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PhD Thesis
Evolution of Post-Soviet Space between Russia and the West.
Period from 1991 to 2022

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SUMMARY

„The disappearance of the Soviet threat was due to its physical elimination or rather to the disappearance of the Soviet Union as subject of international law?”¹ This question was raised by professor Ioan Mircea Pașcu on the occasion of the NATO Bucharest Summit of April 2008. The subsequent developments, most worrying for the stability of post-Cold War liberal order and for the security system such as: the invasion of Georgia immediately following the Bucharest Summit, the annexation of Crimea, the conflict in Eastern Ukraine and the most dramatic of all, the ongoing war unleashed by Russia against Ukraine in 2022, enshrine the validity of the problem over time and ensure its relevance.

At the heart of the events we are witnessing, difficult to predict after the end of the War Cold and the installation of the apparent liberal peace, lies the old confrontation between Moscow and Washington with its allies, the West in general, which has come back to the surface increasingly pregnant with the relations between the two sides gradually slipping away from the enthusiasm and the promise of cooperation that dominated the early 90s towards rivalry and hostility. The transition was not sudden, it represents the result of over 30 years of relations that alternated periods of optimism and "reset" with those of divergences and conflict. Among these are the expansion of NATO in Central and Eastern Europe even beyond the famous red line of the former Soviet borders, with the accession of the Baltic states, NATO intervention in Yugoslavia, the anti-terrorist coalition, the colored revolutions, the war in Georgia, the Obama reset, the Ukraine crisis, the war in Syria, the Trump era, arriving today in the tensest point in post-Soviet relations, the Ukraine War.

The direction in which things were evolving became more and more obvious: with the formation of the new European security system centered on NATO and Moscow's awareness of the "loss" of Central and Eastern European countries in favor of the West after their integration in the North Atlantic Alliance, the "battleground" moved to the post-Soviet space.

The West considers the former Soviet republics, regardless of their size and location, free to choose their own path, their own alliances, their own security guarantees, while Russia denies them this

¹ Ioan Mircea Pașcu, “Dinamica mediului de securitate și rolul intelligence“, Roud Table „Societate, Democrație, Intelligence“, 8 October 2008 <https://www.sri.ro/upload/IMPascuCULTURA.pdf>

legitimate right, still viewing them as part of its sphere of influence upon which it should have a *droit de regard* recognized by the great powers. As the renowned American specialist Ronald Asmus explained, the new rules of the game reject the division geopolitics of the continent, the spheres of influence and enshrine the commitment to the freedom of each country to decide its orientation. This is the fundamental problem from Moscow's perspective, because in this way the Western organizations can expand to its borders².

Consequently, the ex-Soviet space became the epicenter of the West Russia „confrontation”, that marks the world today. The struggle for power, status and influence has once again become a reality.

In this increasingly tense and unpredictable context, the research initiative meets the needs to understand the developments that have led to these realities and where they may lead further.

Without passing them through the filter of history, yesterday's politics, without seeking to understand from where they started, it is difficult to assess what to expect.

Thus, the objective of the thesis consists in analyzing the main tendencies that can be extracted from the dynamics of Russia-West relations and their impact on the evolution of post-Soviet space. At the same time, the research follows the main factors and circumstances in the sphere Russia-West relations that can have dangerous effects for the stability and the security of the region, or on the contrary. The results obtained can help build an interpretative framework or a matrix that serves to evaluate Russia's actions/reactions in the conditions of "meeting" the West in its area of interest and to outline future perspectives on the regional developments as anchored in reality as possible.

I am aware that the way things have occurred in the past may not be replicable now or in the future, but I believe that the recapitulation and the examination of past developments can give us important clues about the factors, the circumstances, the subjects etc. that can lead to certain developments. At the same time, the vastness of the theme made me start this research without the pretense of an exhaustive approach, but having faith that it can contribute to the understanding of the manner in which Russia relates to the ex-Soviet space and its consequences, an increasingly pressing need in the current situation.

² Ronald Asmus, *A Little War That Shook the World: Georgia, Russia, and the Future of the West*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 6

Russia-West relations, Moscow-Washington rivalry, NATO eastward expansion and "the Russia factor"³, Moscow's post-Soviet behavior, Russia as an international actor, the ex-Soviet space in general or in particular, the situation of certain countries, etc. are topics that have always sparked the interest of the academic community and not only. The attention towards these subjects has intensified with the increase of conflictual situations in the region, especially after the Ukrainian crisis in 2014, then as a result of the uncertain and controversial relations in the Trump era, between the White House and the Kremlin and now, with the war started by Russia in Ukraine, they are taking over the whole international environment, the specialists and the analysts in the field. We are trying to understand what is happening, what will happen, Russia's actions are discussed and interpreted, we hear predictions and scenarios... The literature on the subject is extremely vast, with a large number of authors more or less known who devoted much of their works to the themes related to Russia or at least they approached tangentially the subjects. Thus, they are trying to clarify, as far as possible, how we can manage the negative manifestations by treating the causes of Russia 's international behavior, that led, for at least nine years, to the creation of realities on the ground in the meeting space with the West and in the immediate vicinity of NATO and EU countries that can have transformative valence for the system and for the post-Cold War order. The present work has joined these efforts, contributing to the development of the research in the field not only due to the present relevance and importance of the theme, but also by the general approach: putting the events in an historical, evolutionary and comparative context; including the major regional developments in a wider framework, that of the evolution of power relations in the system, Moscow's post-Soviet relations with the West and subordinating them to the dynamics between the two parties; taking into consideration the paradigmatic dimension of the developments in the ex-Soviet space.

Having in mind the objective of the thesis, I outlined the following research questions: 1) in what extent and in what way do the Russia-West relations influence the developments in the ex-Soviet space? and 2) What are the main tendencies that we can extract from the dynamics of Russia-West relations that impact the regional developments?

The research hypothesis can be outlined as follows: The dynamics of Russia-West relations is reflected in the evolution of the ex-Soviet space being able to generate either stability and security, or the opposite, conflict and insecurity. The source of these variations is found in the lack of consensus on the post USSR power relations and on the European security system developed around NATO. Therefore,

³ See Richard Kugler, *Enlarging NATO: The Russian Factor*, (Sanda Monica: RAND Corporation, 1996)

the prospect of ex-Soviet states joining the North Atlantic Alliance, essentially a factor generator of security, attracts extremely aggressive reactions from the Russian Federation that causes regional instability and insecurity.

As methodological approach, I opted for qualitative research methods implementing content analysis and case study. For data collection and selection, I mainly focused on primary sources: speeches, addresses, official documents, declassified materials such as various notes, letters, conversations between the leaders of the times. In this regard, a significant contribution, especially for the first period studied, until 2000 and for the famous Clinton-Yeltsin duet, had the documents collection declassified made available to the public by the National Security Archive. At the same time, to complete the bibliographic analytical arsenal, I also referred to secondary sources: books, reports, studies and analyzes of think-tanks in the field, academic articles, researches, journalistic publications etc. In this regard, I should also emphasize the importance of studying the works of renowned analysts such as for example Strobe Talbott or Ronald Asmus which given the positions held within the Washington administration in crucial moments for the defining of the European post-USSR security system and post-Cold War Washington-Moscow relations brought a behind-the-scenes perspective that helps outline an image as close as possible to reality on the events, their premises, consequences and implications. Also, of great help in the research effort were the publications of RAND Corporation, the prestigious think-tank recognized for the specialists who have crossed its threshold such as Zbigniew Brzezinski, Stephen Larrabee, Eugene Rumer, Richard Kugler, Ronald Asmus, Zalmay Khalilzad etc. and for his valuable contribution both to studies on Russia and on the ex-Soviet space, as well as to the development of US policies in this direction. From the Russian references, I mention for example the revealing writings for the Moscow logic of some significant personalities directly involved in the determining processes for post-Soviet relations with the West such as Andrey Kozyrev, Aleksei Pushkov or analysts such as Dimitri Trenin or Fyodor Lukyanov.

The case studies served to demonstrate in practice how Russian West interactions are reflected in regional developments. In this sense, I have chosen three key events that have marked and continue to mark the evolution of the ex-Soviet space, having a strong impact and significant implications for the future of the countries in the area, for the status quo and the balance of power in the region and not only: Georgia War of 2008, the Ukrainian crises of 2014 (the illegal annexation of Crimea and the separatist conflict in the East) and the ongoing War in Ukraine started in 2022. In developing the case studies, I followed the red thread of Russia West relations, pointing out the factors that could have triggered Russia's behavior, the strategy adopted, the Western response and the consequences.

In addition, I used the comparative method to illustrate the elements of continuity and contrast in West Russia interactions and the similarities or the differences in how they affected the ex-Soviet space, over time, over various periods and circumstances.

Structurally, the thesis is organized in four chapters to which are added the introduction and the conclusions.

The first chapter outlines the theoretical and conceptual framework of the work. The option for the neorealist current came naturally because of its ability to explain the consequences of the major systemic changes from bipolarity to unipolarity and toward multipolarity on Russia-West relations. At the same time, the neorealist premises such as: the primacy of the relationships between the great powers, the "destiny" of small and medium-sized states to always be in the middle of the dynamics between them; the imperative and primacy of obtaining security, the competition between the great powers, mutual mistrust, the importance of power as a mean of achieving security and freedom in relation to the other actors, the focus on geopolitics - form a solid and suitable basis for the development of our research in accordance with the objective pursued. Also, under the impact of RAND recent papers on great power competition and strategic rivalry and following the observation of increasingly frequent use of these concepts in official documents, speeches and in the current diplomatic vocabulary, I chose to approach Russia-West relations in their light and to include a section within the chapter to explain and analyze them. Taking in account the importance attributed to perceptions in the analysis of rivalries, at the end of the chapter, I added some considerations regarding their representation in international relations.

The second chapter traces Russia's position in the international system, its transition and the evolution of relations with the West, marking three main periods of transformations depending on the manner in which Moscow positioned itself vis-a-vis the US, the dominant power in the system and the hegemon of free world: from alignment to great power balancing, period 1991-1999; Russia's resurgence, from partnership to rivalry, period 2000-2012 and period 2012-2022, Russia versus the post- Cold War order, from retaliation to isolation? period 2012-2022. The period 1991-1999 covers the first years after the independence, the so-called Atlanticist period characterized by the apparent alignment of Moscow and its attempt to integrate with the West followed by the disillusionment and the awareness of the new rules of the game in the liberal order that did not allow the co-management of the order with the USA, a so called division of power between the "greatest" of the system, nor access to the decision-making processes within NATO, which was becoming the pillar of the new European security system. More than that, any state from Central and Eastern Europe, even from the former ex-Soviet space, now had the right

to seek to obtain the security guarantees offered by the Alliance. Consequently, Russia starts to revise its position, gradually beginning to challenge American power and to try to balance against it, tendency visible from the last years of Kozyrev's mandate, but better highlighted with the appointment of Primakov as foreign minister, then as prime minister. The period 2000-2012, the coming to power of Vladimir Putin and the Putin-Medvedev duet had again a promising start for Russia-West relations best revealed by Moscow's minor reactions to the expansion of NATO into the former Soviet space with the integration of the Baltic countries, a fact that intrigue to this day - how has Russia accepted so easily this event? Again, the optimism has vanished relatively quickly, the pragmatic partnership took the form of rivalry in the face of Moscow's failure to obtain the concessions it hoped for in exchange for its good will to which are added the color revolutions, the prospect of NATO advancing further towards its borders through the accession of Georgia and Ukraine. The last period addressed 2012-2022 includes the most dramatic developments for Russia's relations with the West, with Moscow starting out what seems to be like a real "crusade" against American power, NATO, the West, the liberal order in general, manifested in Ukraine and which together with the ongoing war it is very hard to predict where it will lead. The chapter also follows the great power logic characteristic to the Kremlin's approach.

In chapter III, I analyzed Russia's attitude towards the North Atlantic Alliance, highlighting the main evolutions and involutions in this sense associated with the major events, developments and interactions in post-Soviet history such as: the decision to expand NATO, the Partnership for Peace, the Helsinki Summit, the signing of the Founding Act for NATO Russia relations, the Madrid NATO Summit in 1997 and the first round of expansion of the Alliance in the former Soviet sphere of influence (after the integration of East Germany), the NATO intervention in Kosovo and Moscow's opposition, "Alliance with Alliance" against terrorism, the creation of the NATO Council Russia, the NATO Big Bang of 2002, when on the occasion of the Prague Summit, seven countries of Central and Eastern Europe including the former soviet Baltic states received the official invitation to join the Alliance, the NATO summit in Bucharest and the possibility of the accession of Georgia and Ukraine, the war in Georgia, the disputes over NATO infrastructure on the eastern flank, the Ukrainian crisis of 2014 and the suspension of cooperation, the weakening of the transatlantic relationship during the period Trump and its revival with the Biden presidency and finally the war in Ukraine. The results shows that Moscow has consistently displayed a negative attitude towards NATO, despite differences in intensity and approach that translate into evolutions and involutions. The source of these variations appears to be circumstantial, relating to the level of threat to its own interests that Russia perceives from the Alliance and especially from the

USA in various situations and, also, especially in the early days, to its inability to stop certain developments.

The last chapter, chapter IV, after a first part dedicated to the "conflict" of perspectives between Russia and the West on the ex-Soviet space and on the regional order, in general terms, the sphere of Russian influence versus the freedom of states to choose their orientation, approaches the case studies as follows: The 2008 War in Georgia, the 2014 Ukrainian crisis with the illegal annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of civil war in the east between Kiev and the separatists supported unofficially at that time by Russia and the ongoing war in Ukraine started in 2022 with the invasion of the country by Russian troops.

The results and conclusions validate the hypothesis and answer the research questions highlighting the very high proportion in which Russia-West relations influence the regional developments and, at the same time, the main tendencies that emerge from this dynamic that can impact the evolution of the post- soviet space. There are some of the conclusions:

- Today's realities confirm the scenarios of which the Central and Eastern European countries were concerned when they pursued the accession to the North Atlantic Alliance- Moscow "comes back" and it again shows an aggressive, imperialist face, repositioning itself as a declared adversary of the free world and West. Naturally, the ex-Soviet states that chose the way of the West and democratic order, in their turn seek to shelter themselves from the "anger" of Russia. As in the precedent case, again Russia blames the West for being behind the rapprochement of these countries to NATO, considering that is a hidden anti-Russia plan of the West, especially the US, to undermine the interests and security of the country. NATO did not come in the ex-Soviet space to "steal" these countries from Russia, but they came towards the West as sensing the danger from the East;
- Tensions and conflicts in the region began to intensify as former Soviets states were getting closer to the Western organizations, NATO and the EU, as a result of Russia's actions in the direction of preventing the development of these relations, and finally the possible accessions;
- The contradiction between Russia's and the West's perspective on regional order, addressed in detail in chapter IV, hides in the background the incompatibility of vision on how the international system was to reconfigure itself after the end the Cold War and the breakup of

- the USSR, and especially what should have been the status of Russia in the new political and security architecture and the power relations with the US;
- Moscow perceives itself in a permanent competition with Washington and the West in general, with vital stake for the security and status of the country. Western organizations, especially NATO, are perceived as a tool through which the US seeks to expand its domination over other states and regions. Therefore, the tendency of association the attitude towards NATO with the relations with the USA can be observed. Concretely, if they were in a favorable, cooperative stage also the attitude towards NATO became more relaxed and vice versa. In the same way, the promotion of liberal order and democracy seems to be understood at Moscow as a mean by which Washington tries to influence the developments in certain countries against Russian interests and from within Russia against the Kremlin regime;
 - Russia has consistently sought to impose at the leadership of these countries pro-Kremlin political forces that as long as they were in power, they represented a guarantee that they would not try to integrate the state into Western organizations. Simultaneously Moscow pursued a policy of construction realities on the ground such as separatist conflicts in which it has the decisive hand and which can be manipulate to exert pressure on states, or by recognized the independence of the separatist regions and include them under its "protectorate", or in the singular case so far of Crimea, chose the option of annexation. The goal is represented by the creation of important obstacles in the process of accession to NATO and the EU, strengthening the position on the ground and the control instruments and securing areas of strategic importance;
 - From Russia's perspective, the integration of the former Soviet in the supranational Eurasian organizations built around Moscow and which could serve to consolidate its dominance over the ex-Soviet space was the best outcome. An acceptable alternative for those who did not join the Russian integrationist plans was neutrality, repeatedly promoted by the Kremlin. But the perspective of "Finlandization" as Ronald Asmus suggestively described this option, it turns out to be ineffective to Russian aspirations, in the current conditions, for example, of Finland's accession to NATO;
 - Thus, Russia's interest was not only preventing the ex-Soviet states from reorienting themselves to the West in different versions, but also obtaining guarantees from the West or at least some tacit arrangements that they will not integrate these countries into European and Euro-Atlantic institutions;

- Russia has tried to "draw" the ex-Soviet states by using its military force or other types of coercion. The assertiveness and aggressiveness with which he tried to impose itself had exactly the opposite result with the neighboring countries seeking to "run" from it and take shelter under the umbrella of the West. Moreover, in the conditions of the invasion launched against Ukraine, even its traditional allies such as Armenia view Moscow's actions with concern and distances itself from them;
- Ukraine, as I explained previously, in Chapter IV, was supposed to be the "piece of resistance" of Eurasian construction from Russia's perspective. With the seemingly "loss" of it in favor of the West and with other states in Moscow's sphere of interest increasingly moving away from it, the project of Eurasian integration supported by President Putin seems to lose its relevance in the future;
- The developments in the ex-Soviet space have a paradigmatic dimension. Moscow is trying to force the transformation of the security system and the replacement of the post-Cold War order, changes that would allow it to occupy another position in the system, to return to the "table of the great" and to manage the global issues on an equal level with the US and, in the same time, to be recognized by the great powers as the hegemon of the ex-Soviet space.

Research limits and possible directions of development

The limits of the research also concern the present relevance of our topic as a large part of the thesis was written under the pressure of major ongoing events in the ex-Soviet space as the war in Ukraine. In this situation, due to the fact that we are dealing with an ongoing phenomenon, the analyzes related to it are natural limited and subject to caution. Another challenge came from the selection of bibliographic material, the literature in the research area being extremely vast. In addition, an important challenge was the language barrier, because I do not speak Russian, the materials from the Russian side were limited to speeches and documents that are translated, to English-language Russian authors or Western authors who cited in their own works sources from the Russian sphere. It is also important to mention that the present research approaches the ex-Soviet space through the lens of Russia's relations with the West considering very important their impact for regional developments, this does not mean that other factors or other approaches do not contribute to discerning this space.

Regarding future research directions, as we were saying above the results obtained can contribute to the premises of an analytical framework or matrix for Russia's actions at the confluence with the West.

At the same time, the research can be developed in the sense of elaborating a set of recommendations, proposals and alternatives for de-tensioning the regional situation and maintaining stable parameters in the Russia-West rivalry relationship. In addition, it can serve as a starter point for a larger study that addresses the evolution of the ex-Soviet space from the perspective of the complex of factors that can determine it or of another research dedicated to the way the evolutions in the post-soviet space can influence the overall power relations.