avoiding to escalate the situation further than it is required. This indicates a sense of responsibility and understanding that direct confrontation between the two sides would be counterproductive and regrettable. It is reassuring to be aware that the countries controlling the largest portion of the nuclear weapons on earth understand that.

Secondly, the international system that occurred after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War has changed and continues to change day by day. The decline of the US power, as well as the war weariness that has been caused by the latest wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have seriously shaken the resolve of the US Government and the resolve of the US public to act as the world's policeman and intervene in every single crisis. In other words, the US has become much more careful in the fights it is picking, without that implying a retreat of the interventionist liberal ideas that have guided the US foreign policy all these years. It is merely a shift in priorities and a frugality in bearing unnecessary costs in American taxpayer money and lives.



As Eric Posner and Stephen Walt argue, as long as the US and its allies remain blindsided by their flawed liberal world order and the idea of the unsustainable “Pax Americana”, as long as they do not realize that the cynical calculus of power is back, they will fail to comprehend the new geopolitical environment and several of the ongoing and future conflicts will remain inexplicable; and the actions taken towards them will be erroneous (Posner, 2014; Walt, 2014b, 2015b).

Thirdly, alongside the US decline, the resurgence of Russia as a stronger, determined, stubborn and unpredictable actor in the international system; and the rise of China as a future challenger (peaceful or not) for the role of global superpower, are causing ripples throughout the very foundation of the existing international system. A new multipolar world is emerging day by day. Regional powers are slowly starting to assert their influence and change the liberal norms, which have been “imposed” during the era of unipolar supremacy of the United States. Since the United States is unable to enforce those values, states have started to reevaluate their commitment to them.

Fourth, these changes are slowly making their appearance in the United Nations voting procedures, where groups of countries are closer cooperating within the U.N. infrastructure and its bodies to advance their mutual national interests. Since February 1984, which was the last time the U.S.S.R. vetoed a U.N.S.C. resolution, there have been approximately 56 vetoes<sup>9</sup>. Since 2007 and especially after Libya, there have been nine vetoed draft resolutions, and only one of them was vetoed by the US. The other seven were vetoed by both China and Russia and one –regarding Ukraine- was vetoed by Russia alone. This highlights an increased cooperation between Russia and China, within the United Nations and especially the within the Security Council (United Nations, 2015).

Fifth, the West is risking to lose the rest of the world. The Ukrainian crisis and its prolonged duration, as well as West’s role in causing the crisis and provoking Russia, alongside their efforts to isolate and demonize it, are not being perceived positively by a large number of the members of the international community, which over the last fifteen

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<sup>9</sup> Of those 56 vetoes, 43 were made by UK, France and the US, while only 13 belonged to Russia or China or both.

years have developed close relations with Russia based on mutually beneficial agreements that further their individual national interests.

Despite, Russia's forceful annexation of Crimea and its destabilizing role in Eastern Ukraine, a large part of the international community is not taking the West's side against Russia, because they perceive the crisis as another struggle between two rival power blocs and not as a question of international order. Additionally, an increasing number of countries is becoming more and more sympathetic to the view expressed by Vladimir Putin that the West is enjoying unjustifiably privileged in the current international system.

This fifth point can be further supported by casting a quick glance on the United Nations General Assembly Resolution (A/RES/68/262) passed on March 28 entitled "Territorial integrity of Ukraine. The resolution was adopted with 100 votes "in favor", 11 votes "against" and 58 "abstains", while 24 member states were absent. Ninety-three member states did not vote in favor of a resolution that was reaffirming the territorial integrity and the sovereignty of another member state, this number is telling.

Sixth, in a world of globalized economy and great economic interdependence, the continuous enforcement of sanction regimes as a mean coerce and punish states by the United States and its allies is destined to reach a breaking point. At some point, the other members of the international community will be force to develop mechanisms to insulate themselves from the control of the US Treasury. Quite possibly, the European Union and other US allies might find themselves among those other members of the international community that wish to diminish their exposure to the choices of the United States.

#### Limitations and future research

As any other attempt to investigate and understand a contemporary and ongoing topic of international relations, this Master's thesis is limited by the ambiguity and lack of available information, as well as the very nature of a progressing crisis that evolves and expands day by day.

These were the reasons why this Master's thesis paper did not focus on specific events or incidents, whose significance cannot be evaluated properly without the valuable

perspective of time, but attempted to identify and explore general objectives and interests of the actors that are not as prone to change as the still in progress crises.

The fact that the Ukrainian crisis is far from resolved and that it will continue to be a focal point between the West-Russia relations for the years to come is creating the necessity to persist in following the developments in Ukraine and around the globe throughout the duration of this crisis and after its resolution, while continuing to observe the effects and changes in the relations, strategies, interests and objectives of the parties involved.

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