

The Future of Frozen Conflicts: Understanding the Evolution of Russia's Strategy in the Near Abroad and What is Next

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Abstract: Frozen conflicts and the near abroad are concepts that have defined Russia's security policy since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Firstly, in this paper, we will try to explain how the Kremlin sees its near abroad and how it defines it as part of its sphere of influence. Consequently, it describes its interventions and its inevitable clash with the West. Secondly, we want to frame frozen conflicts in two periods with defining characteristics. Each was marked by who held power in the Kremlin and Russia's economic and military situation at the time. In the end, we want to reflect on the impact of the war in Ukraine on the future of these two concepts. Obviously, the outcome will obviously influence Moscow's ability to project power in the near future and its use of frozen conflicts to achieve this.

Keywords: *frozen conflicts, near abroad, security policy, Ukraine, Russia*

Rezumat: Conflictele înghețate și străinătatea apropiată sunt două concepte care au definit politica de securitate a Rusiei după dizolvarea Uniunii Sovietice. În primul rând, vom încerca să explicăm cum percepe Kremlinul străinătatea apropiată și cum o definește ca parte din sfera sa de influență. Aceasta a ajuns să descrie intervențiile aici și inevitabila sa ciocnire cu Occidentul. În al doilea rând, dorim să încadrăm conflictele înghețate în două perioade cu caracteristici specifice. Fiecare a fost marcată de cine a deținut putere la Kremlin, precum și de situația economică și militară a Rusiei la momentul respective. La final dorim să reflectăm impactul războiului din Ucraina asupra celor două concept analizate. Este evident că rezultatul va influența abilitatea Moscovei de a-și proiecta puterea în străinătatea apropiată, precum și a folosirii conflictelor înghețate în acest scop.

Cuvinte cheie: *conflicte înghețate, străinătate apropiată, politică de securitate, Ucraina, Rusia*

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After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia was stripped of a significant portion of its empire. Its status of great power was much reduced. The 1990s were a decade of political humiliation, military impotence, and economic struggles. However, given its sheer size, massive natural resources and long history, Russia still wanted to play an essential role in international relations.

In this context, a phenomenon or strategy emerged: *frozen conflicts*. The concept is not new or specific to the former Soviet space. However, it took a new shape and meaning here and became an instrument through which a weakened Russia could still project power in its former empire. In this paper, we will analyze frozen conflicts as a phenomenon evolving over two periods and how the war in Ukraine is changing the current interpretation.

The first part will define these two crucial concepts: near abroad and frozen conflicts. They are essential for a proper grasp of Russia's security policy after the Cold War. Secondly, we will present the two periods of frozen conflicts and their defining characteristics through exemplification. Each was the result of both who was president and Russia's situation at the time. Lastly, we will apply this interpretation model to the Ukrainian situation, and the ongoing war changed how frozen conflicts might evolve in the future.

I. Defining the Near Abroad

Russia is the largest country in the world. It is a fact built on a long history of conquering territories and reflects its continuous expansion, often justified through security reasons. Russia had few natural borders in the pre-modern period when it appeared on the world's political map. As a result, putting more land mass around its core allowed for depth defense. It was especially true concerning Europe, where the main threat lies. The strategy proved efficient during Napoleon's and Nazi Germany's invasions. Hence, at the core of Russian security thinking, the idea of buffer borders has always existed¹. What changes in time is the way it is framed by official discourse.

The Russian perspective can be best understood through the lens of offensive realism. For these specialists, the world is full of potential enemies, and the essence of their security policy is ensuring survival. International institutions are there for debates, but the equation focuses

¹ Tim Marshall, *Prisoners of Geography: Ten Maps That Tell You Everything You Need to Know About Global Politics*, London, Elliott & Thompson, 2019, p.7-8.

on the capabilities and preparedness of individual states². Thus, a buffer border allows them to keep enemies at a safe distance. We can also tie this into an issue of imperial prestige, an expression of might. In simple terms, great power is defined by the scope of its sphere of influence³. Putin's speeches reflect that he sees international relations as a Darwinian game in which only the strong survive⁴.

In the past decade, the idea of a sphere of influence has taken the shape of the idea of the near abroad. Influence in this space could be argued to be necessary to protect kin and national interest. It fits into revisionist thinking, and Putin's regime uses such arguments to justify many foreign policy actions. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, a slew of newly independent countries appeared, fragmenting and complicating this space with new actors. It was an apparent blow to political prestige, but it also meant many Russians became minorities in foreign countries, and not all were friendly. It was a significant change of status; they were no longer the leading majority⁵.

The Near Abroad comprises the newly independent states that resulted from Soviet dissolution. We can group them based on their geographic position and the role this plays. Firstly, we have the Baltic states, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Before 1989, around 1.7 million Russians lived here, but the number has since declined to 1 million. All three countries are part of the EU and NATO and are highly suspicious of their much larger neighbor. The Kremlin often used them as pressure points against the West⁶.

Secondly, Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova are often seen as part of Greater Novorossiia⁷. Lukashenko is one of Europe's last dictators, and his survival depends on Putin's economic and military support. It has brought Belarus back into the fold⁸. Ukraine is a more difficult target, and its relationship with Russia has been one of love and hate. Moscow never

² John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York – London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001.

³ John J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin", *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2014.

⁴ Gerard Toal, *Near Abroad: Putin, the West, and the Contest Over Ukraine and the Caucasus* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017, p.89.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 216.

⁶ <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/security-insights/baltic-states-targets-and-ivers-role-region-russian-strategy-0>, accessed at 25 of June 2022.

⁷ <https://www.fpri.org/article/2014/05/putins-greater-novorossiia-the-dismemberment-of-ukraine/>, accessed at 25 of June 2022

⁸ Piper Coes, "Examining Belarus' Growing Reliance on Russia", *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, October 8, 2021, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2021/10/examining-belarus-growing-reliance-on-russia/>, accessed on June 27 2022.

grew to fully accept an independent Ukraine and always attempted to influence its internal politics. We will further explore this later. Moldova was caught in between from the beginning, given its mixed population. Transnistria was one of the first examples of frozen conflicts, influencing much of internal politics over the past decades.

Another group of states is the 'five Stans': Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. These are Russia's gates towards Central Asia and the old Silk Road. All are dictatorships, and their relationship with Moscow depends on the economic situation. Kazakhstan is the richest, but its regime still relied on Russia to overcome the challenge of the 2022 Revolution⁹; the rest have an even greater economic dependency. The last on our list is the Caucasus, a region that was always difficult to control. There are three conflicts of interest here: the wars in Chechnya, Georgia (South Ossetia and Abkhazia), and Nagorno-Karabakh. The region plays the role of the gate to the Middle East, one of the places where Russian and Turkish interests might collide. It is also a key element to the total control of the Sea of Azov and the Caspian Sea. Another component is energy, given gas and oil deposits that have enriched Azerbaijan. Consequently, the Caucasus is regarded by Russia as essential to its national security¹⁰.

Developments in the past decades show that the near abroad is a disputed place. Gerard Toal identifies four main actors in this space after the dissolution of the Soviet Union: Russia, the new states, the West, and the separatists. Each would play a role concerning the other in a constantly shifting power game. Initially, Russia tried keeping a grip on its former empire by forming the Commonwealth of Independent States. However, the actors had different perspectives on how this new relationship should look. Ukraine and the Baltic states, in particular, were unwilling to give up any part of their newly gained independence¹¹. This would often lead to tense relations. Another issue was regarding former communist states in East-Central Europe. Most of them moved towards the prosperity of the European Union and the security of NATO integration.

Russia initially tolerated NATO enlargement behind the former Iron Curtain for two reasons. Firstly, there was hope for economic aid from the West. Secondly, its weakened state did not allow any real action or opposition. Antagonism grew further with NATO's involvement in

⁹ Yaroslav Trofimov, "Kazakhstan Unrest and Russia's Intervention Transform Ties With Moscow", in *The Wall Street Journal*, January 6, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/kazakhstan-unrest-and-russias-intervention-transform-ties-with-moscow-11641498408>, accessed on June 27, 2022.

¹⁰ R. Craig Nation, "Russia and the Caucasus", *The Quarterly Journal*, Vol. XIV, No.2, Spring 2015, p.3-6.

¹¹ Gerard Toal, *Near Abroad...*, p.9, 65.

Yugoslavia against Serbia, a traditional ally of Russia¹². The failings of the 1990s would give rise to an ever-increasing nationalist discourse. The resurgence of the past decade came to fall on these arguments in the pursuit of aggressive revisionism.

The exercise of influence abroad came not only through military action. Vladimir Putin tried creating organizations that could act as alternatives to the West. The Collective Security Treaty Organization is supposed to be similar to NATO. However, Russia pretty much has commanded. Similarly, the Eurasian Union is the answer to the EU. It is an instrument to project hegemony in the post-Soviet space that subordinates economic interests¹³.

The near abroad is how Russia calls and defines its sphere of influence. It used to be part of its former empire. Thus, in its realist perspective, it has a historical right to exercise political power over it. Frozen conflicts, as we shall see, are one strategy through which it strives to achieve this, with varying degrees of success.

II. Frozen conflicts

II. 1. Main characteristics

Frozen conflicts describe wars without a clear political solution, and no diplomatic end has been reached¹⁴. The main phase of fighting is over, but there still are limited military clashes between the sides¹⁵. Since they remain committed to opposing objectives, the risk of escalation is still present. This usually occurs due to the international community's inability to impose the terms and conditions of a ceasefire.

In the Russian case, frozen conflicts take on a more complex meaning. They are a strategy or a means through which military presence and political influence can be maintained in the near abroad. In some cases, interventions under the guise of peacekeeping can give international legitimacy to the presence of troops. Some of the best examples are Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. It can also take the shape of backing separatist groups, most obviously in Ukraine. In others, the Kremlin plays the role of supposed arbiter. It was the case in Nagorno-Karabakh, although it also offers the opportunity to pit the two

¹² Paul D'Anieri, *Ukraine and Russia: From Civilized Divorce to Uncivil War*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019, p.83.

¹³ Paul D'Anieri, *Ukraine and Russia*, p.22; Luka Jukic, "How Russia Keeps Post-Soviet States in Its Orbit", *Palladium*, February 2019.

¹⁴ Kenneth Yalowitiz, Denis Corboy, William Courtney, "Hitting the Pause Button: The "Frozen Conflict" Dilemma in Ukraine", *The National Interest*, November 6, 2014.

¹⁵ Dan Dungaciu, Jakub M. Godzimirski, "Russia and frozen conflicts in the Black Sea Region", Norwegian Institute of International Affaris & New Strategy Center, 2020, p.4.

sides against each other. Whatever the context, the essential characteristic remains to block a diplomatic solution, thus maintaining a frozen conflict situation.

The Russian cases have several characteristics which make them distinct. Thomas D. Grant enumerates seven of them: 1. armed hostilities have taken place, parties which include a state and separatists in the state's territory; 2. a change in effective control of territory has resulted from the armed hostilities; 3. the state and the separatists are divided by lines of separation that have adequate stability; 4. adopted instruments have given the lines of separation some form of stability; 5. the separatists make a self-determination claim on which they base a putative state; 6. no state recognizes this; 7. a settlement process involving outside parties has been sporadic and inconclusive¹⁶.

Each of these can be used to describe the examples we will use to a certain extent. Another element that must be mentioned is that Russia can and has unfrozen some of these conflicts periodically or allowed for such a situation to occur. It is usually linked to the wish of sending a message to the West that this space is part of its sphere of influence. The level of escalation and intervention depends on the sides involved.

II.2 Periodization

We argue that frozen conflicts can be grouped into two main periods, each with distinctive traits. Alan Potockak and Miroslav Mares have identified two such generations as well. The first was during the late Soviet Union and the first half of Boris Yeltsin's presidency (1988-1994). The second one was during Vladimir Putin's and Dmitry Medvedev's presidencies, a period when "frozen conflicts became instruments of Russia's strategy in geopolitical confrontation." They link this to a form of historical revisionism¹⁷.

This interpretation is incomplete, as it leaves significant chronological gaps. We propose that the first period encompasses Boris Yeltsin's terms, and economic difficulties and military inability characterized the entire timeframe. Also, the First Chechen War took place during the second half of his first term, ending with the withdrawal of Russian troops. The Kremlin was incapable of decisive intervention, even if that was the intent. However, even if it could not win decisively,

¹⁶ Thomas D. Grant, "Frozen Conflicts and International Law", *Cornell International Law Journal*, Vol. 50, No. 3, 2017, p.390.

¹⁷ Alan Potocnak, Miroslav Mares, "Donbas Conflict: How Russia's Trojan Horse Failed and Forced Moscow to Alter Its Strategy", *Problems of Post-Communism*, May 16, 2022, DOI: 10.1080/10758216.2022.2066005, p.1.

the continuation of fighting could still serve Moscow's aim of projecting influence.

II. 3. The First Period

The situation in Transnistria is a showcase example of a frozen conflict. There the first tensions arose in the context of Soviet dissolution. Authorities in Moldova discussed the idea of independence. However, this region was ethnically diverse; the majority are Moldovans (a Romanian people), and Russians and Ukrainians represent a consistent minority. Most lived in Transnistria, the industrial heartland of the country. The new official language was going to be Romanian, the Cyrillic alphabet replaced with the Latin one, and the flag would bare a striking resemblance to that of Romania. Unsurprisingly, Russians were worried about their future status¹⁸.

In 1990, as a pre-emptive move, Transnistria proclaimed its independence while still part of the Soviet Union. This move was not recognized by either Mircea Snegur, president of Moldova, or Mikhail Gorbachev. Violence erupted in August 1991 when Moldova became independent, and Transnistrian forces launched attacks on police stations with help from Russian soldiers. This last part made it impossible for the newly established Moldovan Army to make any progress, but it did limit the escalation of violence. By July 1991, a ceasefire was signed. However, Transnistria refused to accept it as it failed to solve their problems. A security zone was established under Russian control¹⁹.

The following decades saw no progress in negotiations. The borders of Moldova remain disputed, keeping it unable to join any Western organization. It allows Russia to station troops in Transnistria (around 1500) under the guise of peacekeeping²⁰. There are few diplomatic solutions given the geographic position of the enclave between Moldova and a hostile Ukraine. Nevertheless, this also makes the separatists more dependent on Russian support.

Nagorno-Karabakh is another classic example of a frozen conflict with limited direct involvement from Moscow. However, where it still plays a crucial role for both sides. In a sense, we could argue that it perfectly illustrates the extent of cynicism in decision-making in the Kremlin. Also, it shows the dependency of former Soviet republics.

¹⁸ Robert H. Donaldson, Joseph L. Noguee, Vidya Nadkarni, *The Foreign Policy of Russia: Changing Systems, Enduring Interests*, Fifth Edition, New York - London, Routledge, 2015, p.164.

¹⁹ Robert H. Donaldson, *The Foreign Policy of Russia...*, p.159-164.

²⁰ Benjamin Potter, "Unrecognized Republic, Recognizable Consequences: Russian Troops in "Frozen" Transnistria", *Journal of Advanced Military Studies*, Special Issue on Strategic Culture, p. 169-170.

The province's the majority of the population is Armenian but legally is part of Azerbaijan, and the two countries fight for control over it. There is also an ethnic-religious component to the conflict, which is further made worse by the history of the Armenian Genocide. Furthermore, this aspect defines these states' relations with their larger neighbors²¹.

Rivalries between the groups were kept in check during the USSR. National identities were of little consequence since they were all primarily Soviets. Glasnost changed this and encouraged talks of independence²². During the late 1980s, there were repeated attempts from Nagorno-Karabakh Oblast to secede from Azerbaijan, but without any success. However, tensions and violence increased, and Soviet authorities withdrew. Pogroms started in Yerevan and Baku. It would lead to a full-scale war²³.

Russia underlined its responsibility and right to intervene²⁴. This was because they wanted to avert or discourage any involvement from Turkey or Iran. Finding a diplomatic solution was difficult due to the formation of paramilitary groups operating with increasing autonomy. It is a characteristic of Russia's strategy; they undermine state control over the territory and offer military and economic support to third-party actors. A ceasefire was signed on May 12, 1994²⁵. However, it failed to offer a solution, and Nagorno-Karabakh status remained disputed, allowing for renewed fighting. The most recent episode was in 2020, when Azerbaijan, benefiting from better equipment, forced a new peace accord on the Armenians²⁶.

Russia's relation to the region reflects its cynicism and willingness to manipulate both sides. On the one hand, it presents itself as the protector of Armenia, a position based on their shared Christian religion. In 2010 they signed a military accord that stretches to 2044 and should guarantee military security²⁷. On the other hand, Moscow sells weapons to Azerbaijan and maintains excellent economic ties, given the wealth of oil and gas in the Caspian Sea²⁸.

²¹ Dominic Lieven, *Empire: The Russian Empire and Its Rivals*, New Haven - London, Yale University Press, 2001.

²² Robert H. Donaldson, *The Foreign Policy of Russia...*, p.200-201.

²³ James J. Coyle, *Russia's Border Wars and Frozen Conflicts*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, p. 213.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p.201.

²⁵ Robert H. Donaldson, *The Foreign Policy of Russia...*, p.202, 217, 224.

²⁶ Gubad Ibadoglu, "Why Azerbaijan Won", *Institute for War & Peace Reporting*, November 17, 2020, <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/why-azerbaijan-won>, accessed on June 15, 2022.

²⁷ Denis Dyomkin, "Russia extends military presence in Armenia", *Reuters*, August 20, 2010, <https://www.reuters.com/article/armenia-russia-idUSLDE67J0DX20100820>, accessed on June 19, 2022.

²⁸ Zaur Shiriyev, "Azerbaijan's Relations with Russia Closer by Default?", *Chatham House: The Royal Institute of International Affairs*, March 2019.

Georgia illustrates the periodization we have proposed in this paper. The conflict and the relationship with Russia can be seen through the lenses of the two periods, each with its particular impact. During the 1990s, we see the birth of another frozen conflict that the Kremlin both failed to solve but also managed to use to destabilize its smaller neighbor. Later, in the 2000s, as Georgia moved towards the West, the conflict was reignited, allowing for a clear message to be sent regarding the near abroad.

On March 31, 1991, the majority of Georgians voted in favor of independence while also showing interest in reclaiming the breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The relationship with Russia was ambiguous at best, and president Edvard Shevardnadze was not very popular with the Kremlin, although he promised to make his country part of the CIS. The ongoing conflict in the separatist provinces escalated, leading to over 250,000 refugees. In 1993 Boris Yeltsin intervened, trying to impose a short-lived ceasefire. It was only in May 1994 that the conflict finally ended, as Russia promised to send peacekeeping troops and offer economic aid to Georgia²⁹.

While the fighting stopped, the following decades saw Georgia move closer to the United States of America. The Kremlin would often accuse that they were harboring Chechen terrorists. Vladimir Putin gave Russian passports to people living in Abkhazia and South Ossetia as part of an assertion of growing power. In November 2003, the Rose Revolution in Georgia would bring Mikhail Saakashvili to power³⁰. His discourse was based on moving towards the West and nationalism. This would mark a break towards the second phase of the frozen conflict, which we will discuss later.

The wars in Chechnya represent both the point of maximum humiliation for Russia and also the birthplace of Putin's strategy. What sets it apart is that it was not a former Soviet republic but a breakaway province. It changed the nature of the military intervention and the importance of the stakes.

Chechen dreams of independence were not entirely new, but Stalin's policies had almost completely curbed them for half a century³¹. However, in the context of Soviet dissolution, after the election of Djokar Dudaev, they made a bid for independence. The regime quickly descended

²⁹ Donald Rayfield, *Edge of Empires: A History of Georgia*, London, Reaktion Books, 2012, p. 382, 384--386.

³⁰ Robert H. Donaldson, *The Foreign Policy of Russia...*, p.195; Donald Rayfield, *Edge of Empires...*, p. 390-394.

³¹ Adam Jones, *Genocide: A Comprehensive Introduction*, New York - London, Routledge, 2010, p. 226.

into anarchy due to infighting among the clans, which endangered a critical oil line crossing the region, prompting Russia to take action³².

In December 1994, the Kremlin sent 40,000 soldiers to re-establish order. The international community's reaction was ambivalent. They recognized Moscow's right to intervene but also condemned the brutality of the military operation³³. However, the troops were wholly unprepared and underequipped for their opposition level. The Chechens used their knowledge of the terrain and guerilla tactics to foil the intervention. By 1996, the capital, Grozny, was still in the hands of the separatists, but the region was in ruins. The assassination of Dudaev allowed for the signing of an armistice which left Chechnya legally still part of Russia, but in actuality, the Kremlin did not control the territory³⁴.

The first war showcases Russia's inability for decisive action, as it failed to re-establish any semblance of control. The state of the army and its tactics were deplorable and inefficient. It also left a frozen conflict that could risk destabilizing the entire Caucasus. It led to the rise of terrorism, which would shock the world in Moscow and Beslan.

II.4. The Second Period

As previously mentioned, the second period is characterized by Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev's presidential terms. An economic resurgence allowed for military spending. Strategies employed now are more aggressive, as Russia can lay a stronger claim on its near abroad. This was illustrated during the Second Chechen War, the 2008 war in Georgia, and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The Kremlin is also better suited to cooperate with specific figures, as is Ramzan Kadyrov.

The main issue during this period is Russia's clash with the West, which it feels is encroaching on its sphere of influence. Its security does not lie in international institutions but in asserting its rights as a great power. Consequently, EU and NATO expansion and promotion of liberal and democratic values soon became threats to its security.

The signs of this paradigm shift were visible from the Second Chechen War. In September 1999, residential buildings in Moscow and other cities exploded. The attacks were pinned on Chechen terrorists, allowing a relatively unknown Putin to promise revenge publicly. His popularity was sky-rocketed to over 60%. However, in an incident in Ryazan, three FSB officers were caught placing bombs in the basement of

³² Martin Sixsmith, *Rusia: Un mileniu de istorie*, Bucharest, Humanitas, 2016, p.253; Robert H. Donaldson, *The Foreign Policy of Russia...*, p.239; Adam Jones, *Genocide*, p.227.

³³ Robert H. Donaldson, *The Foreign Policy of Russia...*, p.240.

³⁴ Adam Jones, *Genocide*, p.229; Martin Sixsmith, *Rusia...*, p.524.

a building. It was a situation that raised questions regarding the previous attacks³⁵.

The strategy employed now was far more brutal, cynical, and decisive. Objectives were to erode the morale of the Chechens by the use of intimidation and even ethnic cleansing. Men were the primary victim of decapitating military opposition³⁶. Anna Politkovskaya gathered accounts of kidnappings, disappearances, burnt houses, massacred families, and rapes. The capital, Grozny, was leveled by shelling, as Russian forces avoided guerilla warfare this time³⁷.

In 2003, the Kremlin had a puppet leader, Akhmat Kadyrov, who was killed in 2004 by Islamists. He was replaced by his son, Ramzan, who still rules Chechnya in exchange for Russian funding³⁸. His regime can be authoritarian and conservative, turning towards Sharia law, and opponents are arrested, kidnapped, or killed³⁹. It represents an example of a closed, frozen conflict, as the Kremlin could not allow an unstable situation to threaten territorial integrity.

Georgia moved closer to the West, primarily through its relationship with the United States. It hoped it could join NATO, thus gaining protection against its larger neighbor. It was completed by military spending, which went as high as \$1 billion per year. President Saakashvili's discourse also entertained elements of nationalism while eyeing Abkhazia and South Ossetia, a dangerous mix⁴⁰.

During this period, Russia began re-asserting its claims on the near abroad, warning the West against further encroaching on it. The stance was encouraged by events such as the Rose Revolution in Georgia, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan, and the 2005 failed revolution in Uzbekistan. This evolution represented a possible threat to the regime in the Kremlin and it was even seen as a Western ploy⁴¹.

In the months leading up to the 2008 NATO Summit in Bucharest, Russia underlined its opposition to the integration of Georgia and Ukraine. France and Germany wanted to re-assure the Kremlin that the message was received. However, Washington was more idealistic. In fact, during

³⁵ Martin Sixsmith, *Rusia...*, p.553.

³⁶ Adam Jones, *Genocide*, p.230.

³⁷ Anna Politkovskaia, *Doar Adevărul* [Only Truth], Bucharest, Meteor Press, 2010, passim.

³⁸ Martin Sixsmith, *Rusia...*, p.539.

³⁹ Benjamin Bidder, *Generația Putin: Să înțelegem noua Rusie* [Stalin Generation: Let's Understand New Russia], Bucharest, Humanitas, 2015, passim.

⁴⁰ Donald Rayfield, *Edge of Empires...*, p.390-394.

⁴¹ Alexander Cooley, "Whose Rules, Whose Sphere? Russian Governance and Influence in Post-Soviet States", *Task Force White Paper, Carnegie Endowment For International Peace*, June 30, 2017.

this period, Putin started arguing that Ukraine was not a real country⁴². Medvedev's election as president might have downplayed some of these concerns. Optimists saw this as a sign of a functioning democracy and not for what it was, a mere swap.

In August 2008, the situation in the Caucasus deteriorated. A police officer was injured, and three Georgian soldiers were killed in an incident blamed on the separatists. This prompted an invasion of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. However, the Russians were already there as peacekeepers and once they came under fire gave the Kremlin reason to reply. The fighting was short as the Georgian Army was wholly unprepared. The intervention of Frances's president, Nicholas Sarkzoy, convinced Moscow to stop its advance. In the end, Russia recognized the two territories and established permanent military bases. Relations between the two belligerents no longer exist at a formal diplomatic level⁴³.

The War in Georgia underlined the Kremlin's willingness to use military means to protect its near abroad. It hinted at a new way of seeing frozen conflicts. Decisive action was taken against a foreign country labeled as an agent of the West, as an enemy. However, it was of lesser importance since it is relatively geographically isolated and more minor. It means Russia can afford to tolerate hostile politicians in Georgia, and there is no real danger of an attack on its territory.

II.5. The Ukraine Phase in Frozen Conflicts

Events in Ukraine brought frozen conflicts into a new phase of geopolitics. There are several reasons for this transformation. Firstly, Ukraine has the largest population of the former Soviet republics, with around 44 million⁴⁴. Its economy is also relevant, while smaller in comparison to that of Kazakhstan⁴⁵. The disputed region of Donbas is rich in coal, making it wealthy. Also, it is the site of multiple metallurgic plants. Access to the Sea of Azov means it can easily export these products to other places at relatively low prices.

Given its proximity to Russia and the history of Soviet investments, many people living here were more Moscow-oriented. It further worsened the situation after 2014. Another aspect that must be mentioned is that the Donbas was the home of Ukraine's oligarchs, including Rinat Akhmetov. They played an essential role in forming the Party of Regions, supporters

⁴² Paul D'Anieri, *Ukraine and Russia*, pp.161-169.

⁴³ Donald Rayfield, *Edge of Empires...*, p.390-394.

⁴⁴ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=UA>, accessed on July 1, 2022

⁴⁵ <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/kaz/partner/ukr>, accessed on July 1, 2022.

of Viktor Yanukovich. However, their interests were more personal and aimed to maintain autonomy above all else⁴⁶.

Secondly, it is a matter of geography; Ukraine is a buffer between Russia and Europe, more precisely, the European Union and NATO. The long border these two countries share further underlines this argument's role in the Kremlin security policy. Also, Crimea plays a critical strategic role, as it is the home of the Black Sea Fleet. Without it, Russia would face significant difficulties projecting its regional power and deter competitors, including NATO and Turkey⁴⁷. Ukraine occupies a special place in the revisionist discourse regarding the near abroad.

The third reason concerns the historical ties between the two countries. These arguments are essential to the construction of the Kremlin's propaganda. Vladimir Putin has argued that Ukraine is not a real country but an invention of the post-Cold War era. This occurred as early as 2007 at a conference in Munich during a discussion with US president George W. Bush⁴⁸. It was a drawing of a red line that Russia would not allow the West to cross.

With the advent of a new frozen conflict in Donbas, Vladimir Putin introduced another revisionist idea. On April 17, 2014, he mentioned Novorossiia. This describes the territory conquered by Russia in the 18th Century by the Ottoman Empire. It includes about a third of Ukraine's territory, and occupying it would turn it into a landlocked country⁴⁹. The economic consequence would be beyond severe, as it would hinder grain exports. Putin argues that this territory was historically part of Russia, giving it to Ukraine. Thus, they have a right to reclaim it and correct a mistake made by the Bolsheviks⁵⁰.

In short, we can observe Russia pendulating between the cultural ties and similarities they share with Ukraine and invoking aggressive

⁴⁶ Paul D'Anieri, *Ukraine and Russia*, p.130.

⁴⁷ Paul Stronski, "What Is Russia Doing in the Black Sea?", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, May 20, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/05/20/what-is-russia-doing-in-black-sea-pub-84549>, accessed on June 15, 2022; Also see Stephen J. Flanagan, Anika Binnendijk, Irina A. Chindea, Katherine Costello, Geoffrey Kirkwood, Dara Massicot, Clint Reach, *Russia, NATO, and Black Sea Security*, Santa Monica, Rand Corporation, 2020.

⁴⁸ Daniel Fried, Kurt Volker, "The Speech In Which Putin Told Us Who He Was", *Politico*, February 18, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/02/18/putin-speech-wake-up-call-post-cold-war-order-liberal-2007-00009918>, accessed on May 19, 2022.

⁴⁹ Adrian A. Basora, Aleksandr Fisher, "Putin's "Greater Novorossiia" – The Dismemberment of Ukraine", *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, May 2, 2014, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2014/05/putins-greater-novorossiia-the-dismemberment-of-ukraine/>, accessed on July 2, 2022.

⁵⁰ Matthew Burrows, Robert A. Manning, "Three possible futures for a frozen conflict in Ukraine", *New Atlanticist*, May 26, 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/three-possible-futures-for-a-frozen-conflict-in-ukraine/> accessed on July 2, 2022.

revisionist ideas⁵¹. This constantly shifting of position hindered any negotiation of a diplomatic solution. Nevertheless, the Kremlin hardly seemed to wish for such an outcome. The oscillation allows for the justification of actions toward the Russian people, a mere propaganda ploy. It also ties in perfectly to the strategy used to maintain a state of frozen conflict.

The last reason on our list is the level of resistance against the invasion, which encouraged unprecedented international support, leaving Russia isolated. This ties in with the previous argument, as the clash between the two countries, has its origins in the 1990s. The situation led to war through the gradual accumulation of tensions and diverging interests.

III.1. Road to Confrontation

Ukraine's internal road to independence was relatively smooth, as its political elite and population supported the idea. Russia had little to say in this regard, as even its Commonwealth of Independent States idea would prove to be an utter failure. The first tensions between the two countries regarded the relationship they would have in the future. The Kremlin hoped it could convince Kiev to sign a Union Treaty, but they had differing perspectives on it. Yeltsin wanted political and economic integration. However, Ukraine's leaders would only agree to cooperate, and independence remained untouchable⁵².

Distrust between the two countries could be seen from the beginning. One issue was regarding nuclear weapons and who would inherit them. In reality, Ukraine lacked the know-how and resources to maintain such an arsenal and had no operational control. Hence, with support from Western countries, it agreed to give up these capabilities. However, the Budapest Memorandum simultaneously sought to obtain security assurances regarding territorial integrity⁵³.

Another point of contention was the Black Sea Fleet. They agreed to partition it with Russia paying compensation while it got a lease on the naval base in Sevastopol, which would have to be renewed periodically⁵⁴. This meant a certain level of insecurity for the Kremlin and the investments it could make in maintaining the base and the fleet.

The role of energy politics also characterized this relationship. Russia's status as an energy exporter turned Ukraine into one of its primary

⁵¹ Gerard Toal, *Near Abroad...*, p.235.

⁵² Paul D'Anieri, *Ukraine and Russia*, p.29-35.

⁵³ Lawrence Freedman, *Ukraine and the Art of Strategy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019, p.101-102.

⁵⁴ Paul D'Anieri, *Ukraine and Russia*, p.21, 82.

consumers. It generated a dependency that the Kremlin could use to pressure politicians in Kiev to stay in line. The oligarchs of Donbas could ill-afford such disruptions to their businesses, thus influencing decisions in their country. This strategy was aided by the fact that Ukraine was not the best payer, giving justification for reducing gas deliveries or even price changes. Russia also uses this approach in its interactions with friendly countries⁵⁵. In the cases of Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, it takes the shape of allowing passage for their exports. It also 'weaponized' it against the West to limit the extent of recent economic sanctions.

The first major crisis came with the 2004 Orange Revolution. As we have already mentioned, it was seen by the Kremlin as Western meddling in the near abroad⁵⁶. It came on the back of liberal and democratic ideas, as Ukrainians took to the streets to contest fraud in the election. But, also, the ruling of the Supreme Court to annul the result of the second round marked another shift. Institutions could function in the service of the people despite corruption and Russian involvement. In the end, Moscow-backed Viktor Yanukovich lost to Viktor Yushchenko⁵⁷.

However, this victory would not deliver on its promise. Constant infighting among the reformists brought back Yanukovich as prime-minister between August 2006 and December 2007, before being replaced by Yulia Timoshenko. The problem was that very few things changed during this period. There was no radical change in and of the political system. The oligarchs had the resources to oppose it, which they did. Ukraine's approach toward the West was thus limited since it was far from the criteria of the European Union and NATO⁵⁸. Nevertheless, the genie was out of the bottle.

Viktor Yanukovich's victory against Yulia Timoshenko in the 2010 presidential elections was a blow to previously mentioned hopes. Despite accusations and suspicions of fraud, the result did not change this time⁵⁹. Corruption and authoritarianism would come to mark this new period. The new president's family and friends took control of many positions in the state. Also, Timoshenko became the target of multiple criminal cases, accused of abusing her power. On October 11, 2011, she was sentenced to prison and banned from participating in elections. The leader of the

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, p.43

⁵⁶ Robert Orttung, Christopher Walker, "Putin's Frozen Conflicts", *Foreign Policy*, February 13, 2015.

⁵⁷ Serhii Plokhyy, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine*, Basic Books, New York, 2015, p.333-334.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 334-335.

⁵⁹ Nathaniel Copsy, Natalia Shapovalova, "The Ukrainian Presidential Election of 2010", *Representation*, Vol.46, No.2, 2010, passim.

opposition was thus removed from the political equation. This episode illustrates the decline of democratic institutions during this time⁶⁰. However, people still held hope that Ukraine might head towards Europe.

Yanukovich's close ties to Russia were shown in 2010 when he extended the lease on the Sevastopol naval base. It was due to expire in 2017, but now it would last until 2042. The deal was not one-sided, as Medvedev promised Ukraine would get a discount on its gas bill of around 30%⁶¹. This move illustrated a balancing policy often practiced by the country's previous presidents, between good relations with the West and not upsetting Russia⁶².

III.2. Revolution and Frozen Conflict

The situation in Ukraine escalated towards the end of November 2013 when people took to the streets. Events were sparked by the government's decision not to sign the long-awaited Association Agreement with the European Union. Instead, Yanukovich wanted to join Russia's version, The Eurasian Economic Union. This was even though the Rada had voted overwhelmingly for the former⁶³. Ukrainians began protesting against corruption, the oligarchs, and abuse of power, asking for the government's resignation.

Most were focused on the Maidan of Kiev, but it soon spread to other cities, especially in the Western part of the country. Instead of allowing people to cool down or promising partial reforms, Yanukovich tried to clamp down on the protests. Police tried assaulting the Maidan, but it failed. Introducing harsher legislation against such events and activities only mobilized people further. In January 2014, they moved to occupy government buildings. By 18-20 February, the clashes turned very violent, leading to the death of around 100 protesters and 18 police officers. This was the point when the Maidan became a revolution. On February 22, the Rada voted to remove Yanukovich. He subsequently fled to Sevastopol and then to Russia⁶⁴.

⁶⁰ ***, "Yulia Tymoshenko imprisonment 'politically motivated'", *The Guardian*, April 30, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/apr/30/yulia-tymoshenko-jailing-politically-motivated>, accessed on July 1, 2022; Miriam Elder, "Yulia Tymoshenko jailed after 'political trial' that risks making Ukraine a pariah", *The Guardian*, October 11, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/oct/11/yulia-tymoshenko-jailed-ukraine-pariah>, accessed on July 1, 2022.

⁶¹ Luke Harding, "Ukraine extends lease for Russia's Black Sea Fleet", in *The Guardian*, April 21, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/apr/21/ukraine-black-sea-fleet-russia>, accessed on July 2

⁶² Paul D'Anieri, *Ukraine and Russia*, p.17.

⁶³ Lawrence Freedman, *Ukraine and the Art of Strategy*, p.78, 89.

⁶⁴ Paul D'Anieri, *Ukraine and Russia*, p.221-222.

The Kremlin did not waste time and quickly moved to secure its base in Crimea. Protests against the Maidan erupted here, and various groups removed the Ukrainian flag from government buildings. On February 27, 'little green men', not from Mars, occupied the region, quickly taking control. A new prime minister was imposed, Sergey Aksyonov, who would ask Russia for assistance. Later, on March 18, Crimea was formally incorporated⁶⁵. This move meant breaking the terms of the Budapest Memorandum, as Ukraine's territorial integrity was not respected. The Treaty reaffirmed these principles of Friendship and the Partition Treaty on the Status and Conditions of the Black Sea Fleet in 1997⁶⁶.

Eastern and Southern Ukraine saw a rising number of protests against the achievements of the Maidan. These parts of the country have a more significant portion of the Russian-speaking population, which complicates the situation. Again, like in the case of Crimea, suspicious groups encouraged the separatist tendencies of Donetsk and Luhansk. Success was somewhat limited. For example, attempts to take over government buildings in the country's second-largest city, Kharkiv, failed due to the efficient clamp down of authorities⁶⁷. However, in parts of Donbas, the events unfolded differently.

In April 2014, unmarked military units and former Ukrainian security forces took over government buildings in Donetsk. Next, the separatists tried taking over other essential cities in the region, such as Sloviansk, Kramatorsk, and Mariupol. The government did not stand idle and intervened in an attempt to re-take control over the contested parts of Donbas⁶⁸. In May 2014, Donetsk and Luhansk proclaimed the formation of the Confederation of Novorossyia⁶⁹. This tied in with Russian discourse about the region, which translates as the Federal State of New Russia. While the Kremlin denied any official involvement in the civil conflict, it was obvious that the separatists were receiving financial and military backing. There were reports of some Russian troops crossing the border, but Moscow would permanently deny such accusations⁷⁰.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 226-227.

⁶⁶ Spencer Kimball, "Bound by treaty: Russia, Ukraine and Crimea", in *Deutsche Welle*, March 11, 2014, <https://www.dw.com/en/bound-by-treaty-russia-ukraine-and-crimea/a-17487632>, accessed on July 2, 2022.

⁶⁷ Lawrence Freedman, *Ukraine and the Art of Strategy*, p.94, 111; Paul D'Anieri, *Ukraine and Russia*, p.233-234.

⁶⁸ Lawrence Freedman, *Ukraine and the Art of Strategy*, p.90-98.

⁶⁹ Andrei Kolesnikov, "Why the Kremlin Is Shutting Down the Novorossyia Project", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 29, 2015, <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/60249>, accessed on July 1, 2022.

⁷⁰ ***, "Open-Source Sleuths Document Extensive Russian Shelling Of Ukraine In 2014", *RadioFreeEurope/Radio Liberty*, December 21, 2016, accessed on June 23, 2022.

International outcry poured after the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 on July 17, 2014. The investigation proved that it was hit by a surface-to-air missile fired from a Buk 9M83 system of Russian origin. The separatists initially blamed the Ukrainians since they also used this launcher. However, the international investigation concluded in May 2018 that the system originated from a Russian base in Kursk⁷¹. This event led to the West finally taking some action by imposing limited sanctions on the specific individual with close ties to the Kremlin and later banning some luxury exports⁷².

Negotiations between the sides proved to be very difficult, and several attempts at reaching a ceasefire failed. The first Minsk Agreement signed in September 2014 did not last, and very soon, fighting started again. In February 2015, a new set of accords were signed, called Minsk II. Theoretically, this ceasefire was in place until 2022, when the war with Russia started⁷³. However, in reality, the security zone established between the two sides was one of the most violent places in the world. Neither side respected the ceasefire with daily breaches. By this point, the civil war in Ukraine looked like a classic example of frozen conflict. Russia backed the separatists and impeded any diplomatic solution by proposing ideas that were unlikely to be accepted by the government in Kiev.

One of Moscow's proposals was that Donbas remain part of Ukraine but as a region with extended autonomy. This would have allowed it to maintain close ties with Russia in a legal context. Some authors argue that this was similar to a trojan horse strategy. It would have introduced a destabilizing factor in the country while also changing its structure from a centralized state into a federation. Such a transformation could allow for easier manipulation of Ukraine's internal affairs through indirect means since it would limit territorial control⁷⁴.

IV. A new phase in the conflict

Russia has a tradition of "heating-up" its frozen conflicts, either through indirect means (separatists) or direct intervention. In the case of Ukraine in 2022, it escalated from a limited confrontation to a full-blown war and an international crisis. But what did Russia hope to achieve? Or what does it still aim for in the current situation? What is certain is that

⁷¹ Shaun Walker, "MH17 downed by Russian military missile system, say investigators", *The Guardian*, May 24, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/24/mh17-downed-by-russian-military-missile-system-say-investigators>, accessed on July 1, 2022.

⁷² James Coyle, *Russia's Border Wars...*, p.67; Mark Galeotti, *The Vory: Russia's Super Mafia*, New Haven - London, Yale University Press, 2019, p.232.

⁷³ Thomas D. Grant, "Frozen Conflicts and International Law", p.408-409.

⁷⁴ Adam Potocnak, Miroslav Mares, "Donbas Conflict", p.3-5.

the idea of frozen conflicts is changing, and the way and extent of this are still unclear.

There are many indications that Vladimir Putin thought Ukraine would collapse quickly⁷⁵. We have little insight into the reasons for this rationale, and it could have been prompted by a failure of intelligence gathering or an overestimation of the Russian Army's capabilities. In any order, information shows that several officials were punished for this failure⁷⁶. What we can observe is that both the strategy and objectives have changed with the progression of the fighting. At this point, Russia seems to have abandoned offensives in the North and North-East, instead focusing on consolidating gains in the South and occupying the rest of Donbas⁷⁷. Of course, this might change again, but it is the realm of speculation.

The Kremlin wanted to send a message regarding its red line on the issue of the near abroad. However, it faced staunch opposition from Ukraine, and its resistance garnered unprecedented support and reactions of condemnation. Also, the level of violence has turned many Russian speakers against the invading force⁷⁸. Some of Moscow's allies might have been brought deeper into the fold, but this relationship is also more complicated. Kazakhstan's economy relies on gas exports, which go through an ever-more isolated Russia. Should this flow be interrupted or disrupted, civil unrest might arise again⁷⁹. Azerbaijan seems to be playing a double-faced game. On the one hand, it supplies gas to countries cut off by Russia, becoming an alternative for Europe. On the other hand, it tries to maintain good relations with Moscow⁸⁰.

Other frozen conflicts have not re-ignited in this context of chaos. The Armenians are still too weak to try and change the status quo in

⁷⁵ Liz Sly, "Nine ways Russia botched its invasion of Ukraine", *The Washington Post*, April 8, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/04/08/how-russia-botched-ukraine-invasion/>, accessed on July 1, 2022.

⁷⁶ Mike Glenn, "Putin fires top Russian generals amid difficult campaign in Ukraine", in *The Washington Times*, June 3, 2022, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/jun/3/putin-fires-top-russian-generals-amid-difficult-ca/>, accessed on July 2, 2022.

⁷⁷ For more information and constant updates we followed: <https://www.understandingwar.org/publications>, accessed at 2 of July 2022

⁷⁸ Michal Bilewicz, "Even Russian-speaking Ukrainians don't want to be evacuated to Russia or Belarus", in *The Washington Post*, March 7, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/03/07/ukraine-russian-speakers/>, accessed on July 1, 2022.

⁷⁹ Sophia Nina Burna-Asefi, "The Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Implications for Kazakhstan's Energy Sector", in *The Diplomat*, May 27, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/05/the-russia-ukraine-conflict-implications-for-kazakhstans-energy-sector/>, accessed on July 2, 2022.

⁸⁰ Fuad Shahbazov, "Putin's War in Ukraine Is Putting Azerbaijan in a Bind", in *World Politics Review*, March 2, 2022, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/30367/the-ukraine-war-is-a-test-for-azerbaijan-russia-relations>, accessed on June 28, 2022.

Nagorno-Karabakh. Georgia has expressed a renewed wish to join NATO, although this would be nearly impossible to achieve. However, it has not pursued the issue nor contested the situation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia⁸¹. Ramzan Kadyrov has proven his loyalty to the Kremlin, even if his troops were not particularly efficient. Initial unrest in Transnistria has also mostly died out since the region remains isolated. Although, the overall situation has moved Moldova almost entirely towards the West⁸².

There are many scenarios regarding how the war in Ukraine might end and what the consequences could be. This paper will not try to explore them since they still leave too much to the speculative. However, we will try to explain the impact on existing 'frozen conflicts'. Firstly, if Russia comes out with its reputation and great power standing damaged, the situations presented in the above paragraph could change. The threat of intervention maintains the status quo, as the 2008 war in Georgia clearly illustrated. A certain level of instability might arise near abroad, and the red line is contested. It could also spark a weakening of dictatorial regimes in Central Asia and Chechnya if left without the financial backing of Moscow.

Secondly, Russia will face great difficulty in how it re-freezes the conflict. As it stands now, Ukraine is unwilling to give up territory or its claims to what has been occupied. However, pursuing military aid is unlikely to change, and it receives little offensive equipment⁸³. Politically nobody in Kiev will be willing to accept the losses. The conflict might freeze again due to fatigue on both sides. But even with such a narrow victory, the Kremlin has lost much of what made up its European near abroad. If Ukraine and Moldova manage to become part of the EU, Putin will have to contend with even more Western influence.

A significant shift in the perception of frozen conflicts is that of scope, as the one in Ukraine was always broader. The potential for escalation was more prominent here than in any other example. Ukraine is more extensive and has more resources than other contested parts (i.e., Georgia). Russia became directly involved early on, and in 2022 it decided to take decisive action and not rely on proxies. While it tried

⁸¹ ***, "Georgians back Ukraine, but their government is more hesitant", *The Economist*, April 23, 2022, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2022/04/23/georgians-back-ukraine-but-their-gove-rrnment-is-more-hesitant>, accessed on July 3, 2022.

⁸² <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20220616IPR33216/grant-eu-candid-ate-status-to-ukraine-and-moldova-without-delay-meps-demand>, accessed on July 1, 2022.

⁸³ Denys Davydenko, Margaryta Khvostova, Olga Lymar, "How Western offensive weapons can help Ukraine defeat Russia", European Council of Foreign Relations, March 30, 2022, <https://ecfr.eu/article/how-western-offensive-weapons-can-help-ukraine-defeat-russia/>, accessed on July 1, 2022.

using historical justification, it failed to have the full support of Russian speakers. Also, its initial action pointed towards an attempt at violent regime change. This was an over-stretching of ambitions and capabilities to try and undo what happened in 2014.

Success would have ended the stalemate in Donbas, setting it apart from our other examples. Russia either was unable or did not wish to bring a conclusion to other frozen conflicts in the past. It seems to have wanted to assert its status as a great power over its near abroad. However, the outcome might lead to another more complicated frozen conflict and a blunt instead of a sharp geopolitical statement, leaving it more internationally isolated.

Conclusions

The war in Ukraine was meant to be a statement made by Russia regarding its sphere of influence. It wanted to re-assert the red line it would not allow the West to cross in what it saw as meddling in its near abroad. However, the situation turned out to be more complicated due to Ukraine's incredible resistance and the international community's reaction. The Kremlin has grown more isolated as it tries to use energy politics as a weapon against its perceived enemies. These events will impact how we frame frozen conflicts in geopolitics.

In this paper, we aimed to present frozen conflicts as a strategy that emerged in the former Soviet space in the years following its demise. Russia uses them to project power in the near abroad through destabilizing actions which in turn give it a reason to maintain military presence and political influence there. We propose that they can be analyzed in two main periods based on characteristics given by the presidents of Russia at that time. Thus, the first phase comprises Boris Yeltsin's terms in power. It was characterized by economic hardship, status decline, and military impotence. The Kremlin could not have decisive intervention in its near abroad, not on its own territory in Chechnya. The second phase is marked by the transformation brought forward by Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev's presidential terms. Aided by an economic resurgence based on selling energy, Russia has become much more aggressive in its tactics and ambitions. This was made visible in how it ended the war in Chechnya, its war against Georgia, and now in the invasion of Ukraine.

The ongoing war complicates how we see frozen conflicts as it is still uncertain how Russia will refreeze it, if it can even do this. The outcome will be vital as it influences the extent of the Kremlin's influence in the near abroad and its ability to sway other frozen conflicts. If the war

leads to a place of humiliation and depletion, there might be contestation from its 'friends' who might try to re-assert their own ambitions. This could lead to instability in certain regions, but it may lead to more democratization and the fall of authoritarian regimes in Central Asia.