

THE GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT OF THE UKRAINE WAR

ETTORE GRECO

The collapse of the Soviet Union

A geopolitical upheaval

The dissolution of one of the two opposing blocs
An dramatic change in the strategic balance in Europe

- ❑ Some urgent problems required convergent efforts between the winning and the losing side ex: nuclear weapons outside the Russian territory
- ❑ How to address the emerging security vacuum in Central and Eastern Europe
- ❑ How to involve Russia in the management of European security

Failed attempts to create stable cooperation mechanisms

- ❑ NATO-Russia cooperation – NATO-Russia Council (2002-2014)
- ❑ G8 – enlargement of G7 to Russia (1997-2014)
- ❑ Obama's «reset» policy (2009-2013)

Suspension of these initiatives after Russia's annexation of Crimea and the war in Ukraine (2014)

Apples of discord between Russia and the West in the European context

- ❑ NATO's expansion
- ❑ Russia's ambition to recreate a sphere of influence in the «near abroad»
- ❑ The West's support for protest movements in the region

Russia and the «near abroad»/1

Russia's key strategic objectives:

- ❑ How to maintain/recreate a sphere of influence in the former Soviet space – preventing/containing other powers' «interference» in the area

Several means of influence in the «Near Abroad»:

- Economic Links and Energy Dependence
- Military preponderance and presence of bases and troops – Russia's «peacekeeping role» in local conflicts
- Large ethnic Russian communities – A «vital interest»
- Autocratic regimes in need of a «protector»

Russia and the «near abroad»/2

Establishment of cooperative structures (Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Collective Security Treaty)

But: Institutionally weak structures; Low levels of cooperation/integration

Several obstacles:

- Opposing/Antagonistic States; ex: Ukraine, Georgia
- Strong independentist drives – the case of Ukraine: 90% in favour of independence
- Moscow does not have much to offer and its hegemonic ambitions were seen with suspicion
- Growing influence of other actors (US, EU, Turkey, China)

Russia's integrationist plans in the «near abroad» have been largely frustrated

The Western enlargement processes

- ❑ NATO: from 16 to 30 members (including 4 former WP members + the three Baltic States)
- ❑ EU: from 12 to 27 members (including 11 East European and Balkan countries)

Two main drives:

- Candidate countries' wish to be protected and integrated in the West
- NATO and EU members saw the establishment as a stabilizing factor – risk of a security vacuum

- But: failure to adapt the security system – including arms control regimes - in Europe to the changed strategic balance

The tug-of-war over the «near abroad»

❑ A step further : membership prospects for former Soviet States:
NATO's «open door» policy (2008) and EU's Eastern Partnership (2009)

❑ Russia's sources of alarm:

- NATO's prospective military presence in the Near Abroad
- EU's transformative role/pull of attraction - risk of contagion

* The «Colour Revolutions» – Anti-regime protest in several countries:
Georgia (2003-4); Ukraine (2004); anti-Putin movement in 2011-13; **Euro-Maidan in Ukraine (2014)**; Belarus in 2020-2021 – movements supported by the West

A «resurgent» and more aggressive Russia

- ❑ A more aggressive/nationalistic Russia under Putin (since 2000) underpinned by a growing and pervasive anti-West ideology and propaganda (the West portrayed as expansionist but also corrupt and decadent)
- ❑ This coincided with an authoritarian and repressive turn in Russia

Russia's military interventions in Georgia (2008), Crimea and Donbass (2014), ongoing Ukraine war (2022-)

The European security order in deep crisis

- ❑ A revisionist power that aims at changing the status quo, is ready to use force, and is violating basic principles (territorial integrity and independence)

Two main problems:

- how to block the aggression and prevent Putin from achieving its goals;
- how to create the conditions to re-establish stability in Europe with the involvement of Russia