Ignored Warnings, Repeated Shortcomings

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Introduction

Tension in deteriorating Russo-Ukrainian relations peaked on 24 February 2022, when Russia launched a full-scale land, sea, and air invasion against Ukraine, aiming to target Ukrainian military facilities and cities throughout the country (EBSCO, 2023). Many view the conflict as a continuation of the 2014 military escalations, which resulted in Russia's illegal occupation of the Donbas region and annexation of Crimea. The root cause of Putin's decision to invade Ukraine lies in Russia's aspirations to prevent Ukraine from joining NATO and to preserve its influence in the post-Soviet region (Graham, 2022).

The invasion prompted a rapid reaction from the European Union. The EU aided Ukraine with military technology and financial means, issued various sanctions against Russian individuals and entities (EU Consilium, 2026), and has remained actively engaged in providing continuous support to Ukraine to this day.

However, this unified and decisive mobilisation stands in stark contrast to the EU's historical handling of regional crises, particularly regarding its response to the 2008 Russo-Georgian War. Due to incoherent politics towards Russia (Nista, 2020), no unified action was undertaken for conflict prevention, undermining the EU's role as a conflict mediator and ultimately paving the path for the full-scale war in Ukraine years later.

This report argues that the EU's inaction in the 2008 war contributed to the creation of conditions for Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. By studying the diplomatic periphery of the 2008 war and utilising the theory of path dependence, it aims to answer the question regarding the failure of the EU's peacekeeping policies and to draw lessons for future conflict prevention.

Exploration of the 2008 Russo-Georgian War

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia, along with many former Soviet states, has attempted to break out from the Russian orbit and forge

deeper integration with the West – a political path that contradicted Putin's main objective to keep post-Soviet states under Russian control (Fratus, 2022). Following the elections of pro-Western President Saakashvili in 2004, the relations between Russia and Georgia eroded further (Fratus, 2022), as Georgia continued to form diplomatic relations with the West and seek NATO membership. After NATO pledged Georgia and Ukraine eventual membership during the 2008 Bucharest Summit, the geopolitical tension between Russia and Georgia escalated sharply, followed by the intervention of Moscow-backed South Ossetian separatist forces in Georgian villages on August first, 2008 (Chincharadze, 2024). After the refused unilateral ceasefire, offered by President Saakashvili, Georgian troops launched an attack on Tskhinvali (Nista, 2020) in an attempt to reassert control. To support the separatists, Russia sent the 58th army to Georgia on 8 August 2008 (Tchantouridze, 2022), marking the official start of a five-day war. After refusing a further unilateral ceasefire from Georgia on 10 August (Nista, 2020), Russia only concluded its military incursions on 13 August, maintaining soldiers at the checkpoints near the disputed territories and recognising Abkhazia and South Ossetia's independence (Fratus, 2022).

With the United States abstaining, the role of mediation fell to French President Nicolas Sarkozy, whose country held the rotating presidency of the European Council (Nista, 2020). Despite securing the six-point agreement and brokering a ceasefire, Sarkozy faced significant criticism for appeasing Moscow (Nista, 2020). To preserve Europe's energy security, he focused on resolving the global "Russia vs the West" level of the conflict (Kuzmina, 2014), completely disregarding the regional root causes.

Furthermore, his rushed mediation mirrored the incoherent politics of the EU, as the Baltic states and Poland adopted a considerably more critical stance towards Russia's invasion of Georgia (Nista, 2020). However, a firmer position towards Russia would have jeopardised Western Europe's access to cheap energy supplies. The EU refused to risk the economic relations with Russia, as switching to alternative providers was linked to enormous economic costs and the annihilation of the huge investments committed to existing pipeline infrastructure. Consequently, the EU imposed only symbolic economic sanctions on Russia, which were later lifted by the West itself (Tchantouridze, 2022). Economic and diplomatic relations between the EU and Russia were further solidified by the Tagliavini report of 2009, as critics have argued that it selectively provided a one-sided narrative of the 2008 Russo-Georgian war and put the blame on Georgia to legitimise Russia's military actions (Tchantouridze, 2022).

The 2008 Russo-Georgian war was, in part, an aftermath of the EU's flawed perception of Russia – one that treated it as a weak post-Soviet state and underestimated the capabilities of an authoritarian regime (Chincharadze, 2024). The events of 2008 exposed the failure of decade-long attempts to restore diplomatic relations with Moscow (Chincharadze, 2024), as it became clear that Russia remained an important actor in

geopolitics. However, given its entrenched position in European economic and political affairs, Russia's isolation had become costly and inconvenient, which ultimately outweighed the importance of the integration of post-Soviet states in the West. Therefore, the EU disregarded the warning of Georgian President Saakashvili about Russia's future geopolitical ambitions (Chincharadze, 2024) and maintained its path-dependent relations with Moscow. Scholars have since argued that 2008 had been a "dress rehearsal" for the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Tchantouridze, 2022).

Start of an undeclared Russo-Ukrainian Conflict in 2014

After 2008, the EU's institutional logic of continuing diplomatic and economic relations with Russia proved counterproductive during the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Following the political defeat and flight of pro-Russian president Yanukovych, Ukraine fell into crisis. The situation became especially critical in Eastern Ukraine, particularly in Crimea, as the pro-Russian movement organised demonstrations against the Ukrainian government and called on Russia for intervention (Nista, 2020). Following the freeze of the loans, an increase in gas prices, and the launch of a massive military drill on the eastern border of Ukraine, Russia illegally annexed Crimea after an internationally unrecognised referendum (Nista, 2020). Shortly thereafter, pro-Russian separatists backed by Russia declared the self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Luhansk (Bharti, 2022).

The 2014 Ukraine crisis was a more consequential catalyst for the European Union, given that the political instability of the country followed Ukraine's integration process in the EU (Shelest, 2016). Moreover, the Russo-Ukrainian conflict affected the stability of the EU due to Ukraine's geographical proximity to its member states. Hence, the crisis fell in the scope of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and Eastern Partnership (EaP) documents (Petrov, 2014), which shaped the EU's approach to conflict settlement. Accordingly, the EU played a significant role in managing the conflict by sanctioning Russia, closing an Association Agreement with Ukraine (Nista, 2020), providing it with financial aid, and once again undertaking the role of a mediator (Bharti, 2022).

Undeniably, the EU's intervention was crucial in limiting escalation and violence following the crisis (Nista, 2020). However, the evident drawbacks in European politics failed to resolve the aftermath of the 2014 Russo-Ukrainian conflict. Similar to 2008, the European Union's policy towards Russia in 2014 was characterised by inconsistency. Given that the EU maintained its economic relations with Russia after the 2008 Russo-Georgian War to preserve its energy imports, one could argue that Moscow recognised and exploited the EU's weakness, correctly anticipating that their freedom of action would be limited in the case of Crimea's annexation. This could explain why European countries with stronger economic relations

with Moscow started considering lifting sanctions towards Moscow, despite economic leverage being the EU's greatest source of power (Chaban et al. 2019), as they sought to maintain their position as a trustworthy partner with Russia and avoid sabotaging their energy security.

The structural constraints of European energy dependency that had shaped the EU's response in 2008 were equally apparent in the Minsk negotiations. By refraining from imposing any obligations on Moscow (Dumoulin, 2024) and not addressing the conflict's local dimension adequately, the framework replicated the appeasement politics in 2008. Hence, one could argue that European countries prioritised their energy security over a firmer policy towards Russia.

Analysis of Russo-European Relations

After forming diplomatic and economic relations with Russia, the EU and Russia entered a new, mutually beneficial equilibrium. However, these benefits were highly asymmetrical. Whilst Russia relied on the EU for state revenues and investments, the EU entered a path-dependent reliance as Russia became its main energy supplier. The limitation of the EU's freedom of action due to Russia's economic leverage convinced Moscow that it could implement its geopolitical plans regarding post-Soviet states. However, Russia underestimated its own dependence on the EU's funds and miscalculated what an economic crisis and an invasion of Ukraine would bring.

The 2008 Russo-Georgian War came as an unexpected development for the EU, which is why the mediation was not as effective as necessary. At that time, the EU was slowly attempting to build relations with Russia and end the continental divisions left behind by the Cold War. One could also argue that the EU lacked knowledge about what necessary actions in such a situation entailed, especially since the United States decided to step back and refrain from intervention. Therefore, it chose to remain neutral and prioritise the long-term mutually beneficial relations with Russia. Notably, the 2008 war was not a direct result of Georgian-European cooperation, in contrast to the 2014 conflict in Ukraine, which affected the EU's sense of responsibility towards resolving the conflict.

The 2014 crisis in Ukraine was a much bigger disruption of the EU's equilibrium, especially since the root cause was the close cooperation between the EU and Ukraine. However, the mediations in 2008 and 2014 were led by the countries that benefited the most from their relations with Russia. Their particular big influence on the EU, combined with a lack of shared historical experience with Moscow occurring in Central, Eastern, and Northern Europe (Schmidt-Felzmann, 2015), resulted in incoherent politics towards Russia, on which Moscow capitalised to achieve its geopolitical goals. Hence, despite greater efforts, the EU was unable to hold Russia accountable for its actions in 2014, which ultimately contributed to the 2022 war.

Following the "failed" mediations, Russia overestimated its role in European politics, which is evident from Dmitry Medvedev's quote: "These 14 years [since the Russo-Georgia War] have been beneficial for us," he said. "When they [the West] got tired, they came to us and offered to remove the sanctions ... they know that Russia is much more important than Georgia or Ukraine." (Medvedev, 2022). The incoherence of the West and their dependence on Russian gas represented the biggest leverage for Russia in its decision to attack Ukraine. However, the cumulative effect of Russian invasions, the shift from "grey zone" to total war, and the geographical proximity of the conflict disrupted the equilibrium for every European state, prompting the EU to collectively begin supporting Ukraine throughout this war.

Conclusion

The 2022 war was not prevented due to incoherent politics, underestimation of the authoritarian regime, and the EU's path-dependent reliance on Russia. The EU was unable to realise that the integration of Georgia and Ukraine was not compatible with its bilateral relations with Russia. Moving forward, the Union must pursue a coherent and unified foreign policy that prioritises the Europeanisation of these post-Soviet countries over short-term economic convenience.

On the other hand, one could justify the attractiveness of convenient Russian gas for the EU and its reluctance to enter into conflict with its strategic partner. However, cooperation between autocratic and democratic countries always poses a significant risk of power abuse or violation of agreed rules. This report therefore recommends that the EU establish a clear framework governing economic partnerships with authoritarian states, ensuring that energy dependency can never again be weaponised to constrain the Union's political response to military aggression.

The outcome of the current Russo-Ukrainian War is decisive for political developments both within the EU and across post-Soviet countries. The EU must learn from past lessons and build more resilient conflict prevention mechanisms – strengthening Eastern Partnership committees, investing in early warning systems, and ensuring the visibility of vulnerable states through the economic interests of larger countries. These actions will decide upon European security, enlargement, and its freedom of action.

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