

## **Political Conditions Russia**

CountryWatch Reviews

September 2, 2019

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**Length:** 112450 words

### **Body**

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#### Introduction

Islamic insurgency and a decade of transitional economic orchestrations have politically bedeviled the Russian Federation. Today, still amid those concerns, it continues its evolution from the Boris Yeltsin administration to a new cadre of leaders.

First came the August 1999 firing of Prime Minister Sergei Stepashin, who had been prime minister since May 1999. In Stepashin's place, President Yeltsin nominated Vladimir Putin, the former head of the Federal Security Service (previously known as the KGB). Putin won Duma approval on Aug. 16, 1999, on a program of restoring law and order, continuing the fight against Islamic separatists, and pursuing the economic policies of Stepashin. The continuation of Stepashin's policies was also evident in the reappointment of most of the previous government's ministers.

Seven months following his appointment, Putin was elected president by 53 percent of the vote in March 2000. Following his victory, Putin nominated an ally, Mikhail Kasyanov, as his choice for prime minister.

The State Duma, the lower house of Russia's parliamentary system, approved Kasyanov as the country's new prime minister on May 17, 2000. As a former finance minister it was expected the pro-Putin Kasyanov would earmark economic recovery as his chief responsibility. Kasyanov made a name for himself earlier in 2000 by negotiating and winning a large reduction in the portion of debt owed to creditors, The London Club. He was also credited with increasing the salaries of state employees and for maintaining the federation's schedule of payments to foreign creditors.

Much of his acumen for fiscal reform was expected to continue. "Reforms must be energetic, consistent and balanced," the newly installed prime minister said in his acceptance speech on May 17, 2000. He added there were some tough political decisions ahead to be forged and that the will, support and consensus of the Russian people would be required. "Even the strongest government of professionals can't resolve national problems without the support of the whole of society," Kasyanov said.

Fortunately for the Putin administration, its political voyage began on a high note. Russian oil prices had been increasing, leading to a replenished treasury. However, what is past is prologue: the breakaway republic of Chechnya (discussed in the Appendix of this review) and the transition from a closed-system economy to a more open one paved the road ahead.

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To appreciate what Putin, Kasyanov and federation ministers faced, what follows is an exploration of the political conditions, which has set the stage for today's reform in Russia. This exploration begins with the elections in the period of 1999 and 2000 and moves toward the post-Putin era at the end of the decade, followed by the return of Putin to the forefront of the Russian political scene from 2012 and beyond. Other domestic, regional and international issues are also considered in the discussion following.

## Duma and Presidential Election Atmosphere (1999-2000)

Although Russia faced numerous political and economic challenges, such as combating organized crime and strengthening tax collection efforts, the Chechen war dominated as the major issue of the December State Duma election campaign. The approval of the initial Russian attacks in Chechnya resulted in most candidates expounding support of the war effort. There was, however, some opposition to the ongoing attack; many candidates publicly opposed a ground war. In the early days of the conflict, Putin, too, had stated his intention to avoid a long ground war. Other political leaders who supported military action short of a ground war included Grigory Yavlinsky of the liberal "Yabloko" party, former Prime Minister Primakov, and the mayor of Moscow, Yuri Luzhkov.

Many analysts viewed the Duma elections as a foretaste of the presidential election scheduled for June 2000. Undeclared presidential candidates used the Duma election campaigns of their various parties or factions as a means of testing the public's appetite for their own candidacies. Although Prime Minister Putin was not a leader of any political party, a new pro-Kremlin party, "Unity," or MEDVED, was formed under the leadership of the Emergencies Minister, Sergey Shoygu (or Shoigu). Other major contenders in the Duma elections included: the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, or KPRF, under Zyuganov; Fatherland-All Russia, or OVR, led by the mayor of Moscow, Luzhkov, and former prime minister, Primakov; the liberal "Yabloko" party, led by Grigory Yavlinsky; and the pro-Kremlin, Union of Right Forces, or SPS, under the leadership of former prime minister Kiriyenko and other reformers. The Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, or LDPR, which espouses strongly nationalistic and xenophobic policies, was barred from registering the party's list of candidates by the Central Election Commission because several of the LDPR candidates were undergoing criminal prosecution. The leader of the LDPR, Zhirinovskiy, formed a new association, "Zhirinovskiy's Bloc," or BZ, to replace the banned LDPR and removed the offending candidates from the party list.

The media played a very central role in the campaigning, with various candidates closely allied with various media companies. The centrist party of Fatherland-All Russia viewed as being attacked by Kremlin-controlled state media, but Fatherland-All Russia responded to the attacks with media in Moscow influenced by Luzhkov. The campaigns were also characterized by the candidacy of a number of the oligarchs and criminal figures that allegedly ran for seats in the Duma to win immunity from prosecution. Media mogul Boris Berezovsk, who had been seen as a pivotal political actor behind Yeltsin's administration while also routinely facing investigation, ran for and won a seat in the Duma.

Eleven parties or party alliances, plus a large group of non-partisans, won seats in the Dec. 19, 1999, Duma elections. The "Kommunisticheskaya Partiya Rossiyskoyi Federatsiyi" (Communist Party of the Russian Federation or KPRF) won the highest percentage of popular votes with 24.3 percent and won the greatest number of seats at 113. The pro-Kremlin "Mezhregional'noye Dvizhenie Yedinstvo" party (Inter-Regional Movement Unity, "Unity" or MEDVED) came in second with 23.3 percent of the votes, winning 72 out of the 450 Duma seats. The centrist "Otechestvo Vsiya Rossiya" (Fatherland-All Russia or OVR) won 13.3 percent of the votes and 66 seats. The other major parties to pass the five-percent threshold included: "Soyuz Pravykh Sil" (Union of Right Forces or SPS) winning 8.5 percent and 29 seats; the former Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, now "Blok Zhirinovskogo" (Zhirinovskiy's Bloc or BZ), winning six percent and 17 seats; and "Yabloko" winning 5.9 percent and 21 seats.

Other parties which failed to pass the five percent threshold but still won seats in the single -seat constituencies include: "Nash dom Rossiya" (Our Home is Russia or NDR) with seven seats; "Obshcherossiyskoye Politicheskoye Dvizhenie v Podderzhku Armii" (All-Russian Political Movement in Support of the Army or DPA) with two seats; "Partiya Pensionerov" (Pensioners' Party or PP) with one seat; the "Kongress Russkikh Obshchin i Dvizhenie Y.

Boldyreva" (Congress of Russian Communities and Yuri Boldyrev's Movement or KRO-DYB) with one seat; and "Russkaya Sotsialisticheskaya Partiya" (Russian Socialist Party or RSP) with one seat. Additionally, non-partisans won 106 seats. In another important election at the time, Yuri Luzhkov won reelection as Moscow's mayor by a large percentage.

On Dec. 31, 1999, Yeltsin unexpectedly announced his resignation as president of Russia and named the prime minister, Vladimir Putin, acting president. While apologizing for many of his failed policies, Yeltsin also endorsed Putin as his successor. Abiding by the constitutional requirement that presidential elections be held within three months of a president's resignation, Yeltsin also announced that the presidential elections previously scheduled for June would be held on March 26, 2000, a date later approved by the upper house of the parliament. In addition to providing opponents less time to organize presidential campaigns, Yeltsin's resignation allowed Putin to take advantage of incumbency and the popularity that resulted from the Chechen war.

Upon taking over as president, Putin attempted to change some of the impressions of cronyism created by the Yeltsin administration by dismissing Tatiana Dyachenko, Yeltsin's daughter and key adviser. Putin also dismissed the manager of Kremlin properties, Pavel Borodin. Issues concerning the Kremlin's vast holdings had given rise to most of the impressions of corruption in the Yeltsin administration, and Borodin, as the person in charge, had been under investigation for receiving bribes. However, Putin also granted immunity to Yeltsin against prosecution for alleged crimes that occurred during his years in power.

On Jan. 18, 2000, the Duma re-elected a Communist deputy, Gennady Seleznyov, as speaker of the lower house. Seleznyov's re-election was made possible by cooperation between the Communists, the largest faction in the Duma, and the Unity party, the pro-Kremlin party formed in September prior to the Duma elections. More than 100 deputies began boycotting Duma sessions in protest against the alliance made between the Communists and Unity. Among those boycotting were the centrist Fatherland-All Russia, led by Primakov, who also ran for speaker of the Duma, the liberal Union of Right Forces, and the liberal "Yabloko." In addition to Seleznyov's reelection, many deputies were upset by Zhirinovskiy's elevation to deputy speaker of the Duma. On Jan. 27, 2000, the deputies ended their boycott. Nevertheless, an odd situation had arisen in which political parties whose political programs complement the goals of the Kremlin were compelled to enter into opposition to Putin and a government appointed by Putin.

While the politics of the Duma elections, Yeltsin's surprise resignation, and its aftermath were being played out, the military action in Chechnya had entered a new phase. Russian forces were no longer engaged in just bombardment of Chechen positions, but were also actively engaging Chechen separatists with ground troops in an attempt to capture Chechen strongholds. While Russian forces were successful in capturing key towns in Chechnya as well as parts of the capital, Grozny, fighting in the capital continued.

The change in tactics from only artillery shelling and air attacks to bombardment in tandem with ground assaults increased Russian casualty numbers. Although the exact numbers were under much dispute, it was evident that Russian forces were suffering substantial casualties as the intensity of the fighting increased.

On March 26, 2000, Russia held its second post-Soviet presidential elections; acting President Vladimir Putin won the election with 52.6 percent of the votes. His opponents received the following: Gennady Andreyevich Zyuganov (KPRF) 29.3 percent, Grigoriy Alekseyevich Yavlinsky (Yabloko) 5.8 percent, Amman M. Tulane 3 percent, Vladimir Vol'fovich Zhirinovskiy (LDPR) 2.7 percent, Konstantin A. Titov 1.5 percent, Ella A. Pamfilova 1 percent, Stanislav S. Govorukin 0.5 percent, Yuri I. Skuratov 0.4 percent, Alexei I. Podberyozkin 0.1 percent and Umar A. Dzhabrailov 0.1 percent. Although the election was supervised by a group of international mediators, which judged the election fair, it should be noted there was widespread speculation of the media's bias toward Putin.

President Putin's determination to resolve the problem in Chechnya became the focal point of his presidential campaign. Prior to the election, Russian forces captured two of the main Chechen guerrilla commanders Salman

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Raduyev and Salautdin Timirbulatove. In addition, Putin visited Russian troops stationed in Chechnya to boost morale. Polls suggested that voters looked favorably on these actions.

### Domestic Political Landscape

Since taking office, President Putin's government faced several pressing issues on the domestic landscape, including a weak economy, decentralized power and waning international recognition. In terms of the economy, one third of the population lives in poverty while the country's wealth is concentrated in a small percentage. President Putin announced his intention to modernize the economy with the hope of rescuing Russia's economy from several years of depression. President Putin suggested that his government would espouse market reform. According to Putin, state intervention would increase, inevitably forcing Russia's 89 regions to become less autonomous. Finally Putin announced plans to bolster Russia's military capacity with an emphasis on nuclear weapons. This decision to increase Russia's nuclear arsenal could significantly hurt Russia's foreign relations with certain countries such as the United States and Great Britain.

Russia has suffered from very high criminal activity ranging from petty street crime to white collar and bureaucratic corruption. Although early in his presidency, President Putin announced his intention to fight corruption at all levels, little improvement has been made. In mid-2001, Transparency International ranked Russia as a corrupt country giving it a score of 2.3, with 10 being highly "clean" and one being highly corrupt. Organized crime has influenced politics in Russia; often, political parties are funded with mafia money. Corruption and organized crime have also affected foreign investment in the country. In 2001, over 7,000 murderers escaped punishment and remain free; and 30,000 people have disappeared. In a February 2002 speech directed at law enforcement officials, Putin harshly criticized the current state of law enforcement and demanded that changes be made to ensure the safety of the Russian citizens in business and daily life.

Critics have suggested that Putin's ability to push through land reform has been a vital indicator of his ability to enact and secure economic reform and his commitment to attracting foreign and domestic investment. Although since 1993 it has been legal for Russian citizens to own land, there had been no legal means for land to be bought or sold. In October 2001, the Russian Land Code, the legal framework for selling and buying urban land and land for industrial use, was approved by President Putin and became law. This law is a milestone in Russian political and economic life as it makes provisions for foreign ownership, taxation, the methods of placing value on land, the legal rights of landowners and enacts measures to protect the environment on industrialized lands.

Although the framework for urban and industrialized land has been in place for several months now, agricultural land reform has been slower in developing, as it is considered a very controversial subject. Putin's biggest critics of this reform have been the communists and agrarians who are firmly against the selling of farmlands to foreigners. Other worries that surround private ownership include the concern that agricultural lands will be used for speculation and how much land can be sold to an individual. Putin is insisting that agricultural reform be pushed forward and that individual regions put forth their recommendations on the restrictions and procedures on private land acquisition. Legislation on a new agricultural land code was expected to be completed in the next few years.

The accidental sinking of the Russian submarine Kursk in August 2000 and the death of more than 100 crewmembers rattled the Putin administration. The families of the victims, who apparently suffocated in the submerged vessel, declared Putin and other Russian officials cold and unconcerned. Ultimately a military commission determined the accidental cause of the disaster and the vessel was raised and returned to his home base of Murmansk. The Kremlin demoted three top navy commanders and sacked another eight admirals on Dec. 1, 2001, in an expulsion that some observers said was punishment for the Kursk nuclear submarine catastrophe in which 118 crew died a year and a half earlier. Senior military officials denied a direct link with the Kursk disaster, saying the sanctions related to "serious failures in the organization of the military training activities of the fleet." The disaster, the worst in modern Russian naval history, saw Putin publicly berated for failing to end his holiday and take personal charge of the crisis.

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Russia, a country of about 145 million people, had in December 2001 about 163,000 patients infected with HIV/AIDS, a fraction of the four million cases registered, for example, in South Africa, according to government health officials.

However, experts say these statistics hide a catastrophic epidemic, with real figures up to five times those on government files. A bigger problem is the number of young people affected by the disease. More than 80 percent of recorded cases affect people under 30 years old. Initially, HIV spread heavily through Russia's gay community, though drug addicts contracting the disease from infected needles soon came to represent the vast majority of cases. HIV/AIDS is now spreading rapidly among heterosexuals, doctors have noted. Many heterosexuals remain off the record books, their contamination with the virus registered only as "reason unknown."

The issue of media freedom in Russia has also been a key concern for the country. The June 2003 closure of the last of Russia's three independent television stations has resulted in charges of political influence. TVS, like TV6 and NTV before, had been critical of the Russian government and Russian leaders. Its sudden closure was described as being reminiscent of "Soviet-style" machinations when critical and contestatory voices were silenced. Other news agencies across the expanse of Russian media expressed dismay at the closure of TVS. They warned against state monopolization of media channels. Some observed that Russia's national television had been reduced to state-run channels and entertainment channels. Certainly, in the case of TVS, the plan is to have it replaced with a sports channel.

Meanwhile, the Russian press ministry explained that the closure of the station had been due to financial, personnel and management problems. Indeed, before being shut down completely, TVS had earlier been dropped from Moscow's main cable company's offering. Nevertheless, TVS insisted that aside from the obvious financial, personnel and management problems, there was also a political element that led to the station's closure. Representatives from TVS charged that instead of allowing the operational challenges to bring an end to the station, it had been pulled off the air instead. Questions about media freedom have thusly been a concern in recent years.

#### Elections in 2003 and 2004

In December 2003, approximately 23 party lists participated in the fourth elections since the collapse of the former Soviet Union. Half of the 450 seats in the Duma were at play, while the other 225 seats were contested by individual candidates. The results of the election determined the composition of the Duma for the next four years.

Early results showed that the United Russia Party, which has backed President Putin and the Kremlin, appeared headed for victory with over 36 percent of the votes cast. The nationalist party of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, ironically named the Liberal Democrats, appeared to have secured 12 percent of the votes -- just slightly less than the Communists, who garnered 12.8 percent of the votes cast. Other sources, however, suggested that the Communists may have acquired as much as 15 percent. The Homeland bloc obtained close to 9 percent. According to some sources, the two liberal, free market parties each carried less than the 5 percent required to control party list seats in parliament. Other election sources, however, showed a range of results for the Union of Right Forces -- from 4 percent to 9 percent of votes, and Yabloko -- from 5 percent to 7 percent of votes.

Turnout for the election was over 30 percent and therefore exceeded the 25 percent threshold required to validate the election poll.

The overwhelming success of the United Russia Party resulted in criticism by observers and opposition. They charged that the election campaign had been dominated by media bias in favor of the leading party.

On Feb. 24, 2004, Russian President Putin announced the dismissal of the government led by Prime Minister Mikhail Kasayanov. Having sacked his entire cabinet, Russian President Putin named European Union envoy and former tax police chief, Mikhail Fradkov, as his new prime minister. Reports suggested that Putin decided to remove Kasayanov because of his close relationship with Russia's oligarchs and his ties to the administration of Boris Yeltsin. The move came in anticipation of the March 14 elections, which Putin was expected to win by a landslide victory.

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In those presidential elections, President Vladimir Putin won more than 70 percent of the votes cast. Putin's closest opponent, Communist candidate Nikolai Kharitonov, achieved a distant second with 13.7 percent of the vote. None of the other four candidates acquired more than 5 percent of the votes cast. Many of Putin's rivals expressed frustration about the fact they were denied access to the state media. Meanwhile, European election observers said that Russia's presidential election failed to meet democratic standards. Observers from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the Council of Europe took part in the election observation mission.

In the aftermath of the election, President Putin said he would proceed with economic reforms and promised to protect democracy. He also dismissed criticism from the United States government, and particularly that of Secretary of State Colin Powell, about the lack of media access afforded to his rivals. In this regard, Putin noted that Powell's remarks were made because of the domestic political agenda in the United States, which included an election later in the year. Putin also referenced the controversial decisions and flawed ballots in the United States election process in 2000, which led to George Bush becoming president over Al Gore, saying, "In many so-called developed democracies there are also many problems with their own democratic and voting procedures."

## International Landscape: The Issue of Iraq

In early 2003, international politics took center stage as the world grappled with disarming Iraq. France and Germany put forth a plan aimed at averting a war with Iraq. The plan included a provision tripling the number of United Nations weapons inspectors on the ground in Iraq, the deployment of United Nations peacekeepers, and the establishment of a country-wide "no fly" zone. Russia, which, in addition to France has veto power within the United Nations Security Council, stated it would likely support the Franco-German plan.

As these issues were being discussed, the United Kingdom was in the process of drafting a new resolution authorizing the use of force against Iraq. Such a resolution was at odds with the joint declaration developed by France, Russia and Germany, which demanded the reinforcement of weapons inspections, aided by human and technical capacity, within the wider context of peaceful Iraqi disarmament. Specifically, the declaration asserted that while Iraq must be disarmed and neutralized, war should be used only as a final measure. Russia consistently stated that it was in favor of the peaceful disarmament of Iraq.

Diplomatic negotiations surrounding the Iraq crisis collapsed in March 2003. Efforts to modify elements of the draft of a second United Nations Security Council Resolution failed, despite efforts by the United Kingdom to create an agreement that would satisfy the misgivings of most of the Security Council members. France and Russia decried the provisions for an automatic trigger resulting in war if Iraq failed to accomplish various benchmarks in disarmament. Both France and Russia earlier warned that they would veto any resolution containing such language.

Following a meeting in the Azores between the leaders of the United Kingdom, the United States and Spain (the sponsors of the existing United Nations Resolution 1441), Blair announced there would be a final round of informal discussions to try to resolve the impasse between the three allies and the rest of the Security Council. A deadline of March 17, 2003, was given to the rest of the Security Council to decide on a possible course of action, before military force against Iraq would be exerted. France's Ambassador to the United Nations, Jean Marc de la Sabliere, responded that in one-on-one discussions with council members, it was clearly apparent that most did not endorse a use of force against Iraq at this time.

With no progress made in regard to a second resolution, or in building consensus among the Security Council by the March 17 deadline, the United States, the United Kingdom and Spain reversed their original commitment to seek a vote on its passage in the Security Council and, instead, withdrew the draft resolution. In a media conference a week prior, United States President George W. Bush had promised a vote in the Security Council, whether or not the resolution passed, stating that council members would have to "show their cards." Now, in an effort to pursue military action without overt illegality, which the defeat of a second resolution would surely signify, the allies took cover under the original United Nations Security Council Resolution 1441, which augured "serious

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consequences" for Iraqi non-compliance. Experts on international jurisprudence, however, are not at all agreed on this reasoning.

Several hours after the withdrawal of the draft resolution, United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan announced the withdrawal of United Nations personnel, including weapons inspectors, from Baghdad in preparation for an imminent war against Iraq. Russia condemned military action against Iraq and noted that it would only jeopardize international security. The Russian Foreign Minister called for the convening of the Security Council. Apart from the humanitarian and ecological disasters looming on the horizon for Iraq, the Russian Foreign Ministry also vocalized its belief that the current war violates the United Nations Charter. Russian officials have also been clear that they do not believe in the exportation of democracy -- "by way of tomahawks" -- to sovereign nation states. Nevertheless, United States and United Kingdom forces launched its war against Iraq in mid-March 2003.

A week into the war, the United States declared that Russian firms provided anti-combat equipment to Iraq. Russia emphatically denied any such involvement. The United States White House said that such provisions would be in violation of United Nations sanctions and United States President George Bush telephoned Russian President Vladimir Putin to register his displeasure over the matter. Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov responded to the charges by telling reporters, "Russia rigorously observes all its international obligations and has not supplied Iraq with any equipment, including military, in breach of the sanctions regime."

This development was only one more in a list of issues contributing to deteriorating bilateral relations between Russia and the United States. Another key issue was the matter of United States spy flights. In 2003, up to three U2 strategic reconnaissance flights by the United States reportedly occurred along the Russian border with Georgia. Russia has angrily described the spy flights as a quasi-return to the Cold War period.

In the aftermath of the war in Iraq, Russia continued to urge greater United Nations participation and expressed the view that legitimacy in Iraq could only be realized with the crucial involvement of the international body.

## International Landscape: Kyoto Protocol

In the fall of 2004, amidst arguments of impending harm to the Russian economy, President Putin's cabinet endorsed the Kyoto Protocol, which seeks to limit greenhouse gas emissions across the globe. The measure was sent to the Duma to be ratified. Russia's endorsement effectively breathes new life into the international protocol, which had suffered a severe blow after the United States' decision (under President Bush) to withdraw from participation.

## International Landscape: Nuclear Politics

In early 2005, the nuclear issue also took center stage as Iran and Russia signed an agreement by which Moscow would supply fuel for Iran's new nuclear reactor in Bushehr. Under the terms of the agreement, Iran must return spent nuclear fuel rods from the reactor, which had been designed and built by Russia. This condition was implemented in response to growing anxiety by the United States, Israel and others about Iran's nuclear ambitions.

Against the backdrop of this development was a meeting in Slovakia between Russian President Vladimir Putin and United States President George W. Bush in which both leaders agreed that Iran should not develop nuclear weapons. Russia, however, refused to acquiesce to United States's pressure to completely halt cooperation with Iran on nuclear power.

From around 2002 through the next several years, Russia worked with several other countries within a multilateral framework to deal with the threat of nuclear proliferation by North Korea. Those talks stalled soon thereafter.

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In mid-2006, North Korea test-fired a number of short-range missiles and one Taepodong-2 long-range missile into the Sea of Japan. The situation sparked international condemnation and threats of punitive measures by some countries, including sanctions. Others, including Russia, called for a return to multilateral talks on North Korea.

For its part, North Korea said that further missile tests would be launched. North Korea also warned that it would react strongly to punitive pressures from the international community, and it threatened to carry out an "annihilating" nuclear strike if its atomic facilities were pre-emptively hit by the United States.

The missile tests, in conjunction with dire promises of further tests and a nuclear strike, have intensified the widely-held view that North Korea is a threat to global security. Moreover, these moves by North Korea effectively served to further isolate the country and confirm its pariah status within the international community.

The matter resulted in the passage of a resolution by the United Nations Security Council members, including Russia, mandating inspections on cargo going to and from North Korea to search for weapons, a ban on the sale or transfer of materials related to North Korea's unconventional weapons program, and a freeze on the transfer of funds connected with North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile programs. Absent from Resolution 1718 was the Chapter Seven [of the United Nations charter] provision, which would enforce the sanctions via military force.

December 2006 marked the resumption of multilateral talks regarding North Korea's controversial nuclear program. North Korea, South Korea, China, Japan, Russia and the United States indicated their interest in returning to the negotiating table after a year-long hiatus. While the news of the recommencement of six-party talks was welcomed, there was also a pervasive sense of caution. Experts conveyed limited optimism about the prospects of forging a resolution amenable to all parties.

By February 2007, the multilateral discussions were ongoing. Progress was quickly made during the six-party talks in Beijing when North Korea agreed to move closer toward the position of disarmament. Of particular interest was an agreement reportedly requiring Pyongyang to shut down its nuclear facilities at Yongbyon over the course of the ensuing months, in lieu of aid, such as fuel oil provided by the United States and South Korea. The draft agreement, which had been drafted by China, also called for the return of international inspectors to North Korea. On February 13, 2007, it was announced that concurrence on the matter had been reached. Yet to be seen was whether or not the agreement would be ratified by all six parties, and also whether or not North Korea would fully comply with the provisions of the deal.

#### Devolving Relations with the United States

Meanwhile, relations with the United States took center stage in 2005 when United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice visited Russia. During her visit, Rice took time to criticize President Vladimir Putin's political weight by suggesting that he had too much personal power. In this regard, Rice expressed concern over the lack of an independent media in Russia, and she also repudiated the accumulation of political power that Putin had gathered since taking office.

A year later in May 2006, on the heels of sharp criticism by United States Vice President Dick Cheney of Russia's human rights record, the Kommersant business newspaper said that the matter augured the start of a new Cold War. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov offered no comment on the content of Cheney's position, however, he criticized the forum in Lithuania where Cheney spoke. He noted that such meetings were convened for the purpose of uniting a cadre of interest groups against someone. Meanwhile, former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev said that Cheney's speech appeared to be "a provocation and interference in Russia's internal affairs in terms of its content, form and place."

The matter preceded a scheduled meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and United States President George W. Bush at a key industrial summit to be convened in St. Petersburg. At that meeting in July 2006, during a



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joint press address by Putin and Bush, the American president called on Russia to democratize, and said that he hoped that the country would enjoy the kind of freedom now being enjoyed by Iraq. Putin responded to this statement by asserting that the example of Iraq -- now embroiled in what some were calling a civil war -- was not one he thought Russia should emulate.

Relations with the United States would further be strained as a result of foreign investment issues (discussed below under the title "The Yukos Story") and a controversial missile plan for eastern Europe (discussed below under the title "Recent Developments").

### The Yukos Story

Perhaps most important to the Bush administration in the United States, however, was the matter of foreign investors' rights. Openness to foreign investment, for the Bush administration, has been viewed as a sign of market capitalism, which it has linked with notions of freedom. By contrast, the Bush administration has looked unfavorably on government power in the realm of business. In this regard, the Bush administration would apparently be watching closely the fraud and tax evasion trial of the founder of the Yukos oil company, Mikhail Khodorkovsky. Some, perhaps even including those within the Bush administration, had been of the mind that the case against Khodorkovsky was manufactured purely to punish him for his political ambitions. Naturally, those in the Kremlin viewed the situation quite differently. Nevertheless, the verdict, due in April 2005, was to be watched closely by Washington.

In early May 2005, no verdict had been given in the Yukos case against Mikhail Khodorkovsky. Then, on May 16, 2005, a Russian judge adjourned court midway through the verdict in the trial of the Yukos former chief, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, following a reiteration of the indictments. The verdict stage of the trial was to resume the next day. Khodorkovsky's lawyers said they expected a guilty verdict since they viewed all the charges as being political. They also criticized the Russian judicial process. Several of Khodorkovsky's supporters were seen on the streets around the court. Although the anti-Khodorkovsky contingent was less visible, public opinion of Russia, according to recent surveys, showed little sympathy for the Russian tycoon. The surveys contained little good news for either private corporations or the government; indeed, they also showed the public losing trust in both arenas. By May 31, 2005, Khodorkovsky was found guilty and sentenced to nine years in jail for fraud and tax evasion.

The Yukos issue came to the fore again in mid-2006 and again evoked questions about Russia's economic and political position. Was Russia's treatment of Yukos a sign of some kind of backward slide toward government authoritarianism? This was a question that captured the attention of many in the West, and particularly, the United States.

In July 2006, Yukos commenced court action against the Russian state energy firm Rosneft.

The court action was oriented toward stopping Rosneft's flotation on the London Stock Exchange (LSE), which was expected to be Russia's biggest initial public offering (IPO) and one of the largest in the world. Yukos petitioned the court to impose a temporary injunction on the sale of shares, while a full investigation of the flotation was carried out. Yukos argued that Rosneft's key oil producing subsidiary, Yuganskneftgaz, had been taken from Yukos by the Russian government. In fact, Rosneft purchased Yuganskneftgaz in 2004, after it was seized from Yukos and was being auctioned for the purpose of paying unpaid taxes. The Economist (in the July 12-21, 2006 edition), contended that the auction was rigged. Regardless, Rosneft responded to Yukos' court action by saying that its float would not be impeded; it also announced that its main share buyers would include BP of the United Kingdom, Petronas of Malaysia, and CNPN of China. Meanwhile, Rosneft was already trading on the Moscow market. For its part, the London Stock Exchange said that it intended to list Rosneft unless it was blocked by the courts.

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Also in July 2006, creditors of Yukos voted convincingly in favor of the liquidation of company assets. The issue would now go before a bankruptcy court in August 2006 for consideration, where it was expected that the court would appoint a supervisor to sell Yukos' assets. The creditors also soundly rejected a company plan aimed at rescuing the company from its likely financial demise. Among the creditors have been Russian tax agencies and the state-owned oil company, Rosneft, which was discussed above and which was likely to benefit handily from the sale of Yukos' refineries.

On Aug. 1, 2006, the Russian firm Yukos was declared bankrupt by a court in Moscow. The court decision effectively ends the company's bid to survive. The next step was expected to be liquidation and allocation of the firm's remaining assets.

## Domestic Political Tensions

In late December 2005, Economic Advisor Andrei Illarionov offered his resignation to Russian President Vladimir Putin. His withdrawal from service as a political aid to the Russian leader was intended to protest what he perceived as the retrenchment of political freedom. Illarionov charged that Russia was now being run by state corporations and as a result, the country was no longer politically free. Illarionov said to journalists, "It is one thing to work in a country that is partly free. It is another thing when the political system has changed, and the country has stopped being free and democratic." He also noted that the economic model of the Russian state had changed. He went on to suggest that the expression of his viewpoint had also been curtailed. As such, he asserted that remaining in his post would have been impossible.

Illarionov had been a strenuous critic of Putin and the Russian government for some time. Indeed, a year earlier, he referred to the Russian government's actions against Yukos as being inappropriate. Still, the timing of Illarionov's latest remarks was unfortunate for the government since they were uttered just as Russia was about to assume the presidency of the G-8 group of industrialized countries. Nevertheless, Viktor Chernomyrdin, the ambassador to Ukraine and a former Russian prime minister, eschewed Illarionov's criticisms of the Russian government. In an interview with Interfax News Agency, he characterized Illarionov as malicious and "overly negative." He went on to state that it had been a mistake to keep Illarionov at the Kremlin for as long as he had been in that post. Indeed, several observers have suggested that Illarionov had little remaining influence on the Kremlin for some time. In fact, many of his duties at the Kremlin had become increasingly limited and his role as Russia's representative to the G-8 had ended. Still, he was never entirely pushed out since his presence appeased Western concerns about increasing state control over economic policy.

## Energy Politics

In other developments, Russia was embroiled in a dispute with Ukraine over a gas deal in 2006. The Ukrainian Energy Minister Ivan Plachkov traveled to Moscow to try to resolve the dispute ahead of the expiration of the negotiating deadline. The issue has revolved around the price of gas. The Russian gas entity, Gazprom, raised the price of 1,000 cubic meters of gas from \$50 to \$230 -- a rate that would involve the quadrupling of gas prices for Ukraine. Ukraine refused to pay while Gazprom threatened to cut off Ukraine's supplies completely if a new agreement was not forged by the start of 2006. Indeed, Russia said that no new proposals would be advanced and that Ukraine should pay market rates. For its part, Ukraine has said that while it would agree to payment of market rates, such increases should be introduced in a phased cycle over a period of several years.

With no progress made in forging an agreement, Gazprom effectively cut off energy supplies to Ukraine. Because Gazprom supplies a full 20 percent of all the gas consumed by the European Union, the cut-off of Ukraine's gas provisions led to a shortage of gas supplies elsewhere across Europe in the first days of 2006. Countries directly affected by the situation were themselves pumping less gas to their own customers down the line.

Even as Ukraine lost 100 percent of its Russian gas supplies, Moldova was also cut off after refusing to go along with the price increase proposed by Gazprom. In Hungary, gas supplies from Russia were down by 40 percent, although supplies were later restored. In Poland, gas supplies from Russia decreased by around 14 percent,

## Political Conditions Russia

leading the country to consider gas supplies from a different pipeline. In Austria, Slovakia and Romania, gas supplies from Russia decreased by around 33 percent, however, Austrian sources said that the gas flow had since been normalized. In France, which is highly dependent on Russian gas, supplies encountered a 25 percent to 30 percent fall. In Germany, where 30 percent of all gas provisions come from Russia, there was also a reported decrease. German authorities called on Moscow to "act responsibly" in the face of the energy challenges facing the region.

In response, Gazprom announced it would carry out checks on gas volumes and that it would utilize "all possible measures" to ensure that Western consumers continued to receive gas as per contractual agreements. The Russian government said that it would pump more gas to Europe -- a move intended to compensate for gas "stolen" by Ukraine.

On Jan. 1, 2006, Alexander Medvedev, the deputy head of Gazprom, alleged that Ukraine had stolen 100 million cubic meters of gas. Ukraine denied the accusation that it had siphoned off \$25 million worth of gas from the pipeline crossing its territory after Russia cut off its gas supply. Still, Ukraine's Fuel and Energy Minister, Ivan Plachkov, asserted that Ukraine had the right to a portion of the gas transported by the pipeline that exports Russian gas across its territory. Indeed, that pipeline carries 90 percent of Gazprom's exports across Europe.

Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko said he was willing to enter a process of international arbitration to resolve the dispute. In this regard, European Union Energy Commissioner Andris Piebalgs said in a media interview that he had called on Russia and Ukraine to return to the negotiating table. He also described the complexity of the situation, carefully noting that no one was to blame. On Jan. 3, 2006, ahead of a meeting of energy officials from the European Union, Russia notified the European Commission of its opinion of the gas dispute with Ukraine.

At the geopolitical level, the Ukrainian government in Kiev suggested that it was being punished by the Russian government in Moscow for trying to develop stronger ties with the West. Relations between Russia and Ukraine have been strained ever since President Yushchenko came to power. As a pro-Western politician, Yushchenko has appeared to steer the country out of Russia's sphere of influence.

Russia and Ukraine were eventually able to forge an agreement that satisfied both parties and ensured that gas supplies were not hampered.

In December 2006, tensions rose between Azerbaijan and Russia over energy supplies. At issue was the proposed price increase for gas supplies to Azerbaijan by Russia's Gazprom.

In reaction to Gazprom's decision to more than double the price of its supplies, President Aliyev of Azerbaijan threatened to reduce his country's oil exports to Russia. To this end, Aliyev said, "I have decided to find a way out of the situation with minimum losses for Azerbaijan, and at the same time with dignity. I cannot allow Azerbaijan to be turned into a country subject to elements of commercial blackmail."

For its part, Russia's Gazprom explained that the new price of gas was the result of an end to the subsidies that had once benefitted former Soviet republics. As well, Russia's Gazprom maintained that the price of gas was now dictated by the global marketplace and was bereft of political machinations.

Earlier, Georgia had also reacted angrily to the price increase. Indeed, Georgia accused Russia of raising gas prices as a punitive measure against its pro-Western policies. However, because it was unable to secure an alternative supply of gas, and with Gazprom threatening to cut off supplies without agreement on the updated price of gas, Georgia eventually acquiesced to the new arrangement.

Late 2006 and early 2007 saw a similar imbroglio involving Russia and Belarus. In late 2006, an agreement was forged in which Belarus was largely compelled to accept Russian gas supplies at double the previous price. Belarus subsequently retaliated by imposing a new tax on Russian oil shipments that traversed the country, while Russia reacted by refusing to pay the new taxes.

## Political Conditions Russia

The situation became increasingly heated in the second week of January 2007 when the Russian state-owned pipeline firm Transneft closed the Druzhba or "Friendship" pipe. Russia also accused Belarus of siphoning off oil supplies as an illicit means of payment for unpaid taxes and duties. Representatives of the two countries held talks and the situation was eventually resolved. The flow of Russian oil resumed, along with assurances being advanced that such stoppages would not occur again.

The situation was reminiscent of Russia's earlier argument with Ukraine (discussed above) and various other countries in Eastern Europe, which was also spurred by the increased price of gas supplies. As before, Russia said that the price increase was in keeping with market rates, while other countries complained that the new pricing structure was untenable.

## Regional Concerns

Russia has had to deal with its post-Soviet relationship with former republics. For example, in the case of Estonia, tensions have dominated the relationship. First, nearly 30 percent of Estonia's total population is ethnic Russian. Estonia's citizenship laws - which require knowledge of Estonia - have angered Russia, as it views these laws as discriminatory against ethnic Russians in Estonia. Second, Estonia has been investigating and prosecuting former Soviet officials for alleged crimes against humanity during World War II and the Soviet occupation thereafter. Russia resents what it sees as a fervent pursuit of former Soviet officials in the face of a less than equally fervent pursuit of Estonians who collaborated with the Nazis during World War II. Estonia's tendency to give convicted war criminals suspended sentences (as opposed to actual prison sentences) has somewhat ameliorated the situation.

In 2000, relations between Estonia and Russia took center stage as the two countries expelled diplomats from within their own borders over a spying imbroglio.

In March 2005, there was something of a diplomatic flap when President Ruutel decided to decline an invitation to attend the celebrations in Moscow scheduled for May to mark the anniversary of the end of World War II. Nevertheless, in May 2005, the two countries signed a treaty delimiting their shared border.

The treaty was ratified a month later by parliament, however, an amendment was introduced in the language of the legislation that referenced Soviet occupation. The Russian government in Moscow said it would not accept such language and withdrew from the agreement in June 2005.

In February 2007, the Estonian parliament passes legislation banning the display of monuments valorizing the period of Soviet rule. The law effectively set in motion a series of actions, that would ultimately result in political unrest within Estonia and served to strain bilateral relations.

Meanwhile, Chechnya has been the most pressing regional concern for Russia in recent years.

In recent years, Chechnya continued to be a major consideration and the core of Putin's fight against terrorism. The death of the central figure within the Chechen resistance in July 2006, however, functioned as a literal coup for Putin's government. (See the Appendix of this review for more about the situation in Chechnya.)

Chechnya aside, President Putin still faces other geopolitical problems. There are an estimated 3,400 rebels scattered throughout Chechnya and the area around Georgia and the Pankisi Gorge has become a strategic area for the rebels. Tensions between the two countries increased in tandem with Russia's accusation that Georgia has allowed Chechen rebels to move freely and enact terrorist attacks in the area. Russia also claims that after carrying out attacks, the rebels usually flee across the border into Georgia, including the Pankisi Gorge, where they enjoy a safe haven. For its part, Georgia accuses Russia of violating its airspace as it attempts to deal with the rebel threat.

## Political Conditions Russia

Although joint patrols have been established to deal with this transborder issue, at the time of writing, there was no clear resolution. It remains unclear how Putin intends to handle the situation in the long-term, but international observers have expressed increased concern.

Relations with Georgia have also been deleteriously affected by the existence of two Soviet-era bases in that country (set to be closed in 2008), tensions over Russian ties to separatist movements in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and the new Georgian government's pro-Western stances that would orient the country away from Russian influence.

These issues came to the fore in September 2006 following a diplomatic imbroglio between Russia and Georgia over spying.

At issue was the arrest of five Russian officers in Georgia on the basis of allegations of spying. The Russian government in Moscow demanded their release, however, the Georgian government in Tbilisi was itself compelling the handover of a sixth Russian officer. That officer was apparently within Russian army headquarters, which was surrounded by police in the Georgian capital. The Georgian Interior Ministry claimed that it had evidence showing that the Russian officers had been " personally carrying out intelligence activities." It also linked Russia with separatist activities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

In response, Russia ordered the withdrawal of diplomatic officials, including the Russian ambassador, from Georgia using emergency aircrafts. Russia additionally urged its citizens to refrain from travel to Georgia and stopped processing visa requests from Georgian nationals. Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that Georgia's actions were a manifestation of an anti-Russian policy and he warned that he would refer the matter to the United Nations.

The situation was not helped by Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili's dismissal of Russia's reaction as being "hysteria."

By the start of October 2006, Russian President Vladimir Putin entered the fray, saying that Georgia's arrest of the Russian army officers for spying was tantamount to "an act of state terrorism with hostage-taking." His remarks came following a meeting with the security council of his government and a day after his government said that it would halt its scheduled withdrawal of troops from Georgia. The presence of Russian troops in Georgia had been a source of consternation for Georgians and their exit in 2008 had been highly-anticipated. Georgian Foreign Minister Gela Bezhushvili responded to that bit of news by saying that his government expected Russia to honor its prior commitment on troop withdrawals.

On October 2, 2006, Georgia said that it was releasing the Russian military officers. The situation was not automatically resolved, however, as Russia went forward with sanctions against Georgia, including the aforementioned travel restrictions, but also including deportations of Georgians and raids on Georgian-owned businesses. Georgia protested Russia's actions, with Foreign Minister Bezhushvili characterizing it as being beyond xenophobia. On October 9, 2006, Georgia said that it would turn back any aircraft with deported Georgians from Russia.

By March 2007, ties between the two counties -- Georgia and Russia -- were not helped by the poor medical conditions and deaths of several ethnic Georgians who were deported from Russia during the aforementioned diplomatic imbroglio, which started with the detainment of Russian officers on charges of spying in the fall of 2006. Georgians expressed outrage at the deaths of the deportees, and the Georgian government in the spring of 2007 launched charges of human rights violations against Russia at the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. The Georgian Justice Ministry said in a statement, "The lawsuit is based on hundreds of cases of flagrant abuses of the human rights of Georgian citizens and ethnic Georgians by the Russian Federation during their deportations."

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Russia responded by saying that it believed that it had the right to deport illegal migrants, and as such, it was doubtful that the court would consider the case. A spokesperson for the Russian Foreign Ministry, Mikhail Kamynin said, "Actions of this kind are not conducive to the normalization of relations between Russia and Georgia."

On Aug. 22, 2007, Georgia accused Russia of violating its airspace for a second time within weeks. The Georgian Foreign Ministry said that a Russian fighter jet had flown a few miles into its territory, according to tracking data from the country's air defense system. The Russian government in Moscow denied the incursion saying that its planes were not flying close to the border with Georgia on the day in question. The incident followed a similar episode earlier in the month when Georgia accused Russia of violating its border and dropping a missile close to the Georgian capital of Tbilisi. Russia vociferously denied that accusation as well. Two days after the second claim by the Caucasus country that Russia had violated its border, the Georgian Interior Ministry announced that it had fired on what it claimed to be a Russian aircraft after it allegedly violated Georgian airspace. Russia again denied the claim and noted that there were no reports of missing Russian aircraft.

Editor's Note: These incidences have been indicative of a further devolution of poor relations between the two countries. In the background, various issues have worked to sour Russian-Georgian relations. Of grave importance has been the Georgian region of Abkhazia, which has been held by Russian-backed separatists. Georgia views Russia's decision to back the separatists as a virtual annexation. As well, the two countries have been involved in imbroglios involving spying, the expulsion of ethnic Georgians from Russia as a result, as well as a dispute over the price of Russian gas to Georgia.

Another source of tension comes from Russian accusations that Georgia is hiding Chechen militants in the Pankisi Gorge area, the home of Chechen kin people, the Kists.

Meanwhile, there has also been tension with Moldova over the presence of Russian troops in the breakaway Trans-Dniestr region where there is a large number of ethnic Russians living. In March 2005, at the time of the Moldovan election, about 100 Russians were barred from entering the country. While the Russians claimed they were election monitors, Moldovan authorities said they were not registered as such and they were likely to disrupt the election. A month prior, several Russians were expelled from Moldova under suspicion of spying, while Russia threatened sanctions against Moldova. The region returned to the political landscape in March 2006 when new customs regulations were instituted by Moldova requiring exporters in Trans-Dniester to register with the Moldovan authorities. Officials in Trans-Dniester administration said that the new rules constituted a blockade of sorts. Months later in July 2006, an explosion on a bus in the city of Tiraspol left several people dead and around 20 people injured.

## Violence and Intrigue

On Aug. 21, 2006, an explosion in a market in the Russian capital city of Moscow demolished a two-storey building and left 10 people dead and over 40 people injured. Among those killed were two children and six foreign nationals. At first, it was surmised that the explosion was caused by a faulty gas cylinder, however, police subsequently said that a bomb had been placed in a bag and deposited inside a cafe. Security forces said that a simple bomb device was used and they alleged that the blast was the result of a gang feud. Gang feuding has been the stated cause behind a number of small-scale market bombings in the past. Of course, Chechen rebels have also used bombings at markets to further their cause. As such, there was no conclusion about who was responsible. Nevertheless, two people were detained for questioning in regard to the incident.

In mid-September 2006, Andrei Kozlov, the first deputy chairman of the Russian Central Bank, was shot to death by two gunmen. The motive for the apparent murder remained unknown at the time of writing, but there was speculation that it was a contract-type assassination. Prosecutors surmised that Kozlov may have been killed

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because of his leadership in the decision to revoke the licenses of several banks believed to be guilty of money laundering. The move by the Central Bank to revoke these licenses was likely intended to deter corruption in a country seeking to build better transparency while curtailing corruption. The killing of Kozlov, however, suggested that such efforts were likely to be resisted, perhaps even with deadly force.

October 2006 was marked by the murder of a prominent journalist, Anna Politkovskaya, who had been a strong critic of the Kremlin's policies in Chechnya. See "Appendix: Chechnya" for details.

In November 2006, a former Russian spy, Alexander Litvinenko, died in a hospital in London. He was the victim of an apparent poisoning, according to reports by British investigators. Indeed, traces of the radioactive substance polonium-210 were found in his body. Further traces were subsequently found at various locations in London, which were presumed to have been frequented by Litvinenko.

Speculation as to who was responsible for his death was ongoing. As a vocal critic of Putin and the Kremlin, and also because of his recent work investigating the aforementioned murder of an anti-Putin journalist, the immediate assumption was that the Russian government was responsible. The fact that Litvinenko blamed Putin for the poisoning -- from his hospital bed -- only added to this particular theory. But the slow, painful, and rather exotic nature of the poisoning suggested that the incident was not the usual case of politically-motivated assassination.

For its part, the Kremlin rejected any intimations that the Russian government was involved in Litvinenko's death and, instead, encouraged the investigation by law enforcement agencies in the United Kingdom (U.K.). To this end, a spokesperson from President Putin's office said, "Any death is always a tragedy. Now it's up to U.K. law enforcement agencies to investigate what happened."

Other theories were beginning to surface about who might have orchestrated Litvinenko's death. Among them was the notion that rogue elements of the Russian intelligence service may have been responsible. A similar theory postulated that former KGB -- now carrying out more shady activities -- might have been responsible. Given Litvinenko's past role as an agent investigating corruption, there was the suggestion that he may have been the victim of a contract killing carried out by enemies made during that period. Yet another rationale centered on the possibility that the poisoning was carried out for the purpose of implicating the Russian government, presumably to discredit it.

By early December 2006, several British Airways airliners were said to be contaminated with the radioactive substance that caused Litvinenko's death. As well, an Italian contact of Litvinenko, Mario Scaramella, was hospitalized after traces of polonium-210 was found in his body. Scaramella had reportedly met with the former agent on the very day he [Litvinenko] was taken ill. Consequently, the investigation into the matter was widening well beyond British shores, according to British Home Secretary, John Reid. In fact, counter-terrorism experts were expected to travel to Russia to advance the investigation.

In May 2007, the British authorities named a former Russian KGB officer as the likely person behind the poisoning death Litvinenko.

Sir Ken MacDonald, the director of public prosecutions in the United Kingdom, said Andrei Lugovoi should be held responsible for the murder. During a press conference, McDonald said, "I have today concluded that the evidence sent to us by the police is sufficient to charge Andrei Lugovoi with the murder of Mr. Litvinenko by deliberate poisoning."

In response, Lugovoi denied being involved in the death of Litvinenko and said that the accusations being made against him were "politically motivated." To this end, he said in interviews with the Russian media, "I consider that this decision to be political, I did not kill Litvinenko, I have no relation to his death and I can only express well-founded distrust for the so-called basis of proof collected by British judicial officials."

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Meanwhile, a power struggle was unfolding between the United Kingdom and Russia over the possible extradition of Lugovoi. While the British authorities intended to formally request that Lugovoi be extradited, the Kremlin was saying that the extradition of Russian nationals to foreign jurisdiction was unconstitutional. At the same time, Russian authorities suggested that there was room for the prosecution of a Russian citizen accused of a crime in another country within Russia, using "evidence provided by the foreign state." A spokesperson from the office of British Prime Minister Tony Blair countered by noting that Russia had signed the European Union 1957 convention on extradition.

In July 2007, Russian Prosecutor-General Yuri Chayka ruled against the extradition of a former KGB agent Andrei Lugovoi, whom the British authorities said was responsible for Litvinenko's death.

Chayka said that extradition of Lugovoi to the United Kingdom would contradict the Russian constitution.

Now with the official Russian decision on the extradition issued, the British authorities responded by expelling four diplomats from the Russian embassy in London. The British Foreign Secretary David Miliband noted that his country was also reviewing its cooperation with Russia on a number of issues. Soon thereafter, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko noted that the expulsion of its diplomats from London could very well hinder bilateral cooperation on counter-terrorism efforts. As well, Russian announced that it would also expel four staffers from the British embassy in Moscow. The United Kingdom responded to this action by noting that Russia decision to retaliate in kind was "not justified."

Consequently British-Russian relations were at one of their lowest points in recent history.

## Other Developments

April 2007 saw an anti-Kremlin rallies in Moscow and St. Petersburg. The Moscow rally ended in some small clashes with authorities as well as some arrests. The St. Petersburg rally was contained within a square at the city center since riot police prevented demonstrators from marching in the streets. Again, there were small clashes with police and the arrests of some opposition figures, including Eduard Limonov, the leader of the radical National Bolshevik party, Andrey Sidelnikov, the leader of the Pora youth movement, and Olga Kurnosova, the local head of United Civil Front.

The rallies were arranged by these and other opposition groups working under the auspices of the "Other Russia" coalition. They have accused President Vladimir Putin of political repression. In response, President Putin denied charges that he has tried to curtail democracy and instead said that the opposition forces were attempting to destabilize the country.

On April 23, 2007, Boris Yeltsin -- Russia's first democratic leader -- died due to heart failure at the age of 76 years. Russian President Vladimir Putin reportedly telephoned Yeltsin's widow to convey his condolences. Putin also declared a national day of mourning in honor of his predecessor. In a national address, Putin said, "We will do everything we can to ensure that the memory of Boris Nikolayevich Yeltsin, his noble thoughts and his words 'take care of Russia' serve as a moral and political benchmark for us."

Then, on April 25, 2007, at a solemn state funeral at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow, Yeltsin was laid to rest. It was the first religious funeral for a Kremlin leader since the 1890s. Russian and foreign dignitaries, including former Russian President Mikhail Gorbachev, former United States President Bill Clinton, former United Kingdom Prime Minister John Major, and the British Duke of York, were in attendance.

Yeltsin was noted for being Russia's first democratic leader, as well as being the driving force behind the establishment of the new Russian federation in the post-Soviet era. But he has also been associated with the



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economic chaos that plagued Russia in the immediate period after the collapse of the Soviet Union. As such, Yeltsin's legacy will likely be a matter of debate among historians torn between the notion of Yeltsin as the driving force behind democratic change in Russia, and Yeltsin as the force behind the rise of the wealthy oligarchs. His military campaign against independent activists in Chechnya, which led to the razing of Chechen towns, the killing of tens of thousands of civilians, and the horror of the international community, were collectively expected to be matters of grave consternation for decades to come.

Also in April 2007, Russia responded negatively to plans by the Bush administration in the United States (U.S.) to develop a missile defense system in eastern Europe. Russian President Vladimir Putin decried the notion, indicating that he viewed such a missile system as being more than simply a defense plan. To this end, he said, "This is not just a defense system, this is part of the U.S. nuclear weapons system." President Putin went so far as to warn the U.S. that its plans in this regard would run the risk of mutual destruction, saying, "The threat of causing mutual damage and even destruction increases many times." Making clear its hard-line opposition to the notion of a U.S. missile defense system, President Putin also threatened to withdraw participation in a treaty limiting conventional weaponry in Europe.

NATO responded to Russia's threat to suspend its membership in the 1990 Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) with its own concern. Indeed, NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer made it clear that the treaty was a keystone of security and stability in Europe.

With the United States planning to construct missile defense facilities in Europe, Russia had already expressed its opposition to such a plan. But in early June 2007, ahead of the G-8 summit of key world leaders, Russian President Vladimir Putin warned that his country could be forced to point weapons at Europe for the first time since the end of the Cold War. Russia also announced that it had tested an RS-24 ballistic missile a week prior.

Both moves appeared oriented toward the maintenance of "strategic balance" in the region. To this end, Putin pointed to the fact that the United States had already altered the strategic balance by withdrawing from the anti-ballistic missile treaty in 2002. In an interview published in the Italian newspaper, Corriere Della Sera, he made the Russian position clear by asserting, "If the American nuclear potential grows in European territory, we have to give ourselves new targets in Europe."

The climate of bilateral relations thawed somewhat at the summit when United States President Bush said, "They're [Russians] not a military threat." He also called for the United States to work with Russia in dealing cooperatively on the issue.

Then, Russian President Putin proposed an alternate solution to the missile defense issue when he suggested that both countries utilize the radar system at Gabala in Azerbaijan to develop a shield that would cover Europe. In this plan, incoming missiles from hostile countries could be detected.

Putin noted that "This work should be multi-faceted with the engagement of the states concerned in Europe." He also added that if his country and this United States worked together in an open manner to develop missile defense capabilities, "then we will have no problems."

Bush responded to the proposal by saying that it was an interesting option and noted that he and Putin would engage on a "strategic dialogue" on the subject in a forthcoming visit of his Russian counterpart to the United States. Bush' senior advisor on national security, Stephen Hadley's characterization of the Russian proposal as "a positive development" augured a possible productive resolution to the matter.

On Oct. 12, 2007, missile talks between the United States (U.S.) and Russia ended in failure with no resolution in sight. U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice described the bilateral talks with Russia saying, "We discussed a range of proposals we hope they will accept." Her Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, said that the proposals

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required study and in the interim, the U.S. should not work on the missile defense system. But the U.S. rejected Russia's request to put an end to the plan, with Rice asserting that discussions with Poland and the Czech Republic on the deployment of system would go on as anticipated. Responding to the U.S. position, Putin said, "One day you and I may decide that missile defense systems can be deployed on the Moon, but before we get there the possibility of reaching an agreement may be lost because you will have implemented your own plans."

Meanwhile, U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates argued that the missile defense system was not directed at Russia but at rogue states including Iran and North Korea. However, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that the very *idea* of the missile defense shield system was based on the false assumption that Iran presented a nuclear threat. Lavrov also criticized the U.S. for hinting at the use of force against Iran, saying that such an approach contravenes against the notion of a negotiated solution to the Iranian problem. Russia also reiterated its position that its own early warning radar systems in Azerbaijan could easily be used by the U.S. But Gates responded that radar was incapable of guiding interceptor missiles.

U.S. intransigence on the matter thus paved the way for Russia to make good on its earlier threat to withdraw its participation in the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, which was aimed at limiting conventional weaponry in Europe. Russia also warned that it could withdraw its participation in the 20-year old Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, which limits both U.S. and Russian short and medium range missiles, and resulted in the elimination of thousands of missiles in both countries.

## Parliamentary Elections of 2007

September 2007 saw Russian President Vladimir Putin dissolve government following a request from Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov. Putin soon put forth a new name for the position of head of government. That person was Viktor Zubkov -- the financial intelligence chief who had been at the helm of the anti-money laundering entity called Rosfinmonitoring.

For his part, following Putin's announcement of his appointment, Zubkov told legislators that he intended to form a government in which the composition would likely change from the current membership. After his meeting with lawmakers, Zubkov met with members of the media and said that there was a possibility that he might eventually run for the presidency in forthcoming elections, which would result in a successor to the widely-popular Putin. To that end, Zubkov said, "If I achieve something as prime minister then I do not rule out that possibility." Zubkov's nomination was scheduled to be confirmed in parliament on Sept. 14, 2007.

With Russian President Vladimir Putin expected to step down from office, attention shifted to whether or not he would try to remain in the domain of politics. Because he could not run for another term as president, there was speculation about what his role might be.

In October 2007, a hint of Putin's aspirations was revealed when he talked about the possibility of running for a seat in parliament as a candidate of the United Russia party in forthcoming elections. Should such a path be pursued, and assuming that his United Russia party won the parliamentary elections, Putin would be well-positioned to take on the role of prime minister. As discussion was evoked about this possible path, Putin said, "Heading the government is realistic, but it is too early to consider it."

On Dec. 2, 2007, voters went to the polls in Russia to cast ballots in the country's parliamentary elections. Results showed an overwhelming victory for Russian President Vladimir Putin's United Russia party, amidst accusations that the election was not carried out in a fair and fully competitive manner.

Nevertheless, with the majority of ballots counted, Putin's United Russia had 64.1 percent of the vote share. The Communists carried about 11.6 percent of the vote share and were poised to secure some seats in parliament as well. The right-leaning Liberal Party of Russia appeared to have garnered around 8.2 percent of the vote, while A Fair Russia (Mothers/Pensioners/Life) acquired approximately 7.8 percent. Other parties won the remaining vote

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share but were unable to cross the seven percent threshold needed to enter parliament. Since the Liberal Party and A Fair Russia were both allied with United Russia, parties aligned with the Kremlin were expected to hold up to 348 seats in the 450-seat Gosudarstvennaya Duma (State Duma). Should that number hold steady, the Kremlin would likely have a constitutional majority -- that is, control over enough seats in parliament to push through constitutional changes.

The Communists said the election outcome was fraudulent, however, the Central Electoral Commission dismissed this claim.

Communist Party leader, Gennady Zyuganov, said, "We do not trust these figures announced by the central elections commission and we will conduct a parallel count."

On the other side of the equation, the leader of victorious United Russia, Boris Gryzlov, acknowledged that there may have been some violations, but nothing significant enough to place the final result in doubt. To this end, he said, "They in no way put in doubt the final result. The fact that these violations have been registered shows that we have a transparent ballot."

Delays in the procurement of necessary visas allowed only a limited number of monitors from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) to observe the election. Nevertheless, the OSCE subsequently issued a statement characterizing the election as "not fair" and noting that it did not meet European standards, although it did not go so far as to issue charges of fraudulence. Instead, the group noted that the election "took place in an atmosphere which seriously limited political competition" and that "there was not a level political playing field." For his part, Putin asserted that the poll was both "legitimate" and a vote of the public's confidence in him.

Indeed, the landslide election victory for United Russia appeared to be illustrative of popular support for Putin's leadership. United Russia leader, Gryzlov noted that the election was "a referendum on President Putin so I think we can say he has won a victory."

With such resounding ratification, it appeared likely that even after the end of Putin's presidential term in 2008, and even though constitutional provisions prevented him from running for another successive term as president, he could nonetheless remain on the political scene. Indeed, the parliamentary victory for his party opened up a path for Putin in which his leadership role could well transition from that of head of state to head of government. As noted above, current Prime Minister

Viktor Zubkov -- a Putin ally -- was touted as being a possible contender for the post-Putin presidency, thus leaving the prime minister's role vacant. With Zubkov as president and Putin as prime minister, the political orientation of the country was likely to continue on course.

At the same time, Putin could also decline to take on the job of prime minister and simply remain politically active behind the scenes.

In other developments, Liberal Democratic Party candidate, Andrei Lugovoi, could well join parliament if the vote count was sustained. A seat in parliament would immunize Lugovoi from both prosecution and extradition in a notorious spy poisoning case. Indeed, Lugovoi had been named in the United Kingdom in connection with the murder of former Russian operative Alexander Litvinenko, discussed above.

## Presidential Election of 2008

In anticipation of presidential elections to be held in 2008, attention turned to possible presidential contenders. The appointment of Zubkov as prime minister in 2007 had fueled speculation about whether he would be Putin's choice of successor. But on Dec. 10, 2007, Russian President Vladimir Putin nominated First Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev to be the presidential candidate in forthcoming elections, scheduled for March 2007.

Putin noted that Medvedev had his "full support."

As of 2008, Medvedev, backed by Putin, was hoping to slingshot far into the lead over the rest of the candidates. He had the support of not only the president's party, United Russia, but also A Just Russia, Agrarian Party of Russia, and the Civilian Power party. As before, there was speculation that he would appoint Putin as his prime minister if he was elected to the presidency. Another strong candidate was Gennady Zyuganov -- a familiar face in the presidential campaign in Russia, having run twice before. He had served as the leader of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation. Vladimir Zhirinovskiy was also a candidate with experience in the Russian government, holding the position of the Nationalist Deputy Speaker of the State Duma.

He ran for the presidency three times, and was the leader of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia.

The full slate of candidates in the presidential election, which was set to take place on March 2, 2008 were: Vladimir Bukovsky, Alexander Donskoi, Viktor Geraschenko (Other Russia-Rodina), Sergei Gulyayev (Other Russia), Garry Kasparov (Other Russia-United Front), Mikhail Kasyanov (Popular Democratic Union), Gennadiy Seleznyov, Oleg Shenin (Communist Party of the Soviet Union), Vladimir Zhirinovskiy (Liberal Democratic Party), Gennady Zyuganov (Communist Party of the Russian Federation), Grigory Yavlinsky (Yabloko), Dmitry Medvedev (United Russia) and other candidates.

In pre-election polls taken in December 2007, Dmitry Medvedev had a very strong lead over any other candidate, with 79 percent of the vote. Gennady Zyuganov and Vladimir Zhirinovskiy were at the bottom of the poll with 9 percent each. If this trend stayed consistent, it was believed that Medvedev would take the presidency, and Putin would remain in power via the office of prime minister for at least another term.

On election day in March 2008, turnout was high at almost 60 percent. Exit poll data showed that Putin's chosen successor, Dmitry Medvedev, was on track to capture the presidency with 69.6 percent of the vote share. Early election results were in line with the exit poll data and indicated that he was carrying just short of 70 percent of the votes cast. Communist leader, Gennady Zyuganov, was headed for a distant second place finish, garnering close to 20 percent.

While he noted that the election result was not official, Medvedev suggested that his presidency would follow the path set by his predecessor, outgoing President Putin. To this end, Medvedev said his policies and programs would be "a direct continuation of that path which is being carried out by President Putin." He suggested he would work in tandem with Putin, who could move into the office of the prime minister. As well, he noted that in the realm of foreign policy, his core priority would be to defend Russian interests.

#### Leadership in Russia in 2008

On May 7, 2008, Dmitry Medvedev was inaugurated into office and formally

replaced Vladimir Putin in the role of president and head of state.

His inauguration took place some months after his landslide election victory.

A stalwart ally of Putin, Medvedev (like Putin) studied law at Leningrad State University in the 1980s and went on to become a law professor at that very institution. In the 1990s, he moved into the realm of politics, working at the external affairs committee in the St. Petersburg government under Putin's leadership. By the close of the 1990s, he became the deputy chief of the government's staff, and in 2000, he became the first deputy chief of the president's office.

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He was appointed as First Deputy Prime Minister in 2005, and was reappointed to that position in 2007. Medvedev crafted his image into one of a working-class candidate who could relate to those around him. On the issues, he was concerned about the unemployment rate, and was hoping that the rate reductions would continue into his presidency. Medvedev also expressed his intent to continue the policies set by Putin, particularly with regard to Russia's economic growth and prosperity.

Putin, who was constitutionally barred from a third consecutive term as president after eight years in office, remained in the political spotlight. A day after Medvedev's inauguration, Putin was approved by the lower house of parliament as the new prime minister and head of government. Putin was approved by a decisive 392-56 margin and was backed by three of the four main factions within the Duma: United Russia, Just Russia and the Liberal Democratic Party. Only the Communists voted against him. Striking a similar tone to Medvedev, Putin said his government would concentrate on economic and social matters. He also noted that he intended to cut Russia's inflation rate, lower taxation and create a favorable business environment. But foremost on Putin's agenda was the formation of a new government. To that end, he was expected to put forth a cabinet list.

With the new President Medvedev being only age 42 at the time of inauguration, and with Prime Minister Putin in his early fifties, the two leaders of the Russian Federation embodied youthful leadership. Together, it was expected that they would continue to chart the policy course that had prevailed since the start of the Putin era.

## Special Report:

France negotiates truce agreement for Georgia and Russia as fighting dies down in separatist enclaves of South Ossetia and Abkhazia

On August 8, 2008, the Georgian military launched an attack against separatist targets in South Ossetia.

The military offensive ensued only hours after the Georgian authorities and South Ossetia's separatists agreed to a Russian-brokered ceasefire.

The situation began when Georgian military troops and Russian-backed South Ossetian separatists were ensconced in violent clashes over the course of several days. Georgian tanks then attacked the separatist stronghold of Tskhinvali, presumably in an effort to regain control of the region.

According to Russian media, several people were reported to have been killed in the shelling. As well, Georgian forces and South Ossetian separatists were reported to be exchanging heavy fire. To that end, explosions and rocket fire were heard in the area around Tskhinvali. The British newspaper, The Independent, reported that "the assault is coming from all directions."

For its part, Georgia said that it was taking this action to stabilize the territory [South Ossetia]. Georgian Minister for Integration, Temur Yakobashvili, said that his country was compelled to terminate South Ossetia's "criminal regime" and to "restore constitutional order" to the breakaway region.

Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili himself called for an end to bloodshed to end, but warned the South Ossetian separatists that Tbilisi's patience was not limitless.

On the other side of the equation, South Ossetian rebel leader Eduard Kokoity said that Georgia was carrying out "a perfidious and base" attack on Tskhinvali. He also confirmed the assault on Tskhinvali saying, "The storming of Tskhinvali has started." Eyewitnesses on the ground said that the city was being attacked, the hospital was destroyed and the university was on fire. The Red Cross reported that there were numerous casualties needing medical attention.

In response, Russia was said to be deploying troops to South Ossetia to assist peacekeepers operating there.

Indeed, an aide to the Russian Land Forces commander confirmed that Russian tanks and troops had entered South Ossetia and were approaching Tskhinvali, which was reported to have been already devastated by the Georgian offensive there.

Russia's military presence in the region was not well-received by Georgia, given the fact that the Georgian government has long accused Russia of arming South Ossetian separatists. But Russia has its own counter-argument to levy against Georgia. It has accused Georgia of deliberately ramping up its own military presence in breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and assuming a hard-line posture against these enclaves. Russia's tensions with Georgia have been partially rooted in another concern. Specifically, Russia has been opposed to pro-Western Georgia's ambitions to join NATO. This geopolitical element has textured the larger context of the territorial struggle being played out in South Ossetia.

It should be noted that Russia has enjoyed strong ties with South Ossetia, largely due to the fact that the ethnically-related province of North Ossetia is located within its borders, and both the south and the north have long hoped to unite. Indeed, many South Ossetians hold Russian citizenship. As such, with vested interests on both sides of the border, Russia called for an end to the ongoing violence. Russia also urged the

international community to work cooperatively "to avert massive bloodshed and new victims."

However, the prospects for peace were not likely to be easily advanced, given the emerging situation in the region a day later.

On August 9, 2008, Georgian authorities said that Russian jets had **bombed** military targets inside its territory – specifically in the Georgian town on Gori to the south of South Ossetia. They also said that one attack ensued close to the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, which is known to supply Caspian oil to the West. Georgia described the air strikes as "a full-scale military invasion" and Georgian President Saakashvili claimed that Russia was at war with his country.

Russia had a very different perspective and placed the blame squarely on the Georgians. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov indicated the dire nature of the situation by asserting that already 1,500 people had died in the conflict and more than 30,000 South Ossetians had fled into Russia to escape the threat of death. The Russian government said that it had to act to protect the South Ossetians, many of whom hold Russian citizenship. Russian President Dmitri Medvedev said that Georgia also bore a responsibility for "protecting the [South Ossetian] population" and that his country's military action was intended "to force the Georgian side to peace."

By August 9, 2008, the Russian army had advanced to take complete control South Ossetia's capital of Tskhinvali. General Vladimir Boldyrev, the head of the Russian ground forces said, "Tactical groups have completely liberated Tskhinvali from the Georgian military." Boldyrev also said that Russian forces would keep up the pressure on Georgian military units. Russian President Dmitry Medvedev explained his country's objectives in South Ossetia saying, "Under these circumstances, Russia is guided by one task -- to immediately stop violence and defend civilians and restore peace as soon as possible." President Dmitry Medvedev also demanded the withdrawal of Georgian troops from the conflict zone, saying that it was the only way to settle the "tragic crisis."

That same day, Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili called for an end to hostilities saying, "We propose an immediate ceasefire and the beginning of the withdrawal of troops from the contact line." On the home front, the Georgia's parliament approved a presidential decree that essentially imposed two weeks of martial law in the country.

A day later on August 10, 2008, Georgia said that it was withdrawing its troops from the South Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali in the face of Russia's counter-offensive. Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili said his country's troops were returning to the positions they held before the conflict erupted days earlier. There was, however, some confusion about whether Georgian troops were pulling out of Tskhinvali or withdrawing entirely from South Ossetia.

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Georgian Reintegration Minister Temur Yakobashvili confirmed that the troops left Tskhinvali but were remaining in other areas of South Ossetia. Russian sources said that Georgian military units were still active in South Ossetia.

Presumably due to the continued activity by Georgian military units in South Ossetia, and what Moscow described as continued Georgian offensive action, Russian forces were continuing to carry out its own military action into Georgian territory. Reports from the region suggested that Russia carried out an air strike on a military airfield near the Tbilisi International Airport.

With the situation grim despite the earlier declaration of a withdrawal of troops from Tskhinvali, Georgia said that it had submitted a note to the Russian embassy in Tblisi calling for immediate negotiations with Russia regarding "an end to all hostilities and a ceasefire." Russia confirmed that the note had been received. Russia at the time also denied Georgia's claims that Russian air strikes had targeted populated areas.

But movement toward a resolution seemed no closer by August 11, 2008. Georgian authorities said that Russian air strikes hit communications facilities to the west of Tbilisi and the port city of Poti in the Black Sea. As well, Russian forces were reported to have led a raid through the other breakaway enclave of Abkhazia into the western Georgian town of Senaki. On the other side of the equation, Russia said that the Georgian military was still targeting positions in Tskhinvali, despite claims of a withdrawal and overtures of a ceasefire.

In this way, both sides accused one another of continuing the hostilities and exacerbating the conflict.

On the international front, the United Nations Security Council had earlier convened an emergency session to consider the rapidly deteriorating security crisis in the Caucasus. Little was actually accomplished at that session. Likewise, a spokesperson from NATO had already called on both sides -- Georgian and Russian -- to exercise restraint. However, with the violence ongoing, clearly restraint was not at hand.

Nevertheless, the United States said that it was sending a delegation to the region to try to negotiate a resolution. The United States Department of States said that the envoys would "engage with the parties in the conflict."

As well, a European Union delegation was en route to the region and said that it was hoping to procure a ceasefire and withdrawal agreement from both Georgia and Russia.

A separate Council of Europe delegation was also hoping to advance dialogue.

In the same time period, according to news reports, Russian President Medvedev reiterated the death toll -- in the thousands -- during a conversation with United States President George W. Bush. For his part, Bush, who was attending the Beijing Olympics, called for an end to the violence, warned of escalation beyond the zone of conflict, and endorsed the notion of international mediation.

Indeed, the international community's objective appeared to be focused on averting the prospects of a war in the restive Caucasus, which has long been regarded as something of a powder keg. Yet to be determined was the question of whether or not such efforts would actually yield positive results.

Days later, Russia noted that its military activity in the area was ending and Russian troops were seen retreating from the area. The hostilities flared again when Georgia sent in troops to try to regain control of South Ossetia. Nevertheless, witnesses said that the full brunt of the fighting in South Ossetia appeared to be ending. Elsewhere in the region, Russian troops were withdrawing from the other breakaway region of Abkhazia, however, separatist there were reported to be ensconced in some continuing clashes with the Georgian military in the Kodori Gorge.

Yet even with an official truce in the offing (as discussed below) and an end to the fighting, the situation was not peaceful. A war of words continued. On an official day of mourning in his country, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev charged that Georgia had launched "genocide of the South Ossetian people." At issue were the deaths of thousands of South Ossetians, many of whom hold Russian passports, as well as the deaths and injuries to scores of Russian soldiers, including one general. The Russian leader used the Russian word "otmorozki," which

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roughly translates to "thugs" in English, to characterize Georgian troops. Meanwhile, Georgian President Saakashvili addressed a crowd of

thousands gathered in Tbilisi's main and accused Russia of the "ruthless, heartless destruction" of Georgians. The Georgian leader also warned that his country would no longer be a part of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) -- a group consisting of former Soviet republics.

On August 13, 2008, French President Nicolas Sarkozy was leading diplomatic negotiations to help Georgia and Russia resolve the crisis that had been sparked when Georgian military troops and Russian-backed South Ossetian separatists were ensconced in violent clashes over the course of several days. Georgian tanks then attacked the separatist stronghold of Tskhinvali, presumably in an effort to regain control of the region, and went onto gain military supremacy over large swaths of Georgian territory.

Sarkozy put forth a peace agreement that both sides signed days later. Central to the proposed plan for a truce was that all forces would pull back to pre-conflict positions. Other elements of the plan included an end to the use of force, an end to military action in perpetuity, as well as the free access of humanitarian aid.

France, as the head of the European Union, has called on the European bloc to endorse the peace initiative ahead of its submission to the United Nations Security Council. The European Union was also expected consider deploying peacekeepers to the region to maintain peace and security, and also to protect the supply of humanitarian aid.

The remaining thorny issue, which was not included in the framework of the truce, was the future status of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Neither Russian President Medvedev nor Georgian President Saakashvili was likely to find common ground on that matter in the immediate future. Indeed, the Georgian leader asserted, "The territorial integrity and belonging of South Ossetia and Abkhazia to Georgia can never be put under doubt."

On August 17, 2008, Russia officially pledged to withdraw its forces from Georgian territory in keeping with the agreement. At the time, however, its forces had control over large swaths of Georgian territory, including the main east-west highway through that country. There was speculation that Russian troops might withdraw only as far as South Ossetia since Russia said it would only fully withdraw when Georgian police were ready to take over responsibility for security. NATO responded to anxieties that Russia would not abide by the withdrawal requirements of the agreement by warning that relations would be compromised if Russian troops remained in Georgia. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that Russia was not occupying Georgia and would not annex South Ossetia. However, he also characterized NATO as biased and intent on saving the "criminal regime" of Tbilisi.

Meanwhile, Russian President Dmitri Medvedev told his French President Nicolas Sarkozy that the Russian withdrawal would be complete by August 22, 2008, although approximately 500 troops would be installed as peacekeepers on both sides of South Ossetia's border. Russian troops were soon identified exiting Gori -- the largest town in Georgia located close to the border of South Ossetia. Sarkozy, during talks with Medvedev, acknowledged this withdrawal but noted that Russian troops were yet to exit Poti and Senaki. Russia had earlier indicated that it would not soon leave the port city of Poti, and claimed that this would be in keeping with the terms of the ceasefire agreement. Medvedev's government said that Russian peacekeepers were allowed to take "additional security measures." However, the United States and the United Kingdom countered this claim noting that such buffer zones would violate the deal.

In other developments, the first United States ship with humanitarian aid was expected to dock in Georgia by the last week of August 2008. Two more ships were expected to arrive in Georgia as well.

In the last week of August 2008, Russia's Kremlin officially recognized the breakaway enclaves of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states. South Ossetians and Abkhazians celebrated the news of this recognition of their self-proclaimed sovereignty. However, without wider international recognition of sovereign status, and with



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many countries of the West committed to the notion of Georgia's territorial integrity, the actual status of South Ossetia and Abkhazia remained in the zone of "contested independent status."

By the start of September 2008, the European Union (EU) had decided to suspend talks on a new partnership pact with Russia, given the still-incomplete withdrawal of Russian troops from Georgia. EU-Russian negotiations on the partnership agreement had been scheduled for mid-September 2008 but were based on a shared understanding that Russian troops would withdraw to pre-conflict positions. The lack of progress on that withdrawal front, followed by the EU's response, signaled that relations between the EU and Russia were moving into highly challenging territory.

Following a meeting in the Belgian capital city of Brussels, EU Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso said that the bloc that he represented could not "continue as if nothing had happened." As well, the European bloc's foreign policy chief, Javier Solana, said that the EU could deploy civilian monitors to Georgia to determine whether or not Russia was complying with the ceasefire agreement that had been brokered earlier. Meanwhile French President Sarkozy said, "The EU would welcome a real partnership with Russia, which is in the interests of all, but you have to be two to have a partnership."

On the other side of the equation, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov warned that unchecked support by the EU and the United States for the government of Georgian President Saakashvili would be a "historic" mistake. He also introduced the notion of an embargo on arms supplies to Georgia until a new regime was established there. These declarations came in the background of Russian President Dmitry Medvedev's assertion that his country's foreign policy principles would not be dictated by the hegemony of any single country, such as the United States.

In October 2008, months after the Russian-Georgian conflict over South Ossetia, Russia removed a checkpoint near the town of Gori. The removal of the checkpoint at Gori -- located in Georgian territory close to the separatist region of South Ossetia -- marked the first significant sign that Russia intended to comply with its withdrawal pledge, which was part of the ceasefire deal negotiated by French President Nicolas Sarkozy. Indeed, Russia also pledged to withdraw troops from two buffer zones within Georgia -- now under European Union observation -- by October 10, 2008.

At the same time, Russia increased its troop presence in South Ossetia -- largely a result of an explosion that left eight Russian soldiers and three civilians dead in the early part of the month. Russia accused Georgia of orchestrating the attack; Georgia denied the accusation. Russia also maintained its troop presence in the other separatist region of Abkhazia. Russia has recognized both South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent while Western countries have backed Georgian territorial integrity. The matter of sovereignty has remained unresolved.

Editor's Note:

August 2009 marked the one year anniversary of the war between Georgia and Russia over the breakaway republic of South Ossetia.

On August 13, 2009, Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin visited Abkhazia, where he promised to build a military base along the border with Georgia. Putin also said that such a move would help guarantee the stability of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The Russian head of government said: "Russia is going to deploy its armed forces in Abkhazia and take the necessary efforts to build a modern border guard system in cooperation with the relevant Abkhazian authorities." He continued, "All these factors are serious guarantees of the security of Abkhazia and South Ossetia." Putin's pledge came on the first anniversary of the cease-fire, which ended Russia's war with Georgia over South Ossetia. As might be expected, Georgia decried the move, characterizing it as "yet another provocation," that could potentially "escalate tensions" in the region of the Caucasus.

In October 2009, a report commissioned by the Council of the European Union placed the blame for the start of the 2008 war over the semi-autonomous region of South Ossetia on Georgia. The report by the Independent

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International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia found that the war, which erupted on August 7, 2008, was spurred when Georgian forces attacked the breakaway republic of South Ossetia, in an attempt to re-establish sovereign control. Still, the report did not cast Georgia as being the only guilty party. It noted that the hostilities between the two sides led to provocative actions by both Georgia and Russia. The report also acknowledged that after Georgia shelled South Ossetia, Russia responded by not only repelling the assault but, in fact, pressing further into Georgian territory.

Both Abkhazia and South Ossetia declared independence from Georgia during a war in the 1990s, which followed on the heels of the collapse of the former Soviet Union. Both Abkhazia and South Ossetia are recognized by Russia as sovereign states, but have nonetheless remained internationally-recognized as Georgian territories.

They have increasingly become flashpoints in the region.

See appendices of this Country Review on South Ossetia and Abkhazia for more details.

## Other Developments in 2008-2010

October 2008 saw Russia test-fire three intercontinental ballistic missiles. One launch took place from the Barents Sea, east of Norway; a second was launched from north of Japan; the originating location of the third was not specified. These developments came one day after Russia said that another missile fired from a submarine had traveled a record distance of 7,145 miles. President Dmitri Medvedev, who witnessed one of the missiles being test-fired from the north-western region of the country and who watched the missile being test-fired from the submarine from an aircraft carrier, noted that they were illustrative of Russia's defensive and military strength. The show of military might by the Kremlin appeared to be in reaction to the United States' plans to establish missile defense centers in eastern Europe. In a similar attempt to flex military muscle, Russian ships were en route to Venezuela to participate in joint naval exercises with that country in waters of the Western Hemisphere.

In November 2008, the issue of relations with the United States came to the fore following the election of Democrat, Barack Obama, as president in that country. In a speech delivered to the Council on Foreign Relations in the United States capital of Washington D.C., Russian President Dmitry Medvedev expressed hopes that his country would enjoy improved relations with the United States under an Obama administration.

Russian President Medvedev said that United States President-Elect Barack Obama had the potential to rebuild "necessary mutual trust" that had waned during the Bush years. The Russian president also hinted at possible compromise with the United States over the controversial plan for a United States missile shield in Europe. He said, "We have a chance to solve the problem through either agreeing on a global system or, as a minimum, to find a solution on the existing programs, which would suit the Russian Federation."

Relations with Georgia returned to the fore due to the chaos that marked the fifth anniversary of that country's Rose Revolution, which swept President Mikhail Saakashvili to power. As the Georgian president traveled in a motorcade with Polish President Lech Kaczynski close to the breakaway republic of South Ossetia, shots were fired.

Although no one was hurt in the incident, both the Georgian president and his Polish counterpart accused Russian troops of being behind the apparent attack in an area that has been the site of much cross-border violence. According to Reuters, one individual in Saakashvili's entourage said that South Ossetians fired warning shots when their motorcade came close to a checkpoint at the quasi-border area. Meanwhile, President Saakashvili said that the situation was a "reminder" that Russia was in flagrant violation of the European Union-brokered ceasefire between Tblisi and Moscow. President Saakashvili also railed against the Russians saying, "Twenty-first Century occupiers, who have no legal, moral or other right to be there and oppress people, are stationed in the heart of Georgia."

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On the other side of the equation, however, the Russian military as well as South Ossetian forces denied an involvement in the gunfire incident. In an interview with RIA Novosti, a South Ossetian spokeswoman, Irina Gagloyeva, asserted the following: "The South Ossetian side has nothing to do with it. There was no shelling from our side."

A Russian spokesperson said to the Interfax news agency, "The claims that Russian servicemen were implicated in the shelling of the cortege do not correspond with reality."

In December 2008, the Russian Federation Council, which is the upper house of the parliament, approved the extension of the presidential term from four years to six years. The legislative body also passed the amendment of the Constitution, which will increase the mandate of the deputies of the State Duma, lower house of the parliament, from four years to five years. The draft legislation was pending because for it enter into force, it required approval of two-thirds of regional legislatures. Given the ruling United Russia party's influence and popularity, it was believed that the constitutional amendments would successfully be formalized. These constitutional changes were put forth by President Dmitry Medvedev during his first state-of-the-nation address.

In early 2009, Russia and Ukraine were at odds over a gas deal. At issue was Russia's refusal to implement an agreement with Ukraine to resume the flow of gas to Europe.

Russian President Dmitri Medvedev accused Ukraine of adding a declaration to the text of the agreement that contradict Russia's position. The central issues in Ukraine's declaration relate to its gas debts to Russia and accusations that it has siphoned off gas intended for other European customers. Meanwhile, there was no agreement about how much Ukraine should pay Russia for gas, or, how much Russia should pay Ukraine for transporting gas to other European destinations.

The dispute has left several countries in the region without gas, and with Russian energy company Gazprom unwilling to restart gas supplies, even as wintry conditions prevailed in the region. As such, the European Union intervened in an energetic shuttle diplomacy effort to resolve the matter.

On January 12, 2009, it was announced that Russia would resume gas supplies to other European countries via Ukraine. The announcement came as the EU was successfully able to broker an agreement between Russia and Ukraine. Central to the agreement were new provisions for (1) pricing for the purchase of Russian gas by Ukraine, and (2) the rate to be charged by Ukraine for the transit of Russian gas. But by the third week of January 2009 began, the EU warned that the energy crisis would not be resolved unless the flow of gas actually resumed.

In April 2009, ahead of the G-20 summit in London,

United States President Barack Obama met with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev. The two leaders agreed to restart negotiations aimed at reducing nuclear warheads.

Nuclear politics took center stage when, ahead of a meeting with European Union leaders in the Czech Republic, United States President Barack Obama called for a world free of nuclear weaponry and cooperative action on global security. President Obama said that his administration was committed to ultimately reducing the United States' nuclear arsenal, noting that the very existence of thousands of nuclear weapons was "the most dangerous legacy of the Cold War." Acknowledging that a nuclear weapons-free world was unlikely to be realized in his lifetime, President Obama made clear that he intended to work toward that outcome.

In April 2009, Russian authorities announced that Moscow was ending its "counter-terrorism operation" against separatist rebels in Chechnya. The move would end military operations in the semi-autonomous republic with a majority Muslim population after more than a decade. It would also set the foundation for "normalizing the

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situation," according to Russia's anti-terrorism committee. Russian authorities said that after years of violent unrest, Chechnya was not stabilized under the leadership of its pro-Kremlin leader, Ramzan Kadyrov.

For his part, Kadyrov responded to Moscow's announcement saying, "We received the news about cancelling the counter-terrorism operation with great satisfaction."

He continued, " Now the Chechen Republic... is a peaceful, developing territory, and cancelling the counter-terrorism operation will only promote economic growth in the republic."

Critics of Kadyrov have said that stability in Chechnya has come at a grave price -- via fear of violence. They alleged that he has used torture and death to intimidate his opponents. Human rights groups concurred that such allegations were not without merit. For his part, Kadyrov has dismissed such charges as untrue. Meanwhile, occasional unrest prevailed in parts of Chechnya as well as the nearby regions of Dagestan and Ingushetia.

In June 2009, Yunus-Bek Yevkurov, the leader of the southern Russian republic of Ingushetia, was critically wounded and hospitalized following an assassination attempt. Yevkurov's brother was injured and three of his bodyguards reportedly died in the attack on their convoy, which was traveling on a highway close to the city of Nazran. Reports on the ground indicated that a car bomb exploded just as Yevkurov's car drove by.

This attack was the third such incident in June 2009. On June 10, 2009, the deputy chief supreme court justice of the Russian republic was assassinated by gunmen. Just days later, the formed deputy prime minister was shot to death. Both attacks took place in Nazran. Ingushetia -- like neighboring Chechnya -- has been the site of violence in recent years. While Chechnya, which was beset by a militant Islamic insurgency, has seen increased stability in the last year, Ingushetia has absorbed a number of refugees from the Chechnya conflict.

In July 2009, prominent human rights activist, Natalia Estemirova, was abducted in the Chechen capital of Grozny and later shot to death. Her body was discovered in a woodland in neighboring Ingushetia. Estemirova's apparent assassination was met by outrage in Russia and across the globe. She was the latest victim in a string of murders that appeared to target activists and journalists trying to bring attention to the human rights situation in Chechnya where a long-standing conflict between Muslim separatists in the semi-autonomous republic and Russian authorities intent on preserving territorial sovereignty. In recent times, that conflict has waned and, in fact, Russian authorities announced earlier in the year that Moscow was ending its "counter-terrorism operation" against separatist rebels in Chechnya. The abduction and murder of Estemirova was therefore seen as a blight on the increasingly stable political situation in Chechnya.

In reaction, the human rights agency, Memorial, as well as Russia's longest standing non-governmental organization, the Helsinki Group, both placed the blame for Estemirova's death on Chechnya's Kremlin-backed President Ramzan Kadyrov. For his part, Kadyrov denied any involvement and vowed to investigate the killing. Meanwhile, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev also promised a full investigation as well as justice. But the Russian president went further in acknowledging that Estemirova was likely assassinated for political reasons. He said: "It is obvious to me that this murder is linked to her professional work and this work is necessary for any normal state." The Russian president then paid tribute to that work saying, "She did something very useful. She spoke the truth, she gave a very open and sometimes very tough evaluation of what's happening in the country. And that is the value of human rights campaigners, even if they make those in power feel uncomfortable." In so doing, President Medvedev broke new ground by rapidly, expressly and publicly condemning the assassination of a human rights activist with ties to Chechnya.

August 2009 saw Construction Minister Ruslan Amerkhanov murdered in the volatile Russian republic of Ingushetia. Amerkhanov was reported to have been shot dead in his office. It was the latest manifestation of political violence in the Muslim enclave. Only ten days prior, three employees of the Russian ministry charged with

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dealing with emergencies were themselves shot to death. Moreover, several months earlier, Ingushetia's President Yunus-Bek Yevkurov was critically injured in an attempted assassination.

Then days after the murder of Amerkhanov, a suicide bomber in an explosives-laden truck charged through the gates of the Nazran police station in Igushetia, killing more than 20 people and injuring at least 100 others. The explosives were detonated just as police officers were gathering in the morning courtyard. It was the single most violent attack in restive Igishetia in years.

Note that Ingushetia -- like neighboring Chechnya -- has been the site of violence in recent years. While Chechnya, which was beset by a militant Islamic insurgency, has seen increased stability in the last year, Ingushetia has absorbed a number of refugees from the Chechnya conflict. In fact, during the second Chechen war which began in 1999, Ingushetia was the destination for thousands of Chechen refugees. The United Nations refugee agency has reported that approximately 13,000 displaced people remain in Ingushetia today. Analysts have said that in addition to the refugee crisis, the emerging wave of violence in Ingushetia has been spurred by a mixture of Islamic radicalism, frustration with the high level of poverty, as well as outrage over corruption and the repressive actions by the local security forces.

Prospects of a Russian loan to Venezuela to help finance the purchase of Russian arms were being discussed on September 9, 2009. Chief Russian foreign policy aide, Sergei Prikhodko, said that the Kremlin was considering such a loan to Venezuela. The announcement came as Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez arrived in Moscow for meetings with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev.

In addition to the possibility of an arms deal, the meeting was intended to establish multiple areas for bilateral cooperation. To that end, President Medvedev's Press Secretary Natalya Timakova said, "There are plans for the conclusion of documents and agreements on oil and gas cooperation, on ecology in the oil and gas industry, and also an agreement between the Justice Ministries."

After his trip to Moscow, President Chavez confirmed in a weekly televised address that Russia had agreed to lend Venezuela over \$2 billion for the purchase of weapons, such as 100 tanks and a series of anti-aircraft rocket systems, and were intended to boost the country's defensive capacity. President Chavez noted that the anti-aircraft rocket systems would make it difficult for Venezuela to be attacked. He said, "With these rockets, it is going to be very difficult for them to come and bomb us. If that happens, they should know that we will soon have these systems installed, [and] for an enemy that appears on the horizon, there it goes." The move appeared to be in retaliation to a deal struck between Colombia and the United States to allow American troops access to Colombian military bases.

Also in September 2009, Iran put forth its package of proposals to the five permanent United Nations Security Council members and Germany. According to the independent United States-based entity, ProPublica, the five-page proposal, Iran called for "comprehensive, all-encompassing and constructive" negotiations on a range of security issues, including global nuclear disarmament. However, the document detailing Iran's latest proposals on its nuclear ambitions conspicuously failed to mention Iran's own nuclear program.

The United States reacted by registering dissatisfaction with the proposal package. Philip Crowley, the United States Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs, said that the proposed measures failed to address the status of Iran's nuclear program. He said, "Our concern is that the response itself did not really address what is the core issue of the international community and the core concern, which is Iran's nuclear ambitions."

Conversely, Russia reacted by suggesting that the Iranian proposals signaled positive progress. Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said, "Based on a brief review of the Iranian papers my impression is there is something there to use." Lavrov also indicated that there would be no oil sanctions against Iran. "Some of the sanctions under discussion, including oil and oil products, are not a mechanism to force Iran to co-operate, they are a step to a full-blown blockade and I do not think they would be supported at the UN Security Council."

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The American and Russian responses showed divergent approaches to the Iranian nuclear issue, and suggested that consensus on the matter would not be easily achieved.

The controversy surrounding Iran's nuclear program took on greater significance after the IAEA meeting, as discussed above. If Russia was indicating that it would not support strong oil sanctions against Iran, then what options would be available to countries such as the United States, which has made clear that consequences were in the offing if Iran failed to resolve the international community's concerns about its nuclear ambitions?

Indeed, neither the United States nor Israel have ever actually foreclosed the possibility of targeted air strikes against Iran, which would be specifically aimed at preventing that country from obtaining a nuclear weapon. But Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin entered the fray, speaking against not only the imposition of new sanctions, but also targeted military action against Iran. Prime Minister Putin characterized any attack on Iran as "very dangerous" and warned that it would lead to "an explosion of terrorism." That said, he also called on Iran to show "restraint" in its nuclear program and to be mindful of Israel's security concerns. Prime Minister Putin said, "This is a dangerous region and Iran should show responsibility, especially by taking into account Israel's concerns."

Earlier, the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was reported to have made a secret visit to Moscow to discuss the matter of Russian arms sales to Iran and Syria. At issue has been rising tensions between Israel and Russia over Moscow's arms sales to Iran and Syria. Of particular concern have been the transfers of weapons to the extremist Islamic organization, Hezbollah, in Lebanon -- a particular flashpoint even since the 2006 between Israel and Lebanon-based Hezbollah.

On Dec. 4, 2009, an attack by Islamic militants on a Russian express train left 26 people dead. The militants targeted the luxury Nevsky Express that traverses Moscow and St. Petersburg in what was one of the worst attacks in recent years. A letter from the rebels claimed responsibility for the attack saying, "This operation was prepared and carried out ... pursuant to the orders of the Emir of the Caucasus Emirate Doku Umarov." It was a clear reference to the Umarov enclave, led by Russia's most sought after rebel leader of the same name who has led a jihadist insurgency aimed at removing the predominantly Islamic North Caucasus region from Russian rule.

While attacks in the North Caucasus have taken place with some degree of frequency, attacks in major Russian cities have been fairly rare. Now, Russia plunged into a state of anxiety as a result of promises from the terrorists to carry out further "acts of sabotage" via its website. Indeed, the rebels noted that they sought to sabotage strategic economic targets across Russia saying, "These acts of sabotage will continue for as long as those occupying the Caucasus do not stop their policy of killing ordinary Muslims."

For over a decade, Russia has been dealing with a violent Islamic insurgency in the North Caucasus republics of Dagestan and Ingushetia. As well, it has fought two wars against Islamic separatists in Chechnya. While the security situation in Chechnya has improved in recent years, the situation has not been nearly as positive in Dagestan and Ingushetia where violent insurgent attacks have increased, leading President Dmitry Medvedev to cast the North Caucasus as Russia's biggest domestic problem.

As if to underscore this claim, only days after the railway **bombing** on Dec. 4, 2009, another **bomb** exploded under a train traveling from Siberia to Azerbaijan in Dagestan region. While that incident yielded no deaths, it was deemed to be a "similar act of terror" by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. According to Russian intelligence experts, the use of follow-up attacks has been a hallmark of terrorists in the North Caucasus.

On Jan. 10, 2010, a raid by Russian security forces resulted in the killing of Madrid Begov -- a notorious terrorist in the restive territory of Dagestan. Russian authorities have said that Begov -- the leader of a subversive terrorist enclave, Shamkhal-Makhachkala -- had died after he refused to surrender to security forces. Police have accused Begov of participating in a 2009 attack on a Dagestani security officer near the security service's headquarters in Makhachkala.

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February 2010 saw explosions at a house in Russia's restive region of Ingushetia leave at least two people dead and 28 others injured. One of the dead was a police officer while the other was a civilian. Police were searching the area and investigating reports that an improvised explosive device had been planted in the house. The incident was attributed to the ongoing conflict between Islamist insurgents and militants against the pro-Moscow governing authorities.

In early March 2010, an Islamist rebel leader in Ingushetia was killed during a raid by Russian troops. Seven other rebels also died in the incident, according to the Russia's Federal Security Service. Alexander Tikhomirov, also known as Said Buryatsky, was believed to have been responsible for the **bombing** of a train in November 2009 that left 26 people dead. While Tikhomirov had actually acknowledged his involvement in that attack, which was officially claimed by "Caucasian Mujahadeen," he did admit his involvement in the suicide attack on police headquarters in Nazran in August 2009. In that attack, 20 policemen were reported to have died.

In the early morning rush hour of March 29, 2010, female suicide bombers carried out attacks at two Moscow subway stations, killing at least 40 people and injuring more than 80 others. The first blast struck the Lubyanka subway station, followed by a blast at the Park Kultury station. The blasts appeared **timed** to maximize damage and casualties. Moscow Mayor Yury Luzhkov said, "It was a terrorist act carried out by ... female suicide bombers." To that end, suspicion fell on the Chechen "Black Widows" who lost their husbands during the conflict with the Islamic separatist republic in Chechnya. According to CNN, a group associated with Chechen separatists indeed claimed responsibility for the attacks. Russian President Dmitry Medvedev promised that his country "will fight terrorism without hesitation and to the end," while Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said those behind the attacks would be punished. According to RIA Novosti, he said: "It is well known that today a terrible crime against civilians in its effects and disgusting in its character was carried out. I am sure that police will do their best to find and punish the criminals. The terrorists will be destroyed."

Days after that attack, a teenage widow of a senior Caucasus militant was identified as one of the Moscow subway bombers. Dzhennet Abdurakhmanova was believed to be from the Khasavyurtsky region of Dagestan and was married to Islamist militant, Umalat Magomedov, who was killed by Russian security forces at the end of 2009. The second Moscow subway bomber was believed to have been the widow of another Chechen Islamic militant. Also in the days after the subway attacks there were two more suicide bombings -- this **time** in Kizlyar, leaving 12 people dead, the vast majority of whom were police officers. As before, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev struck a hard tone as he spoke from Russia's restive North Caucasus region. He said, "We must deal sharp dagger blows to the terrorists; destroy them and their lairs." He continued, "The list of measures to fight terrorism must be widened. They must not only be effective but tough, severe and preventative. We need to punish."

On July 2, 2010, a suicide **bombing** ensued in Grozny, the capital of Russia's restive Chechnya region. Three police officers and two civilians were injured as a result. The attack took place close to Grozny's theatre where a musical performance was set to take place.

While the Russian military has not been involved in offensive against militant extremist separatists in recent **times**, with Russian authorities declaring success in the breakaway republic, clashes and incidences of violence have nonetheless flared occasionally. In addition to Chechnya, neighboring regions of Ingushetia and Dagestan have also seen similar clashes and incidences of violence over the years.

Earlier, on June 28, 2010, ten individuals using aliases were arrested in the United States for allegedly spying for the Russian government. According to the Justice Department of the United States, the ten individuals were charged with conspiracy to act as unlawful agents of a foreign government. Eight of the ten suspects were reported to have had "long-term, deep-cover assignments" in the United States. As well, nine of the ten suspects were charged with conspiracy to launder money. Five of the suspects appeared in a New York federal court where they were ordered to remain in jail pending hearings set for the end of July 2010. Other suspects soon faced court in

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Virginia. The arrests came after an investigation that went on for several years and, if convicted, the suspects could face five years in prison.

Authorities said they were in pursuit of an eleventh suspect. That eleventh suspect was soon arrested in Cyprus and released on bail; he was subsequently reported to be missing after failing to present for a scheduled "check in" meeting with the Cypriot police. An arrest warrant was issued for that individual as a result but reports soon emerged that he may have fled that country. The Cypriot authorities were now under fire for mishandling the situation; members of the opposition party in that Mediterranean country railed against the fact that an alleged spy was allowed bail rather than being subject to a detention order.

Meanwhile, United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, on a trip to Eastern Europe, made clear that the U.S. was committed to positive ties with Russia, the emerging spy scandal notwithstanding. Secretary Clinton said, "We're committed to building a new and positive relation with Russia." She continued, "We're looking toward the future." For its part, Russia has also indicated that the scenario would not affect closer bilateral relations with the United States.

Indeed, only weeks ago, Russia backed the United States in advancing a plan for further international sanctions against Iran for its controversial nuclear program. The United States-drafted proposal was passed in the United Nations Security Council with Russian support, effectively imposing harsh sanctions against Iran.

By the first week of July 2010, plans were in the works for a Cold War era "spy swap" in which ten Russian agents would be deported in exchange for the return of United States agents being held in Russia. Those agents sought by the United States included a Russian nuclear scientist, a former Russian military intelligence agent and a former KBG agent who were jailed for spying on behalf of the United States. There was also a former military intelligence agent jailed for spying for the United Kingdom.

The exchange ensued in Austria with the ten Russian agents boarding a flight to Moscow, and the four agents released by the Kremlin boarding an American aircraft close to the main passenger terminals at the airport in Vienna. The entire exchange took a total of 90 minutes.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the two countries involved cast the spy swap in positive terms. Russia said that the ten persons in United States custody facing charges there had been freed "for humanitarian considerations." Russia also lauded the move as being illustrative of "the general improvement of Russia-United States relations." Meanwhile, the United States was dismissing claims that only four agents were released in exchange for the ten Russians. United States authorities made clear that the four in question were "high value" and garnered far more usable information in comparison to the ten Russians. Moreover, the White House in the United States was playing up the fact that knowledge of the spy ring and plans for the spy swap had been in the works for several months before the Russians were ever arrested.

On September 5, 2010, a suicide car **bombing** at a military base in the restive Russian republic of Dagestan left three soldiers dead and 32 others wounded. The suicide bomber was driving an explosives laden vehicle and charged through the gates of the base in the Dagestan city of Buinaksk. Soldiers opened fire on the attacker before he could get to the center of the base, but the attacker was able to strike a military truck, followed by the explosion. There was speculation that the actions of the soldiers likely decreased the carnage on the scene. Magomedsalam Magomedov, the leader of Dagestan, said in an interview with Interfax: "Today's terrorist attack indicates that militants in the republic still have the power to conduct such treacherous attacks."

In Moscow, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev again reiterated his oft-expressed view that violent insurgencies in the North Caucasus have prevailed as Russia's most significant domestic challenge and a threat to national security. The Russian leader has in the past offered the view that poverty alleviation in the region should be part of



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the solution aimed at stabilization of the area. Indeed, expert analysts have likewise noted that poverty has been a driving motivator behind the decision of many youth to join extremist Islamic militant groups in the North Caucasus.

Days later on Sept. 9, 2010, another suicide **bombing** took place at a crowded marketplace in the North Caucasus city of Vladikavkaz. At least 17 people died as a result of that attack while close to 140 others were wounded. According to the independent Kavkazsky Uzel website, the bomber was identified as a resident of neighboring Ingushetia. Alleged accomplices of the bomber were apprehended, according to the federal security chief, Alexander Bortnikov. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said of this attack, "The crimes like the one that was committed in the North Caucasus today are aimed at sowing enmity between our citizens. We mustn't allow this." He continued by placing the blame for the violence on "people without souls, without hearts." of them Putin said, "They literally hold nothing sacred. Our common duty is to fight these crimes, these criminals."

While there were no official claims of responsibility for these bombings, they were the latest manifestations of almost-daily violence in the North Caucasus region, usually by Islamic militants. In Dagestan, clashes between security forces and insurgents likely linked with separatists in Chechnya have become regularized fare. Despite successful offensive operations in the North Caucasus, violence by militants has been ongoing for some **time**, effectively plaguing areas in the region, such as Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan. Of note was the fact that while Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan have predominantly Muslim populations, thereby fueling the possibility that attacks there contain a religious motivation, Vladikavkaz -- located in North Ossetia -- has been home to a predominantly Christian Orthodox population. In Vladikavkaz case, there was speculation that the motivation for that attack resided with the prevailing tensions between ethnic Ossetians and ethnic Ingush. But the North Ossetian city of Beslan was the site of the horrific 2004 siege where Chechen militants took hundreds of hostages at a school, leading to the tragic deaths of more than 330 people, at least half of whom were children.

On September 16, 2010, Chechen separatist leader Akhmed Zakayev was arrested in Poland. He was in that European country to attend a two-day Chechen summit when he was detained. Zakayev was then subject to several hours of interrogation by Polish police, who were acting on the basis of an international arrest warrant issued by Russia, which sought his extradition on terrorism, murder and kidnapping charges. For his part, Zakayev has denied being involved in terrorism, and indeed, could be considered something of a moderate since he has called for negotiations with Russia -- a position not embraced by most extremist Chechen separatists. Since being granted asylum in the United Kingdom in the first part of the 2000s, Zakayev has been known to travel within Europe. But in this case, he was arrested by Polish authorities who had no choice but to act on the decision by Interpol to place Zakayev on its most wanted list, at Russia's request.

Attention was soon focused on the question of if Zakayev would actually be extradited to Russia to face charges.

Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk said that although the Chechen separatist leader had been arrested, there was no guarantee that Polish courts would rule in favor of extradition to Russia. Meanwhile, the head of the international affairs committee of the Russian Duma or lower house of parliament, Konstantin Kosachev, applauded Poland for taking its international obligations seriously.

A day later on September 17, 2010, a Polish court ruled that Zakayev could be released pending its decision on the matter of extradition. But even if the Polish court eventually ruled in favor of extradition, according to Polish Finance Minister Jan Rostowski, the government of Poland still had the power to intervene on behalf of Zakayev. Russia responded to events unfolding in Poland in a less than favorable manner this **time**. Konstantin Kosachev warned Poland that its failure to act in accordance with international law would yield deleterious consequences.

In mid-October 2010, Islamic militants stormed the parliament in Chechnya, killing several people and injuring even more. Two guards and an official were among the dead. The militants shouted Islamic slogans, detonated a **bomb** and opened fire using guns as members of parliament arrived at the compound for work. Many people, included members of parliament already inside the building, were able to avoid the bloodshed by running to upper floors. This was the latest episode of violence erupting in Chechnya, despite Moscow's official declaration ending counter-

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terrorism operations in the breakaway republic more than a year prior. Since then, Moscow has relied on the pro-Moscow efforts of Chechnyan leader, Ramzan Kadyrov, to eradicate the remaining threat by Islamist separatist rebels. However, recent times have seen an increase in insurgent violence not only in Chechnya but also other regions of the North Caucasus such as Ingushetia. As well, only days after the attack on the Chechnyan parliament, explosives were discovered and defused close to a bus station in the republic of Kabardino-Balkariya, while the director of a children's rehabilitation centre in Dagestan was shot to death.

Despite successful offensive operations in the North Caucasus, violence by Islamist separatist militants has been ongoing for some time, as discussed above, effectively plaguing areas in the region, such as Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan. Russian President Dmitry Medvedev has often expressed the view that violent insurgencies in the North Caucasus have prevailed as Russia's most significant domestic challenge and a threat to national security. The Russian leader has in the past offered the view that poverty alleviation in the region should be part of the solution aimed at stabilization of the area. Indeed, expert analysts have likewise noted that poverty has been a driving motivator behind the decision of many youth to join extremist Islamic militant groups in the North Caucasus.

## Special Entry

U.S. and Russia forge agreement to cut stockpiles of nuclear weapons as Obama and Medvedev set new tone for bilateral relations

On July 6, 2009, United States President Barack Obama met with his Russian counterpart, President Dmitry Medvedev, for talks on their countries' respective nuclear arsenals. Following three hours of discussion, the two world leaders signed an outline agreement aimed at reducing their countries' stockpiles of nuclear weapons. The "joint understanding" was signed in a public ceremony in Moscow and would cut deployed nuclear warheads to under 1,700 on both sides within seven years of a forging new accord. That new accord would stand in replacement of the 1991 Start I treaty, which was set to expire at the close of 2009.

A statement from the White House explained that the new treaty would "include effective verification measures" and "enhance the security of both the US and Russia, as well as provide predictability and stability in strategic offensive forces."

While the terms of the new concord would still leave both countries with enough weaponry to destroy one another, the move was intended to stop the diplomatic "drift" away from cooperation on shared interests, which had occurred in recent times.

To that end, President Obama said the United States and Russia were both "committed to leaving behind the suspicion and the rivalry of the past." He also noted that the new agreement was part of an initiative "to reset U.S.-Russian relations so that we can co-operate more effectively in areas of common interest."

For his part, President Medvedev said that the talks had been "very frank and very sincere" and were

"without any doubt, the meeting we had been waiting for in Russia and the United States." The Russian leader went on to state, "I would like particularly to stress that our country would like to reach a level of cooperation with the United States that would really be worthy of the 21st Century, and which would ensure international peace and security."

In addition to reduced levels of nuclear warheads and delivery systems, including intercontinental ballistic missiles, there were also provisions for submarine-launched missiles and bombers.

In a separate agreement, Russia said it would allow the United States military to transport troops and weaponry across its territory to Afghanistan, where the war against resurgent Taliban and al-Qaida was ongoing. This use of Russian territory to move troops and equipment into the conflict zone would foreclose the use of routes through Pakistan, which have been the target of attacks by militants on a frequent and increasing basis.

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In another development, Russia and the United States agreed to establish a joint commission, which would facilitate greater cooperation on energy, fighting terrorism and dealing with narcotics trafficking.

In a particularly significant move, the two countries agreed to resume military cooperation, which was suspended in 2008 as a result of the conflict between Russia and Georgia.

Yet unresolved was the prevailing source of controversy on both sides -- the United States' plan to develop a missile defence shield system in Eastern Europe. This proposal has been strenuously resisted by Russia, which eschews greater American domination in its own backyard.

In a move aimed at gradually moving the two countries toward consensus on the issue, both Obama and Medvedev said that they backed a joint study on the threat of ballistic missiles and the institution of a data exchange center.

President Obama, who characterized former President Vladimir Putin as having "one foot in the old ways of doing business and one foot in the new," met with the prime minister of Russia on July 7, 2009.

#### U.S. President Obama abandon's Bush era missile shield; Russia lauds move

On September 17, 2009, United States President Barack Obama announced that his administration was abandoning the Bush-era missile defense shield program in Eastern Europe, which caused the grave consternation of Russia. In its place, President Obama unveiled a "phased, adaptive approach" for missile defense on the European continent. At a news conference in the White House, President Obama said, "This new approach will provide capabilities sooner, build on proven systems and offer greater defenses against the threat of missile attack than the 2007 European missile defense program."

President Obama explained that he made the decision based on an assessment of Iran's missile threat and the Pentagon's "phased and adaptive" approach, which would ensure the American homeland defense. While President Obama acknowledged the threat posed by Iran, and although he insisted that he was committed to "deploying strong missile defense systems which are adaptable to the threats of the 21st century," he also wanted to institute a plan that would be appropriate and effective in responding to the current intelligence assessment of Iran's missile programs. To that end, recent intelligence appeared to indicate that Iran's capacity to attach warheads to long-range missiles would not pose an immediate strategic threat to the United States and its allies. Indeed, Iran was more likely to pursue short-range and medium-range missile development.

President Obama noted, "The best way to responsibly advance our security and the security of our allies is to deploy a missile defense system that best responds to the threats that we face and that utilizes technology that is both proven and cost-effective." He explained that the new missile defense architecture would provide "stronger, smarter and swifter defenses."

The plan would essentially nullify former President George W. Bush's plan to deploy 10 missile interceptors in Poland and a radar system in the Czech Republic as part of its European missile shield, charged with preventing European allies from missile threats by "rogue states," such as Iran. Bush's plan had been criticized by some as being impractical to implement. Perhaps more significantly, Russia strongly opposed the missile defense shield concept and argued that it posed a security threat to the region. The matter caused a devolution in positive relations between the United States and Russia at the time, with Russia warning of retaliatory moves.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Russia was now lauding the decision by the Obama administration to dispense with the Bush missile defense shield system. Russian President Dmitry Medvedev welcomed the shift as "positive" and made clear that there were now "good conditions" for United States-Russia talks on dealing with missile proliferation. It was apparent that the "reset button" on bilateral relations between the two countries had, indeed, been pressed.

Meanwhile, Russia quickly announced that it would now scrap its own controversial plans to deploy missiles close to Poland. That proposal had been advanced in response to the Bush missile shield plan.

But now, as noted by Deputy Defense Minister Vladimir Popovkin during an radio interview in Moscow, "Naturally, we will cancel the measures that Russia planned to take in response to the deployment of U.S. missile defense systems." He continued, "Common sense has finally prevailed over ambitions."

For his part, President Obama said on an interview with CBS on September 20, 2009, that his decision was not dictated by Russian opposition. He said, "The Russians don't make determinations about what our defense posture is." He continued, "If the by-product of it is that the Russians feel a little less paranoid... then that's a bonus." President Obama also noted that one of the bonus effects could be that the Russians might be more willing to work with the United States in dealing with ballistic missiles from Iran or nuclear development in Iran.

Missile defense talks to commence between Russia and the United States; geopolitics and arms control also on agenda

United States officials were expected to be in Russia on Oct. 12, 2009, for missile defense negotiations with Russian counterparts. The Russian were led by Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov while Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security, Ellen Tauscher, was to head the United States delegation. After the groundwork has been established, further talks were set to take place later in the week between Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

Speaking ahead of the negotiations, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev said the United States and Russia must advance strategic arms reduction. In an interview with Russia's Channel Once, President Medvedev said, "While dealing with non-proliferation, we must simultaneously deal with the limitation and reduction of strategic offensive potentials -- both carriers and nuclear warheads." Medvedev continued, "Today we have the chance to advance this process. We will be dealing with this. And I call on our American partners to do the same."

With the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty set to expire on Dec. 5, 2009, President Medvedev said he believed Russia and the United States could reach a new strategic arms reduction accord.

He observed, "There is definitely a chance for the agreement, since the new U.S. administration has demonstrated interest in this issue." Medvedev also said he did not support the expansion of nuclear weapons states recognized by the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty. Striking a tone harmonious with his American counterpart, President Barack Obama, president Medvedev said, "We are against the extension of the nuclear club. Otherwise the situation will get out of control. The world without nuclear weapons is an ideal which should be on our agenda."

President Medvedev also reiterated his appreciation for President Obama's decision to scrap the Bush-era missile defense shield plan, calling President Obama's new missile shield plans "sensible." He additionally noted that Russia was eager to extend missile defense cooperation with the United States and Europe.

On October 13, 2009, United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton traveled to Moscow to meet with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. In addition to the issues related to missile defense and a new successor treaty aimed at strategic arms reduction, the two diplomats were reported to have discussed approaches to dealing with geopolitical challenges in Iran, the wider Middle East, and Afghanistan, as well as possible joint work on climate change.

In an interview with the Newsweek's Russian edition, which was published in the German daily, Die Welt, and translated by Reuters, Secretary Clinton said that her country and Russia found broad agreement on the issue of Iran's controversial nuclear program. While there was no specific promise from Moscow to impose harsh sanctions on Iran if diplomacy failed, Secretary Clinton said, "We have agreed to make diplomacy the priority with Iran. But if we are not successful, we will consider other steps." She described her talks with Russian leaders as "very constructive" and noted that the United States and Russia were in "full agreement" on the path before them. The United States' top diplomat also lauded Russia for not following through with plans to deliver high-grade S300 air defense missiles to Iran. Secretary Clinton additionally addressed the Obama administration's plan to scrap the

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Bush-era missile defense system in Eastern Europe saying, "On the question of the missile shield, we are very open to cooperation with the Russians. We have made this clear to them. We believe that a joint missile defense would make sense."

On Dec. 21, 2009, Russia and the United States were reported to have made good progress on negotiations on a new strategic arms agreement. In an off-side meeting at the Copenhagen Climate Change Summit, United States President Barack Obama met with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and expressed confidence that a new treaty would soon be signed. At issue was the impending expiration of the existing Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty and the need to forge a new agreement.

## Russia and United States Sign New Arms Treaty

On Feb. 24, 2010, United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton urged her Russian counterpart, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, to move forward with efforts to finalize a new arms reduction treaty. During a briefing, State Department spokesman Philip Crowley said the United States' top diplomat "emphasized to the foreign minister that our negotiators are close to reaching an agreement and encouraged Russia to continue to move ahead, push hard so we can reach an agreement in the next couple of weeks." That timeline seemed to coincide with Russian expectations, since a Russian lawmaker, Konstantin Kosachyov, noted that discussions were underway on a new treaty to replace the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), which expired on Dec. 5, 2009.

In March 2010, Secretary of State Clinton was in Moscow for meetings with Foreign Minister Lavrov. From Moscow, Clinton and Lavrov noted that a new START would soon be finalized.

At a joint press conference with Lavrov, Clinton said, "The results of the latest negotiation rounds lead us to believe we'll be reaching a final agreement soon." At issue is a plan that would reduce the United States' stockpile of 2,000 strategic nuclear weapons, and Russia's stockpile of close to 3,000, be reduced to between 1,500 and 1,675 warheads respectively. There was, however, some dissonance on verification measures aimed at quantifying weapons and launch systems.

Meanwhile, as progress was being made on a successor treaty to START, United States President Barack Obama called for a reduction in the number of nuclear weapons, as part of a changing national security strategy. To this end, he said: "The United States reaffirms our resolve to strengthen the non-proliferation regime to meet the challenges of the 21st century as we pursue our ultimate vision of a world without nuclear weapons." As President Obama marked the 40th anniversary of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, he intimated new post-Cold War policy, saying: "Our forthcoming Nuclear Posture Review will move beyond outdated Cold War thinking and reduce the number and role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy, even as we maintain a safe, secure and effective nuclear deterrent." President Obama also said he would work to seek ratification on the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, which was adopted by the United Nations in 1996, but which had yet to be enforced. These statements appeared to reify President Obama's vision of a nuclear-free world, which was laid out in a keynote speech in Prague in 2009. It also came ahead of a nuclear security summit, set to take place in Washington D.C. in April 2010.

On March 24, 2010, the United States and Russia announced they had arrived at a breakthrough agreement that would pave the way for the establishment of a new START. Titled "Measures to Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms," the new agreement was a milestone in the decades-long thrust to decrease the chances of nuclearized warfare. Indeed, it could arguably be characterized as one of the most important treaties forged in a generation.

Both President Obama and his Russian counterpart, President Dmitry Medvedev, were expected to sign the landmark accord, which provides for the reduction of long-range nuclear weapons on both sides, and sets the path for further disarmament in the future. The accord was illustrative of the new texture of bilateral relations, marked by

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an increased level of cooperation and trust between the United States and Russia in the last two years. "Measures to Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms" was expected to be signed on April 8, 2010, in the Czech capital of Prague, symbolically marking President Barack Obama's call for a world without nuclear weapons in that very city a year earlier. The timing would also ensure that both the United States and Russia would be able to enter the forthcoming Summit on Nuclear Security with a joint claim of accomplishment. They would also have the moral high ground in their efforts to pressure Iran to abandon its nuclear ambitions.

Lauding the treaty as the most comprehensive weapons control accord in two decades, President Obama declared: "With this agreement, the United States and Russia - the two largest nuclear powers in the world - also send a clear signal that we intend to lead." He continued, "By upholding our own commitments under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, we strengthen our global efforts to stop the spread of these weapons, and to ensure that other nations meet their own responsibilities." Via his spokesperson, President Medvedev said the treaty "reflects the balance of interests of both nations." As well, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that the treaty marked a "new level of trust" between the two countries.

That being said, on April 8, 2010, President Obama and President Medvedev held private talks at Prague Castle ahead of the signing ceremony. Later, both leaders signed their names on the new document that would significantly reduce the arsenal of nuclear weapons held by their respective countries. The two leaders of the countries controlling 90 percent of the world's nuclear weapons made it clear that membership in the global nuclear club came with extraordinary responsibility, and a vision of non-proliferation. President Obama said, "This day demonstrates the determination of the United States and Russia... to pursue responsible global leadership. Together, we are keeping our commitments under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which must be the foundation of global non-proliferation." Meanwhile, President Medvedev said: "This is a win-win situation. No one stands to lose in this agreement. Both parties won ... the entire world community won." In effect, the fact that the two countries were able to find consensus on such a complex matter, and the two leaders were able to sign one of the most important treaties in decades, signaled the anticipated "re-setting" of United States-Russian relations sought by the Obama administration in the United States when it came to power.

The difficult process of forging and signing such a bilateral agreement would be followed by the equally challenging process of ratification in the United States Senate. With an eye on this process, President Obama met in the Oval Office with the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in the United States Senate, Senator John Kerry (D-Massachusetts) and the ranking republican, Senator Richard Lugar (R-Indiana) to discuss this imperative. To the end, Senator Kerry said, "A well-designed treaty will send an important message to the rest of the world that America is prepared to lead efforts with key stakeholders to reduce the threat of nuclear weapons." It should be noted that the new START would also have to be ratified by the Russian Duma. Nevertheless, ahead of a global security summit scheduled to take place in Washington, Russia and the United States would be able to claim the high ground on leadership and responsibility among nuclear-armed nation states.

## Latest Developments --

In November 2010, President Obama was calling on the United States Senate to ratify the treaty. He characterized the need to do so as "a national security imperative" on November 18, 2010, demanding that the upper chamber of Congress act affirmatively before departing at the close of the year. Bringing as much pressure to bear, President Obama drew upon support from former secretaries of states and secretaries of defense from both political parties in the United States -- Republican and Democratic -- to emphasize the urgency in ratifying the treaty. President Obama noted that his country would not "afford to gamble" with the matter. He emphasized that the United States could not risk alienating Russia, whose support would be needed in pressuring Iran, given that country's suspected program of nuclear proliferation.

But delay was on the mind of some Republican senators who rejected the president's call for a review process during the Senate's lame duck session of the outgoing Senate.

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Speaking to this issue, President Obama said: "Every month that goes by without a treaty means that we are not able to verify what's going on on the ground in Russia. And if we delay indefinitely, American leadership on nonproliferation and America's national security will be weakened."

Note that despite heavy Republican opposition in the United States, the treaty was ratified in the United States Senate and then went through the ratification process at home in Russia.

The new arms reduction treaty between the United States and Russia went into effect on Feb. 5, 2011, effectively replacing the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START). Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and his United States counterpart, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, exchanged ratification documents pertaining to "Measures to Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms" or "New START" at a conference in Germany. Secretary of State Clinton said that the treaty was "another example of the kind of clear-eyed cooperation that is in everyone's interests." Foreign Minister Lavrov characterized the new treaty as "a product of the understanding that unilateral approaches to security are counterproductive." He continued, "The treaty that enters into force today will enhance international stability."

The "New START" would significantly reduce the arsenal of nuclear weapons held by the United States and Russia; it would limit the United States' stockpile of 2,000 strategic nuclear weapons, and Russia's stockpile of close to 3,000, to between 1,500 and 1,675 warheads respectively. "New START" was regarded as a milestone in the decades-long thrust to decrease the chances of nuclearized warfare. Indeed, it could arguably be characterized as one of the most important treaties forged in a generation

## 2011 - 2012 Update:

On Jan. 24, 2011, a **bomb** attack at Moscow's Domodedovo airport left more than 35 people dead and at least 170 others wounded -- many of them critically. Russian authorities said the explosion that took place in the international arrivals hall of the airport, was carried out by a suicide bomber and appeared to be an act of terrorism. The location of the suicide **bomb** attack was not a restricted area of the airport; instead, it was open to non-passengers. Eyewitnesses reported that the suicide bomber yelled, "I'll kill you all!" before presumably detonating the explosives strapped to his body.

The Federal Investigative Committee said the **bombing** was aimed "first and foremost" at foreign citizens. Indeed, among the dead were citizens from the United Kingdom, Germany, Austria, Ukraine, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Russia. Perhaps not surprisingly, suspicion in this case quickly fell on North Caucasus Islamist extremists, with a record of terror attacks, as the likely culprits.

President Dmitry Medvedev delayed his impending trip to the World Economic Forum in Davos, increased security across Moscow, convened an emergency meeting with officials, and said that a commission of inquiry would be activated "to conduct urgent on-the-spot investigations." The Russian president also warned that those behind the attack would be hunted down and punished to the full extent of the law. President Medvedev demanded that the organizations responsible for the attack be "eliminated." To that end, three suspects were being pursued in connection to the airport **bombing**. Meanwhile, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin was echoing the president's hard line, saying that "retribution is inevitable." He continued, "This was an abominable crime in both its senselessness and its cruelty."

At the close of January 2011, Russian investigators said they had identified the Domodedovo Airport suicide bomber as a 20-year-old man from the North Caucasus. As well, at least two people were arrested on allegations that they were involved in the **bombing**. As well, Russian authorities said that several other suspects in possession of pertinent information about the terror attack had been detained.

Blame was also expanding to the authorities who may not have properly responded to threats of a potential act of terrorism at the airport. The news organization, RIA Novosti, reported that Russian authorities were warned in

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advance that an "act of terror" was in the offing at one of Moscow's airports. President Medvedev attributed blame to airport officials for "clear security breaches," and said that a shake-up was likely if the evidence pointed toward criminal negligence by transport officials. To that end, the federal Security Service later announced that several officers had been fired.

President Medvedev also seemed to hint toward major changes in Russia's security system, including the establishment of Israeli-style airport security. He appeared to be referring to Israel's Ben Gurion airport, which is generally regarded as one of the safest in the world, and the wider airport security apparatus in Israel, which depends on "smart profiling," spot checks by armed guards, preliminary checkpoints, multiple rounds of surveying of luggage, intense vigilance, and other measures oriented toward to maximizing security.

By the second week of February 2011, a Chechen warlord, Doku Umarov, had claimed responsibility for the suicide **bombing** at the Moscow airport. He also threatened further attacks, insinuating that the extremist Islamic insurgency would intensify with more "special operations" in the future if Russia refused to allow theCaucasus to become an independent Islamic state. In a videotaped message, he warned, "Among us there are hundreds of brothers who are prepared to sacrifice themselves." Umarov, who has been seen more of a philosophical separatist leader rather than a military figure, has claimed responsibility for a number of terrorist attacks, including the double suicide **bombing** of the Moscow subway system in 2010.

The threat emanating from the Caucasus has long been Russia's most pressing internal challenge. Speaking of the difficulty in keeping the Russian people safe from the threat of terrorism from extremist Islamic separatists, Dmitri Peskov, a government spokesperson said, "The government is taking all necessary measures. But the nature of terror is that none of us, none of the countries in this world, are free from this threat. None of us could ensure 100 percent security level." Vladimir Vasilyev, the head of parliament's security committee, issued a similar warning. In an interview with the media, he said, "All residents of our country need to realize that we will have to live under the threat of terror for a long **time** to come."

Terrorism in Russia was not a new phenomenon with militant Islamic North Caucasus terrorists behind a number of attacks over the years. In October 2010, militant extremists stormed the parliament in Chechnya. In March 2010, the Moscow underground transit system was hit by two female suicide bombers from Dagestan. In November 2009, the express train from Moscow to St. Petersburg was hit by North Caucasus Islamic terrorists. Years earlier in 2004, Chechen terrorists carried out a brutal and bloody attack on a school in Beslan. Even earlier, Chechen rebels fought two wars with the Russian military since the 1990s in the fight for Chechen independence. But that effort seemed to have yielded some success for Russian authorities who, with the help of Moscow-backed strongman, Ramzan Kadyrov, claimed that the war in Chechnya was over. Clearly, that success had been concentrated in Chechnya with resistance spreading to other areas in the Caucasus region. Abject poverty in the wider area of the Caucasus only served to create more fertile socio-political soil for extremism.

Returning to Umarov's claim of responsibility, it was becoming increasingly clear that the ambitions of Islamist extremists had expanded from the goal of Chechnya's independence to a broader Jihadist ambition of creating an Islamic state across the Caucasus, governed by Shar'ia law.

On Feb. 27, 2012, Ukrainian authorities in the port city of Odessa said that they foiled an assassination plot against Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

According to the Russian news agency, Ria Novosti, two suspects were shown on Russian television detained admitting their involvement in an assassination plot that targeted Putin. One suspect, Ilya Pyanzin, claimed that he had been hired by Chechen militant leader, Doku Umarov, and tasked with killing Putin. A second suspect, Adam Osmayev, was identified as being on an international wanted list since 2007. It should be noted that a third suspect, Ruslan Madayev, died in an explosion in Odessa that appeared to have sparked the discovery of the assassination conspiracy. That conspiracy supposedly involved a plan to plant mines on Kutuzovsky Avenue in Moscow, which has been regularly traversed by Putin. Details of the plan were reportedly discovered on laptops seized at the Odessa apartment where the aforementioned explosion occurred.



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It should be noted that if Umarov was, indeed, shown to be the central orchestrator of this plot, the motivation for the attempted assassination could lie with the Chechen separatist movement. That movement has long sought to impose an Islamist state throughout the North Caucasus and has been embroiled in a bloody and lengthy fight with Russian security forces in the region. As the principal architect of Russia's military campaign in Chechnya, it was conceivable that Putin might be at the top of the Chechen rebels' target list.

## Primer on 2011 Parliamentary and 2012 Presidential Elections in Russia

## Parliamentary elections report (Dec. 4, 2011) --

A parliamentary election in Russia was scheduled to take place in December 2011. Russian President Dmitry Medvedev confirmed this timeline when he announced that the country's parliamentary elections would be held on Dec. 4, 2011. Although the Russian Federal Assembly, known as the *Federalnoye Sobraniye*, was a bicameral entity composed of the *Sovyet Federatsiyi* (Federation Council) and the *Gosudarstvennaya Duma* (State Duma), in fact, only the 450 seats in the State Duma were up for election. Typically, members of the State Duma are elected by popular vote to serve four-year terms. The last elections were held in December 2007; the United Russia Party of President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin have dominated Russian politics, and won an overwhelming victory of 64 percent in those previous elections. Clearly, United Russia hoped to continue its reign on supremacy following the 2011 elections.

Ahead of the parliamentary contest, the head of Russia's only independent election monitoring group, Golos, was detained for several hours. Lilya Shibanova, who was held at Moscow's main airport after refusing to hand over her laptop to authorities to be checked, said that the move constituted political pressure and intimidation. While she was subsequently released, her group, Golos, was fined for allegedly violating election law. The violation involved the release of "election-related opinion polls and research" in the days ahead of the election -- a time period when such opinion survey research is not allowed to be published.

This scenario notwithstanding, the elections went forward as scheduled and Russians went to the polls to express their political voices. Indeed, President Medvedev noted that Russia's political parties enjoyed "free and equal competition" in elections.

His pronouncement would prove to hold some merit as the outcome was not the one that the president might have ideally preferred. With the votes counted, it was clear that the composition of the Duma would be somewhat different in the new parliament. Specifically, it would no longer be as heavily dominated by the United Russia Party of Putin and Medvedev.

Indeed, United Russia appeared to have garnered just under a bare majority in the Duma (49.6 percent) in terms of the popular vote, but 238 seats of the 450-seat lower chamber. In this way, the ruling United Party of Russia would claim victory, albeit with reduced support. The new parliament would see representation by the Communist Party with 19.8 percent, and 92 seats as well as the social-democratic Fair Russia with 12.8 percent and 64 seats, and the nationalist Liberal Democrats, with 11.42 percent and 56 seats.

Prime Minister Putin parlayed the election results into populist political rhetoric, noting that the outcome reflected the "real situation" in the country. Meanwhile, President Medvedev said that the United Russia would have to close ranks with other political parties on certain issues in the new Duma, in order to get some things done. He said, "We will have to take into account the more complex configuration of the Duma and for some issues we will have to join coalition bloc agreements."

Following the outcome of the 2011 parliamentary elections that returned Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's United Russia party to power by a slim parliamentary majority, Russians took to the streets of Moscow in pro-government and anti-government rallies. Anti-government demonstrators were claiming that the elections were flawed and

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subject to both vote rigging and ballot box stuffing. Indeed, tens of thousands of Russians took to the streets in Moscow on Dec. 10, 2011, to protest the election results.

Protests were also reported in St. Petersburg, the southern Siberian city of Barnaul, Krasnoyarsk, Vladivostok, Chita and Khabarovsk. The spirit of discontent was heightened when the Communist Party posted a notice on its website stating that it did not recognize the results of the elections as valid. But supporters of the United Russia Party were also in the streets to rally support for Putin. As well, Russian authorities deploying thousands of police and Interior Ministry troops for the purpose of "ensuring the security of the citizens."

As the mass action continued, according to Amnesty International, more than 420 people were arrested in the demonstrations across Moscow and St. Petersburg, including several journalists and activists. Amnesty International urged the release of the detainees, which were referred to by the human rights group as "prisoners of conscience." Russia's presidential Council for Human Rights also expressed concerns over the election results and the detainment of protesters. Even former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev entered the fray, calling for new elections, given the strong sense of irregularities that had taken hold in Russia.

For his part, on Dec. 11, 2011, Russian President Medvedev posted on his Facebook page that he had called for an investigation into the alleged elections fraud; he also expressed disagreement with the protesters' slogans. His post read as follows: "Under the Constitution, Russian citizens have the freedom of speech and the freedom of assembly. People have a right to express their positions and that is what they did yesterday. It is good that everything was held within the law. I agree neither with the slogans, nor the statements made in the protests. Nevertheless, I have ordered probes into all reports from polling stations regarding the compliance with the electoral laws." The Russian president was met by hostile Russian Facebook posters who expressed vituperative scorn for his pledge.

With the Russian citizenry in a less than amiable mood as regards the governing leadership, President Medvedev on Dec. 23, 2011, announced a series of political reforms that would relax restrictions on political parties and presidential candidates. The proposals were ensconced in draft bills that were sent to the State Duma for approval. According to the Kremlin, the proposal was intended to "liberalize the requirements" for the creation and activities of political parties." Certainly, the changes would make it easier for small political blocs to be registered with the party membership threshold reduced from 50,000 to 500.

The comprehensive reform proposal was not expected to deter protesters from again taking to the streets to register discontent over the entrenched political interests in Russia. Certainly, it was clear that the protest movement was alive and well in Russia on Dec. 24, 2011, when tens of thousands of people gathered in Moscow to once again protest the outcome of the parliamentary elections held weeks earlier.

Presidential Election (March 4, 2012) --

Summary:

Russians voted in a presidential election on March 4, 2012. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, who previously served as president, was looking to return to the helm as president of Russia. On election day, after the votes were cast, exit poll data and preliminary results indicated that Putin was on track to win the presidency in the first round with around 60 percent of the vote share.

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In Detail:

Note that a presidential election in Russia was expected to be held in 2012. In September 2011, Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, who previously served as president, said he intended to contest that election with an eye on returning to that post. Current President Dmitry Medvedev indicated support for his mentor, Putin, and that he would consider taking on the role of prime minister himself. President Medvedev said that he was interested in

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"engaging in the practical work of the government." It was apparent that both Putin and Medvedev wanted to remain in the top posts of Russian government but did not want to contest elections against one another. In mid-October 2011, the ruling United Russia Party confirmed that it would formally nominate Putin as its presidential candidate for the presidential election scheduled to be held on March 4, 2012. On Nov. 27, 2011, as expected, the United Russia party officially nominated Prime Minister Vladimir Putin as its presidential candidate in the forthcoming election.

For his part, Putin made clear that since he intended to resume his post as president, he expected the current president -- Medvedev -- to hold the post of prime minister in the future. Putin said, "I would like to once again stress that if the voters trust us with forming the government, that they vote for the United Russia and me as the Russian president... Dmitry Anatolyevich (Medvedev) would undoubtedly head the government." Putin called for a national modernization plan to be implemented in Russia as part of an economic development strategy. To that end, he noted, "Russia should end its dependence on oil and gas and perform a transition to the innovative development model."

On Dec. 11, 2011, Russian billionaire and leading industrialist in the precious metals sector Mikhail Prokhorov announced he would contest the presidential election to be held in 2012. Speaking at a news conference, Prokhorov said, "I made probably the most serious decision in my life. I will run for president." Prokhorov seemed realistic about his prospects at the polls against Putin. Indeed, Prokhorov acknowledged that his bid for the presidency was unlikely to receive popular support in 2012, but that he could potentially see inroads over the course of "the next 10 or 15 years."

Another candidate was also known to be contesting the presidential election -- Sergei Mironov, leader of the center-left A Just Russia party. Other candidates included Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov and Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR) chief Vladimir Zhirinovskiy. However,

Yabloko leader Grigory Yavlinsky was barred from contesting the election as some of the signatures collected in the process of registration were deemed to be invalid.

Note that in January 2012, polling data showed diminishing support for Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's presidential bid. The state-run polling agency, VTsIOM, said that Putin commanded about 48 percent in popular support -- far less than his landslide-levels of support in previous elections. Still, that 48 percent -- while diminished in comparison to previous levels of support for Putin -- was nonetheless an improvement over VTsIOM's previous polling data, which showed Putin with only 42 percent of voters' support. Another polling outfit, the independent Levada Center, indicated less optimistic election results for Putin. Indeed, Levada Center forecast Putin to carry only 42 percent of the vote -- not enough for victory in the first round of voting. Meanwhile, VTsIOM said that support for other candidates was holding fairly stable -- with 10 percent for Zyuganov, nine percent for Zhirinovskiy, five percent for Mironov, three percent for Prokhorov, and two percent for Yavlinsky.

By February 2012, VTsIOM found momentum on the side of Putin, with 53.3 percent of respondents saying they support the prime minister who was seeking to return to the presidency.

The VTsIOM survey showed Zyuganov was significantly behind with 10 percent of support, while Zhirinovskiy had 8.2 percent, and Prokhorov had 4.6 percent of support. Since Putin would need at least 50 percent of the vote share in the March election to avoid a second-round runoff, this polling result at the start of February 2012 was encouraging for his ambitions.

A week ahead of the Russian presidential election, polling data indicated that Putin was enjoying momentum and was on track to win Russia's presidential election in the first round. According to Levada Center's poll, Putin was expected to receive about 63 percent of the vote share -- well over the 50 percent majority. Following the trends of the weeks before, Zyuganov would come in significantly behind in second place with about 15 percent, while Zhirinovskiy continued to track with about eight percent.

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Also in February 2012, tens of thousands of people participated in a number of political rallies in Moscow. The rallies appeared to be roughly divided into two categories: pro-Putin events and anti-Putin demonstrations. The anti-Putin contingent alleged fraud in the parliamentary elections held in December 2011 and urged voters to deny the former president a return to power. Pro-Putin elements accused the opposition of fomenting discord and seeking a revolution that would ultimately result in Russia being too closely linked with Western powers. On Feb. 17, 2012, a pro-Putin rally was organized by Federation of Trade Unions of St. Petersburg and the Leningrad region and attracted tens of thousands of participants. The organizers called on Russians to vote for Putin in the interests of the political stability of Russia. As February 2012 was coming to a close, further such rallies were ongoing. It should be noted that Russian authorities made it clear that even after the presidential election was decided, it would not try to stop protests or such mass action, which could well ensue.

The political landscape of Russia at the time in late February 2012 was also dominated by news of a foiled plot, apparently by Chechen rebels, to assassinate Putin. That news was likely to remind Russians of Putin's leading role in the fight against Chechen Islamic militant separatists. While human rights activists have criticized Putin for orchestrating a harsh crackdown against the movement, many Russians have applauded him for his hard line actions in this regard, given Chechen militants' willingness to use terrorism to further their aims. Accordingly, Putin's national security record could well be beneficial to him at the polls.

As March 2012 began, and as the Russian presidential election loomed only days away, the Russian Central Electoral Commission (CEC) rejected complaints submitted by the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) and the League of Voters about the unbalanced provision of broadcast time by a number of channels to presidential candidates. The CEC resolution determined that the complaints lacked objective foundation and concluded that there was "no evidence of equality violations of the candidates for the post of Russian president in the placing of informational materials on Channel One, Rossiya 1, Centre TV or REN TV, or of any discrimination concerning their access to airtime."

That case, along with the aforementioned political rallies, drew attention to the matter of a functioning opposition in Russia. Was there an effective opposition force in Russia presenting a serious challenge to the traditional power base in this country? Does Russia embrace the notion of vigorous and open debate, common in mature democracies? Or does Russia's autocratic legacy prevail at the socio-cultural level? Is Russia a venue for thriving political activism, or, it is a country that continues to adhere to a sense of order?

While not a direct response to these questions, the news agency, Interfax, released a survey on the matter of opposition forces and political mass action. The survey showed that the majority of Russians -- 55 percent -- believe that political opposition should exist in the country. The survey, which was conducted by Public Opinion Foundation, also found that most Russians believe that the country's authorities should be more responsive to the opposition. That being said, 12 percent of respondents expressed a penchant for autocracy, saying that there was no need for an opposition. About a quarter of respondents said that they did not believe a political opposition actually existed in Russia. Close to 80 percent of those who replied to the survey questions said that they were not interested in participating in protest action; only 13 percent responded positively to the idea of protest participation. That all being said, an overwhelming 84 percent of respondents said that they did not believe Russia was in need of any kind of revolution at this time.

Perhaps those last two data points would prove to be the most salient indicators of the outcome of the forthcoming Russian presidential election. Stated differently, with the vast majority of Russians not enthused about either the notion of radical change, or, participating in protest action, it was quite possible that they would vote in favor of the status quo. The status quo would, more than likely, line up with Putin as president.

Heading into the Russian presidential election, the main question would be whether or not Putin could win outright victory in the first round.

Polling data right before election day gave Putin a clear majority; it was yet to be seen if this would hold on March 4, 2012. Note also that according to Russia's Central Elections Commission, almost 670 international monitors from

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various international, national, and regional agencies, were accredited to observe the Russian presidential election to be held on March 4, 2012.

On election day, turnout was reported to be high at 58 percent -- notably higher than the level of turnout in the 2008 election. After Russian voters had cast their ballots, exit poll data and preliminary results indicated that Putin had won election, having secured around 60 percent of the vote share. Other candidates were trailing significantly behind, including Putin's toughest rival, Gennady Zyuganov. Given the fact that he had crossed the 50 percent majority threshold outright, Putin avoided having to contest a second round.

In an appearance with current President Dmitry Medvedev, Putin claimed victory declaring, "I promised you we would win, and we won," he said. "Glory to Russia!"

He continued saying, "We have won in an open and honest battle. We proved that no-one can force anything on us." Outside the Kremlin, pro-Putin supporters gathered in the tens of thousands with flags and banners with messages such as "We believe in Putin," to celebrate the election victory for their standard bearer and his imminent return to the helm of the Russian presidency.

Not all Russians were celebrating the election outcome, though, as opposition groups reported widespread fraud and charged that there were incidences of multiple voting by individual persons.

Indeed, activists were outraged about the level of voting violations, while election observers were pointing to a phenomenon called "carousel voting," whereby busloads of voters were driven around to different polling stations to cast ballots on a repeated basis. Still, Putin's campaign chief, Stanislav Govorukhin, disputed these claims, instead asserting that this 2012 election was "the cleanest in Russian history."

International monitors from the the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe had its own assessment of the Russian presidential contest. The OSCE said that although Putin's challengers were able to compete openly, the election conditions favored Putin's election. In response, the British government called for Russia to consider this finding seriously.

British Foreign Secretary William Hague said in a statement. "A Russia with greater political freedoms, including the registration of political parties, freedom of assembly and freedom of the media is in the interests of Russians and of the wider world." Striking a similar chord, Human Rights Watch called on Putin to undertake key reforms once he begins his new term as president.

There were reports that Moscow was under tight security after the election, and all expectations were that anticipated opposition protests would ensue in the future.

For his part, opposition leader, Zyuganov, characterized the elections as "unfair and unworthy," but encouraged Russians to take comfort from the knowledge that Putin "would not be able to rule like he used to."

Zyuganov appeared to be referring to a hitherto reluctance of opposition-aligned Russians to take to the streets to register their discontent. As discussed above, though, mass action in Russia, while on the rise in recent times, remains a relatively infrequent occurrence in this country, with many Russians seemingly ambivalent about it at a constituent level.

#### Post-Election Developments --

In May 2012, Vladimir Putin was sworn into office as Russia's president. The first week of May also saw outgoing President Dmitry Medvedev positioned to become Russia's prime minister. The joint moves were a reversal of the outgoing hierarchy in the executive branch of government, which for years saw Putin serve as prime minister and Medvedev as president. Those years were sometimes understood as Medvedev functioning as a place holder for

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Putin, who was constitutionally barred from serving more than consecutive terms as president, and who had already held the presidency from 2000 to 2008. The year 2012 heralded Putin's return to the helm of the Russian political scene as head of state. That being said, Medvedev was not expected to quickly exit the executive branch of government himself.

In fact, in April 2012 -- a month after the Russian presidential election -- Putin indicated he would announce his choice of prime minister around the same *time* of his inauguration. Under Russia's constitution, the candidacy of prime minister is proposed by the president but has to be approved by the State Duma. Given the continued majority of the ruling United Russia Party in parliament, Putin's choice was likely to be ratified. To that end, all eyes were on Medvedev as Putin's likely choice. Putin's decision in the last week of the month to hand over leadership of the United Russia Party on to Medvedev augmented expectations that the outgoing head of state was set to move in the position of head of government

In early May 2012, ahead of Putin's return to power as head of state, the country was rocked by virulent protests, leading ultimately to the arrests of hundreds of people demonstrating against the incoming president. Among those arrested were anti-corruption activist, Alexey Navalny, leftist activist, Sergei Udaltsov, and former Deputy Prime Minister Boris Nemtsov. Protesters hurled rocks, bottles, and flares at police, who responded using pepper spray and clubs to beat back the crowds. Several people were injured in the fracas while a journalist was killed when he fell from a fire escape as he tried to film the unrest.

On May 7, 2012, as scheduled, Putin was sworn into office as president of Russia at a heavily-fortified ceremony at the Kremlin States Palace. In his inauguration speech, Putin said that it was his "life's meaning" to serve the country and its people. He also augured democratic progress in Russia saying, "We are entering a new stage of national development. We want to live in a democratic country ... in a successful Russia." With the constitution of the country having been amended to provide for longer presidential terms, Putin would now serve as head of state for a six-year term.

A day later on May 8, 2012, Russia's State Duma (the country's lower house of parliament), overwhelmingly approved Medvedev's candidacy as prime minister in the new government. Medvedev was supported by two of the four Duma factions -- the United Russia Party and the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia -- while members of parliament belonging to the Communists and A Just Russia lawmakers voted against him. In a speech to the State Duma, Medvedev said his new government intended to focus on economic and social issues, and that he would engage all political parties in dialogue.

Note that at the close of May 2012, Medvedev was formally approved as the new leader of the United Russia Party. The new party leader said that his objective was to ensure that in 2016, the United Russia Party "must be at the top again and win a parliamentary majority."

### Special Entry

### Nuclear Politics

March 2012 was marked by the Nuclear Security Summit in South Korea, and attendance of global leaders from Russia, China, and the United States. The summit agenda aimed at reducing the risk of nuclear terrorism.

Ahead of the Nuclear Security Summit, United States President Barack Obama reiterated his call for "a world without nuclear weapons" and advanced his foreign policy agenda that advocates non-proliferation and the reduction of nuclear weapons through increase diplomacy.

In a speech to students at South Korea's Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, President Obama said the United States -- the only nation to have ever used nuclear weapons -- was fully committed to reducing its stockpile of nuclear arms. The United States leader said his country had a

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"moral obligation" to pursue strategic arms cuts. President Obama also drew thunderous applause from the audience of students when he said that, as a father, he did not wish to see his daughters growing up in a world with nuclear threats.

"I say this as president of the only nation ever to use nuclear weapons," Obama said. "I say it as a commander in chief who knows that our nuclear codes are never far from my side. Most of all, I say it as a father, who wants my two young daughters to grow up in a world where everything they know and love can't be instantly wiped out."

President Obama acknowledged his country's unique position in the world, but he noted that "serious sustained global effort" was needed to achieve his expressed hope for a nuclear weapons-free world.

The issue of nuclear proliferation has been at the forefront of the international purview given the ongoing concerns about North Korea's nuclear arsenal as well as Iran's nuclear ambitions. To that latter end, President Obama was expected to meet with Russia's outgoing President Dmitry Medvedev on the matter of Iran's nuclear program -- an issue that has not always seen progress due to divisions among countries with veto power on the United Nations Security Council. With an eye on working cooperatively with such countries, President Obama pledged to work with Russia and China at reducing the risk of nuclear terrorism.

With regard to China, President Obama noted that he has called on Beijing to work directly with Washington and this offer "remains open." He further noted that the Nuclear Security Summit in Seoul presented an opportunity for the United States and China to fortify bilateral relations. He said, "I think this is also an opportunity to build on the excellent cooperation and dialogue across all the dimensions of our relationship that we've been able to establish over the last three years" The United States leader observed that the summit "shows the progress that the international community has made in preventing nuclear proliferation and making sure that we've secured nuclear materials." He continued,

"And I know that's in the interest of both the United States and China."

With regard to Russia, the United States president said he hoped to follow up on the New Start Treaty (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty).

The "New START" provided for the significant reduction of the arsenal of nuclear weapons held by the United States and Russia; it would limit the United States' stockpile of 2,000 strategic nuclear weapons, and Russia's stockpile of nearly 3,000 to between 1,500 and 1,675 warheads respectively. "New START" was regarded as a milestone in the decades-long thrust to decrease the chances of nuclearized warfare. Indeed, it could arguably be characterized as one of the most important treaties forged in a generation.

President Obama expressed hope there could be a deal forged with Russia for further strategic arms cuts with Russia as part of the nuclear disarmament agenda. "Going forward, we'll continue to seek discussions with Russia on a step we have never taken before -- reducing not only our strategic nuclear warheads, but also tactical weapons and warheads in reserve," President Obama said.

That being said, President Obama was overheard telling his Russian counterpart President Dmitry Medvedev that dealing with the European missile defense shield would have to wait until after the election. The White House explained that President Obama was expressing the political reality of the campaign season where rigorous diplomacy and negotiations would be difficult to accommodate.

President Obama addressed the issue of Iran's controversial nuclear development program, saying that time remained to resolve the deadlock through diplomacy. "But time is short," said President Obama. "Iran must act with the seriousness and sense of urgency that this moment demands," he continued.

For its part, Iran has insisted that it has the right to develop nuclear development for peaceful civilian purposes. On the other side of the equation, the West has asserted that Iran is seeking to build nuclear weapons via its clandestine nuclear arms development program. While Iran has been subject to sanctions as a result of its failure to fulfill its international obligations, international concurrence has not come easily due to objections from China and

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Russia. However, President Obama made it clear that he intended to work with these two countries as he stated: "Today, I'll meet with the leaders of Russia and China as we work to achieve a resolution in which Iran fulfills its obligations."

Addressing the matter of North Korea's nuclear ambitions, President Obama made it clear that the United States held "no hostile intent" to that country, but warned that there would be "no rewards for provocation."

Note: In addition to the controversial and difficult issues of nuclear development in Iran and North Korea, the summit would also address the threats posed by nuclear terrorists, as well as radiological materials that could be used to construct a "dirty **bomb**" (i.e. a **bomb** that would spread radiological contamination rather than causing a nuclear explosion). Also on the agenda was a plan for nuclear power stations to convert to low-enriched fuel. Due to the complexity of these issues, it was unlikely that new agreements and concurrence would be found anytime soon despite the participation of 50 countries at the Nuclear Security Summit. Notably absent from the list of participants at the summit were North Korea and Iran.

## Special Entry

Russian President Putin says missile deal more likely with Obama than Romney

In the first week of September 2012, Russian President Vladimir Putin entered the fray of American presidential politics, characterizing United States President Barack Obama as "a very honest man" while disparaging Republican nominee Mitt Romney as being politically craven.

In an interview with state media, President Putin said that if President Obama was re-elected in the November 2012 elections in the United States, he believed it was possible for a compromise agreement to be forged over the difficult issue of a United States' proposal for missile defense system in Europe. Russia has been opposed to the establishment of such a missile system in its geopolitical neighborhood; however, President Putin was signaling that a deal could be reached with an Obama administration in the United States that would satisfy the interests of both countries. He said, "Is it possible to find a solution to the problem, if current President Obama is re-elected for a second term? Theoretically, yes." The Russian president went on to state the following: His desire to work out a solution is quite sincere. I met him recently on the sidelines of the G-20 summit in Los Cabos, Mexico, where we had a chance to talk. And though we talked mostly about Syria, I could still take stock of my counterpart. My feeling is that he is a very honest man, and that he sincerely wants to make many good changes." He continued, "But this isn't just about President Obama."

The Russian head of state pivoted to talk about President Obama's rival for the presidency saying that although he could work with any American administration, there were limits to be considered. He said, "We'll work with whichever president gets elected by the American people. But our effort will only be as efficient as our partners will want it to be." President Putin then launched into as sharp rebuke of Mitt Romney's claim that Russia was "without question" the United States' "Number one geopolitical foe."

Putin said: "As for Mr. Romney's position, we understand that this is to a certain extent motivated by the election race. But I also think that he was obviously wrong, because such behavior on the international arena is the same as using nationalism and segregation as tools of U.S. domestic policy. It has the same effect on the international arena when a politician, a person who aspires to lead a nation, especially a superpower like the U.S., proclaims someone to be an enemy." Returning to the contentious matter of the missile shield, President Putin posed the following rhetorical question: "But what happens if Mr. Romney, who believes us to be America's No. 1 foe, gets elected as president of the United States? In that case, the system will definitely be directed against Russia."



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It should be noted that President Putin's rare praise for President Obama stands in contrast to his attitude towards other American officials, or, American foreign policy in general. Russia has blocked a number of United State-backed Security Council resolutions against Syria at the United Nations, has at times stymied efforts to pressure Iran on its nuclear development program, and has even accused the United States' Department of State of providing tacit verbal support of anti-government demonstrations after Russia's recent disputed parliamentary elections.

Update:

In the second week of February 2013, a well-known opposition activist Sergei Udaltsov was placed under house by a Russian court, pending an investigation into the case against him.

Udaltsov, the leader of the Left Front coalition, was charged with organizing "mass disorder" during a May 2012 protest in Moscow. For his part, Udaltsov has rejected the accusations against him, accusing Russian authorities of carrying out a political vendetta against him. But the Russian television channel, NTV, broadcast footage allegedly shows Udaltsov and others, including an official from the neighboring country of Georgia, discussing a plan to depose the Russian government. For years, Georgia and Russia have had a fractious relationship. Should Udaltsov ultimately be convicted of the charges against him, he would face up to ten years in prison.

On May 20, 2013, Russian authorities announced they had foiled an attempted terror attack on Moscow following a raid on a home in the town of Orekhovo-Zuyevo to the east of the Russian capital. The raid sparked a gunfight that ended in the death of two suspects and the arrest of a third individual. All three of the suspects were Russian citizens

who were believed to have recently returned from an Islamic militant training camp along the Afghan-Pak border. According to Russian security sources, the three Muslim suspects had been under surveillance for approximately one month leading up to the raid. They were allegedly planning to carry out an attack at a large public gathering in central Moscow. With Russia's Independence Day occurring on June 12 and attracting large crowds for independence celebrations, there was speculation that this particular occasion may have been a possible target date.

Five days later on May 25, 2013, a female suicide bomber carried out an attack close to an interior ministry compound in Makhachkala, the capital of the southern Caucasus semi-autonomous republic of Dagestan. The suicide bomber, a so-called "black widow," whose spouse was believed to have been killed in the extremist Islamic separatist campaign against Russia, was the only person to have died in the attack, while as many as 15 people, including five police officers, however, were injured. Identified as

Madina Aliyeva, she was actually married twice and both times to members of militant entities in the North Caucasus.

Whereas Chechnya has long been viewed as the center of militant Islamic separatist violence in the North Caucasus against Russia, in recent years, it was Dagestan that had seen a steady stream of violence and bloodshed in recent times, related to the separatist agenda of Islamic extremists against Russian rule. As if to illustrate that reality, on May 26, 2013 -- only a day after the "black widow" attack -- four people died and several others were wounded in two car bomb explosions in Makhachkala. The government of Dagestan said that it believed the incidences were all related.

Special Report:

Boston terror bombings intersects with challenge of Islamic separatism and extremism in Russia

On April 15, 2013, two **bombs** exploded along the path to the finish line of the Boston Marathon in the state of Massachusetts in the United States. The explosive devices were believed to have been placed inside backpacks and detonated remotely. Three people died as a result of these apparent terrorist acts. Meanwhile, there were more than 130 people hospitalized due to the intensely grave nature of so many injuries. It should be noted that due to the placement of the explosive devices, many of the victims endured horrific injuries to their lower extremities, with limbs severed as a result. Indeed, the scene of the tragedy displayed a traumatizing scene of dismembered and bloodied body parts along with the injured victims and shocked bystanders.

Thanks to the sheer quantity of photographic evidence from witnesses at the marathon taking pictures of the day's events, as well as cameras installed on commercial buildings, authorities were able to get a sense of the perpetrators and their actions. On April 18, 2013, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) released photographs of two suspects and actively sought the public's assistance in apprehending those responsible.

Later on the night of April 18, 2013 -- presumably agitated by the realization that their pictures were being shared with the world -- the two suspects became engaged in a spate of violent activities with deadly consequences. The two killed a police officer on the campus of MIT University, carjacked a man in a Mercedes-Benz SUV, held him by gunpoint, identified themselves as the Boston marathon bombers, and used his ATM card to withdraw \$800 in cash from the car owner's bank account, before releasing him at a gas station in Cambridge. The suspects then exchanged gunfire with police, with many stray bullets landing in the homes of people who lived in the hitherto quiet residential neighborhood of Watertown. As well, one transit officer was seriously wounded in the mayhem. The situation became even more intense when, during their attempted getaway, the two suspects hurled explosive devices at the police. Residents of the neighborhood who witnessed the events said in interviews with the media that the devices looked like a combination of grenades and pressure cooker **bombs**. **Bomb** detecting robots were soon dispatched to the scene to determine the security of the area since the two men reportedly hurled an arsenal of weapons and explosive devices on the Watertown residential street. Meanwhile, the firefight between the suspects and police was ongoing. One suspect was shot in the exchange of gunfire with police and then was run over by a car as his accomplice made his escape. The first suspect ultimately died as a result of his injuries, while the second suspect was captured after Boston and its surrounded areas was placed under lockdown for several hours. The second suspect would later be charged in the United States with using a weapon of mass destruction.

In the early hours of April 19, 2013, details regarding the identities of the two suspects were beginning to surface.

The suspect seen in the FBI photographs wearing the black cap, and who had died as a result of the firefight with police, was identified as 26-year old Tamarlan Tsarnaev.

The surviving suspect, who was seen in the FBI photographs wearing the white cap, was identified as his brother, 19-year old Dzhokhar A. Tsarnaev. The young men were of Chechnyan and Avar (Dagestani) ethnicity. The father of the two brothers had worked in the former Soviet republic of Kyrgyzstan, which is now independent; the Tsarnaev brothers spent some of their younger years there. Anzor Tsarnaev was fired from his government job in Bishkek (the capital of Kyrgyzstan) when the war sparked again in Chechnya in 1999; the general view was that he lost his job due to his Chechen ethnicity. The Tsarnaev family then moved to the Russian semi-autonomous region of Dagestan, close to the breakaway Russian region of Chechnya, which has been the site of an extremist separatist Islamic insurgency for about two decades. The entire family emigrated to the United States about ten years ago and settled in the suburban Boston area of Somerville and Cambridge. Tamarlan Tsarnaev was a legal resident of the United States and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev had become a United States citizen in 2012.

Information about Tamarlan Tsarnaev suggested that he had a difficult **time** adjusting culturally to life in the United States, despite some success with a boxing career. His decision to stop boxing on religious grounds appeared to have angered and perplexed his father, who had been socialized in the Soviet system and culture to hold a far more permissive and moderate attitude towards Islam. Influenced by his mother's religious transformation to Islamic

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orthodoxy, Tarmalan Tsarnaev reportedly became increasingly hard line in his Islamic and extremist views, even alienating some members of his extended family. Ruslan Tsarni, an uncle to the Tsarnaev brothers, was on the record with the media saying that as far back as 2009, Tamerlan Tsarnaev was becoming more of an extremist Muslim, expressing what he described as "this radical crap." This trend appeared to have fueled a break in contact among family members.

It should be noted that the Russian government had Tamarlan Tsarnaev on its radar, having requested that the United States authorities investigate him as early as 2011, due to suspicions of involvement with Islamic extremists and unspecified underground groups. The FBI confirmed that they interviewed Tamerlan Tsarnaev in 2011, as requested, but found no cause for alarm at the time.

Tamarlan Tsarnaev certainly traveled out of the country for extended periods of time, most recently in 2012 to visit his father who was now living in the Dagestan region of Russia. However, the actual time Tamarlan Tsarnaev spent with his father in Dagestan was limited to one month, leaving the rest of the period a mystery and open for interpretation. It was possible (although not confirmed) that he attended a terrorist training camp -- perhaps in the Caucasus region or elsewhere. But even without such an expedition, Tamarlan Tsarnaev may very well have been radicalized in a less "official" manner. While politicians in the United States were eager to suggest that Tamarlan Tsarnaev was radicalized out of the country, it was apparent that his increasingly extreme Islamic views were part of a personal transformation taking place in the home he shared with his mother. Still, it was after an overseas trip more recently that Tamarlan Tsarnaev created YouTube postings called "Terrorists," which featured videos from a militant extremist in Dagestan known as Amir Abu Dudzhan. In one posting, Dudzhan is shown holding a Kalashnikov rifle and declaring: "Jihad is the duty of every able-bodied Muslim." It was apparent that Tamarlan Tsarnaev was ideologically inspired by Islamic extremism and radicalism, while being sympathetic to the Chechnyan and Dagestani separatist and Jihadist causes.

Of course, the motivation for Dzhokhar A. Tsarnaev to join his brother in carrying out terrorist attacks remained more of a matter for debate. Significantly more well-adjusted to American life than his brother, the younger Tsarnaev was a seemingly successful student at the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth, with a number of American friends, an active social life, and hopes for a medical career. It was difficult to determine if Dzhokhar Tsarnaev shared his brother's Jihadist views, or, if he was simply motivated by his relationship with his brother. To that end, there were some suggestions that Tamerlan Tsarnaev may have "brainwashed" his younger brother into participating in his terrorist agenda. For his part, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev's posts on the Russian social media site, Vkontakt, made it clear that he self-identified as Islamic in terms of religion and "world view," and Chechnyan in terms of ethnicity and culture. He also posted links to Islamic and pro-Chechnyan independence websites.

There seemed to be bewilderment among United States intelligence circles about the idea that the Chechnyan drive for independence and war with Russia should be transported to American terrain. But it was not clear that Chechnyan independence was the driver for the two Tsarnaev brothers to commit acts of terror.

In fact, it should be noted that Islamic militants operating under the aegis of the Caucasian Mujahedeenin denied any involvement in the Boston marathon terror attacks, emphasizing that their conflict was with Russia. However, as discussed below, the militant Islamic insurgency in the North Caucasus has steadily expanded past Chechnya's borders to neighboring territories, such as Dagestan and Ingushetia, and the cause itself has moved past establishing an independent Chechnya to a broader Jihadist goal in the Caucasus. It was quite possible that personal transformation to radical Islam meshed with the Jihadist agenda for the older Tsarnaev brother, and he drew the younger one into the fold.

But it was also possible that these two young men -- neither of whom were victims of economic strife as is the case for many Chechens, Dagestanis, and Ingushetians at home -- were motivated for different reasons. It was possible

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that they were inspired by a broader ideological (read: global Islamic Jihadist) sensibility, reminiscent of the September 11, 2001 hijackers, or the Nigerian Christmas Day bomber. All the young men in these cases were well-educated, spent several years in Western countries, quite possibly suffered from cultural alienation to some degree as a result of the experience, thus driving them to take on radicalized Islamic extremist identities, and ultimately -- to terrorist actions on the basis of religion.

On April 22, 2013, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev was reported to have told investigating authorities that he and his brother acted alone, rather than in concert with an organized Jihadist or terror enclave, and that their actions were motivated by their Islamist beliefs, and inspired by the goal of global Jihadism. By the last week of April 2013, a clearer picture of the motivation for the bombings was emerging as reports surfaced about the radicalization of Tarmalan Tsarnaev as early as 2010 -- a track that seemed to run parallel with the increasingly religious orientation of his mother. Both mother and son, as noted above, were wiretapped by Russian intelligence and appeared to have discussed the possibility of participating in Jihad. As such, it was apparent that Islamic extremism within the Tsarnaev family fueled the terrorist actions of the two brothers.

## Special Entry

Russian president accused of repression as opposition leader is sentenced to five years in jail

In mid-July 2013, Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny was convicted of stealing and sentenced to five years in jail. At issue were accusations that Navalny orchestrated a scheme to steal approximately 16 million roubles (\$494,000) from a timber company when he was advising the governor of Kirov in 2009. Judge Sergei Blinov delivered the verdict saying, "The court, having examined the case, has established that Navalny organized a crime and ... the theft of property on a particularly large scale."

Political analysts had anticipated a suspended sentence; the particularly harsh five-year jail sentence was, therefore, being regarded with shock by political observers. Supporters of Navalny gathered outside the court in Kirov, to the northwest of Moscow, to register their outrage over the conviction and jail sentence. Other mass gatherings attracted thousands of protesters in Moscow and Saint Petersburg. They railed in outrage against Russian authorities, screaming "Shame!" and "Disgrace! Indeed, some critics were comparing the Navalny case to political "show trials" under Soviet leader, Josef Stalin. To be sure, Navalny has the distinction of being the most prominent opposition leader to be prosecuted in Russia since the Soviet era.

For his part, Navalny gained notoriety in Russia as a vociferous anti-corruption campaigner and as one of the leading voices behind anti-government protests. He was also regarded as one of incumbent President Vladimir Putin's most formidable rivals. Accordingly, critics of the Russian president decried the legal case against Navalny, placing the blame on the president for the conviction and jail sentence, and further accusing Putin of political oppression.

At the practical level, it was certainly true that a five-year jail sentence would ensure that Navalny was unable to contest the next presidential election in 2018. Thus, anti-Putin critics perceived the legal case against Navalny as a campaign to sideline one of Putin's toughest political rivals.

Navalny was not one to shy away from criticisms of Putin, even referring to the Russian president as a "toad" and accusing him of using the country's oil revenues to retain power. With the knowledge that he would soon be outside the political purview, Navalny urged his supporters to keep up the opposition fight. Via Twitter, he said: "Okay, don't miss me. More important - don't be idle. The toad will not get off the oil pipeline on its own."

The international community was also weighing in on the situation with both the United States and the European Union expressing concerns over Navalny's conviction and noting that it raised questions about the rule of law and

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Russia's treatment of Putin's opponents. The White House called it part of a "disturbing trend aimed at suppressing dissent."

Irrespective of criticism from the West, or even pressure from Navalny at home, however, the fact of the matter was that President Putin remained the most popular political figure on the Russian landscape. Survey data by an independent pollster, Levada, showed that Putin had a 63 percent job approval rating in mid-2013 -- certainly higher than post heads of state in democratic countries across the world.

## Special Entry

NSA leaker finally escapes Russian airport purgatory and accepts asylum in new homeland of Russia

Mid-2013 was dominated by questions about the fate of Edward Snowden -- a former contract employee of the National Security Agency (NSA) -- who leaked classified information to the public and then fled the United States. The revelations about the United States' secret surveillance program highlighted the post-September 11, 2001, debate over privacy rights versus national security interests in the United States.

The matter emerged in the public purview via an article in the United Kingdom-based Guardian newspaper.

The Guardian's piece focused on a phone records monitoring program by the National Security Agency (NSA), which gathers millions of phone records in the United States as part of a database for national security purposes. The phone records or so-called "meta-data" theoretically do not include the actual content of conversations. Instead, the meta-data concentrates on points of contact, frequency of contacts, location data, call duration, and other such patterns that could presumably assist in determining whether terror suspects are in communication with persons in the United States.

The United States soon took legal action against Snowden for absconding with sensitive intelligence documents and then disclosing that classified information. Snowden was charged with theft of government property, unauthorized communication of national defense information to someone without a security clearance, and willful communication of classified intelligence. The latter two charges were violations covered under the Espionage Act.

After fleeing the United States, Snowden headed to the Chinese territory of Hong Kong, and from there he was in Russia en route to his final destination -- political asylum in another country. With the United States making it difficult for the NSA leaker to reach his final destination for asylum, Snowden was quite literally trapped at the "in transit" area of Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport, which was not technically Russian territory.

United States authorities were demanding the NSA leaker's extradition to face justice for the crimes outlined above. But while Russian President Vladimir Putin did not seem particularly enthused with Snowden's presence at the Sheremetyevo Airport, he nonetheless quickly foreclosed the notion of honoring United States requests for Snowden to be returned to the United States, saying the fugitive leaker had not broken any Russian laws.

Meanwhile, the motives behind Snowden's leaking activities were receiving even greater scrutiny. Snowden expanded his leaking agenda beyond the realm of exposing the NSA's surveillance activities to sharing information about the clandestine infiltration of the Chinese computer network intelligence with the Chinese themselves. Accordingly, it seemed that Snowden crossed the line into the realm of foreign espionage.

Snowden offered a sense of his motivation for this line-crossing during a live online chat with the Guardian newspaper on June 24, 2013. Snowden declared: "All spying is wrong." Apparently, from the perspective and personal judgment of Snowden, no covert activities by the United States targeting foreign governments were acceptable.

Left unconsidered for Snowden was the matter of whether or not his fellow Americans concurred with his stance, or, if Americans might appreciate the utility of long-standing clandestine intelligence services in the interests of keeping the citizenry safe. Still, Snowden believed he was on a mission to expose this "wrongdoing" to the world.

The matter of how to go about accomplishing that goal was revealed in an interview with Snowden that was published by the South China Morning Post on the morning he departed Hong Kong. In that South China Morning Post interview, the fugitive leaker admitted that he took the job as an NSA contract worker with Booz Allen Hamilton for the specific purpose of acquiring and releasing sensitive classified intelligence. Snowden was now on the record stating the following: "My position with Booz Allen Hamilton granted me access to lists of machines all over the world the NSA hacked. That is why I accepted that position about three months ago." This admission was unlikely to strengthen his credibility, since it suggested that Snowden did not simply happen upon data he believed should be shared with the citizenry. Instead, he actively sought employment as a contractor to the NSA for the expressed purpose of acquiring classified intelligence data, which he then illegally released not only to the public -- but also to foreign powers.

For his part, President Barack Obama weighed in on the Snowden affair on June 27, 2013, when he dismissed the notion of personally pressuring his Chinese and Russian counterparts regarding extradition. Speaking from a news conference in Senegal (Africa) where he was on an overseas trip, the president said that he was concerned about the documents Snowden might have in his possession. "That's part of the reason why we'd like to have Mr. Snowden in custody," Obama said. The president continued, said. "But what I think we're going to continue to do is make sure that we are following the various channels that are well established and the rules that are well established to get this thing done." President Obama dismissed the notion of using tactics beyond the traditional outlets available, saying that he was "not going to be scrambling jets to get a 29-year-old hacker."

Snowden appeared to draw closer to a future in Russia in July 2013, when the fugitive leaker applied for political asylum in Russia. Snowden indicated that he would pursue temporary refuge in that country until he could be guaranteed "safe passage" to an unspecified Latin American country in the future.

Noteworthy was the fact that around the same time, Russian President Putin pugnaciously asserted that Moscow had "no intention" of handing over Snowden to the United States. The Russian leader opened the door for Snowden to successfully find asylum in his country, pending one condition. Putin said: "If he [Snowden] wants to stay here, there is one condition: He must stop his activities aimed at inflicting damage on our American partners, no matter how strange it may sound coming from my lips."

For his part, United States President Obama addressed the unfolding imbroglio with Russia over the Snowden affair as follows: "We don't have an extradition treaty with Russia. On the other hand, Mr. Snowden, we understand, has traveled there without a valid passport and legal papers. And we are hopeful the Russian government makes decisions based on the normal procedures regarding international travel and the normal interactions law enforcement have."

It should be noted that in a statement released via Wikileaks, Snowden had argued that the United States condemned him to a life of "the extra-legal penalty of exile" as a punishment for his crimes. He continued, "Although I am convicted of nothing, it has unilaterally revoked my passport, leaving me a stateless person." Left unstated by Snowden was the fact that on June 21, 2013, the United States government levied legal charges of theft of government property and two violations covered under the Espionage Act. Clearly, in so doing, there was nothing "extra-legal" being undertaken by the United States government. It should also be noted that the revocation of a passport is standard procedure for persons charged with crimes and deemed to be flight risks. According to federal law, an American citizen's passport can be revoked due to "an outstanding federal warrant of arrest for a felony" as provided under Title 22 of the U.S. Code. Thus, despite Snowden's claim that he was now left a stateless

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person due to the revocation of his passport, in truth, he remained a citizen of the United States, retaining all constitutional rights as a United States citizen, while at the same time being subject to prosecution on United States soil for his violations of the law. Moreover, United States Attorney General Eric Holder expressly noted that Snowden would not be facing draconian legal consequences, such as the death penalty, if he were extradited to face justice.

Snowden made the announcement to seek asylum in Russia while meeting with human rights activists and politicians at Moscow's Sheremetyevo airport where he also condemned the West for preventing him from reaching his ultimate destination in Latin America. This was in apparent reference to the fact that the Bolivian president's aircraft was denied access to certain European countries' air space on suspicion that Snowden was aboard. Snowden said, "Some governments in Western European and North American states have demonstrated a willingness to act outside the law, and this behavior persists today... This unlawful threat makes it impossible for me to travel to Latin America and enjoy the asylum granted there in accordance with our shared rights." In fact, sovereign states are fully within their rights to control access to their air space, even if the outcome produces diplomatic imbroglios.

Left unsaid by Snowden was whether or not he would be meeting the conditions of the Russian government that he refrain from further harming the interests of the United States if he wanted to take refuge in Russia. It was not known how Russia intended to respond to this request from Snowden, given an impending meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and United States President Barack Obama at a summit in Russia in September 2013. Obviously, by granting Snowden even temporary asylum in Russia, there would be a deleterious effect on relations with the United States. Indeed, the decision to allow Snowden to meet with human rights activists and political figures at Moscow's Sheremetyevo airport was already raising the ire of the United States.

As noted by the White House itself, the prospect of Russian asylum would violate Moscow's own stated position that Snowden should avoid further damage to American national security. White House Press Secretary Jay Carney said: "Providing a propaganda platform for Mr. Snowden runs counter to the Russian government's previous declarations of Russia's neutrality and that they have no control over his presence in the airport. It's also incompatible with Russian assurances that they do not want Mr. Snowden to further damage U.S. interests."

On Aug. 1, 2013, Edward Snowden was finally able to leave Russian airport purgatory and enter asylum in new homeland of Russia. Snowden's Russian lawyer said that his client received the legal documents necessary to exit the Sheremetyevo Airport's in-transit zone and enter Russian territory.

Anatoly Kucherena declined to comment on the details of Snowden's Russian living arrangement, saying, "His location is not being made public for security reasons, since he is the most pursued man on the planet." He did, however, disclose that Snowden would be staying in a private home of American expatriates. Kucherena also acknowledged that Snowden intended to "build a new life in Russia" and noted that the NSA fugitive leaker was looking forward to learning about Russian culture. Kucherena added that while Snowden's legal permit allowed him temporary asylum for one year, the fugitive leaker did not foreclose the possibility of pursuing Russian citizenship in the future.

The movement of Snowden into Russian territory, and with Snowden's activities indicating a clear pursuit of a life in his new Russian homeland, marked a shift in Snowden's status. Indeed, it reflected Russia's official decision to support the NSA leaker wanted by the United States government. The move would invariably and deleteriously affect United States relations with Russia.

Yury Ushakov, foreign policy adviser to President Putin, tried to make light of the situation, saying the Snowden affair was "rather insignificant" and should not negatively impact relations with the United States. However, the United States seemed to be taking Russia's decision to grant asylum to Snowden quite seriously. White House Press Secretary Jay Carney said: "We're extremely disappointed that the Russian government would take this step

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despite our very clear and lawful requests in public and in private to have Mr. Snowden expelled to the United States to face the charges against him."

With United States President Barack Obama due to travel to Russia to attend the G-20 summit, the fact of the matter was that the Snowden affair could potentially cause the United States leader to cancel his planned private meeting with Putin, his Russian counterpart. As noted by White House Press Secretary Jay Carney, "We're evaluating the utility of a summit in light of this and other issues." Democrat Senator Chuck Schumer was more forthright in his assessment of the situation. He said Russia's decision to grant Snowden asylum was a "stab in the back" and recommended that President Obama consider relocating the G-20 summit to a country other than Russia.

Not surprisingly, in the first week of August 2013, President Obama cancelled his meeting with President Putin, although the United States president did intend to travel to Russia to attend the G-20 summit in St. Petersburg. A statement from the White House read as follows: "We have reached the conclusion that there is not enough recent progress in our bilateral agenda with Russia to hold a U.S.-Russia Summit." The White House statement continued, "We believe it would be more constructive to postpone the summit until we have more results from our shared agenda."

The Russian Kremlin expressed disappointment over President Obama's decision. As before, Putin's foreign policy adviser, Ushakov, tried to downplay the situation and move toward more productive ground, saying, "Russian representatives are ready to continue working together with American partners on all key issues on the bilateral and multilateral agenda." But at home in the United States, it seemed that White House national security advisers had unanimously backed the decision to cancel the meeting with Putin.

## Special Report

## Syrian Crisis and U.S.-Russian deal:

Report of chemical weapons usage surfaces and exacerbates Syrian Crisis; has the "red line" been crossed and will international powers now involve themselves in the Syrian civil war?

## Summary:

Since early 2011, anti-government protests have spread and escalated across the Arab world; Syria emerged as an addition to the list of countries experiencing unrest in March 2011. At first, protesters stopped short of demanding the resignation of President Bashar al-Assad, instead demanding greater political freedom and efforts to end corruption. For his part, President Assad announced he would advance a reform agenda, which would include lifting the emergency laws that had been in place for decades, and increased rights to the country's disenfranchised Kurdish population. These moves were aimed at quelling the rising climate of unrest gripping the country. But over time, as protests continued, and as the Assad regime carried out a hard line crackdown on dissent, tensions escalated between the government and the protesters.

In mid-2011, the United Nations Security Council and the Arab League respectively issued condemnations of the violence in Syria. As well, the United Nations Human Rights Council called for an independent inquiry into the violent crackdown on dissent. Meanwhile, global leaders were calling for President Assad to step down from power, given the brutality of the Syrian regime's crackdown on protesters. As of 2012, the bloody crackdown by the Assad regime on anti-government protesters was ongoing. In fact, the crackdown appeared to become more relentless in places such as Homs and Aleppo. Despite widespread condemnation from the West, a United Nations Security Resolution on the situation in Syria was subject to veto by Russia and China. A subsequent vote in the United Nations General Assembly overwhelmingly condemned Syria for its brutal crackdown. A prevailing truce, brokered



by the joint United Nations/Arab League envoy, Kofi Annan, was established in the interests of preventing further bloodshed; however, it was revealed to be an exercise in theory rather than practice and eventually the United Nations monitoring mission ended in failure.

Syria has, meanwhile, been subject to sanctions by various countries and was sliding into pariah status in the international community. Assassinations, alleged massacres, geopolitical tensions with Turkey and Israel, and most recently, suspicions about the use of chemical weapons, have since mired the Syrian landscape. Indeed, it was increasingly clear that Syria had slipped into a state of civil war and was facing a devastating humanitarian crisis. That crisis reached new heights in August 2013 with claims that Syrian forces launched a chemical attack on the outskirts of Damascus. Was this the clear sign that United States President Barack Obama's "red line" had definitively been crossed? And would the international community become more involved in the Syrian crisis? The answers to those questions were yet to be determined.

Chemical weapons issue resurfaces:

On Aug. 21, 2013, Syrian opposition activists and rebels said that chemical weapons had killed hundreds of people on the outskirts of Damascus. They said that government forces launched a major bombardment on rebel forces in the area of Ghouta using rockets with toxic agents. The Syrian government dismissed the accusations as "illogical and fabricated." The Syrian military further said that rebel forces were suffering major defeat and were using claims of chemical attacks to draw attention away from the fact that they were losing the war.

The claims and counter-claims set up rival theories that could not be verified simply by looking at the videotaped footage of victims that immediately surfaced online. Stated differently, while the international media was able to obtain visual evidence of victims who had died, that footage could not prove whether they died as a result of conventional military bombardment or due to exposure to toxic substances. However, there was an increasing chorus of disturbing assertions by medical staff that the victims, particularly children, appeared to have suffered suffocation and blurred vision. As well, further videotaped footage was starting to surface about the purported attacks, this *time* showing victims enduring convulsions or distinctly encountering breathing problems. In an interview with BBC News, Professor Alexander Kekule of the Institute for Medical Microbiology at Halle University in Germany, admitted that the videotaped images of the victims certainly suggested they had been subject to a chemical agent of some kind. However, he made a point of noting that none of the victims showed signs that they had been exposed to chemicals such as sarin or organophosphorous nerve agents.

The international community seemed initially wary to accept the claims of chemical attacks, perhaps with the memory of the inconclusive chemical weapons claims so fresh in their minds from earlier in the year (2013). Only recently, United Nations investigators traveled to Syria to look into those earlier claims. In August 2013, the United Nations convened an emergency meeting to discuss the newest chemical attack claims and its immediate response was to seek clarification on the situation in Syria. As noted by Maria Cristina Perceval, Argentina's United Nations Ambassador, "There is a strong concern among council members about the allegations and a general sense that there must be clarity on what happened and the situation must be followed closely."

That being said, individual countries -- such as France and the United Kingdom-- were going further and demanding that United Nations inspectors who were already investigating the earlier allegations of chemical attacks in Syria now look into these fresh claims. The United States echoed their call via White House spokesperson Josh Earnest, who said: "The United States is deeply concerned by reports that hundreds of Syrian civilians have been killed in an attack by Syrian government forces, including by the use of chemical weapons, near Damascus earlier today. We are formally requesting that the United Nations urgently investigate this new allegation. The United Nations investigative team, which is currently in Syria, is prepared to do so, and that is consistent with its purpose and mandate." Both the European Union and the Arab League entered the fray, adding their own voices to the call for United Nations inspectors to go look into the matter.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Russia had a different view and noted that the timing of the fresh claims of chemical attacks came just as United Nations inspectors were in Syria to investigate the chemical claims from earlier in 2013. The Russian foreign ministry said, "This makes us think that we are once again dealing with a premeditated provocation." Indeed, there was a legitimate question as to why the Syrian government would choose to use chemical weapons at a time when United Nations inspectors were "in country" and especially given United States President Barack Obama's 2012 famous statement that his country would not be involving itself in the Syrian crisis unless the Assad regime used chemical weapons -- essentially crossing a vital "red line" -- that could augur international military action.

There was incremental movement in that direction on Aug. 22, 2013, when the United Kingdom, France, and Turkey all demanded that the international community take a strong stand against the Syrian regime, if the chemical weapons attack was verified.

France went further with French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius saying that if the claims of a chemical attack proved to be true, a "reaction of force" would result. The United Kingdom issued a similar threat via the British Foreign Office, noting, "We believe a political solution is the best way to end the bloodshed" but also warning that the government of Prime Minister David Cameron "has said many times we cannot rule out any option that might save innocent lives in Syria." Meanwhile, Turkey goaded the United Nations about its symbolic "foot dragging" as Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu declared: "All red lines have been crossed but still the United Nations Security Council has not even been able to take a decision."

On Aug. 23, 2013, United States President Barack Obama offered comments on the alleged use of chemical weapons in Syria saying that the claims constituted a "big event, of grave concern." In an interview with CNN, President Obama noted that the conflict in Syria would have a bearing on United States national interests "both in terms of us making sure that weapons of mass destruction are not proliferating, as well as needing to protect our allies, our bases in the region." Nevertheless, the United States leader struck a cautious note, reminding journalists that his country was still in the process of seeking confirmation on the matter of chemical weapons usage; however, he asserted that if the allegations proved to be true, the crisis would "require America's attention." Left unsaid was the nature of that attention. For his part, President Obama urged prudent action, tacitly reminding people of the consequences of the reckless military intervention of his predecessor, George W. Bush, into Iraq. The United States president said: "Sometimes what we've seen is that folks will call for immediate action, jumping into stuff, that does not turn out well, gets us mired in very difficult situations, can result in us being drawn into very expensive, difficult, costly interventions that actually breed more resentment in the region."

Around this time, Russia maintained its belief that the use of chemical agents might be a provocation by the opposition. Still, Russia was now urging Syria to cooperate with an "objective investigation" by United Nations chemical weapons experts. United Kingdom Foreign Secretary William Hague indirectly addressed this suggestion that the use of chemical agents was a provocation by rebel forces saying, "I know that some people in the world would like to say this is some kind of conspiracy brought about by the opposition in Syria. I think the chances of that are vanishingly small and so we do believe that this is a chemical attack by the Assad regime on a large scale."

United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon demanded an immediate investigation to clear up the matter. He said: "I can think of no good reason why any party -- either government or opposition forces -- would decline this opportunity to get to the truth of the matter." Ban also emphasized the fact that any use of chemical weapons -- by any actor or party -- would be a violation of international law, which would inevitably result in "serious consequences for the perpetrator."

United States weighs its options:

Meanwhile, even as the evidence was increasing to support the claim of a chemical weapons attack in Syria, the political will to build an international coalition to act against Syria was eroding. At issue was a parliamentary vote in the United Kingdom's House of Commons urging an international response to the Syria chemical weapons crisis. The vote came amidst British Prime Minister David Cameron's vociferous condemnation of Syria's apparent use of chemical weapons, and his suggestion that the United Kingdom would join the United States and France in delivering some kind of punitive action against Syria. But when the parliamentary vote went down to defeat in the House on Commons on Aug. 29, 2013, it was apparent that the United Kingdom would not be a player in any kind of military intervention.

Irrespective of the political developments across the Atlantic, in the United States, President Barack Obama on Aug. 30, 2013, made clear that he was still considering the full range of options in response to Syria's use of chemical weapons against its own citizens.

Referring to the aforementioned report on the suspected chemical weapons usage in Syria released by Secretary of State Kerry, President Obama said, "As you've seen, today we've released our unclassified assessment detailing with high confidence that the Syrian regime carried out a chemical weapons attack that killed well over 1,000 people, including hundreds of children. This follows the horrific images that shocked us all."

With an eye on showing why the use of chemical weapons required a response, President Obama said, "This kind of attack is a challenge to the world. We cannot accept a world where women and children and innocent civilians are gassed on a terrible scale." He continued, "So, I have said before, and I meant what I said that, the world has an obligation to make sure that we maintain the norm against the use of chemical weapons."

In this way, the United States president was making it clear that the international community had an obligation to respond to Syria's use of chemical weapons -- an act that was undertaken in defiance of international law and in contravention to international norms.

President Obama indicated that several options were under review, as he noted, "Now, I have not made a final decision about various actions that might be taken to help enforce that norm. But as I've already said, I have had my military and our team look at a wide range of options."

That being said, President Obama noted that a long-term campaign involving a ground force in Syria (reminiscent of Iraq) were not among those possibilities. He expressly said, "We're not considering any open-ended commitment. We're not considering any boots on the ground approach. What we will do is consider options that meet the narrow concern around chemical weapons." Evidently, although President Obama believed there was a moral obligation to act against Syria for its use of chemical weapons, he was not eager to see the United States mired in another war in the world's most volatile region. Stated differently, it was through the prism of the Iraq debacle that the United States leader was viewing his options for dealing with Syria.

Syria's stance:

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has repeatedly denied that his forces launched any chemical attacks. The Syrian leader has warned of a wider Middle Eastern war if foreign countries decide to move forward with military action against Syria. That wider war could occur if Assad decided to react to a yet-to-occur military strike by international powers on Syria. Some of the possibilities available to Assad would include retaliatory attacks on pro-Western allies of the United States, such as Israel, Jordan, and Turkey. But the reality was that Syria's military already had its hands full fighting the civil war at home. Moreover, Syria likely could not risk sparking the ire of Israel, with its own well-armed military, or Jordan, which hosts United States fighter jets, missiles and troops, or Turkey -- a NATO

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member state. Indeed, an attack on any NATO country, such as Turkey, would prompt a response from the entire security alliance.

Note on Russia's position:

Russia has maintained the view that the notion of a chemical attack by the Syrian government was inconceivable. Russia has also indicated that it would block a resolution in the United Nations Security Council authorizing a use of force against Syria. However, in early September 2013, Russian President Putin indicated some softening of his stance as he noted that he could be persuaded to change his mind if provided with clear evidence of a chemical attack. Russia has also long advocated for a negotiated or diplomatic settlement to the Syrian crisis.

Status update:

On Sept. 8, 2013, the European Union called for no action to go forward with regard to Syria until the findings on the chemical agents were made available by the United Nations investigative team. As well, plans for a full vote in the United States Congress authorizing use of force against the Syria regime were cancelled.

At issue was an unexpected diplomatic breakthrough that emerged when United States Secretary of State John Kerry uttered a (seemingly) off-hand remark during a news conference in London on Sept. 9, 2013 with British Foreign Secretary William Hague. Secretary of State Kerry said that President Assad could prevent a military strike on Syria if he handed over "every single bit" of his chemical weapons to the international community. At the time, Secretary of State Kerry said that he did not expect Assad to respond to this call; but, in fact, the remark appeared to have sparked fresh possibilities for a diplomatic solution with Russia championing the idea of subjecting Syria's chemical weapons stockpile to international auditors, and then placing them under the aegis of international jurisdiction. Syria -- Russia's client state in the Middle East -- was almost immediately scrambling to say that it would be willing to move in this direction. That stance by Syria functioned also as an admission by the Syrian regime that it was, in fact, in possession of chemical weapons. Until that moment, the Assad regime would not even acknowledge that reality.

On Sept. 10, 2013, Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem offered a public admission of the Assad regime's chemical weapons stockpile when he said: "We are ready to inform about the location of chemical weapons, halt the production of chemical weapons, and show these objects to representatives of Russia, other states and the United Nations." He continued, "Our adherence to the Russian initiative has a goal of halting the possession of all chemical weapons."

On the night of Sept. 10, 2013, United States President Obama delivered a national address on the Syrian issue. Originally, the speech had been regarded as an opportunity for the president to build congressional support -- then, at anemic levels -- for authorizing strikes against Syria, and assuring a war-weary and skeptical nation that such action was necessary. Now, however, the speech had a two-fold purpose -- to bolster that aforementioned case against Syria, but also to address the emerging diplomatic channel.

As regards the former objective, President Obama presented a succinct case for acting against Syria. President Obama emphasized his conviction that the Assad regime was responsible for the chemical toxins attack that ensued around Ghouta on Aug. 21, 2013, characterizing the scene of death as "sickening," reminding the global community that such an attack was a violation of international law, and warning Americans that it posed a threat to United States national security.

But the president also opened the door to a negotiated settlement on the issue of Syria's chemical weapons arsenal and usage. He said that the Russian plan to report Syria's chemical weapons arsenal and place them under the aegis of international jurisdiction constituted "encouraging signs" and announced that he would pursue a "diplomatic

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path." The president said that his top diplomat, Secretary of State Kerry, would travel to Geneva in Switzerland to meet his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, with an eye on pursuing a negotiated settlement on the issue of dealing with Syria's chemical weapons.

President Obama offered cautious support for this path forward, saying, "It's too early to tell whether [the plan] would succeed, and any agreement must verify that the Assad regime keeps its commitments. But this initiative has the potential to remove the threat of chemical weapons without the use of force, particularly because Russia is one of Assad's strongest allies." President Obama defended his decision to consider military strikes against Syria, arguing that the current diplomatic opening was only possible as a result of the credible threat of military force by the United States. Accordingly, the United States leader made it clear that his country's armed forces would maintain their posture, saying: "Meanwhile, I've ordered our military to maintain their current posture, to keep the pressure on Assad and to be in a position to respond if diplomacy fails."

On Sept. 11, 2013, Russia officially handed over its plan for placing Syria's stockpile under international control to the United States. Discussion over its contents was expected to take place in Geneva, Switzerland, between United States Secretary of State Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov.

Those negotiations would be of a bilateral nature.

The Obama administration announced that in addition to Secretary of State Kerry's meeting with Foreign Minister Lavrov, the United States' top diplomat would also meet with the United Nations-Arab League special envoy on Syria, Lakhdar Brahimi.

The diplomatic path was not without serious obstacles. Russia was demanding that the United States withdraw its threat of force, while France -- the United States' ally on the issue of action against Syria -- was crafting a United Nations Security Council resolution that would include a provision for precisely such action, should Syria fail to comply with the dictates of the plan. At issue was France's inclusion of a Chapter VII provision (of the United Nations charter), which would effectively authorize the use of force if Syria failed to adhere to its stated obligations.

For its part, Russia advocated for a non-binding declaration supporting its initiative.

At stake in that initiative was a demand for Syria to provide a full audit of its chemical weapons -- including varieties of toxins and storage locations -- within 15 days, as well as procedures facilitating the transfer of control over those chemical substances, and ultimately, their destruction. Of course, the issue of destruction itself presented a disagreement between Russia and Syria with the latter not keen on that aspect of the plan. Still, with the client state of Syria reliant on Russia to save the regime from United States strikes, it was likely that the arsenal of chemical toxins would ultimately be set for elimination.

Complicating the diplomatic path was an opinion editorial piece penned by Russian President Vladimir Putin, which was published by the New York *Times*. At the more conventional level, the piece included a fulsome plea for diplomacy by Putin as follows: "The potential strike by the United States against Syria, despite strong opposition from many countries and major political and religious leaders, including the pope, will result in more innocent victims and escalation, potentially spreading the conflict far beyond Syria's borders."

Putin also urged international action via global instruments of jurisprudence, noting that any actions should go through the United Nations Security Council, which stood as "one of the few ways to keep international relations from sliding into chaos." Putin also offered the reasonable argument that the United Nations could go down the road of obsolescence as its precursor, the League of Nations, if "influential countries bypass the United Nations and take military action without Security Council authorization."

Left unstated by the Russian leader, however, was the fact that his country's penchant for United Nations authorization for the use of force was not at play during the Soviet Union's invasion of Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Afghanistan, or even its limited engagement in the Georgian territory of South Ossetia most recently.

The most incendiary element in Putin's editorial was perhaps his chastisement of President Obama's declaration on United States' exceptionalism. Putin argued against that claim, stating: "And I would rather disagree with a case he made on American exceptionalism, stating that the United States' policy is What makes America different...it's what makes us exceptional. It is extremely dangerous to encourage people to see themselves as exceptional, whatever the motivation." This statement was a stunning example of irony coming from a world leader who declared to his fellow Russians in February 2013: "We are a victorious people! It is in our genes, in our genetic code!"

The Obama administration responded to this provocative opinion piece by Putin a day later on Sept. 12, 2013 with White House Press Secretary Jay Carney saying, "It's worth also pointing out there's a great irony in the placement of an op-ed like this, because it reflects the truly exceptional tradition of this country of freedom of expression." Carney then went on to note that freedom of expression and free speech were "on the decrease in Russia." Carney also used the occasion to place the burden of the success of a diplomatic path on Russia, noting that the Russian president had placed his "prestige and credibility on the line" in offering a proposal to Syria to turn over its chemical weapons.

The Putin versus Obama contretemps aside, the diplomatic channels remained open. On Sept. 12, 2013, the United Nations announced that it had received documents from Syria, effectively acceding to the Chemical Weapons Convention, which prohibits the production and use of chemical weapons. Syrian Ambassador to the United Nations, Bashar Ja'afar, said, "Legally speaking Syria has become, starting today, a full member of the (chemical weapons) convention."

Meanwhile, negotiations were ongoing in Geneva (Switzerland) between the top diplomats from the United States and Russia respectively -- Secretary of State Kerry and Foreign Minister Lavrov -- with leaks indicating that the two men enjoyed good rapport. The negotiations were being characterized as "constructive" and went late into the wee hours of Sept. 14, 2013, suggesting that climate was ripe with the possibility of forging a deal.

#### Chemical Weapons Deal

On Sept. 14, 2013, United States Secretary of State Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov announced that a breakthrough agreement had been reached and that diplomacy had won the day. Speaking at a joint news conference with his Russian counterpart, Foreign Minister Lavrov, Secretary of State John Kerry said of the concord: "If fully implemented, this framework can provide greater protection and security to the world."

The agreement, titled "Framework for Elimination of Syrian Chemical Weapons," calls for a full accounting of its chemical weapons stockpile within one week, the destruction of all production equipment by November 2013, and the elimination or transfer of the arsenal of chemical weapons by the middle of 2014. Achieving the objectives of the agreement promised to be difficult. A one week deadline for a full audit of Syria's chemical weapons arsenal was strenuously aggressive. As well, the destruction of production equipment and chemical toxins by 2014 was considered unprecedented since previous processes of this nature have typically taken several years to complete. Moreover, there would be complicated questions yet to address, such as how to ensure the safety of international inspectors in Syria.

It should also be noted that agreement on a United Nations Security Council resolution mandating Syrian disarmament on chemical weapons still promised to be potentially fractious. Russia was reluctant to the notion of

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adding a Chapter VII provision (authorizing the use of force if Syria reneged on its obligations) to the resolution, although Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov intimated that the provision could be added in the future in a worse case scenario. As such, the United States was not expected to press for that particular inclusion at this time.

The diplomatic breakthrough and the agreement itself were thus being lauded by all veto-wielding members of the United Nations Security Council (the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia, and China), as well as the broader United Nations and NATO. But with the same lack of diplomatic restraint shown by Russian President Putin in his opinion editorial in the New York Times, Syria's Assad regime hailed the breakthrough agreement as a "victory" for that country. Syrian Reconciliation Minister Ali Haidar declared in an interview with Russian media, "It's a victory for Syria achieved thanks to our Russian friends."

United States Secretary of State Kerry quelled Assad regime's bravado warning on Sept. 15, 2013 that the United States retained its right to carry out punitive strikes against Syria, if that country did not meet its publicly stated international obligations. Secretary of State Kerry said, "If diplomacy has any chance to work, it must be coupled with a credible military threat." "We cannot have hollow words in the conduct of international affairs," Kerry added.

Already, President Obama in the United States had reminded the Syrian regime that while the agreement was "an important step" in the right direction, his country reserved the right to act against Syria for failing to meet its obligations. The United States leader said, "If diplomacy fails, the United States remains prepared to act." Indeed, the United States Pentagon noted that the United States military remained in a posture poised for military strikes against Syria.

Within the rebel ranks, the agreement was being regarded with scorn and bitterness. Indeed, the military leader of the anti-Assad Free Syrian Army, General Salim Idriss, dismissed the deal as irrelevant, saying, "All of this initiative does not interest us. Russia is a partner with the regime in killing the Syrian people." Idriss also cast the deal as a Russian plan intended to gift the Assad regime with more time, and as such, he vowed to keep up the fight.

## Special Report:

Suicide bomber attacks train station in Russia; trolley bus attack follows the next day

## Summary

An attack on a train station in Volgograd in southern Russia on Dec. 29, 2013, left at least 15 people dead and scores more injured. A day later on Dec. 30, 2013, another bomb attack ensued in the very same Russian city of Volgograd. This time, the explosion struck a trolley bus. The blast, which occurred just as people were going to work in the morning rush hour, left between 10 and 15 people dead and more than 20 others injured. All eyes were on Islamist extremists, who have been carrying out an insurgency in the North Caucasus region, as the likely culprits. With the attacks occurring only six weeks ahead of the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, there were increased anxieties over the threat of terrorism in Russia. To that end, the Russian government called on the international community to close ranks in the fight against extremism and terrorism.

## In Detail

An attack on a train station in Volgograd in southern Russia on Dec. 29, 2013, left at least 15 people dead and scores more injured. Children were among the victims. The bomb reportedly contained more than 20 pounds of explosives and contained shrapnel; it was detonated close to the metal detectors at the entrance of the train station. The conventional wisdom was that the presence of security personnel at the location of the blast likely

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ensured the death toll was not higher. Not surprisingly, Russian President Vladimir Putin said that security at airports and train stations would be increased in response to the attack

At first, Russian authorities said that a female suicide bomber -- possibly from Dagestan -- was likely responsible for the attack, which they made clear was an act of terrorism. A government spokesperson said the suicide attacker was likely looking to another target but having seen security personnel on the scene, she opted to detonate the **bomb** in her possession at the train station entrance. Subsequently, contradictory reports were emerging suggesting that the suicide bomber may have been a backpack-wearing male.

The issue of who might be responsible became more mysterious a day later on Dec. 30, 2013, when another **bomb** attack ensued in the very same Russian city of Volgograd. This **time**, the explosion struck a trolley bus close to a busy market in Volgograd's Dzerzhinsky district. The blast, which occurred just as people were going to work in the morning rush hour, left between 10 and 15 people dead and more than 20 others injured. Children were among the victims. As was the case the day before, Russian authorities emphasized that the violence was the result of terrorism, and noted that because the same type of explosives were used in both the train station and trolley bus attacks, both incidences were clearly linked together.

It should be noted that only days before the Volgograd train station and trolley bus attacks, there was a car **bombing** in the southern Russian city of Pyatigorsk. The attack, which was reported to have been carried out by Islamic extremists, left three people dead. Noteworthy was the fact that Pyatigorsk has been the focus of a federal administrative district aimed at stabilizing the North Caucasus region. As well, Volgograd was the site of a previous terrorist attack at a bus station in October 2013. In that incident, the female suicide bomber was believed to be a member of an Islamic separatist group known as Caucasus Emirate and detonated the explosives strapped to her vest on a bus in Volgograd; that attack killed eight people.

It should be noted that so-called "Black Widows" have increasingly been responsible for terrorist acts linked with the North Caucasus. The women -- mostly the widows or female relatives of militants killed in action -- have become more active in the ongoing Islamic extremist insurgency and the effort to create an Islamic Caliphate in the North Caucasus region. Indeed, "Black Widows" could trace their activism to **bombing** attacks in the late 1990s although they entered the public purview in 2002 following their involvement in the 2002 terrorist attack on the Dubrovka theater in Moscow.

It was to be seen if they were involved, once again, in the Volgograd bloodshed.

Regardless of the precise identity of the main actors in the Volgograd attacks in December 2013, all eyes were on Islamist extremists as the likely culprits.

With the attacks occurring only six weeks ahead of the 2014 Winter Olympics in the Russian city of Sochi, there were increased anxieties over the threat of terrorism in Russia. Earlier, in July 2013, Doku Umarov -- an Islamic extremist Chechen leader, called on other militants to deploy "maximum force" in the effort to target civilians, and even to interrupt the 2014 Olympics.

In truth, the connection between Volgograd and Sochi was a bit murky. Nevertheless, the fact of the matter was that the city of Volgograd was located 600 miles from Sochi and was regarded as a gateway to the Caucasus. Indeed, Volgograd -- once known as Stalingrad -- has been the main railway hub along the route connecting European Russia with central Asia.



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For its part, the government of Russia called for international solidarity in the fight against terrorism, which was characterized as "an insidious enemy that can only be defeated together." The international community was quick to respond to this call with British Prime Minister David Cameron saying via Twitter, "I've written to President Putin to say the UK will help Russia in whatever way we can." On behalf of the Obama administration in the United States, the White House National Security Council issued the following statement: "The United States stands in solidarity with the Russian people against terrorism. The U.S. government has offered our full support to the Russian government in security preparations for the Sochi Olympic Games, and we would welcome the opportunity for closer cooperation for the safety of the athletes, spectators, and other participants."

## Special Entry

Sochi winter Olympics begin; Russian government's attention focused on North Caucasus terrorism threat

## Summary:

On Feb. 7, 2014, the Winter Olympics began in the Russian city of Sochi on the Black Sea. The 2014 Olympiad would be known as the most expensive in history -- largely as a result of the security threat posed by Islamist extremist separatists from the North Caucasus region. Fears of attacks by militant terrorist cast a shadow on the highly anticipated games, which Russian President Vladimir Putin hoped would highlight his country's emerging dominance on the world stage. Nevertheless, President Putin has insisted that visitors to Sochi for the Winter Olympics would be safe. He pointed to the experience Russia has had in carrying out secure international events, such as the G8 and G20 summits, as well as the extraordinary security measures (discussed below) being taken to ensure that the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi went off in a successful manner.

## In Detail:

In the second week of January 2014, Russian authorities announced the arrest of five North Caucasus terror suspects. The arrests were made in the town of Nalchik, 185 miles to the east of the city of Sochi on the Black Sea, where the 2014 Winter Olympics were set to start two weeks later. According to the National Anti-Terrorist Committee in Russia, the five suspects were reported to be in possession of a massive arsenal of weapons, including "grenades, ammunition, and a homemade explosive device packed with shrapnel." The particular items in this cache indicated plans for some sort of **bombing** operation and rang alarm bells about the possibility of not only the threat of terrorism at the hands of Muslim extremists from the North Caucasus, but also their targeted sabotage of the impending Olympic Games.

Only a few weeks earlier in late 2013, terrorism emanating from Muslim extremists of the North Caucasus struck Russia in the form of an attack on a train station in Volgograd, which left at least 15 people dead and scores more injured. A day later on Dec. 30, 2013, another **bomb** attack -- this **time** on a trolley bus -- ensued in the very same Russian city of Volgograd. The blast, which occurred just as people were going to work in the morning rush hour, killed between 10 and 15 people dead and injured more than 20 others.

As Russian authorities carried out a security sweep ahead of the Sochi Olympics, they became engaged in a shootout in the Dagestan region of the North Caucasus. According to Russia's National Anti-terrorism Committee (NAC), the episode resulted in the deaths of three Russian servicemen and several gunmen including one man accused of orchestrating a car **bombing** in the city of Pyatigorsk in late 2013.

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Around the same period in mid-January 2014, Russian security forces also announced the arrest of five members of a banned militant group in southern Russia. Officials said the militants were in possession of a homemade **bomb** packed with shrapnel that had to be defused.

On Jan. 17, 2014, there was a grenade attack outside a restaurant in Makhachkala -- the regional capital of Dagestan -- followed by the detonation of a car **bomb timed** to coincide with the arrival of police on the scene. Several people were injured in that episode. A day later on Jan. 18, 2014, a siege at a house in Makhachkala left several militants dead. Those militants, which included one trained female suicide bomber, were suspected of being behind the restaurant attack in Makhachkala.

All eyes at the **time** were on Islamist extremists, who have been carrying out an insurgency in the North Caucasus region, as the likely culprits. With the attacks occurring only weeks ahead of the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, there was increased anxiety over the threat of terrorism in Russia. Those anxieties were fueled by the recollection that Doku Umarov -- an Islamic extremist Chechen leader -- had called on other militants to deploy "maximum force" in the effort to target civilians, and even to interrupt the 2014 Olympics.

With the threat of Islamic militants from the separatist North Caucasus region threatening to disrupt and even sabotage the Olympics, and with the record of attacks in Volgograd in late 2013, followed by the attack in Makhachkala in early 2014, as well as the discovery of the weapons cache in Nalchik in January 2014, Russia announced a draconian safety and security plan. That security plan -- reported to be the biggest of any Olympics to date, included the deployment of 30,000 police and interior ministry troops, backed by anti-aircraft missiles, war ships, and military aircraft, all of which were placed on combat-ready status. As well, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed as security decree that effectively established two security zones; one "controlled" zone would apply stringent security and document protocols to visitors and vehicles, while a second closed or "forbidden" zone was established from the border with Abkhazia all across major portions of the mountainous Sochi national park. Presumably, the intent was to ensure safety at a **time** when the world's eyes would be on Sochi in Russia.

By the third week of January 2014, Russian authorities turned their attention towards a suspected female suicide bomber with an alleged plan to attack the Sochi Olympics. Wanted posters depicting Ruzanna "Salima" Ibragimova from Dagestan in the North Caucasus region have been circulated in Russia with authorities fearing that the widow of an Islamist militant may have already slipped into Sochi. Two other potential female suicide bombers - - quite likely so-called "Black Widows" as well -- were said to be in the region. (Note that the Russian authorities later took back these claims, suggesting that the Olympic city was safe.)

The Volgograd attacks resurfaced in late January 2014 -- just weeks ahead of the Sochi Olympics -- with an ominous videotaped warning by two young Islamic militants believed to be the suicide bombers in those two episodes of terrorism that plagued Russia in December 2013. The footage, which was posted on a Jihadist website, showed the (now deceased) militants issuing the following warning: "We've prepared a present for you and all tourists who'll come over. If you will hold the Olympics, you'll get a present from us for the Muslim blood that's been spilled."

Intensifying the climate of anxiety was the news that North Caucasus Islamic militants dispatched email threats to the national teams of certain European countries and the United States at the Sochi Olympics. In response, United States President Barack Obama offered his "full assistance" in ensuring the Olympics at Sochi were "safe and secure." To that end, two United States warships and several transport aircraft would be on standby in the Black Sea for the opening of the Sochi Olympics; the United States would also supply Russia with technologically sophisticated equipment able to detect improvised explosives.

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For his part, Russian President Putin insisted that visitors to Sochi for the Winter Olympics would be safe. He pointed to the experience Russia has had in carrying out secure international events, such as the G8 and G20 summits, as well as the extraordinary security measures (discussed above) being taken in preparation for the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi.

By the first week of February 2014, Russian security forces announced the elimination of a militant they said may have orchestrated the suicide bombings at Volgograd discussed above. Russian security forces said that Dзамалтин Mirzayev had been killed during a gun battle with law enforcement officers outside a house in the North Caucasus province of Dagestan. Located on the Caspian Sea about to the southeast of Sochi, Dagestan has been known for its notorious record of daily violence associated with the ongoing separatist aspirations of militant Islamists. According to Russian authorities, Mirzayev was thought to have been responsible for dispatching two assailants to Volgograd to carry out back-to-back attacks in late December 2013.

While this development was a boon for Russian authorities, who were beset by negative Olympic publicity over the security concerns (as well as unfinished or "problem" infrastructure and controversial anti-gay legislation), there were further wrinkles on the security scene. On the eve of the opening of the Sochi Olympics, the United States Department of Homeland Security issued a warning to airlines flying to Russia, saying that terrorists might attempt to smuggle explosives on board aircrafts by hiding them in toothpaste tubes.

Law enforcement experts suggested that the explosives transported in this manner could be assembled either "in flight" or upon arrival at the Olympics in Russia. Due to the looming threat, United States authorities went so far as to ban liquids on all flights from the United States to Russia.

Note that on Feb. 7, 2014, the Opening Ceremony of the Winter Olympics began at Fisht Olympic Stadium in Sochi. The event was marked -- as is traditional -- by the parade of nations, the athletes' oath, addresses by dignitaries, and performances aimed at highlighting Russia's illustrious cultural contributions to world history. Notably, Russian President Vladimir Putin declared the games of the Winter 2104 Olympiad open.

Various international heads of state were in attendance including Chinese President Xi Jinping of China, Prince Albert of Monaco, Grand Duke Henri of Luxembourg, King Willem-Alexander of the Netherlands, Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani of Qatar, President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan, President Serge Sarkisian of Armenia, President Sauli Niinisto of Finland, President Filip Vujanovic of Montenegro, President Tomislav Nikolic of Serbia, President Olafur Ragnar Grimsson of Iceland, and President Tsakhiagiin Elbegdorj of Mongolia, among others. Conspicuously absent were the leaders of the leading Western nations, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Canada.

## Special Note on Chechnya

In December 2014, ahead of Russian President Vladimir Putin's annual state of the union address, violence broke out in Chechnya. At issue was an incident in which gunmen opened fire on security forces and then stormed a media office building in the Chechen capital Grozny. The ambush led to a violent gun battle, which ultimately resulted in the deaths of six gunmen and three police officers. Ramzan Kadyrov, the Kremlin-backed leader of Chechnya, remarked on the developments via social media, writing that "six terrorists were annihilated" following the fracas.

For their part, Muslim extremists claimed responsibility for the attack, saying that it was carried out as an act of retaliation against the oppression of Muslim women in the Islamic separatist republic. While Chechnya has been under the harsh hand of Kadyrov, Islamic insurgency and terrorism continues to plague the North Caucasus region. Indeed, only two months prior in October 2014, a suicide bomber killed five policemen and injured a dozen other individuals when he strategically detonated the explosives strapped to his body just as police officers walked up to him to request identification.

## Editor's Note:

The militant Islamic insurgency in the North Caucasus has steadily expanded past Chechnya's borders to neighboring territories, such as Dagestan and Ingushetia, and the cause itself has moved past establishing an independent Chechnya to a broader Jihadist goal in the Caucasus. To be clear, an Islamic insurgency emanating from the North Caucasus has bedeviled the Russian Federation for close to two decades. Despite successful offensive operations by the Russian military in the North Caucasus, violence by Islamist separatist militants has been ongoing. At issue has been the Chechen mandate to create an independent Islamic state and the willingness of the Chechen militants to use terrorism and violence to achieve their ends.

While the mainstream media has focused on this separatist war carried out by extremist Islamic insurgents from Chechnya, the neighboring restive provinces in the North Caucasus have also been engulfed in the conflict. The epicenter of the Islamic separatist insurgency is, of course, Chechnya, which has been in state of war for some time; however, neighboring Dagestan and Ingushetia have been intensely affected and a discussion of Islamic insurgency in Russia can not ensue without including all three territories. Dagestan is the site of militant activity, and a frequent target of terrorism and violent criminality, with attacks occurring on a daily basis. Meanwhile, Ingushetia is a literal war zone. Other parts of the North Caucasus have also seen violence -- North Ossetia is the site of militant activity, while Kabardino-Balkaria is often caught in the crossfire of violence between government forces and Chechen rebels.

The area is beset by daunting poverty and Russian leaders, such as Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, have offered the view that poverty alleviation in the region should be part of the solution aimed at stabilization of the area. Indeed, expert analysts have, likewise, noted that poor socio-economic conditions constitute the stimulus for many youth to join extremist Islamic militant groups in the North Caucasus. At the same time, it must be emphasized that revenge and resistance against the brutal tactics of the Russian military are part of the equation, ultimately serving to augment extremism and militancy, and create more fertile political soil for radical action.

Of particular note has been the militancy of so-called "Black Widows" who have increasingly been responsible for terrorist acts linked with the North Caucasus. The women -- mostly the widows or female relatives of militants killed in action -- have become more active in the ongoing Islamic extremist insurgency and the effort to create an Islamic Caliphate in the North Caucasus region. Indeed, "Black Widows" could trace their activism to bombing attacks in the late 1990s although they entered the public purview in 2002 following their involvement in the terrorist attack on the theater in Moscow (mentioned below).

The motivation of extremism and militancy aside, it should be noted that terrorism by Islamic extremists on Russian terrain is not a new phenomenon. Militant Islamic extremists from the North Caucasus have been behind a host of terrorist attacks over the years. In 2002, Chechen rebels carried out a siege on a theater in Moscow. The Chechen militant rebels who took over the Dubrovka theater demanded an end to the war in Chechnya, and threatened to kill the hostages if their demands were not met. The grave situation demanded a rapid and overwhelming response by Russian authorities and, indeed, most of the hostages were eventually freed when Russian forces stormed the theater. However, 116 hostages were killed in the rescue operation, due to the indiscriminate use of an unspecified sleep-inducing agent by the Russians to deal with the Chechen rebels. In 2004, Chechen terrorists carried out a brutal and bloody attack on a school in Beslan, in which hundreds of people were taken hostage. A two day siege ended with a bloodbath in which more than 300 people were killed under the most horrific conditions. At least half the victims in that case were children. In 2009, the express train from Moscow to St. Petersburg was hit by North Caucasus Islamic terrorists. In 2010, militant extremists stormed the parliament in Chechnya. That same year, the Moscow underground transit system was hit by two female suicide bombers from Dagestan. In 2011, a bomb attack at Moscow's Domodedovo airport left more than 35 people dead and at least 170 others wounded -- many of

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them critically. The suicide bomber in that attack was identified as a 20-year-old man from the North Caucasus although a Chechen warlord, Doku Umarov, had claimed responsibility for orchestrating the attack at the Moscow airport. As discussed here, December 2013 brought terrorism in the form of an attack on a train station in Volgograd, which left at least 15 people dead and scores more injured. A day later, another **bomb** attack -- this **time** on a trolley bus -- ensued in the very same Russian city of Volgograd and left 10 and 15 people dead. At the start of 2014, a grenade attack ensued outside a restaurant in Makhachkala followed by the detonation of a car **bomb timed** to coincide with the arrival of police on the scene. North Caucasus terrorists were said to be responsible for this latest episode of violence.

The Chechen leader, Doku Umarov, who has been seen as more of a philosophical separatist leader than a military figure, claimed responsibility for a number of these terrorist attacks, including the double suicide **bombing** of the Moscow subway system in 2010 and an attack on the Moscow airport in 2011. In fact, Umarov has threatened further attacks, insinuating that the extremist Islamic insurgency would intensify with more "special operations" in the future if Russia refused to allow the Caucasus to become an independent Islamic state. In a videotaped message in 2011, he warned, "Among us there are hundreds of brothers who are prepared to sacrifice themselves." Umarov's warning served as both a clarifier of sorts. Specifically, it was becoming increasingly clear that the ambitions of Islamist extremists had expanded from the goal of Chechnya's independence to a broader Jihadist ambition of creating an Islamic state across the Caucasus, governed by Shar'ia law. This broader objective explained the widening of the Jihadist cause -- from a concentrated geopolitical center in Chechnya to a broader claim across the Northern Caucasus. By 2013, Umarov had cancelled a moratorium on killing civilians and was urging militants to use "maximum force" in the effort to sabotage the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi. While those games passed without incident, attacks by Islamic separatist terrorists continued to plague the region as of the close of 2014.

## Special Entry on Ukraine's Uprising and Russian annexation of Crimea

## Special Report:

Following landmark uprising in Ukraine, Russia annexes Crimea in new East-West confrontation; anxieties raised over Russian nationalist ambitions to recapture Soviet-era territory

## Summary:

Turbulence and turmoil have characterized the landscape in Ukraine. Tensions initially flared in late 2013 in response to Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich's decision not to move forward with a pending association agreement with the European Union. That decision brought more than 100,000 protesters to the streets to rally against what they saw as Ukraine's movement towards greater control by Russia. Indeed, the general consensus was that President Yanukovich had bent to pressure by President Vladimir Putin of Russia to step away from the European Union Association Agreement and instead embrace a customs union with Russia.

By the start of 2014, another flare of protests ensued in Ukraine in response to legislation passed by members of parliament loyal to President Yanukovich. The laws at stake were intended to curb the free expression of political opposition and curtail public protests. The passage of such legislation raised the ire of Ukrainians, particularly those aligned with the opposition, and alarmed the West with the United States and European Union worried about the Ukraine's slide into autocracy under Yanukovich. In a twist of irony, the very laws intended to suppress mass action actually spurred exactly that end as mass protests attracting tens of thousands of people once again rocked Ukraine. As January 2014 entered its final week, concessions by President Yanukovich to include members of the opposition in government yielded no positive results. Instead, the unrest spread to the eastern part of the country. With the situation deteriorating, the prime minister and the government resigned, and the Ukrainian parliament repealed the controversial anti-protest laws.

In mid-February 2014, the turmoil re-ignited as police tried to clear the main protest camp. Ukraine was again thrust into a renewed state of turbulence and turmoil. A truce was forged on Feb. 19, 2014, but only after more than

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two dozen people died. That truce collapsed a day later, effectively returning the capital city of Kiev to a battle zone and leading to an increasing death toll. Yet another agreement was forged in which the president conceded to many of the demands of the opposition. But the deal appeared to have come too late to appease an enraged populace. By Feb. 22, 2014, President Yanukovich had fled to the eastern part of the country while his party abandoned him and joined the opposition to officially impeach him, while his political nemesis - former Prime Minister Tymoshenko - was freed from captivity.

The move was a clear message to Moscow that Ukraine would not be controlled by Russia and that Ukraine instead was looking toward Europe as it charted its future path. Indeed, to the chagrin of Russia, the new interim president of Ukraine declared the country would pursue closer ties with the European Union. The winds of change had swept across Ukraine with the "Maidan" or Independence Square stamped in the history books as "Ground Zero" of Ukraine's 2014 battleground.

But the celebration in Ukraine did not last long. The battleground terrain shifted eastward at the start of March 2014 when the Russian parliament granted Russian President Putin authorization to use force in Ukraine, and Russian forces annexed the Ukrainian territory of Crimea. Clearly, Putin and Russia felt entitled to reclaim their foothold in Ukraine, thus recalling alarming memories for the rest of the world of the Soviet invasion of then-Czechoslovakia in 1968 to subdue the independence-minded Prague Spring. Adding to the crisis was the perplexing decision by Russian President Putin to refuse to acknowledge that Russian troops were even in Crimea.

In response to Russia's actions against Ukraine, and particularly in the direction of controlling Crimea, the G7 countries (G8 minus Russia) pulled out of preparations for the G8 summit set to take place in Russia and the United States instituted targeted sanctions against Russian officials.

Talks aimed at resolving the crisis yielded no results. Indeed, an East-West conflict was intensifying as Crimea scheduled a referendum for mid-March 2014 when residents would decide whether or not to join Russia. A meeting between Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov and United States Secretary of State Kerry ended in failure. Because Russia viewed the overthrow of Yanukovich as illegal, and because the West viewed Crimea's decision to join Russia as in violation of international law, an impasse was at hand.

The United States and the European Union respectively warned that such a unilateral action would run counter to international law, and thus they would not recognize the likely ratification of Crimean unification with Russia. For its part, Ukraine insisted that it would not accept the fracturing of its territorial integrity.

Meanwhile, the West attempted to condemn Crimea's secession referendum, and issue its support for Ukraine's sovereignty, by moving forward with a resolution in the United Nations Security Council. As expected, Russia -- as a veto-wielding permanent member -- vetoed the draft. Every other Security Council member voted in favor of the measure, with the exception of China, which abstained from the vote. The inaction at the Security Council was reminiscent of the Cold war era in which both sides habitually vetoed the other's measures, essentially creating a state of diplomatic paralysis.

On March 16, 2014, ethnic Russians in Crimea voted overwhelmingly to secede from Ukraine and unite with Russia. Crimea then officially requested that the "Republic of Crimea" be admitted as a new subject to the Russian Federation.

On the Russian side of the equation, Russia recognized Crimea as a sovereign entity. Russian President Putin soon responded by officially annexing Crimea.

The United States and the European Union imposed personal sanctions on Russian and Crimean officials. This punitive action was intended as a rebuke against the actions in Crimea; however, there was no sign that Russia was even slightly daunted by its decision to seize control of a territory belonging to Ukraine under the established

system of international jurisprudence. As stated above, Russia justified its moves by asserting that the interim post-Yanukovich government in Ukraine was illegitimate.

Russian ambitions to regain territory lost following the collapse of the Soviet Union soon entered into the equation. Of note was the fact that in the aftermath of Russia's annexation of Crimea, Russian attention was glancing towards other parts of eastern Ukraine. Eruptions of unrest in this Russian-speaking part of Ukraine were blamed on Russia, and reminiscent of what had transpired in Crimea. Indeed, Ukraine was accusing Russia of carrying out its Crimea formula by orchestrating unrest further into Ukrainian territory.

It was to be seen if the landscape in eastern Europe in the spring of 2014 represented the foundation for a renewed Cold War between the East and West. It was also possible that President Barack Obama of the United States was correct in dismissing such a notion on the basis of the fact that Russia was no longer a super power and, instead, a regional power acting as a bully against its neighbors.

Note that a presidential election was held in Ukraine on May 25, 2014. Petro Poroshenko claimed victory in Ukraine's presidential contest but turmoil continued to rock Ukraine. Entering the fray at the start of June 2014, NATO moved to bolster its security presence in eastern Europe as a deterrent against Russian aggression.

In June and July 2014, Ukrainian forces made some progress in retaking the rebel-held parts of eastern Ukraine, while the United States intensified its sanctions against Russian companies as a punitive measure against Russia for failing to de-escalate the conflict.

The landscape in eastern Ukraine took a disturbing turn on July 17, 2014, when a civilian passenger aircraft traveling from Netherlands to Malaysia went down in eastern Ukraine. All 298 people aboard the Boeing 777 airliner perished when Malaysian Airlines flight 17 crashed in the rebel-held territory of Donetsk close to the Russian border. That event augured a geopolitical land mine as Ukraine said the Malaysian Airlines flight was shot down and placed the blame on pro-Russian separatists battling Ukrainian forces. The tragedy of the Malaysian Airlines flight occurred one day after the Obama administration in the United States unveiled harsh punitive sanctions against major Russian firms aligned with Russian President Putin.

In the aftermath of the tragic downing of the Malaysian Airlines flight, and because the majority of the victims with Dutch nationals, Europe's stance against Russia hardened. Accordingly, the West -- including the United States and the European Union -- intensified its sanctions regime against Russia.

Meanwhile, in August 2014, Ukrainian forces at first held the momentum in the fight to regain control over the pro-Russian eastern part of the country, particularly in separatist strongholds of Donetsk and Luhansk. However, Russian-backed separatists were vigorously defending what they viewed as their own territory later in the month. By the close of August 2014, NATO said that Russian forces had violated Ukraine's territory while the Ukrainian president warned that his country was on the brink of war with Russia.

At the start of September 2014, NATO announced a rapid reaction force as well as military exercises in eastern Europe. Pressure from NATO and the threat of fresh sanctions by the European Union appeared to have spurred pro-Russian separatists to go to the negotiating table with Ukrainian authorities. There, a fragile truce was soon established but sporadically violated as fighting continued in Donetsk and Luhansk, and as Ukrainian forces fought to hold the port city of Mariupol.

In September 2014, with the ceasefire still in effect, Ukraine concentrated on the process of trying to retain its territorial integrity while meeting the needs of the pro-Russian separatists. To that end, Ukraine unveiled a proposal that would convey "special status" for eastern part of country, conveying greater autonomy. Meanwhile, the Ukrainian parliament advanced its pro-Western orientation by ratifying the Association Agreement with European

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Union (the basis of the uprising that caused the ousting of Yanukovych in the first place), while Ukrainian President Poroshenko unveiled a package of reforms aimed at securing membership in the European Union.

By October 2014, Russian President Putin was calling for the withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukrainian border. However, NATO was warning that there was no sign of Russian troops actually retreating from the border in any significant fashion; as well, Russian forces remained active within Ukraine in violation of that country's sovereignty. Ukrainian President Poroshenko viewed the strong election performance of allied pro-Western parties as a ratification of, and a mandate for, his security plans for eastern Ukraine. However, that eastern portion of the country was moving forward with illegal elections of their own, which were rejected by Ukraine and the larger international community, but which were (unsurprisingly) being backed by Russia.

By November 2014, fighting had erupted in the east, there were reports of a build up of pro-Russian reinforcements there, and it was fair to say that the fragile ceasefire that had been in place since September 2014 was on the brink of collapse.

December 2014 saw a prisoner exchange occur between the Ukrainian government and pro-Russian separatists. As well, Ukrainian President Poroshenko said that he intended to meet with his Russian, French, and German counterparts in early 2015 for discussions on the restoration of peace in the eastern part of the country. These actions were regarded as positive steps in the arena of regional relations. However, Ukraine's decision to revoke its neutral status -- a move that could potentially facilitate future NATO membership -- was likely to raise the ire of Russia, which has opposed Ukraine's westward drift from the onset. Ironically, it was Russia's own aggressive interventions in eastern Ukraine, particularly marked by the annexation of Crimea, that actually catalyzed Ukraine's haste to move out of Russia's orbit.

At the start of 2015, the Minsk ceasefire agreement was effectively dead as fighting resumed around Donetsk and as pro-Russian separatists carried out an assault on the strategic port city of Mariupol, prompting Ukrainian President Poroshenko to warn that his forces would not bend to pro-Russian rebels and that Ukraine would protect its sovereignty. Fighting had extended to other areas in Ukraine's east as pro-Russian separatists aggressively sought to consolidate control over what they have termed "New Russia."

As the month of February 2015 began, there were reports that the Obama administration in the United States was considering additional support for Ukrainian forces in protecting Ukraine from the pro-Russian offensive. As well, NATO was considering the establishment of special command units in eastern Europe to respond rapidly to threats in the region.

Note that on Feb. 12, 2015, a new Minsk ceasefire agreement and a roadmap for peace were forged. But later in February 2015, peace in eastern Ukraine remained elusive as pro-Russians took control over the town of Debaltseve and forced Ukrainian forces into retreat. Pro-Russian forces were reportedly attacking government-held positions in eastern Ukraine -- including the area around the strategic port of Mariupol -- while Ukraine accused Russia of dispatching more troops and tanks to the region, specifically in the direction of the town of Novoazovsk on the southern coast.

Meanwhile, a year after the original Maidan uprising in Kiev ousted former pro-Russian President Yanukovych from power, Ukraine's second largest city of Kharkiv was struck by a **bomb** attack as demonstrators marched in a national unity rally. Despite the existence of the second Minsk ceasefire agreement, Ukraine was still occasionally mired by war and bloodshed. Europe warned of further sanctions to come if violations to the truce occurred and, indeed, a fragile peace appeared to take hold in the region. Juxtaposed against this background came a surprising admission from Russian President Putin that he had long-standing ambitions to regain Russian control over Crimea.

By mid-2015, despite the existing new Minsk ceasefire agreement, key areas of eastern Ukraine were beset by heavy fighting between Ukrainian forces and pro-Russian separatists.



Tension were also rising over the findings of a multinational investigation into the aforementioned tragedy of Malaysian Airlines Flight 17. The inquest, led by the Dutch Safety Board, indicated that a Russian Buk surface-to-surface missile was fired from a village in eastern Ukraine under pro-Russian control and struck Malaysian Air Flight 17, precipitating the crash.

As such, there were rising calls for an international tribunal to ensure justice was served.

For his part, Russian President Vladimir Putin cast the move as "premature."

Around the same period of mid-2015, Ukraine's parliament was moving forward with constitutional reforms aimed at establishing temporary self-rule in the eastern part of the country under pro-Russian rebel rule. The changes to the constitution were aimed at meeting Ukraine's obligations under the prevailing Minsk peace accord.

While the legislative progress in Ukraine signaled to some that the government in Kiev was adhering to its Minsk peace accord commitments, Russia objected to the changes, arguing that they did not go far enough to fulfill the obligations of the Minsk. There were also objections at home in Ukraine by nationalists to the deal that would grant autonomy to pro-Russian rebels. Those protests in Kiev turned deadly, effectively expanding the landscape of unrest in Ukraine.

In September 2015, the schedule for local elections in the pro-Russian eastern part of Ukraine threatened to upend the Minsk peace accord. In the same period, Ukraine was calling on NATO to provide it with military weapons; however, NATO made clear that its priority was to ensure the implementation of the Minsk peace agreement.

See below for further details related to Russia's invasion, occupation, and annexation of Crimea following the ousting of Yanukovych from power, as well as the ongoing unrest in eastern Ukraine, which has been blamed on Russia.

Russia stakes its claim in Crimea:

Irrespective of the ethos of celebration in Kiev following the ousting of Yanukovych, the close of February 2014 was also marked by an ominous warning from Ukraine's new interim president, Turchynov, who said there were "signs of separatism" in Russian-speaking Crimea in the eastern part of the country. That warning seemed prescient as residents of Crimea were soon demanding that the region secede from Ukraine.

Occupied by the Nazis in World War II, Crimea has long been a historic battleground through the course of history. It was the central locus of the Crimean War involving Russia and the French-British-Ottoman alliance in the 19th century. Further back, Scythians, Greeks, Huns, Bulgars, Turks, Mongols, and others occupied or invaded the territory, which was also part of the Roman and Byzantine empires in ancient times.

Crimea came under Russian/Soviet jurisdiction but was transferred to Ukraine as a "gift" by Nikita Khrushchev in 1954. In more recent times, the Russian naval base has been located at Sevastopol in Crimea, with the Russian Black Sea Naval Fleet based on the Crimean coast.

To date, the population of Crimea has remained heavily ethno-linguistically Russian, however, ethnic Tartars -- as the indigenous people of Crimea -- also call the region home, and do not necessarily align with the dominant pro-Russian sentiment there. Indeed, ethnic Tartars take a dim view of Russia and the Soviet past, even harboring deep resentment over the dark days of Stalin's rule when their people were deported en masse to Central Asia.

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Given this complex socio-cultural composition of Crimea, the Russian role in the region was emerging as a primary concern in the initial days after Ukraine's 2014 uprising. Moscow made it clear that it would not engage with the new government of Ukraine, which it viewed as illegitimate, and also pointed to the ethno-linguistic Russian population of eastern Ukraine, suggesting that they might need "protection" from Russia in the face of the new pro-Western leadership in Kiev. Going a step further in the direction of sabre rattling, Russia soon placed 150,000 combat troops on alert for war games close to the border with Ukraine -- presumably in preparation to take up the mission of "protecting" the Russian ethno-linguistic population of Crimea.

The fact that there was no sign of violence against ethno-linguistic Russians, this move by Moscow was regarded with great suspicion.

The West had a very different view and wasted no time in expressing support for the interim leadership of Ukraine, and warning Russia from intervening into Ukrainian affairs. At a meeting of the European parliament, European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso said, "I launch from here an appeal to all our international partners, in particular Russia, to work constructively with us to guarantee a united Ukraine that can be a factor for stability in the European continent." He also expressed the European view that the removal of Yanukovich was the result of the will of the Ukrainian people and an act of self-determinism, saying, "The winds of change are knocking again at Ukraine's doors; the will of the people must prevail." The United States struck a similar chord, with the Obama white House urging Russia to respect Ukraine's territorial integrity. White House spokesperson Josh Earnest said, "We urge outside actors in the region to respect Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, to end provocative rhetoric and actions, to support democratically established transitional governing structures and to use their influence in support of unity, peace and an inclusive path forward." Meanwhile, in an interview with MSNBC, United States Secretary of State John Kerry said, "We're hoping that Russia will not see this as sort of a continuation of the Cold War...We do not believe this should be an East-West, Russia-United States (issue)."

But the landscape in Ukraine was quickly turning tumultuous. The stakes in an East-West confrontation intensified on Feb. 26, 2014, when rival groups of demonstrators -- some of whom were pro-Russian and others who were anti-Russian -- erupted at the parliament building in Ukraine's Crimea region. The scene devolved further when armed men seized control of the parliament of Crimea in the regional capital Simferopol, declared Crimea to be an autonomous entity with its own constitution, and raised the Russian flag.

The area was soon being patrolled by Russian-speaking persons clothed in military garb but without specific insignias. Reporters on the scene asked some of these individuals where they were from and were told "Russia" in response. A Ukrainian official, Sergiy Kunitsyn, said in an interview with the media that Russian jets carrying troops had landed at a military air base near Simferopol. This claim by Kunitsyn was being treated as an unconfirmed report; however, videotaped footage soon emerged that appeared to show Russian planes flying into Crimea. Subsequently, further reports emerged suggesting that two Russian anti-submarine warships were spotted off the coast of Crimea in violation of prevailing agreements that limit the presence of Russia's Naval Fleet in the Black Sea.

Alarmed at the prospect of Russia either surreptitiously or even actively advancing into Ukraine, three former Ukrainian presidents -- Leonid Kravchuk, Leonid Kuchma, and Viktor Yushchenko -- crossed partisan lines to jointly accuse Russia of "direct interference in the political life in Crimea." Meanwhile, Ukraine's interim President Turchinov demanded that Russia remain within its military confines at the naval base saying, "I am appealing to the military leadership of the Russian Black Sea fleet...Any military movements, the more so if they are with weapons, beyond the boundaries of this territory (the base) will be seen by us as military aggression."

At the international level, NATO joined the fray as it urged Russia to refrain from doing anything that would "escalate tension."

As well, United States Secretary of State John Kerry reminded Russia that it has eschewed foreign intervention into the affairs of sovereign countries, saying: "For a country that has spoken out so frequently ... against foreign

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intervention in Libya, in Syria, and elsewhere, it would be important for them to heed those warnings as they think about options in the sovereign nation of Ukraine." Kerry added, "I don't think there should be any doubt whatsoever that any kind of military intervention that would violate the sovereign territorial integrity of Ukraine would be a huge - a grave -- mistake."

On Feb. 28, 2014, United States President Barack Obama also registered his own warning to Russia, noting that "any violation of Ukraine sovereignty... would be deeply destabilizing" and pointing to the potential "costs" of Russian intervention into Ukraine.

This warning fell on deaf ears. It was now evident that pro-Russian cadres of armed men were controlling major swaths of Crimea. Ukrainian interim President Turchynov thus accused Russia of trying to provoke an "armed conflict" in his country. Turchynov suggested that Russian President Putin was trying to get the new interim government of Ukraine to react to Russian provocations in a way that would justify the Russian annexation of Crimea. Turchynov pointed to the fact that this modality had been used before by Russia in the Georgian territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in 2008, which also were home to large ethno-linguistic populations but were legally under Georgian jurisdiction. Indeed, the Ukraine/Crimea issue was clearly reminiscent of the Russian intervention into the Georgia/South Ossetia crisis in 2008 since both scenarios involved a Russian ethno-linguistic population in semi-autonomous enclaves of countries that were longer part of the Soviet Union. The only conclusion was that Russia believed it was entitled to control swaths of territory where there was a Russian cultural connection.

Interim President Turchynov's claim that Russia was trying to provoke conflict found resonance a day later on March 1, 2014 when the Russian parliament voted unanimously to approve the use of military force "in connection with the extraordinary situation in Ukraine, the threat to the lives of citizens of the Russian Federation, our compatriots" and also to protect the Black Sea Fleet in Crimea. Russian President Vladimir Putin said his request for authorization to use military action in Ukraine would endure "until the normalization of the socio-political situation in that country." Of concern was the fact that the authorization was for the use of force in Ukraine as a whole -- and not just the flashpoint area of Crimea.

In response, Ukrainian President Turchinov ordered troops to be placed on high combat alert, while the new foreign minister, Andriy Deshchytsya, said Ukraine had lodged a request with NATO to "examine all possibilities to protect the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine."

Still, the new government in Ukraine -- in that job for a week -- displayed remarkable restraint. During a live address that was broadcast nationally, President Turchynov urged Ukrainians of all backgrounds to stand united and not succumb to provocations. On the issue of provocation, the Ukrainian leader had already told contingents in Ukraine not to resist Russian armed operatives in Crimea.

#### International Response:

European countries registered dismay at these developments in their backyard. United Kingdom Foreign Secretary William Hague expressed "deep concern" over Russia's actions while Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt characterized Russia's actions as "clearly against international law."

Czech President Milos Zeman poignantly noted that the crisis in Ukraine was a disturbing reminder of the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in order to subdue the independence-minded Prague Spring movement.

United States President Barack Obama reportedly shared a 60-minute telephone call with Russian President Vladimir Putin in which he repeatedly accused Russia of violating international law and violating the sovereignty of Ukraine. Putin apparently told Obama that Russia reserved the right to protect its interests and the interests of the Russian ethno-linguistic population in Ukraine. Stated differently, Putin was affirming his belief that Russia had the right to invade Ukraine on the basis of national interests. As a point of clarification, these concerns by Russia could

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certainly be addressed with the presence of international monitors rather than via an uninvited intervention of Russian forces into Ukraine.

Moreover, the fact of the matter was that the interim government of Ukraine had already offered assurances that minority (i.e. Russian) populations within Ukraine would be respected.

For its part, Ukraine was said to be "mobilized for war," having called up its military reserves. Arseny Yatseniuk -- now at the helm of the interim Ukrainian government in the position of acting prime minister -- declared that Russia's actions constituted "the beginning of war and the end of any relations between Ukraine and Russia." As regards the effective annexation of Crimea by Russia, Prime Minister Yatseniuk said: "This is not a threat: this is actually the declaration of war to my country."

At the international level United States Secretary of State John Kerry condemned Russia for its "incredible act of aggression" saying in an interview with CBS News, "You don't just, in the 21st century, behave in 19th century fashion by invading another country on a completely trumped-up pretext." Kerry also floated the possibility of sanctions against Russia and promised that Western countries would "go to the hilt to isolate Russia."

Already, the United States had announced it would suspend participation in preparing for the G8 summit set to take place in mid-2014 in Sochi, Russia. The United States also made clear that it would consider having Russia removed from the G8 grouping -- generally believed to be the political and economic leading nation states of the world. Canada soon joined the United States in suspending participation in preparatory meetings for the G8 summit and also recalling its ambassador to Russia. The United Kingdom followed by becoming the third country to end its participation in preparatory meetings for the G8 summit. It was to be seen if the remaining G8 nation states -- France, Germany, Italy, and Japan -- would be taking the same stance.

Russia, however, was undeterred by these moves. Indeed, its mission may have well been accomplished as it now had a firm hold on Crimea and a foothold on Ukrainian territory. Reports that the new head of the Ukrainian navy, Rear Admiral Denis Berezovsky, had defected to Russian separatists in Crimea on March 2, 2014, only augmented that Russian foothold. Although the Ukrainian government in Kiev immediately fired Berezovsky from his post and charged him with treason, the damage was done. Around the same time, the Kremlin in Russia was resolute as it asserted its right to intervene in Ukraine, charging that the country was under threat from "ultra-nationalists" in the aftermath of the ousting of Yanukovych from power.

Russia's stance was publicly augmented by Russia's ambassador to the United Nations, Vitali Churkin, who submitted a letter to the United Nations Security Council, which was supposedly from ousted President Yanukovych. That letter cast Ukraine as on the precipice of a civil war and Russian speakers suffering harsh persecution -- a characterization denied by the new government of Ukraine. Nevertheless, the letter from Yanukovych called on Russia to intervene, and read as follows: "I would call on the president of Russia, Mr. Putin, asking him to use the armed forces of the Russian Federation to establish legitimacy, peace, law and order, stability and defending the people of Ukraine." According to Churkin, since Yanukovych was Ukraine's legitimate leader, and not interim President Olexander Turchynov, Russia's actions in Ukraine were justified rather than a violation of international law, as charged by the West.

United States ambassador to the United Nations, Samantha Power, dismissed Russia's rationale, saying, "Russian mobilization is a response to an imaginary threat." She continued, "Military action cannot be justified on the basis of threats that haven't been made and aren't being carried out."

United Kingdom ambassador to the United Nations, Mark Lyall Grant, struck a similar note saying, "It is clear that these claims have simply been fabricated to justify Russian military action." Indeed, as noted above, there was no actual sign of persecution or intimidation of Ukraine's ethno-linguistically Russian population. NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen joined the fray in condemning Russia for continuing to "violate Ukraine's

sovereignty and territorial integrity," and thus creating "serious implications for the security and stability of the Euro-Atlantic area."

Clearly, the East-West division was hardening -- but at a time when Russian military forces were on the ground in Ukraine and in control of Crimea.

An anonymous Western official was cited by Reuters News as saying, "This is probably the most dangerous situation in Europe since the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968... Realistically, we have to assume the Crimea is in Russian hands. The challenge now is to deter Russia from taking over the Russian-speaking east of Ukraine." The Russian grip on Crimea was confirmed on March 2, 2014, when United States officials noted that Russia had "full operational control" over the entirety of Crimea.

Late on the night of March 2, 2014, a joint statement of the world's seven major industrialized powers expressed harsh condemnation of Russia's invasion and apparent occupation of Crimea in the Ukraine. The statement, which was released from the Obama White House in the United States, read as follows: "We, the leaders of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States, and the President of the European Council and President of the European Commission, join together today to condemn the Russian Federation's clear violation of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine...We have decided for the time being to suspend our participation in activities associated with the preparation of the scheduled G8 Summit in Sochi in June." The G7 nations also offered de facto support for Ukraine by declaring that they were ready "to provide strong financial backing to Ukraine."

To that end, United Kingdom Foreign Secretary William Hague had departed for Kiev for talks with the new Ukrainian government for the purpose of solidarity. United States Secretary of State John Kerry arrived in Kiev on March 4, 2014 to show support for the new interim government of Ukraine, but also armed with a package of \$1 billion in loan guarantees for Ukraine and pledges of technical assistance for Ukraine's national bank and finance ministry. He also offered assistance in preparations for fresh elections. While Kerry was in flight, the United States Department of State was in the process of putting together punitive sanctions against Russia.

As well, the European Union was considering its own sanctions, including possible travel bans and targeted economic measures, if Russia failed to "de-escalate" its threat of military force against Ukraine. The European Union was also floating the notion of paying Ukraine's bill to Russia for gas bills totaling \$2 billion. Collectively, the effort was aimed at ensuring that Ukraine was positioned to withstand the reduction of energy subsidies from Russia, which was almost certain to occur in short order.

It was apparent that the diplomatic isolation -- however symbolic -- of Russia had begun. Of course, there was no sign that Russian President Putin was viewing the situation through the lens of economic pragmatism. While the Russian ruble had plunged to an all-time low amidst the chaos, Putin was buoyed by the national support he was getting from Russians at home for taking a hardline approach to Ukraine. In fact, Putin continued to advance the view that Ukraine was embroiled in a state of chaos, having been taken over by extremists, and that Russia was simply doing its duty by protecting the Russian population.

Making the matter more perplexing was the Russian president's claim that the troops that seized control of Crimea were not actually under Russian command, but simply inspired activists functioning organically in the face of Ukrainian oppression. Of course, the West reacted to this claim with utter disbelief and ridicule.

From Kiev, United States Secretary of State Kerry deconstructed Putin's stance on Ukrainian oppression of Russian speakers saying, "I think that it is clear that Russia has been working hard to create a pretext for being able to invade further." He continued, "Russia has talked about Russian-speaking minority citizens who are under siege... They're not. It is not appropriate to invade a country and dictate what you want to achieve at the end of the barrel

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of a gun." Kerry also praised the new government of Ukraine, headed by interim President Turchynov, noting that he had shown Herculean restraint in the face of provocation.

Later on March 4, 2014, there were high level efforts being made at the diplomatic level in Paris between envoys from Russia, Ukraine, United States, United Kingdom, and France, to find a resolution to the Ukraine/Crimea crisis. Those meetings ended without any progress being made. United States Secretary of State Kerry tried to place a positive spin on his meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov as he said, "Don't assume that we did not have serious conversations which produced creative and appropriate ideas on how to resolve this, we have a number of ideas on the table." Kerry continued, "I don't think any of us had an anticipation that we were coming here at this moment, in this atmosphere of heightened tension and confrontation, that we were suddenly going to resolve that here, this afternoon."

But the truth was the Russia had defiantly ignored the West's calls for its forces to withdraw from Crimea and return to military barracks and bases. As well, the Russian delegation refused to acknowledge -- far less meet with -- the Ukrainian delegation. Moreover, Russian authorities were also advancing the erroneous notion that an agreement was reached with Western powers over returning to the European Union-brokered peace deal that was on the table prior to the ousting of Yanukovych. The United States Department of State thus responded by denying that such a deal existed, with an official saying: "There were no agreements in this meeting, and there never will be without direct Ukrainian government involvement and absolute buy-in."

The lack of progress, coupled with Russian defiance, spurred NATO to announce from Brussels that it would curtail cooperation with Russia. Instead, NATO announced that it would intensify its engagement with the new government of Ukraine. As well, the United States also announced that it would double the number of fighter jets it furnishes for NATO air patrol missions in the Baltic regions and increase air force training with Polish forces. Furthermore, the United States Pentagon was deploying a Navy destroyer to the Black Sea. These moves were sure to aggravate Russian authorities, who certainly did not wish to see a heavier American military footprint in their backyard. Once again, the underlying theme was ongoing East-West dissonance.

Meanwhile, the United States, Canada, and various European countries were moving forward with punitive actions against Russia. President Barack Obama of the United States delineated his first concrete punitive measures against Russia for "threatening the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine" by freezing the United States assets of Ukrainians deemed to have undermined the democratic process in Ukraine, and instituting a travel ban in the form of visa restrictions on several Russian and Ukrainian officials. Various European Union countries announced they would also freeze the assets of Ukrainians suspected of misappropriating state funds and human rights abuses; the list included ousted Ukrainian President Yanukovich, former Prime Minister Mykola Azarov. The European Union also warned again that if Russia failed to de-escalate tensions, then the regional body was prepared to move forward with sanctions. French President Francois Hollande said, "There will be the strongest possible pressure on Russia to begin lowering the tension and in the pressure there is, of course, eventual recourse to sanctions." Canada announced economic sanctions on members of the ousted government of Yanukovych. Already Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper had recalled his ambassador from Russia.

## Flashpoints

While at this point there was no bloodshed in the Ukrainian-Russian crisis, it should be noted that on March 5, 2014, a United Nations special envoy -- Robert Serry of the Netherlands -- was detained in Russian-occupied Crimea outside the naval headquarters in Simferopol. Serry was forced to depart the region without even having the chance to collect his belongings. United Nations Deputy Secretary-General Jan Eliasson expressed outrage over the incident, saying that Serry was "seriously threatened." As well, a mission of unarmed military observers from the pan-European Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) was prevented from entering Crimea.

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Also on March 5, 2014, Russia intensified its provocation of the Ukrainian/Crimean crisis by test-firing an intercontinental ballistic missile -- the Topol RS-12M -- from Russia's Kapustin Yar test range near the Caspian Sea in the direction of the Sary Shagan range in Kazakhstan. The Russian defense forces said that the missile launch was intended to test the payload of the nuclear missile and went off successfully using a dummy warhead. The Russian armed forces also said that the United States had been notified in advance of the missile test, in keeping with prevailing bilateral arms treaties. Still, the action only served to heighten tensions further in the region where Cold War memories were being stirred at a furious rate.

Anxiety over the future of Ukraine, and the fate of Crimea in particular, dramatically increased on March 6, 2014, when Crimea's parliament voted unanimously to secede from Ukraine and "to enter into the Russian Federation with the rights of a subject of the Russian Federation." A date for a referendum was set for mid-March 2014. Following that referendum, whose outcome was almost certainly ratification, all state property would be "nationalized" and the Russian ruble would be adopted. As well, all Ukrainian troops in Crimea would be forced to either depart or surrender, or face captivity as foreign occupying forces. The move served only to cast further turmoil into the cauldron of Crimea.

Western countries made it clear that they would not accept the outcome of the Crimean referendum, noting that it would be in contravention to international law. For its part, Ukraine said that the referendum was illegal and warned that Ukraine's armed forces was prepared to respond if Russian intervention escalated any further into Ukrainian territory.

On March 8, 2014, the international stakes heightened when pro-Russian soldiers in Crimea fired warning shots at a team of international observers from the Vienna-based OSCE. Although there were no casualties in the incident, it showed continuing intransigence on the part of the pro-Russian forces who asserted that the OSCE, which was invited by the Ukrainian government, did not have its permission to enter Crimea. As noted above, previous attempts made by the OSCE to enter Crimea were also met with resistance.

A day later on March 9, 2014, pro-Ukrainian activists were attacked and beaten by pro-Russian and Cossack cabals during a rally in the Crimean city of Sevastapol. The rally centered on the celebration of Taras Shevchenko, a Ukrainian poet and national hero. The pro-Russians and Cossacks attacked those attending the rally, presumably for their pro-Ukrainian inclinations. The incident highlighted the irony of Russia's position in noting that its presence was needed in Crimea to "protect" the ethno-linguistic Russian population of the region. Indeed, the persons needing protection in Crimea on this day were Ukrainians and pro-Ukrainians and not ethnic Russians.

For its part, Moscow dismissed the notion that it played any role in the escalating the Ukrainian crisis, even rejecting the notion that it sent troops into Crimea, and saying instead that it simply supported the local defense forces who happen to be pro-Russia. Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov even suggested that the Ukrainian crisis was "artificially" created by Kiev "for purely geopolitical reasons."

## International Action (and Inaction)

Together, the events at the start of March 2014 likely strengthened the resolve of the West to enact further measures against Moscow for failing to defuse the crisis. To that end, the United States announced that it would be welcoming interim Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseny Yatseniuk to Washington for talks on how to end turmoil rocking Europe.

Meanwhile, the countries of Europe along with the United States emphasized its views of Russia's action as aggression against Ukraine and again warned that any active annexation of Crimea would end the diplomatic track. The West also reminded Russia and pro-Russian entities controlling Crimea that most of the world would not recognize the results of the illegal referendum in Crimea. The European Union on March 12, 2014, also agreed on a framework for sanctions against Russia. The sanctions would mirror United States measures, as they would include travel bans and asset freezes.

As well, NATO determined that it would cease cooperation with Russia, while deploying reconnaissance planes in Poland and Romania to monitor the Ukrainian crisis. This measure by NATO was sure to annoy Russia, which has long eschewed the presence of Western powers in eastern Europe, which it considers to be its own "backyard."

Despite these moves, the fact of the matter was that NATO has not been eager to enter into the Ukrainian/Crimean crisis. It has treaded lightly into this landscape, noting that because Ukraine was not a NATO member state, there was no actual obligation to protect it. However, Ukrainian acting Prime Minister Arseny Yatseniuk has noted that under a 1994 disarmament treaty, known as the Budapest Memorandum, Ukraine agreed to give up its Soviet nuclear weapons in return for assistance from Russia and the West in defending Ukraine's sovereignty. He posed the following question: "What does the current military aggression of the Russian Federation on Ukrainian territory mean?" He then continued, "It means that a country which voluntarily gave up nuclear weapons, rejected nuclear status and received guarantees from the world's leading countries is left defenseless and alone in the face of a nuclear state that is armed to the teeth."

In truth, the United States and the European Union were more likely to offer financial aid and public declaration of solidarity than military support to an encroaching Russia, which was quite likely to officially annex Crimea following the ratification of Russian unity on March 16, 2014. But that move would inevitably highlight the fact that European countries unfortunate enough to be on Russia's radar could also be subject to annexation while facing no serious consequence for violating the modern international order, which it founded on the notion of sovereignty.

Tensions were on the rise in Crimea in the second week of March 2014 as troops believed to be Russian, in conjunction with local militias, seized control of a military hospital in the regional capital Simferopol. As well, pro-Russian armed troops, described as "self defense forces," blockaded Ukrainian troops from entering Crimea, even as Russia itself denied that it was participating in such blockades.

Tensions were on the rise elsewhere in eastern Ukraine as pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian activists clashed in the cities of Kharkiv and Donetsk, where at least one person was killed.

Sensing that the scene was taking a dark turn, Ukraine's interim President Oleksander Turchinov had established a new National Guard and called on the international community for assistance in dealing with what it cast as Russian aggression.

Acting Prime Minister Arseny Yatseniuk vociferously blamed Russia for the current crisis, and for actively undermining the global security structure as he declared, "This is not a two-sided conflict. These are actions by the Russian Federation aimed at undermining the system of global security."

United States President Barack Obama promised to "stand with Ukraine" and chastised Russia saying, "It is absolutely unacceptable to have Russian boots on the Ukrainian ground in the 21st century, violating all international deals and treaties." President Obama also warned his Russian counterpart, President Vladimir Putin, that the international community would be forced "to apply costs" if Russia did not remove its troops from Crimea.

However, the actual value of those costs was a matter of debate. Given Russia's reserves, the combination of travel bans, asset freezes, and sanctions were unlikely to do much damage to a country more intent on reconstituting its Soviet domain.

That being said, President Obama was not alone. The leaders of most of the world's leading industrialized countries -- the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, Canada, and Japan -- issued similar stances in repudiation of Russia's actions in Crimea and in solidarity with Ukraine.

A statement from the leaders of the G7 nation states -- the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, Canada, and Japan -- demanded that the referendum not go forward. That statement included the following



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declaration: "In addition to its impact on the unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea could have grave implications for the legal order that protects the unity and sovereignty of all states." Warning Russia of consequences, the statement continued, "Should the Russian Federation take such a step, we will take further action, individually and collectively."

Far from being chastened by such promises of condemnation at the international level, Russia appeared to suggest there was a need for increased -- rather than decreased -- involvement in Ukrainian affairs. Signaling even further encroachment into Ukrainian territory, Russia expressed "deep concern" over the activities of "nationalists" in eastern Ukraine and the need to provide security in that country against a backdrop of "radicals."

It was to be seen how Russia would explain its incursion into Ukrainian territory and its audacious seizure of a gas plant in the eastern part of the country as being a measure of "protection" against radicals. Indeed, on March 15, 2014, approximately 80 Russian troops landed by helicopter in Ukrainian territory and seized control over a natural gas terminal. Ukraine responded by stationing its own troops outside the facility and issuing a statement that read as follows: "Ukraine reserves the right to use all necessary measures to stop the military invasion by Russia."

One glimmer of hope emerged in the form of a temporary truce over the blockade of Ukrainian military units in Crimea; on March 21, 2014, that blockade was scheduled to be lifted.

Meanwhile, the West attempted to condemn Crimea's secession referendum, and issue its support for Ukraine's sovereignty, by moving forward with a resolution in the United Nations Security Council. As expected, Russia -- as a veto-wielding permanent member -- vetoed the draft. Every other Security Council member voted in favor of the measure, with the exception of China, which abstained from the vote. Normally, China has joined Russia in controversial votes at the Security Council, such as action on the Syrian civil war. But in this case, with territories such as Tibet in mind, China was seemingly interested in delivering the message of its pro-sovereignty/non-interventionist stance.

The inaction at the Security Council was reminiscent of the Cold war era in which both sides habitually vetoed the other's measures, essentially creating a state of diplomatic paralysis.

The United States ambassador to the United Nations, Samantha Power, characterized Russia's veto of the measure as a "sad and remarkable moment" and cast Russia as "isolated, alone and wrong." Undaunted, Russia's ambassador to the United Nations, Vitaly Churkin, asserted that Crimea's referendum was needed to fill the "legal vacuum" in the aftermath of Ukraine's "coup d'etat."

With Crimea's referendum only days away, there were last minute talks between Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov and United States Secretary of State Kerry to find a negotiated settlement. That meeting ended in failure with Lavrov declaring that Kerry's package of solutions were "not suitable: because they take "the situation created by the coup as a starting point." Because Russia viewed the overthrow of Yanukovich as illegal, it was not swayed by the arguments of the West. Clearly, an impasse was at hand.

#### Crimea votes for secession from Ukraine and unity with Russia

On the eve of the referendum in Crimea, the United States and the European Union repeated their threats to slap further sanctions on Russia, and warned that the ratification (i.e. an affirmative vote to unite with Russia) would not be internationally recognized.

Nevertheless, on March 16, 2014, voters went to the polls in Crimea to participate in a hastily organized referendum aimed at ratifying its breakaway from Ukraine and its union with Russia. The move was largely viewed as an illegal move that contravened against international law, and as discussed above, it was guaranteed to be rejected by most countries of the world.

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The referendum itself was being regarded as something of a sham as no international monitors were present to witness the event, while accredited journalists were required to pledge not to report "negative news." Meanwhile, with the region's original but minority Tartar population boycotting the vote, the outcome was almost guaranteed to be ratification of a proposed union with Russia.

Indeed, once the votes were counted, as many as 95 percent of voters in Crimea had backed secession from Ukraine and unity with Russia. Celebratory crowds were on the streets rejoicing the move to join with Russia, with many people expressing the view that they would now be "protected" by Russia. Sergey Aksyonov, the businessman who actually won only five percent in the Crimean assembly in the previous elections but who installed himself as Crimea's regional leader following Russia's de facto takeover of Crimea was also celebrating the vote in favor of unity with Russia. He also insisted that the vote was free and fair, irrespective of the fact that there were no monitors and a prevailing boycott by the Tartar population.

On March 17, 2014, one day after Crimea voted to join Russia, the United States and the European Union imposed personal sanctions on Russian and Crimean officials believed to be involved in the annexation of Crimea. This punitive action was intended as a rebuke against the illegal vote. But these moves were being regarded as insignificant by Russia, which some officials making sport of them via social media.

For its part, Crimea officially requested that the "Republic of Crimea" be admitted as a new subject to the Russian Federation.

On the Russian side of the equation, Russia recognized Crimea as a sovereign entity. Russian President Putin was set to address the Russian parliament at which time, presumably, he would make clear whether or not his country intended to officially annex Crimea. Finally, Ukraine insisted that it would not accept these moves by Crimea and Russia, and that its sovereignty and territorial integrity should be respected.

United Kingdom Prime Minister David Cameron urged the European Union to send "a very clear warning" to Russia, and suggested that Russia be permanently expelled from the G8 group. As well, United States Vice President Joe Biden, on a trip to Europe, warned Russia that it was on a "dark path" to isolation. Vice President Biden asserted, "As long as Russia continues on this dark path, they will face increasing political and economic isolation." During a session of the United Nations Security Council, United States Ambassador Samantha Power declared, "Russia it seems has re-written its borders but it cannot rewrite the facts." Likewise, NATO condemned Russia for attempting to "redraw the map of Europe."

But the admonishments and warnings from the United States, the United Kingdom, and NATO fell on deaf ears. Indeed, around the same time, Russian troops consolidated their hold on Crimea by seizing

Ukrainian naval bases in Crimea, including the headquarters in Sevastopol where the Russian flag was raised. As pro-Russian forces took control of the Ukrainian naval headquarters in Sevastopol, they also managed to capture the commander of the Ukrainian navy, Admiral Serhiy Haiduk, along with several others. Haiduk was only released after Russian authorities in Moscow intervened.

#### Russia formally annexes Crimea

On March 19, 2014, Russian President Vladimir Putin -- in defiance of international condemnation and Western sanctions, signed a treaty making Crimea part Russia. President Putin delivered a triumphant address to the Russian parliament in the Kremlin celebrating the return of Crimea to the Russian fold. Side-stepping the reality that the Crimea referendum had been held under Russian occupation, and with nary a word for Crimea's ethnic Tartars, Putin said the referendum result showed the will of the Crimean people to reunite with the Russian homeland. He said, "The hearts and minds of people, Crimea has always been and remains an inseparable part of Russia."

Putin also excoriated the West for its hypocrisy, pointing to the fact that many of those Western countries had supported the independence bid of Kosovo (home to a predominantly ethnic Albanian population) from Serbia (an ethnically Slavic nation state). Putin claimed that the West now wanted to deny Crimea the same right to follow its own identity-driven path. To raucous applause in the Kremlin, Putin declared: "You cannot call the same thing black today and white tomorrow." He also had harsh words for Ukraine's new government, casting them as "neo-Nazis, Russophobes, and anti-Semites."

Putin had a message for Ukraine, suggesting that Russian aggression against that country had now ended and there was no reason to fear a Russian push further into Ukrainian territory. He said, "Don't believe those who try to frighten you with Russia and who scream that other regions will follow after Crimea...We do not want a partition of Ukraine. We do not need this."

For its part, Ukraine seemed to accept the reality that it had lost Crimea. Ukrainian authorities announced that they would be withdrawing soldiers and their families from Crimea in an orderly manner. As well, Ukraine with its far less superior military sought to lessen the prospects of further Russian encroachment by stating that it had no intention of joining NATO and vowing to disarm nationalist militias.

Perhaps these assurances and the plan for withdrawal were driven by the fact that the first death associated with the crisis had been a Ukrainian soldier who died when his base came under attack by Russian forces in the Crimean town of Simferopol. Although Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatseniuk cast the death of the soldier as a "war crime," and even as President Oleksander Turchinov instructed Ukrainian troops in Crimea "to use weapons to defend and protect the lives of Ukrainian servicemen," the fact of the matter was that the losses of life and territory were being experienced on the Ukrainian side of the equation.

Indeed, one could argue that Russia had effectively "won" this round of confrontations, by seizing Crimea from that country and by not having to pay a price for the violation of sovereignty. Russia was gaining even further rewards with these aforementioned assurances from Ukraine.

Note that on March 21, 2014, having secured parliamentary support for the move, Russian President Vladimir Putin formally signed into law the annexation of Crimea.

### Ukraine Moving Forward

Regardless of its effective loss of Crimea, Ukraine was moving forward with its pro-European stance and signed an association agreement with the European Union on March 21, 2014. European Union President Herman Van Rompuy hailed the agreement, saying, "Today, we are signing the [association] agreement's political provisions. It shows our steadfast support for the course the people of Ukraine have courageously pursued. Today is but the opening act. We expect to soon sign the agreement's remaining parts, not least the economic provisions. Together with the political ones, they form a single instrument."

Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk celebrated the signing of the agreement, saying, "This deal covers the most existential and most important issues, mainly security and defense cooperation. This deal will establish a joint decision-making body, which is to facilitate the process of real reforms in my country. And this deal meets the aspirations of millions of Ukrainians that want to be a part of the European Union." Underlining Europe's commitment to Ukraine was the statement by the president of the European Commission, Jose Manuel Barroso, who asserted: "This is the democratic choice that Ukraine has made. It is our firm intention to sign the remaining parts of the agreement in due course. Europe is committed to Ukraine for the long term."

Of course, that association agreement was the very foundation of the unrest in Ukraine in late 2013 through 2014, that ended in the ousting of Yanukovych, and ultimately spurred Russian encroachment into Crimea. To that latter

end, on the same day as Ukraine signed the Association Agreement with the European Union, having secured parliamentary support for the move, Russian President Vladimir Putin formally signed into law the annexation of Crimea.

Meanwhile, at the political level, opposition figure, Klitschko, who played a central role in the protests of 2013 and 2014 in Ukraine announced that he would not be pursuing the presidency. Instead, he said that he intended to run for the post of mayor of Kiev and placed his support for the presidential contest behind businessman Petro Poroshenko, who also was a central player in Ukraine's anti-Russian/pro-European uprising. It was to be seen if the consolidation of support around Poroshenko would stave off victory by Tymoshenko, who also announced her bid for the presidency. Now released from prison under the presidency of Yanukovich for largely political reasons, it was to be seen if Tymoshenko -- still, a polarizing figure -- could secure the most painful revenge against ousted Yanukovich by winning the post he held only a few months prior.

Is Russia setting its sight on the Moldovan territory of Trans-Dniestr?

As March 2014 entered its final week, and as Russia had its foot firmly implanted in Crimea, anxieties about Russian territorial ambitions were sparked again -- but this time on the former Soviet republic of Moldova. At issue was the disputed territory of Trans-Dniestr which resides under the jurisdiction of Moldova while harboring separatist ambitions.

Shortly after Moldova declared its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Trans-Dniestr declared its independence from Moldova, sparking an armed conflict between Moldovan and Trans-Dniestrian forces. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has remained involved in negotiations over Trans-Dniestr's status since the conflict began, though a long series of negotiations have thus far failed to produce a final status agreement. Moldova has tried to accommodate its ethnno-linguistic Russian minority in the region by offering broad cultural and political autonomy. But given Russia's success in Crimea, it was to be seen if the Russian argument that it must act to "protect" ethno-linguistic Russians would hold sway in Moldova. The Russia argument in that direction would be aided by the call from the speaker of Trans-Dniestr's parliament for Russia to incorporate the region.

The attention of Trans-Dniestr emerged in late March 2014 as speculation arose about Russia using its many political and economic levers to prevent Moldova from moving forward with its Western integration effort. At the top of Russia's list of objectives was likely to be the derailment of Moldova's proposed association and trade agreements with the European Union. Moldova completed the initial rounds of signatures in late 2013 during a summit in Vilnius (Lithuania) -- the same meeting at which former Ukrainian President Yanukovich rejected the deals. With Moldova set to sign on to the association agreement officially in mid-2014, it was to be seen if Russia would leverage its power to prevent that from occurring.

Meanwhile, on March 25, 2014, Russia held military exercises in Trans-Dniestr. NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe, United States Air Force General Philip Breedlove has noted that Russia had built up a "very sizeable" force on its border with Ukraine, that could easily be activated elsewhere in the region. Chief among the possibilities for expanded Russian encroachment, according to Breedlove, was the Moldovan territory of Trans-Dniestr. In his remarks to the Marshall Fund think tank, Breedlove said, "There is absolutely sufficient (Russian) force postured on the eastern border of Ukraine to run to Trans-Dniestr if the decision was made to do that, and that is very worrisome." Breedlove thus added, "We need to think about our allies, the positioning of our forces in the alliance and the readiness of those forces ... such that we can be there to defend against it if required."

Of course, given the lack of international action -- including on the part of NATO -- in punishing Russia for seizing Crimea, it was barely conceivable that NATO would act to save Moldova's territorial integrity, should Russia choose to incorporate Trans-Dniestr. To date, Russia has paid no price for its action in the Russian-speaking regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which remain officially under Georgian jurisdiction. As well, sanctions and

condemnations against Russia for annexing Crimea has resulted in only mocking responses from the Russian political class.

UN General Assembly declares Crimean independence referendum to be invalid:

On March 27, 2014, the United Nations General Assembly passed a non-binding resolution declaring Crimea's independence referendum, and its associated secession from Ukraine, to be invalid. The approved declaration dismissed the vote in Crimea as "having no validity" and noted that it "cannot form the basis for any alteration of the status of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea or of the City of Sevastopol." The resolution further stated that the United Nations General Assembly "calls upon all States, international organizations and specialized agencies not to recognize any alteration of the status" of Crimea and Sevastopol.

There were 100 votes in favor, 11 votes against it, 58 abstentions, while 24 countries did not participate at all. The countries of the West wasted little time in noting that the overwhelming vote at the General Assembly to invalidate the Crimean independence referendum showed Russia's global isolation. Indeed, with only 10 countries willing to officially place themselves on the record as being in Moscow's corner, the vote in the United Nations General Assembly was a rebuke of sorts. That short list included certain "rogue" nations such as North Korea, Sudan, and Syria, along with countries not known for their democratic records, such as Cuba, Venezuela, Belarus, and Zimbabwe. Indeed, the vote outcome was illustrative of the fact that Russia held waning influence on the global stage.

The Russian ambassador to the United Nations Churkin, seemed unwilling to accept the condemnation by the global community, saying instead, "Historical justice has been vindicated." He also took comfort in the 58 abstentions, which included China, saying that they implied tacit support for Russia. In truth, however, there were reports of countries being bullied by Russia into abstentions. In particular, several Eastern European and Central Asian states were threatened with retaliation if they voted in favor of the resolution declaring invalid Crimea's referendum on seceding from Ukraine. Reuters News reported that in interviews with United Nations diplomats, many of the countries targeted with political and economic threats by Russia included Moldova, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Given the geopolitical and geostrategic stakes, it was not surprising that Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan opted not to cast a vote at all.

The West was meanwhile making the most of the strong "yes vote." French Ambassador Gerard Araud declared: "When you lose, you have to be a good loser...I think Russia is a bad loser. They lost and they did by 100 votes."

Two days before the vote in the United Nations General Assembly, United States President Barack Obama was himself employing strong language to diminish Russia's standing in the world. During a joint news conference with Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, President Obama dismissed Russia as simply a "regional power," which was threatening its neighbors out of a position of weakness rather than strength. President Obama added that his country, the United States, had no need to invade any of its immediate neighbors to maintain its influence on them or force a cooperative relationship. The following day, speaking from Belgium, President Obama emphasized his perception that Russia was a waning influence -- no longer a super power on the world stage -- and thus the conflict over Ukraine did not constitute the beginning of another Cold War. President Obama relentlessly noted that Russia did not lead a bloc of nations, and did not possess a global ideology that a large number of other countries wished to follow or emulate.

Despite the edgy rhetoric, the diplomatic track continued to move forward with United States Secretary of State John Kerry holding meetings with his Russian counterpart, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, on March 30, 2014. Those talks were characterized as "frank" but ended without any agreement on Ukraine being forged. Russia was reportedly making demands that Ukraine be a neutral and federal entity while the United States advocated for Ukraine to be at the table where its own future was being discussed. As noted by Secretary of State Kerry, "This principle is clear: no decisions about Ukraine without Ukraine." Kerry also expressed "strong concerns" about the presence of Russian troops on the Ukraine border, while Lavrov insisted that Russia had not plan for an invasion of

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Ukraine. For its part, the Ukrainian foreign ministry cast Lavrov's demands for a future federal system of government in Ukraine as "patronizing." Clearly, the diplomatic track had a lengthy distance to be traversed.

NATO suspends cooperation with Russia while looking towards military exercises with Ukraine:

A further blow to Russia's standing internationally came via the news that NATO would be suspending "all practical civilian and military cooperation" with that country. NATO foreign ministers made the decision at a meeting in the Belgian capital of Brussels on April 1, 2014, saying it was in response to Russia's annexation of Crimea.

NATO, however, said it would continue with some degree of political dialogue with Moscow through the NATO-Russia Council, and it would continue to work with Russia on counter-narcotics efforts.

NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said, "I would expect the [NATO-Russian] counter-narcotics project to continue. It also involves other countries than Russia and I think Russia has a very strong interest in continuing our strong efforts in countering drugs trafficking. I would also expect the Afghanistan-related cooperation projects to continue -- the [troop] transit arrangement as well as the helicopter projects."

Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen also noted that while NATO would be prepared to assist Ukraine in its effort to ameliorate its military, it would not be in a position to provide Ukraine with weapons since all military equipment was actually owned by NATO member states. Any arms assistance to Ukraine would have to be rendered via "bilateral arrangements between NATO allies and their partners."

Nevertheless, NATO announced that it would intensify cooperation with Ukraine through military training. To this end, Ukraine's parliament approved conducting military exercises with NATO countries later in 2014. NATO would additionally consider the deployment of military assets in eastern European NATO countries, such as the Baltic states and Poland, which in the post-Soviet era have consistently been eager to move out of Moscow's orbit and were now disturbed by Russia's actions in Ukraine.

For its part, Russia continued its campaign of intimidation against Ukraine as it warned that country not to consider accession to NATO. Russia also threatened Ukraine's economic fortune by saying future economic ties would depend on Ukraine's foreign policy decisions. Russia's state-controlled gas company, Gazprom, underlined that threat by increasing the price of gas for Ukraine by 40 percent.

#### Eastern Ukraine is new Flashpoint in Crisis

In the first week of April 2014, eastern Ukraine emerged as a new flashpoint with pro-Russian cabals taking control over government buildings in cities such as Luhansk, Donetsk, and Kharkiv. These pro-Russian separatists were urging Russia and President Vladimir Putin to intervene, even calling for a Crimea-style referendum in which they could unite with Russia. The government of Ukraine was in no mood to entertain such notions and, instead, made clear it would restore order forcibly if necessary.

With an eye on a some sort of resolution, Interior Minister Arsen Avakov said, "A resolution to this crisis will be found within the next 48 hours." He continued, "For those who want dialogue, we propose talks and a political solution." But Avakov also issued a warning as he said, "For the minority who want conflict they will get a forceful answer from the Ukrainian authorities."

The Obama administration in the United States accused Russia of being behind the effort to destabilize and ultimately fragment Ukraine. Indeed, United States Secretary of State John Kerry went so far as to accuse Russian agents of fomenting the separatist sentiment and turmoil in eastern Ukraine, with the goal of ultimately justifying military action further into Ukrainian territory. He said, "It is clear that Russian special forces and agents have been the catalyst behind the chaos of the last 24 hours."

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The United Kingdom also joined the chorus with Foreign Secretary William Hague saying that the mass protests and occupation of government interests in eastern Ukraine bore "all the hallmarks of a Russian strategy to destabilize Ukraine."

Meanwhile, Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseny Yatseniuk cast the developments as follows: "An anti-Ukrainian plan is being put into operation ... under which foreign troops will cross the border and seize the territory of the country." He went on, "We will not allow this."

These claims were not, in actuality, farfetched since it was this very mode of operation that led to the referendum in Crimea, and ultimately, its annexation by Russia, as discussed above. In fact, in the second week of April 2014, Anders Fogh Rasmussen -- the head of NATO -- echoed the view that the unrest in eastern Ukraine was reminiscent of what had transpired in Crimea and placed the blame on Russia. Rasmussen made note of the "reappearance of men with specialized Russian weapons and identical uniforms without insignia, as previously worn by Russian troops during Russia's illegal and illegitimate seizure of Crimea."

United States Secretary of State John Kerry went further, noting that the uprisings in eastern Ukraine "could potentially be a contrived pretext for military intervention just as we saw in Crimea."

For its part, Russia dismissed the accusations, insisting that any uprising in eastern Ukraine was merely a natural development on the political scene. Left unmentioned was the fact that Russia was maintaining its buildup of military forces on the border with Ukraine. In an interview with ABC News, Samantha Power, the United States ambassador to the United Nations, rejected Russia's claim that unrest in eastern Ukraine was an organic occurrence. Pointing to the systematic manner in which pro-Russian militants were able to take control of government interests in Ukraine, she said, "It's professional, co-ordinated. Nothing grassroots about it."

Meanwhile, plans were afoot for a meeting that would include representatives from Russia, Ukraine, the United States and the European Union. On the agenda was a negotiated resolution to the Ukrainian crisis, although the actual feasibility of such an agreement was a matter of debate. According to United States diplomat, Victoria Nuland, there were no high hopes for a resolution being forged; however, she expressed the view that it was important to keep the "diplomatic door open."

But by mid-April 2014, the diplomatic door appeared to be closing. Pro-Russian forces were holding sway over an increasing number of government buildings, and the unrest was spreading to other eastern Ukrainian cities, such as Sloviansk, Kramatorsk and Druzhkivka.

Outraged over what they perceived as Russian intervention into Ukrainian affairs, by backing pro-Russian mobs in eastern Ukraine, Acting President Oleksandr Turchynov drew a symbolic line in the sand and declared that a military operation would be launched to oust the pro-Russian cabals.

In a national address that was broadcast in the media, Acting President Turchynov warned that the government of Ukraine would not allow pro-Russian forces to repeat what was done in Crimea, and which ultimately ended with the annexation of that region by Russia. Referring to Russia directly as the source of unrest in eastern Ukraine, the president said: "The aggressor... is continuing to sow disorder in the east of the country." He continued, "We will not allow Russia to repeat the Crimean scenario in the eastern regions of Ukraine." Unwilling to cede any further Ukrainian territory to Russia, Acting President Turchynov thus issued a decree demanding that pro-Russian militants relinquish their weapons and vacate government buildings in eastern Ukrainian flashpoint cities, or, face a full-scale military assault.

Presumably alarmed by this news, Russia accused Ukraine of "waging war against its own people" and demanded an emergency meeting of the United Nations Security Council. At that emergency meeting on April 12, 2014, Russia called for dialogue with Ukraine, while its ambassador to the United Nations, Vitaly Churkin, demanded that

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"the henchmen of Maidan" -- a reference to Ukraine's protest movement -- "stop attacking their own people." He also warned that neo-Nazis and anti-Semites were now sitting in "the self-proclaimed government in Kiev."

For its part, Ukraine reiterated its accusation that Russia had orchestrated the crisis unfolding in eastern Ukraine, while Russia denied the allegations that its agents were responsible for fomenting unrest in eastern Ukraine.

Meanwhile, despite the Ukrainian promise of an "anti-terrorism" operation to come in eastern Ukraine if pro-Russian cabals did not withdraw from government buildings, and in defiance of a deadline for action imposed by the Ukrainian government, pro-Russian militants expanded their control into other towns.

Of note was the storming and occupation of a police station in the town of Horlivka, close to Donetsk. In Donetsk itself, pro-Russian militants said they intended to seize control of the local government infrastructure there and declare themselves to be an independent "People's Republic of Donetsk."

In Slaviansk, where the Ukrainian government said it would begin its "anti-terrorism" operation, pro-Russian militants held Russian flags, shouted "Russia! Russia!" and made it clear they retained control of the city council offices. They even placed Ukrainian troops on a bus and sent them back to their base at Dnipropetrovsk.

In the city of Kramatorsk, where Ukrainian forces were supposed to be regaining control, the effort was curtailed. Soon after Ukrainian forces recaptured an airfield, pro-Russian militants seized and disarmed Ukrainian military vehicles.

The humiliation of Ukrainian authorities at the hands of pro-Russian forces continued in Pchyolkino, where again Ukrainian military vehicles were subdued by pro-Russian forces. In some cases in the eastern part of the country, Ukrainian forces quite literally surrendered to pro-Russian militants.

It was apparent that the so-called "anti-terrorism" operation was, if not a humiliating failure for the Ukrainian authorities, then certainly an embarrassing illumination of Kiev's weakness in confronting Moscow's aggression.

Amidst criticism of the Ukrainian authorities' ineffectual response to the Russian threat, Vitaly Tsyanok, the head of Ukraine's anti-terror operations, was sacked from his post. Those criticisms included the question as to why the government had not yet declared a state of emergency over the crisis in the eastern part of the country. In response, the government said it had not yet taken that action since it would require the suspension of the presidential election set for May 25, 2014, which was a priority for the political stabilization of the country.

While Ukrainian interim President Turchynov railed against the apparent encroachment by Russia again into Ukrainian territory, he nonetheless suggested he was open to the idea of transforming Ukraine from a republic to a federation, effectively conveying greater autonomy on the Russian-speaking eastern part of the country. To this end, he said he would support the notion of a national referendum on the matter. Of course, ratification was not guaranteed since western Ukraine was supportive of a fully unified republic. Clearly, Turchynov was banking on the pro-republic/anti-federation vote winning the day. The president mentioned this reality as he said, "We are not against holding a national referendum... I am certain that a majority of Ukrainians will support an indivisible, independent, democratic and united Ukraine."

Deepening the crisis was the news in the early hours of April 17, 2014, that pro-Russian separatists attacked a national guard base in Mariupol on the Sea of Azov; three of them were killed in the ensuing fracas with Ukrainian forces.

Adding even further to the sense of chaos and turmoil were disturbing reports that members of the Jewish community in eastern Ukraine were being targeted. At issue was the release of leaflets in the city of Donetsk instructing Jews to "register" with the new authorities or face deportation and having their citizenship revoked. It



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should be noted that the self-appointed authorities in Donetsk distanced themselves from the leaflets and made it known that it was not their work. Still, the fact of the matter was that such leaflets did exist and were circulated in the city. The irony in this alarming event was the fact that Russia had long accused Kiev of repressing the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine. In fact, this case showed that other minorities were being subject to repression by the Russian ethno-linguistic population of eastern Ukraine.

With the United States and NATO making it clear they had no intention of involving themselves in the burgeoning Ukrainian civil war, and with the European Union unlikely to support such a course of action on its doorstep, there were few quivers in the arsenal of the West against Russia. Instead, further economic sanctions and a symbolic show of force were in the offing.

The United Kingdom had already called for the imposition of further sanctions by the European Union against Russia as a result of its actions in the ever-escalating Ukrainian crisis. With the scenario in Ukraine devolving further, foreign ministers from the European Union agreed to expand their sanctions against Russia, while the Obama administration in the United States said it was exploring means to impose more painful "costs" on Russia. The United States also said it was approving non-lethal aid for Ukraine.

On the military end of things, NATO announced it would reinforce the security of alliance member states. NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said, "You will see deployments at sea, in the air, on land, to take place immediately. That means within days." Of course, the truth was that the action was not in NATO member states but in vulnerable Ukraine, which had the rhetoric -- but not practical -- support of the West in its fight against Russian territorial ambitions.

It was to be seen if peace conference set to convene on April 17, 2014, in Geneva between representatives of Ukraine, Russia, the United States, and the European Union would actually yield results. Going into the meeting, there was no sense of optimism. Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseny Yatseniuk said he had limited expectations and added, "I don't trust the Russian side."

That sense of trust was not likely helped by the leader of Russia on the eve of the peace conference. Indeed, President Putin did little to rhetorically calm the situation. While paying lip service to his preference for diplomacy, Putin insisted that Russia had the right to militarily intervene in neighboring countries. He said, "The Federation Council granted the president the right to use military force in Ukraine. I really hope that I do not have to exercise this right and that we are able to solve all today's pressing issues via political and diplomatic means." He continued, "We must do everything to help these people (in eastern Ukraine) defend their rights and independently determine their own destiny." Putin set off alarm bells across the region as he intimated that such Russian help would not stop with Ukraine but extend elsewhere in the region. To this end, Putin looked to Trans-Dniestr and said that the people of that Moldovan separatist enclave should also be permitted to "determine their own destiny." Putin also had sharp words for the new Ukrainian government, which he accused of dragging that country into an abyss. He said, "I hope that they are able to realize what a pit, what an abyss the current authorities are in and dragging the country into."

#### Agreement forged to end Ukraine Crisis

Despite the low expectations regarding the potential success of that meeting, the hard work of diplomacy won the day on April 17, 2014, when an agreement was reached to de-escalate the crisis in Ukraine. The agreement was forged between United States Secretary of State John Kerry, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, European Union foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton, as well as acting Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andriy Deshchychia.

The four joint parties in Geneva released a statement announcing the agreement as follows: "The Geneva meeting on the situation in Ukraine agreed on initial concrete steps to de-escalate tensions and restore security for all citizens."

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Central to the Geneva agreement were the following elements --

- all illegal militant groups in Ukraine should be dissolved immediately-
- all separatists occupying government buildings should be disarmed and depart those compounds
- amnesty would be granted to all anti-government protesters

The agreement also demanded that the violence end in Ukraine, and in an apparent reference to the circulation of reprehensible leaflets urging Jews to "register" in eastern Ukraine, it also condemned racism, extremism, racism, and religious intolerance, including anti-Semitism.

Baroness Ashton said the agreement contained "concrete steps" that should be implemented "immediately." But with an eye on ensuring that the agreement were not simply guiding principles but mandated actions, these steps were to be overseen by monitors from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

Beyond the immediate goals of the deal, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov espoused the Russian view that long-term constitutional reforms would have to be implemented in Ukraine. Left unsaid was what those constitutional reforms would entail although Russia has, for some time, advocated that Ukraine be transformed from a republic to a federation.

Meanwhile, regardless of the apparent success of diplomacy (at least on April 17, 2014), United States Secretary of State Kerry retained a bitter tone when he praised Ukraine for showing extreme restraint in regards to provocation from pro-Russian cabals. Kerry warned that the deal was only useful if its provisions were actually applied in practice. He said, "What is important is that these words are translated into actions and none of us leave here with the sense that the job is done, because the words are on the paper...The job will not be done until these principles are implemented and are followed up on."

While there were suggestions that the deal might result in a halt on further sanctions being levied against Russia, Kerry made sure to point out that such measures remained on the table. Kerry warned that Russia could be presented with "further costs" if de-escalation, as set forth in the agreement discussed here, did not emerge. Kerry also called on Ukraine to do its part to subdue heightened tensions.

In the third week of April 2014, mediators from Europe were set to commence negotiations aimed at securing the surrender of pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine. That effort by mediators from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) promised to be difficult since the pro-Russian cabals in the region were refusing to recognize the Geneva accord (discussed here). As noted by Envoy Christian Schoenenberger of Switzerland (the country chairing the OSCE at the time): "For the time being the political will is not there to move out." He continued, "That's the task of the monitors, to create this political will, inform the people, so eventually they will understand that the best option for them is to move out." Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andriy Deshchych said that if there was no progress, the Ukrainian government would look to the OSCE to "work out practical steps for the implementation of the Geneva agreement."

Note that as of April 21, 2014, the viability of the Geneva accord seemed a matter of debate. Pro-Russian militants showed no interest in withdrawing from government facilities, and meetings with OSCE mediators yielded no productive results. Instead, both sides (pro-Moscow and pro-Kiev respectively) accused each other of breaching the terms of the agreement.

On one side of the equation, pro-Russian activists blamed Ukrainian nationalists from the group, Right Sector, for the killing of three people at a security checkpoint. On the other side of the equation, activists in Slaviansk indicated that they intended to "dig in" their proverbial heels as they moved to reinforce their barricades. In Kramatorsk, masked gunmen ousted the local police chief and took control of the security services office.

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Elsewhere in eastern Ukraine, pro-Russian militants told international journalists that they had no intention of disarming unless Ukrainian nationalist groups in the western part of the country disarmed first.

While the OSCE mediators had not yet abandoned their mission to get the provisions of the agreement implemented, the United States and the European Union made it clear that they would impose new sanctions on Russia if pro-Russian separatists did not soon disarm and remove themselves from government buildings. Some Western diplomats were indicating that the entire deal was an exercise in the futility and only served the purpose of buying time for Russia to extend its grip in Ukraine. As noted by one European diplomat in a conversation with Reuters News over Putin's interest in seeing the Geneva accord implemented: "Talks and compromises are just part of his tactics...He wants to have Ukraine." The fact that Western diplomats were actually expressing such views -- admittedly "off the record" -- was a signal that the political climate for compromise was grim.

Meanwhile, in a fresh show of support for Ukraine, United States Vice President Joe Biden arrived in the Ukrainian capital of Kiev where he was set to unveil technical assistance measures. Vice President Biden's presence was also aimed at stressing the importance of moving forward with the provisions of the Geneva accord. As noted by a spokesperson from the White House, "He will call for urgent implementation of the agreement reached in Geneva... while also making clear ... that there will be mounting costs for Russia if they choose a destabilizing rather than constructive course in the days ahead."

On the issue of Russia's "destabilizing" course, Ukraine release photographs that seemed to prove that the masked combatants in eastern Ukraine were under the control of Moscow. Throughout, Russia has passionately dismissed the charges that it was orchestrating the unrest in eastern Ukraine, and has insisted that masked gunmen bearing no military insignia were simply local activists who were driven to extreme action out of fear of the new authorities in Kiev. However, photographic evidence indicated that the gunmen were actually Russian operatives of the same type believed to have carried out the takeover of Crimea. One gunman was even identified as Igor Ivanovich Strelkov -- a well known Russian intelligence agent with a long career in clandestine activities on behalf of the Russian government.

The White House in the United States endorsed the photographic evidence, with State Department spokesperson, Jen Psaki, saying, "There has been broad unity in the international community about the connection between Russia and some of the armed militants in eastern Ukraine, and the photos presented by the Ukrainians... only further confirm this."

By April 22, 2014, Ukraine's interim President Turchinov had called for government forces to resume its offensive operation against pro-Russian rebels. The Ukrainian leader made the decision after the gruesome discovery of the dead body of Volodymyr Rybak -- a politician from Turchinov's own Batkivshchyna political party. Tybak's body bore signs of torture. Another body showing signs of being subject to torture was also found in Slaviansk. These discoveries, along with the failure of pro-Russian militants to abandon their occupation of government buildings in eastern Ukraine in violation of the Geneva deal, appeared to have spurred the Ukrainian leader to take a more hardline stance. For his part, President Turchinov blamed Russia for the brutal killings as he said, "These crimes are being carried out with the full support and indulgence of the Russian Federation...I call on the security agencies to re-launch and carry out effective anti-terrorist measures, with the aim of protecting Ukrainian citizens living in eastern Ukraine from terrorists."

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov tried to redirect the blame for the crisis in eastern Ukraine onto the United States when he said, "There is no reason not to believe that the Americans are running the show." A statement from Lavrov's ministry went further as it said, "Instead of taking effective measures to implement the ... agreements, Kiev, Washington and a series of European capitals continue to insist that it is only Ukrainian citizens defending their rights in the south-east of Ukraine who need to give up their weapons."

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By April 24, 2014, Ukrainian forces had killed five pro-Moscow rebels in the eastern part of the country and Russia was flexing its military might as it carried out military exercises close to the Ukrainian border, presumably to show that it could invade Ukraine at will.

With the news emerging as well about Ukrainian commandos carrying out raids on pro-Russian checkpoints in Sloviansk, and the ensuing deaths of at least two pro-Russian separatists, Russian President Vladimir Putin warned that if the interim Ukrainian authorities in Kiev used its army to attack the people of eastern Ukraine, it would be carrying out a crime against its own people deserving on consequences. Speaking from St. Petersburg, he said, "It is just a punitive operation and it will of course incur consequences for the people making these decisions, including (an effect) on our interstate relations."

But even as Russia was threatening consequences for Ukraine, the United States was trained on Russia. United States President Obama warned that his country was ready to impose fresh sanctions on Russia if it did work to end the crisis in eastern Ukraine. Speaking from Japan where the United States leader was on an official visit, President Obama said, "We have prepared for the possibility of applying additional sanctions." President Putin dismissed the threat of sanctions as being "dishonorable" but unlikely to strike critical damage on Russia.

It was to be seen if Putin would be equally dismissive of the increased presence of United States forces in eastern Europe on behalf of its NATO allies. To that end, a contingent of 600 United States troops arrived in Poland as an effort to shore up NATO support in the region, even as Russia built up its own military presence on the Ukrainian border.

As well, United States Secretary of State John Kerry sharpened his rhetoric against Russia as he declared on April 25, 2014 that Russia was responsible for "deception and destabilization" in eastern Ukraine. "This is a full-throated effort to actively sabotage the democratic process through gross external intimidation that has been brought inside Ukraine," he said. Kerry also accused Russia of "playing an active role in destabilizing eastern Ukraine" with personnel, weapons, money and operational planning."

Meanwhile, pro-Russian militants in eastern Ukraine acknowledged on April 23, 2014, that they had an American journalist Simon Ostrovsky in their custody. A spokesperson for the pro-Russian militants in the eastern city of Sloviansk, Stella Khorosheva, said Ostrovsky was being held in captivity for "bad activities" and that he would have to be investigated. The United States Department of State issued a demand for the safety and release of Ostrovsky, who was ultimately freed on April 24, 2014.

However, the news was not so good on April 26, 2014, for the OSCE observers who were in eastern Ukraine to ensure the Geneva accord was implemented. Eight OSCE observers were abducted by pro-Russian militants in the eastern Ukraine city of Sloviansk under spurious charges of spying and held in captivity. United States Secretary of States John Kerry demanded that Russia use its influence to ensure the release of the observers. By the start of May 2014, most of the OSCE observers being held in Sloviansk remained in captivity despite requests from the West that Russia intervene into the matter, and secure their release.

## Latest Developments --

- Dozens killed in clashes in the southwestern city of Odessa marking worst death toll in a single incident since outbreak of unrest
- Pro-Russia activists, armed with automatic rifles, stormed several official buildings in the eastern Ukrainian city of Luhansk
- Several separatists were reported to have been killed in a government offensive in Sloviansk
- Pro-Russia activists, armed with clubs, broke up a pro-Kiev rally in Donetsk
- The self-declared leader of Donetsk said the region would not participate in the presidential election scheduled for May 2014

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- Ukrainian President Olexander Turchynov condemned local security personnel in Luhanski and Donetsk for "inaction" and "criminal treachery"
- Four soldiers and about 30 separatists were killed in an "anti-terrorism operation" in the eastern town of Sloviansk
- Gunfire was reported in the port of Mariupol, which was taken over by pro-Russian militants
- Accusations emerged about former President Yanukovych and his associates stealing billions of dollars worth of assets
- Norway's defense ministry suspended all defense co-operation with Russia except on border controls
- The European Union published a new list of 15 individuals facing travel bans and asset freezes including major Russian intelligence officials
- The United States issued sanctions against individuals and companies with links to President Putin's "inner circle"
- The United States said it would deny export licenses for any high-technology items that could conceivably contribute to Russian military capabilities

At the end of the first week of May 2014, due to the violence in Odessa, Ukrainian authorities were trying to regain control there while locals buried their dead. Meanwhile, the negative rhetoric between Ukraine and Russia was on the upswing with both sides accusing the other of tearing Ukraine apart. Indeed, there was a fairly open discourse about the high possibility of war in eastern Europe. Even previously cautious European leaders were speculating about that outcome with German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier saying, "The bloody pictures from Odessa have shown us that we are just a few steps away from a military confrontation."

By the second week of May 2014, in the port city of Mariupol, fierce fighting between Ukrainian forces and separatists ended in the deaths of several people. Ukrainian Interior Minister Arsen Avakov explained that 20 "terrorists" were killed when pro-Russian militants tried to take control over the police headquarters.

Meanwhile, Russia was attempting to advance the image of a country stepping back from the Ukrainian conflict as it announced it was pulling back its military forces from the border with Ukraine. Russia also urged the separatists in the eastern region to refrain from holding referenda on secession similar to the one that ensued in Crimea and ended in the Russian annexation of that region. Russia also expressed support for the presidential election in Ukraine set for May 25, 2014. Previously, Russia had disparaged the notion of that election taking place in a climate of civil strife. Now, Russian President Vladimir Putin was saying that Ukraine's presidential election was a step "in the right direction."

It was not known if these statements from Russia were to be regarded as a ploy. Such a possibility loomed large when NATO said that satellite imagery showed no evidence of a Russian pull back.

As well, Russian President Vladimir Putin arrived in Crimea on May 9, 2014, to celebrate the anniversary of the allied victory over the Nazis in World War II. The presence of Putin in Crimea, which had been annexed by Russia only a month before, was a sign that the Russian leader wanted to flaunt his effective "victory" over the Ukrainians with regard to Crimea. Clearly, he also wanted to extrovert his Russian nationalist agenda. Putin made this purpose for his presence in Crimea clear when he declared: "I am sure that 2014 will go into the annals of our whole country as the year when the nations living here firmly decided to be together with Russia, affirming fidelity to the historical truth and the memory of our ancestors."

It should be noted that Putin's presence in Crimea was frowned upon by the West, with NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen saying, "His visit to Crimea is inappropriate."

By the second week of May 2014, separatists in eastern Ukraine made clear that irrespective of Russia's call for them to hold off on a breakaway referendum, they were going forward with that vote anyway. To that end, self-rule referenda ensued in eastern Ukraine in the areas of Donetsk and Luhansk on May 11, 2014. Reports from the ground indicated an overwhelming affirmative vote ratifying self-rule in Donetsk. In fact, the separatist leader in Donetsk, Denis Pushilin, warned that with announcement of the results in favor of self-rule, all Ukrainian military

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troops in the region would be regarded as "occupying forces." The next step for Donetsk was, apparently, to go down the road of Crimea and petition for Donetsk to be "absorbed" by Russia.

In Luhansk, following the self-rule referendum there, rebels declared independence. A statement by rebel leaders read as follows: "The people of Luhansk Region declare the creation of a sovereign state -- the Luhansk people's republic." The rebel leaders in Luhansk also said that the impending presidential election in Ukraine would not take place within its new self-declared independent borders.

Of course, it was to be seen if Ukraine would let wide swaths of eastern Ukrainian territory be lost to Russia as quietly as it assented to Russia's annexation of Crimea.

With Donetsk and Luhansk providing significant industrial production and more than 15 percent of Ukraine's GDP, Ukraine was not likely to accept such a loss easily. In fact, the International Monetary Fund has warned that its aid package to Ukraine would have to be renegotiated if that country lost significant industrial territory in the eastern part of the country.

The vote -- largely cast as both illegal and a sham by Ukraine and the West -- was marked by disorganization, no electoral oversight, and violence, with at least one death reported. As well, persons with Ukrainian loyalties complained of death threats and intimidation, probably contributing to a scenario in which the only persons casting (unregulated) ballots were likely in the self-rule or pro-Russian corners anyway. For his part, Ukraine's acting president said in an address to the parliament, "The farce that terrorist separatists call a referendum is nothing more than propaganda to cover up murders, kidnappings, violence and other serious crimes." The United States and European Union joined the chorus of international powers condemning the referenda, with Herman Van Rompuy, the president of the European Council of European Union leaders, saying, "We will not recognize the so-called referendums of yesterday. They are illegal, illegitimate and incredible."

#### Presidential election in Ukraine

A presidential election was set to be held in Ukraine on May 25, 2014. The election was intended to democratically decide a new head of state for the country, following the ousting of President Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014. There were also high hopes that the vote would settle the political landscape in Ukraine that deteriorated to a state of turmoil in the eastern part of the country. Indeed, the period following Yanukovich's ouster has been marked by the refusal of Russia to accept the new pro-European government of Ukraine, a pro-Russian uprising in eastern Ukraine, the Russian annexation of Crimea, and ongoing turbulence in Russian-speaking parts of the country.

Ahead of that election, Russian President Vladimir Putin promised his country would work with whatever new Ukrainian administration emerged following that election. Putin said: "We will respect the choice of the Ukrainian people and will be working with the authorities formed on the basis of this election." The Russian leader made this pledge presumably with an eye on easing tensions in eastern Europe even as pro-Russian separatists continued to lobby for Russian integration and rail against the Ukrainian presidential election.

Putin's tone of cooperation was welcomed by the West, which has been bedeviled by questions of how to deal with nationalist Russian ambitions in recent times.

Meanwhile, in Ukraine, all eyes were on a billionaire businessman and former cabinet minister Petro Poroshenko as a favorite to win the Ukrainian presidency although veteran politician, former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, was also viewed as one of the more significant players in the political game. In truth, however, the attention was less on which politician would emerge as the victor, and more on the matter of the election being a proxy sign for stabilization in the Ukrainian political scene.

Election result:

After the ballots were counted, it was the business tycoon, Petro Poroshenko, who claimed victory in Ukraine's presidential contest. The man known as the "chocolate king" because of his confectionary business enterprise, Roshen Chocolates, was also the owner of a television station and manufacturing interests. He was on track to secure 55 percent of the vote share and, thus, outright victory. Former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko was in a distant second place with 12 percent of the vote share; however, she was quick to concede defeat and offered gracious congratulations to Poroshenko and to Ukraine, declaring: "I want to congratulate the whole of Ukraine since despite external aggression, despite the Kremlin's intent to disrupt this election we had an honest and democratic election in Ukraine."

Meanwhile, former boxing champion-turned opposition politician Vitaliy Klitschko was on track (according to exit poll data) to become the new mayor of Kiev. Klitschko had abandoned his bid for the presidency, turning instead to the mayorship as his first main foray into the political heavyweight scene in Ukraine; however, he was quick to endorse Poroshenko prior to the presidential contest, who was headed for the presidency.

The defeat of former Prime Minister Tymoshenko indicated that Ukrainians were ready for fresh leadership. To that end, Poroshenko also called for fresh parliamentary elections later in the year. Poroshenko additionally promised closer ties with the European Union -- effectively consolidating the pro-Western bent of Kiev since the ouster of Yanukovych at the start of the year. The new president also promised to work to restore peace and stability in the volatile eastern zone of the country, although Poroshenko made it abundantly clear that he would never recognize Russia's "occupation of Crimea." The new president also warned that in regards to relations with Russia, his biggest priority would be the "sovereignty and territorial integrity" of Ukraine. Clearly, Poroshenko was a fierce patriot, aware of the nationalist overtones of the citizenry in recent times, and was determined to send the message that he would defend his country.

It should be noted that the election did not go off smoothly in those restive eastern regions where pro-Russian separatists did their best to disturb and disrupt the democratic process there. Indeed, there were no polling stations open in Donetsk where separatists hold sway.

That being said, the election was regarded as a positive development on Ukraine's difficult and tumultuous political landscape in recent times. As noted by United States President Barack Obama, the election in Ukraine was an "important step forward in the efforts of the Ukrainian government to unify the country."

#### Post-election Developments:

In the days after the election of a new president, Ukraine was subject to bloodshed and violence. On May 27, 2014, pro-Russian separatists tried to seize the airport in the eastern city of Donetsk. Newly-elected President Poroshenko made good on his promise to take a hardline approach to separatists and launched a rapid air and land assault. While dozens of people -- mostly separatist fighters -- were killed as a result, Ukrainian forces were able to regain control over the Sergei Prokofiev airport in Donetsk. The action shifted only two days later to the eastern city of Sloviansk when pro-Russian separatists shot down a Ukrainian army helicopter, killing 12 people including an army general. Ukraine's newly elected President Poroshenko warned that the pro-Russian rebels responsible for the attack would be punished. He said, "These criminal acts of the enemies of the Ukrainian people will not go unpunished. This is the moment of deep sorrow, and I express my sincere condolences to the families and relatives of the victims. We must make every effort to make sure that no more Ukrainians die at the hands of terrorists and bandits."

In the first week of June 2014, the bloodshed and violence in eastern Ukraine was ongoing. Ahead of the presidential inauguration ceremony, battles between the Ukrainian government and pro-Russian separatists sparked the landscape in the areas of Sloviansk and Donetsk. As well, pro-Russian separatists claimed they brought down an army surveillance helicopter close to Sloviansk and seized a hospital in Donetsk.

### Inauguration:

On June 7, 2014, Petro Poroshenko was officially inaugurated as the new president of Ukraine. The day before, Poroshenko had a brief and unofficial meeting with his Russian counterpart, Putin, in France where world leaders marked the 70th anniversary of the D-Day invasion. Putin appeared to strike a conciliatory tone as he expressed support for Poroshenko's plans to end the violence in eastern Ukraine, saying he "overall has the right approach" to the crisis. That being said, Putin urged Poroshenko to end "punitive" military operations against pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine.

### Multilateral action:

With an emphasis on security and stability in eastern Europe, United States President Barack Obama soon announced a \$1 billion fund earmarked for security in eastern Europe. The gesture was welcomed by NATO allies in Europe.

Entering the fray at the start of June 2014, NATO moved to bolster its security presence in eastern Europe as a deterrent against Russian aggression. According to NATO head Anders Fogh Rasmussen, NATO defense ministers forged an agreement to develop a "readiness action plan... to respond to the changed security environment" that had evolved in eastern Europe as a result of the conflict in Ukraine. He added, "We agreed that we will continue to reinforce NATO's collective defense with more air and sea patrols and more exercises and training, from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea and the Mediterranean."

Rasmussen also took the opportunity to note that Russia's annexation of Crimea was "a blatant breach of the 1997 Founding Act." This reference was to the fact that the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act formalized post-Cold War borders in Europe and made clear that the West, the United States, and Russia would refrain from deploying forces or arms in the newly-independent nation states of eastern Europe in an aggressive mode.

With no small measure of irony, Russia responded to the news of NATO's decision to increase its security presence in eastern Europe by accusing NATO of breaching the same 1997 treaty. Left unaddressed by Russia was its own actions in Ukraine and its adherence (or lack thereof) to the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act. But Rasmussen was adamant that NATO had no choice but to take measures to counteract the threat posed by Russia.

On the matter of the threat posed by Russia, United States President Barack Obama publicly condemned Russia's aggression in Ukraine. During a trip to Europe at the start of June 2014, President Barack Obama said, "We will not accept Russia's occupation of Crimea or its violations of Ukraine's sovereignty. As we've been reminded by Russia's aggression in Ukraine, our free nations cannot be complacent in pursuit of the vision we share -- a Europe that is whole and free and at peace."

President Obama also took the opportunity to meet with newly-elected Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko and pledge support for that country's path towards stability. That pledge included \$5 million in military assistance to Ukraine (separate from an earlier disbursement of aid funding in March 2014).

Meanwhile, leaders of the world's industrialized nations at a meeting in Belgium warned they were prepared to levy further sanctions against Russia for its actions in Ukraine.

In a joint statement, the leaders from G7 countries also excoriated Russia for its violation of Ukrainian sovereignty. The statement read as follows: "We are united in condemning the Russian Federation's continuing violation of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine. We stand ready to intensify targeted sanctions and to consider meaningful additional restrictive measures to impose further costs on Russia should events so require."



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Perhaps faced with the reality that further international action might be at play, Russia moved in a conciliatory direction in the second week of June 2014. At issue was a series of negotiations between Russia and Ukraine that was being brokered by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Following the talks between Moscow and Kiev, the authorities in Ukraine said they would work towards "mutual understanding" with Russia in actualizing newly-elected Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko's stabilization plan.

The Ukrainian Foreign Ministry issued a brief statement noting that Russian and Ukrainian representatives had met several times to discuss Poroshenko's plan to end the violence in the eastern part of the country. The statement read as follows: "As a result of the work, the sides reached a mutual understanding on key stages of the implementation of the plan and on a list of priorities which will contribute to a de-escalation of the situation in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine."

In the background of these negotiations were threats by Russia that it would turn off its gas supplies if a satisfactory agreement with Ukraine was not reached. Clearly, this was Russia's "back pocket" ammunition that it was willing to use as a counterpoint to the West. This threat was itself a concern to European countries who receive significant gas imports from Russia -- and via Ukraine.

Note that on June 12, 2014, Russia indicated it would submit a draft resolution to the United Nations Security Council pressuring Ukraine to move forward with the OSCE's "roadmap" to peace. That roadmap was actually drafted in May 2014 and according to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, Ukraine was not adhering to the agreement's provisions. Of course, from the point of view of Ukraine, the obstacles to peace were emanating from Moscow and not Kiev.

Alert:

Attempts to return Ukraine to stability were severely marred by an incident in mid-June 2014 when pro-Russian separatists shot down a Ukrainian army transport plane in the eastern part of the country, killing as many as 50 troops. The incident took place at the Luhansk airport as the aircraft was coming in for a landing. While the government held control over the airport, pro-Russian separatists held sway elsewhere in the city. Already, there were claims by pro-Russian separatists that they shot down a Ukrainian air force bomber in the Donetsk region.

President Petro Poroshenko responded by convening his security team for talks and promising of an "adequate" response to the killing of some 50 servicemen. He declared a period of mourning and warning, "All those involved in cynical acts of terrorism of this magnitude must be punished." He continued, "Ukraine needs peace. Counterterrorism receives an adequate response."

It should be noted that pro-Russians showed little regret, with one separatist saying to Reuters News, "This is how we work. The fascists can bring as many reinforcements as they want but we will do this every time. We will talk to them on our own terms."

In more positive news for the Ukrainians, their forces were able to reclaim control over the major port town of Mariupol, with the Ukrainian flag returned to its place -- flying above the regional government compound.

Meanwhile, the global community was not ignoring the fact that pro-Russian separatists had access to significant military equipment -- a disturbing revelation for a so-called "grassroots" separatist movement. All eyes were on Russia as the likely source of such military resources. The United States Department of States spokesperson, Marie Harf, noted: "We assess that separatists in eastern Ukraine have acquired heavy weapons and military equipment from Russia, including Russian tanks and multiple rocket launchers." Harf added that a convoy of tanks, rocket launchers, and other military vehicles crossed from Russia into eastern Ukraine in mid-June 2014. She said, "Russia will claim these tanks were taken from Ukrainian forces, but no Ukrainian tank units have been operating in that area. We are confident that these tanks came from Russia."

NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen had said that if these reported deployments were verified, they would constitute an "escalation" of the Ukrainian crisis. Unsaid by Rasmussen was the matter of how NATO would respond although he demanded that Russia withdraw its military forces on the border with Ukraine, "stop the flow of weapons and fighters across the border," and "exercise its [Russian] influence among armed separatist to lay down their weapons and renounce violence."

By the third week of June 2014, eastern Ukraine was beset by fierce fighting between Ukrainian troops and pro-Russian separatists. The advantage appeared to be with Ukrainian forces as a pro-Russian commander admitted that the separatists were suffering heavy losses.

While President Petro Poroshenko had been considering a resolution plan to end the uprising and violence in the eastern part of the country, he was nonetheless prepared to take a hardline approach against pro-Russian separatists. On the domestic agenda, Poroshenko also confirmed he would sign the association agreement with the European Union officially moving his country westward and further out of Moscow's orbit. It was the status of that very agreement that sparked the turmoil in Ukraine from late 2013 well into 2014.

It should be noted that Poroshenko's moves were finding resonance among Ukrainians in other parts of the country who were tired of being at the mercy of Moscow and its pro-Russian factions in Ukraine.

By June 20, 2014, the Ukrainian president called for a ceasefire as part of his aforementioned resolution plan. Also included in the plan's provisions was an amnesty for separatists willing to lay down their weapons, the release of hostages, and the establishment of a "regime of control" on the Ukrainian-Russian border.

On paper, the plan appeared to be a reasonable attempt to garner Russian support and on June 21, 2014, Russian President Putin issued a handful of statements in favor of the ceasefire, although he noted that there would have to be negotiations with the separatists to ensure the truce did not collapse. The statement by Putin was released officially by the Kremlin and read as follows: "The opportunity which the ceasefire opens up should be used to start meaningful negotiations and political compromise between the opposing sides in eastern Ukraine."

But the Ukrainian government was soon forced to accept that the separatists were not interested in disarmament and a new burst of fighting broke out. Pro-Russian separatists stormed a Ukrainian military base and attacked border posts by on the very night the ceasefire was to go into effect.

As noted by a government forces spokesperson, Vladyslav Seleznyov, "We issued an ultimatum to the terrorists overnight to surrender their weapons. We guarantee their safety and investigation in line with Ukrainian law ... They refused." As a consequence, Ukrainian forces responded militarily, with most of the losses being suffered by the rebel side, as noted above.

Meanwhile, speaking on behalf of his country, United States Vice President Joe Biden made clear to Ukrainian President Poroshenko there would be "further costs on Russia" if it failed to use its influence to halt the violence by separatists in the eastern part of Ukraine.

NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen was at the same time signaling the alarm about the deployment of thousands of Russian troops along Ukraine's eastern border. He said, "I consider this a very regrettable step backwards. It seems Russia keeps the option open to intervene further in Ukraine." he added a warning: "The international community would have to respond in a firm manner if Russia were to intervene further in Ukraine."

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It should be noted that Russian officials have denied that they built up forces on the joint border with Ukraine, just as they denied that they provided military equipment to pro-Russian separatists, and certainly in much the same way as they have dismissed accusations that Russia has fomented separatist unrest in eastern Ukraine.

Adding to the pressure on Russia was the warning from the European Union and other Western powers that it would impose further sanctions on Russia if it failed to defuse tensions and more pro-actively support the peace process in eastern Ukraine.

United States Secretary of State John Kerry warned that his country was collaborating with European partners to prepare a new round of sanctions against Russia. United Kingdom Foreign Secretary William Hague cautioned that if Russia did not "stop the flow of arms across the border and stop supporting illegally armed separatist groups," the argument in favor of for harsher sanctions would "of course become stronger." German Chancellor Angela Merkel joined the chorus, noting during a discussion in parliament : "Progress is slow... Diplomatic solutions are always preferable but, if nothing else works, sanctions can be put back on the agenda."

## Later Developments:

Perhaps with an eye on reducing the possibility of further international action, on June 24, 2014, Russian President Putin called on Russia's upper parliamentary house to revoke the right it had granted him authorizing military intervention into Ukraine to defend the Russian ethno-linguistic population there. The upper parliamentary chamber soon granted that request although some members of parliament noted that it would rapidly reinstate that authorization, if the need arose. A spokesperson for the Russian leader said that the move was aimed at facilitating the peace process in eastern Ukraine.

Regardless of the actual intent, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko welcomed the move, calling it a "first practical step." Signaling that he was ready to extend his own olive branch, the Ukrainian president said that there were plans afoot to establish more regional autonomy in eastern Ukraine.

These moves by global power-brokers notwithstanding, pro-Russian separatists continued to act in a provocative manner. Despite the fact that they had agreed to a temporary ceasefire with the Ukrainian government, the militant activists continued to engage in fighting with Ukrainian forces. In the 24 hours after the truce was declared on June 23, 2014, the Ukrainian government said there had been approximately 45 violations by pro-Russian militants. For example, on June 24, 2014, at least one Ukrainian soldier was killed and several others were wounded due to the pro-Russian separatists' violation of the truce. On that same day, pro-Russian separatists shot down a Ukrainian military helicopter, killing all nine persons on board the aircraft. Around the area of Sloviansk, separatist militias were using grenade launchers and mortars to attack a military post. Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko issued a hardline response, telling Ukrainian forces to return fire if they were attacked and threatening to abandon the truce completely.

By the start of July 2014, Ukrainian President Poroshenko ended the government ceasefire, which had been established in order to pursue peace talks. Explaining his decision, the Ukrainian leader said, "The unique chance to implement the peace plan was not realized. It happened because of the criminal actions of the militants. They publicly declared their unwillingness to support the peace plan as a whole and in particular the ceasefire."

In fact, the pro-Russian separatists refused to disarm and repeatedly violated the truce, as exemplified by the incident in which they shot down a helicopter thus killing nine individuals on board. Moreover, as noted by several Ukrainian security experts, the rebels were not simply unwilling to support the peace plan, but had used the ceasefire to regroup and reassert their campaign of violent resistance.

Accordingly, President Poroshenko wasted little time after ending the ceasefire and resumed a full-scale military operation against pro-Russia separatists in the eastern part of the country. In a national broadcast, the president emphatically asserted:

"The decision not to continue the ceasefire is our answer to terrorists, militants and marauders." He then declared: "We will attack, we will free our land." Ukraine's parliamentary Speaker Oleksander Turchynov said in an address to the legislative body of Ukraine, "I can inform you that in the morning the active phase of the anti-terrorist operation was renewed. Our armed forces are carrying out strikes on terrorist bases and checkpoints."

Indeed, Ukrainian military forces were soon launching an aggressive operation against pro-Russian separatist bases in the eastern regions using aerial bombardment and artillery strikes. The Ukrainian military appeared to calculate the operation as a success, issuing the following statement: "The terrorists' plan to significantly escalate armed confrontation has been disrupted and the threat of losses to the civilian population and service personnel has been liquidated."

Predictably, Russia condemned Ukraine's move and President Vladimir Putin promised to protect the interests of ethnic Russians in Ukraine. Putin also tried to give the impression that his stance was backed by Western European powers as he said, "Unfortunately President Poroshenko took the decision to restart military operations and we -- I mean myself and my European colleagues -- could not convince him that the road to stable, strong and long-lasting peace does not lie through war."

In truth, it was difficult to determine in Western powers such as Germany and France shared this interpretation of their stances. For her part, German Chancellor Angela Merkel renewed threats of further sanctions against Russia, saying of that country's willingness to violate Ukraine's territorial integrity: "Regarding sanctions against Russia, we have so far reached level two and we cannot rule out having to go further."

That being said, Germany was also working to bring Russia, pro-Russian separatists, and Ukraine together, with an eye on a fresh ceasefire. At issue was a plan for multilateral negotiations involving all three parties, with the objective of forging a new ceasefire. To this end, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier held talks with Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, Ukraine's Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin, and French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius. Following that meeting, which he described as "constructive," he indicated that progress had been made in moving -- at least -- in the direction of multilateral negotiations starting on July 5, 2014. Those negotiations would focus on establishing a new ceasefire that would be monitored by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Also on the agenda would be the terms of the ceasefire, cessation of violence on all sides, the release of hostages, and the return of control over Ukrainian border points from Russia to Ukrainian government control. With concurrence being found on following this path, the German foreign minister said,

"It is a clear commitment to a multilateral ceasefire" and added that all parties "realize what responsibility we bear."

A turning point for eastern Ukraine?

As July 2014 moved through its second week, Ukrainian troops recaptured the pro-Russian separatist stronghold of Sloviansk. Ukrainian President Poroshenko characterized the event as a "turning point" in the eastern Ukrainian conflict that for months saw momentum on the rebel side. President Poroshenko noted that the return of the Ukrainian flag in Sloviansk was not a total victory, but instead a symbolically significant development. He said, "This is not a complete victory yet, and it is not the time for fireworks displays. But the cleansing of Sloviansk from gangs who are armed to the teeth is of huge symbolic importance. This is the start of a turning point in the fight against the militants."

Indeed, offensive operations in the eastern part of the country were ongoing with the pro-Russian separatists still in control of the regional capitals of Donetsk and Luhansk. Still, the recapture of Sloviansk -- the military center of the

self-declared People's Republic of Donetsk -- indicated that the energy was on the side of the pro-government forces.

For their part, some rebels claimed they were simply going forward with a "tactical retreat" from Sloviansk; however, in truth, as many of them moved towards Horlivka, they were being intercepted by government troops. Moreover, other rebels were admitting that morale was low among the pro-separatist factions, with many of them claiming they had been abandoned.

That low morale was not likely to be boosted by the news on July 6, 2014, that pro-government forces had recaptured the east Ukrainian towns of Artyomivsk and Druzhkivka. While being of far less strategic value than Sloviansk, the hold on Artyomivsk and Druzhkivka reinforced the view expressed by President Poroshenko that Ukraine had reached a turning point. To that end, the Ukrainian president was poised to continue -- and even intensify -- the offensive assault against pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine. Via Twitter, President Poroshenko declared, "My order is now in effect -- tighten the ring around the terrorists. Continue the operation to liberate Donetsk and Luhansk regions."

It should be noted that this military mission in eastern Ukraine meant that the proposed multilateral meetings (discussed above) were now less likely to involve separatist rebels. Those meetings were intended to discuss a renewed truce.

The prospects for a renewed ceasefire looked bleak on July 12, 2014, following a rocket attack by pro-Russian separatist rebels on Ukrainian soldiers close to the border with Russia. That attack involved a relentless volley of Grad missiles and left 20 Ukrainian troops dead and close to 100 others injured in the border village of Zelenopillya. Ukrainian President Poroshenko promised retribution, vociferously declaring that his forces would root out those responsible for the bloodshed. The Ukrainian leader asserted: "For every life of our soldiers, the militants will pay with tens and hundreds of their own. Not one terrorist will evade responsibility. Everybody will get what is coming to them."

It should be noted that around the same time of this deadly attack by pro-Russian separatist rebels in eastern Ukraine, a human rights organization publicized a damning report on abuses, including torture, by pro-Russian groups. Amnesty International's report titled "Abductions and Torture in Eastern Ukraine" accused pro-Russian groups of abducting hundreds of people, and targeting protesters and journalists particularly. Amnesty International noted in the report that its investigators had discovered "graphic and compelling evidence of savage beatings and other torture" by pro-Russian groups in eastern Ukraine. Ukrainian government forces were not exempt from criticism, with the human rights group noting that abuses had been committed on that end as well, albeit at far less of a pervasive level.

In mid-July 2014, a Ukrainian military transport aircraft was shot down in the eastern part of the country.

Crew members were reported to have survived the attack and a search and rescue mission to find them was ongoing. It should be noted that the transport military aircraft was shot down using a missile launcher and was quite likely fired from Russian territory. While Russia did not offer any feedback on that report, pro-Russian rebels were being quite forthright about their intent to target the aircraft.

Also in mid-July 2014, Ukrainian forces launched air strikes on the pro-Russian stronghold of Luhansk, with the Ukrainian air force announcing it had successfully carried out "five powerful air strikes" on targets in the eastern region. Ukrainian authorities also announced that the country's military forces now held control over several villages around Luhansk and that the airport was no longer being blocked by pro-Russian separatists.

United States intensifies sanctions against Russia by targeting major firms --

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On July 16, 2014, the Obama administration in the United States intensified its sanctions against Russia, targeting large Russian firms as a punitive measure against Russia for failing to de-escalate the conflict in eastern Ukraine.

On the target list of Russian firms being hit by United States sanctions were significant defense and energy companies, as well as large banks. Indeed, the targets of the new sanctions list included Russia's largest oil producer, Rosneft, as well as the country's second largest gas producer, Novatek, and also Russia's third largest bank, Gazprombank. Other targets included Vnesheconombank, which functions as a payment agent for the government of Russia, and eight weapons companies, most notably the one that produces Kalashnikov assault rifles. Of significance was the fact that these particular enterprises were controlled by some of Putin's closest allies.

The new sanctions stopped short of cutting off entire key sectors of the Russian economy; however, they were the harshest measures to date against Russia. They were certainly more damaging than the financial and travel restrictions on a handful of individuals and businesses that went into effect months prior.

Across the Atlantic in Europe, leaders were meeting to discuss the measures they would take to intensify pressure on Russia. Together, the West was coordinating their efforts to punish Russia; however, European sanctions were not expected to go as far as those imposed by the United States.

In Russia, the government of that country was reacting with furor to the United States' action, charging that such sanctions constituted "primitive revenge" and promising retaliation. Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev vituperatively cast the sanctions as "evil" while Russian President Putin warned that the move would bring relations with the United States to a "dead end." Putin also had sharp words for the European Union, which was yet to announce its measures. But with the knowledge that some action was in the offing, his government accused the European bloc of succumbing to the "blackmail of the U.S. administration."

In Ukraine, Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk noted that the action by the United States and Europe to punish Russia for its complicity in the Ukrainian crisis showed that Western countries were united in their support for Ukraine. In a cabinet meeting, he said, "All attempts by Russia to split the European Union, and to stop the European Union and United States from agreeing, were doomed to failure." He continued by demanding that Russia stop supplying weapons to Ukraine's rebels.

Geopolitical crisis as civilian airliner is shot down --

The landscape in eastern Ukraine took a disturbing turn on July 17, 2014, when a civilian passenger aircraft traveling from Netherlands to Malaysia went down in eastern Ukraine. All 298 people aboard the Boeing 777 airliner perished when Malaysian Airlines flight 17

crashed in the rebel-held territory of Donetsk close to the Russian border. Among the dead were nationals the Netherlands, Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, Australia, New Zealand, United Kingdom, Germany, Belgium, Canada, and United States among others. It was unclear if Americans were on board the flight. That event raised the stakes in the ongoing crisis in eastern Ukraine. Indeed, it augured a geopolitical landmine as Ukraine said that Malaysian Airlines flight 17 bound from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur was shot down.

By far, the Netherlands suffered the greatest blow with the vast majority of the passengers aboard Malaysian Airlines flight 17 being from that country. Included in the dead was the Dutch senator Willem Witteveen as well as the world's leading HIV/AIDS researcher, Professor Joep Lange. In fact, as many as 100 HIV/AIDS activists and researchers were on the flight as they were scheduled to attend a conference in Australia. Their collective deaths were sure to strike a damaging blow to the global effort to fight the devastating HIV/AIDS disease.

For his part, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte said, "I am deeply shocked by the dramatic reports on the crash of Malaysia Airlines MH17" while King Willem-Alexander expressed his heartfelt condolences about the tragedy.

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In Malaysia, the loss of Flight 17 presented a painful blow to Malaysia Airlines, which earlier in the year suffered the mysterious disappearance of Flight 370, which was traveling from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing.

Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak gave voice the sentiment felt by his citizens as he said, "This is a tragic day, in what has already been a tragic year, for Malaysia." But the Malaysian head of government also expressed his shock and outrage over the fate of Flight 17, saying via the social media outlet Twitter, "I am shocked by reports that an MH plane crashed. We are launching an immediate investigation." Demanding justice, he was also on the record declaring, "If it transpires that the plane was indeed shot down, we insist that the perpetrators must swiftly be brought to justice."

Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko said in a statement that he would call for an immediate investigation into the fate of the of the flight. While there was some hesitation at first from the Ukrainian president to attribute the crash of the civilian airliner to a missile attack, he was soon unconditionally accusing "terrorists" in the eastern part of the country of shooting down Malaysian Airlines flight 17.

Via the social media outlet, Twitter, Poroshenko declared: "MH-17 is not an incident or catastrophe, it is a terrorist attack."

The government of Ukraine also pointed to the fact that pro-Russian separatists had shot down a military transport plane only days earlier (discussed above). In fact, pro-Russian separatists have themselves been quite forthright about their efforts to target aircrafts entering "their" self-declared air space. To reiterate some of the coverage from above, a month earlier in mid-June 2014, pro-Russian separatists shot down a Ukrainian army transport plane as it was landing at the Luhansk airport in the eastern part of the country, killing as many as 50 troops. At that time, pro-Russians showed little regret, with one separatist saying to Reuters News, "This is how we work. The fascists can bring as many reinforcements as they want but we will do this every time. We will talk to them on our own terms."

In regards to the events of July 17, 2014, United States authorities were soon corroborating claims that the flight had gone down as a result of a missile attack. United States officials confirmed that based on its tracking of the missile's final trajectory from infra-red sensors on a spy satellite, a surface-to-air missile had indeed been used to impact the Malaysian airliner, which was flying at about 30,000 feet at the time. United States authorities stopped short of attributing blame to any group, while making it clear that the missile attack was deliberate. Indeed, United States Vice President Joe Biden expressly stated that the Malaysia Airlines jet was apparently "blown out of the sky."

Leaders of the rebel-held and self-declared Donetsk People's Republic denied being behind the missile attack on Malaysian Airline flight 17, with one representative saying to the international media, "We simply do not have such air defense systems." He also noted that their shoulder-launched Man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADs) have the limited range of 4000 meters (around 13,000 feet). It was certainly true that MANPADs are typically used by insurgent and terrorist movements worldwide on low-flying aircrafts, and in this case, Flight 17 was known to be traveling at the altitude of 30,000 feet.

But Ukraine was accusing the pro-Russian rebels of using more sophisticated missile launchers, such as the Russian anti-aircraft Buk system (vis a vis MANPADs). The Buk system dates back to the 1970s; it is a radar-guided missile system, typically mounted on a truck, and codenamed SA-11 Gadfly. This system was absolutely capable of the range needed to hit a plane flying at an altitude of 30,000 feet. Ukraine was thus placing the blame at Russia for providing separatists with such sophisticated military equipment.

Worthy of note was the fact that the United States has for several months been sounding the alarm about Russia transporting heavy weaponry into eastern Ukraine. To recapitulate what was discussed above, pro-Russian separatists have had access to significant military equipment -- a disturbing revelation for a so-called "grassroots"

separatist movement. All expectations were that Russia was the likely source of such military resources. In June 2014, the United States Department of State made the assertion that separatists in eastern Ukraine had acquired heavy weapons and military equipment from Russia, and specified that these resources included Russian tanks and multiple rocket launchers. At the time, NATO warned of consequences if these claims were verified.

Meanwhile, the accusations from Ukraine were bolstered by an unabashed claim of responsibility by a pro-Russian separatist leader in Donetsk. Igor Girkin (also known by the name of Strelkov) proudly claimed credit for shooting down an aircraft near the border of Russia around the same time the Malaysian Airlines flight went down. According to the Kiev Post, he proudly said, "The plane has just been taken down somewhere around Torez (Donetsk Oblast). It lays there behind the Progress mine. We did warn you — do not fly in our sky." It could not be confirmed if he was actually referring to the Malaysian Airlines flight, mistaking it for a Ukrainian military jet, or another aircraft entirely.

While Strelkov was prepared to brag about taking down what he believed to be a Ukrainian aircraft, such hubris can sometimes have deadly consequences. It was to be seen if Girkin would continue to claim responsibility now that close to 300 civilians were dead as a result of a plane going down in the same area he was targeting. It was possible that he and his Donetsk People's Army mis-identified Malaysian Airlines flight 17 for a Ukrainian army plane; as such, he might recant the claim of responsibility once the geopolitical implications of accidentally shooting down a passenger vessel became clear.

This version of the events that transpired -- that is, an accidental missile assault on a passenger jet misidentified as a Ukrainian military aircraft -- was further augmented by leaked recordings of a pro-Russian rebel commander talking to a Russian intelligence officer in which the pro-Russian separatists admit that they accidentally shot down a passenger aircraft.

Along a related vein, the security services of Ukraine released three intercepted telephone conversations, which that country said proved that pro-Russian separatists were responsible for downing the Malaysian airliner.

In one recording, a pro-Russian separatist commander, Igor Bezler, was heard telling Russian military intelligence officer, Vasili Geranin, "We have just shot down a plane. That was Miner's group. It fell down outside Yenakievo." In the second recording, two separatists were heard confirming that the missile attack was carried out by a unit to the north of the crash site. In the third recording, supposedly between a local separatist leader and a militant, the following statement is heard in relation to the downed flight: "Well then it was bringing spies. Why the hell were they flying? There is a war going on."

It should be noted that both Russia and allied pro-Russian separatists denied any responsibility for the downing of Flight 17, irrespective of the material detailed in the leaked recordings mentioned just above. In fact, some pro-Russian separatist leaders were going so far as to suggest that Ukraine's armed forces may have shot down the plane, regardless of the fact that Ukraine was emphatic about the fact that it was not launching any missile attacks at the time.

The full facts of the tragedy were yet to be determined, but that process of fact-finding promised to be slow (and likely hindered) by rebel separatists unwilling to aid the West, and certainly unlikely to assist in a process that might ultimately implicate them as the culprits behind the downing of Malaysian Airlines aircraft.

There were attempts from the countries of the West to internationalize the fact-finding mission and evidence procurement effort, in order to preserve the crash site as best as possible. However, the pro-Russian separatists were showing little indication that they would be willing to relinquish control over the territory where the crash site was located. In fact, they displayed little interest in assuaging the humanitarian concerns of the global community by simply respecting the bodies of the dead.



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The fact of the matter was that the crash site was in the center of a war zone and under the control of rebels unfriendly to the West. Questions thus erupted as to why a commercial airliner would be flying about a conflict zone. It should, however, be noted that the flight path followed by Malaysian Airlines flight 17 was an established one for aircrafts traveling from Europe to Asia, and at an accepted level of 30,000 feet altitude. Thus it was difficult to apportion blame to Malaysian Airlines when it was compliant with prevailing guidelines. That being said, some countries such as United States authorities had earlier ordered its airliners to avoid flying over the Crimea region and eastern Ukraine, given the hostilities ongoing in that region of the world. Several other airliners from around the world, however, continued to fly over the volatile region. Now, with the tragedy of Flight 17, Ukraine closed its air space over the eastern part of the country.

The United Nations Security Council held an emergency meeting on the situation in Ukraine on July 18, 2014. In that emergency session, there was a call from the Security Council for a "full, thorough and independent international investigation" into the downing of Malaysian Airlines flight 17, as well as "appropriate accountability" for those responsible. However, with the exception of these broad terms, the emergency session was marked by dissonance and acrimony as envoys from Kiev and Moscow respectively blamed each other for the tragedy.

Russia blamed the crash of Malaysian Airlines flight 17 on Ukraine for carrying out its offensive operations in the eastern part of the country against pro-Russian separatists. At home, Russian President Vladimir Putin was emphasizing this claim as he accused Ukraine of creating the conditions for the uprising in eastern Ukraine that culminated with this tragedy.

But Ukraine dismissed this line of reasoning, characterizing the downing of a civilian airliner as an "act of terrorism" and releasing further intercepted phone recordings that it said proved Malaysian Airlines flight 17 was shot down by pro-Russian separatists. Yuriy Sergeyev, Ukraine's ambassador to the United Nations, went further by implicating Russia for the deaths of almost 300 people as he said that the attack have been impossible were it not for Russia's decision to provide sophisticated anti-aircraft missile systems to extremists. At home in Ukraine, the government underlined its accusations against Russia, announcing that it was in possession of "compelling evidence" that the missile launcher was not simply provided by Russia, but also operated by Russian citizens, who transferred the truck-mounted Buk system back over the border into Russia.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov dismissed any claims that his country was to blame, and instead accused Ukraine of dishonesty as he declared in an interview with Russian media, "I have not heard a truthful statement from Kiev for months."

During the emergency session of the Security Council on July 18, 2014, the United States added its voice to the accusations that pro-Russia separatists in eastern Ukraine were behind the downing of the Malaysian Airlines jetliner. United States Ambassador to the United Nations, Samantha Power, said there was "credible evidence" that a Russian-built anti-aircraft system located in a separatist stronghold had fired the missile that destroyed the commercial Boeing 777 airliner and was thus responsible for the killing of all 298 people aboard.

United States President Barack Obama expanded on the claims of Ambassador Power, saying that a surface-to-air missile fired from territory controlled by pro-Russian separatists was responsible for the tragic fate of Flight 17 and cast the missile attack as "an outrage of unspeakable proportions." The United States president asserted that he would make sure that the real story of Malaysian Airlines flight 17 was told. He said, "This was a global tragedy... The eyes of the world are on eastern Ukraine, and we are going to make sure that the truth is out." In a clear prod to his European counterparts who have been unwilling to press too hard on Russian President Putin for economic reasons, President Obama added that the downing of the Malaysian jetliner by Russian-backed separatists should act as a "wake-up call for Europe and the world" to act more assertively. President Obama also demanded that Russia cease its flow of both weapons and fighters into eastern Ukraine. For Americans wary of further international engagement, President Obama foreclosed the notion of United States military intervention into the Ukrainian crisis; however, he made it clear that he was prepared to be more aggressive in its sanctions regime against Russia.

With outrage rising among the people of Europe, some leaders across the Atlantic were stirred to stake out firmer positions against Russia. Germany warned that Russia was now being presented with its last chance to cooperate, while the United Kingdom indicated that the European Union should rethink its hitherto cautious approach to Russia, given the emerging corpus of evidence pointing to Russian culpability. Following a meeting of the European Union's Foreign Council, a statement from the office of United Kingdom Prime Minister David Cameron was issued. Referring to the decision makers at that meeting, the statement read as follows: "They ... agreed that the EU must reconsider its approach to Russia and that foreign ministers should be ready to impose further sanctions on Russia."

The outrage in Europe rose to levels of furor on July 19, 2014. On that day, news broke that personnel from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) were prevented by pro-Russian separatists from doing their work to secure the crash site and collect the bodies of the victims.

In fact, a member of the OSCE team charged that the Russian-backed separatists behaved in an unprofessional manner and exhibited a lack of respect for the bodies of the victims. In an interview with journalists, Michael Bociurkiw, said: "Unfortunately the task was made very difficult. Upon arrival at the site ... we encountered armed personnel who acted in a very impolite and unprofessional manner. Some of them even looked slightly intoxicated." He also said the bodies of the victims had been left exposed to the elements.

United States Secretary of State John Kerry vociferously condemned pro-Moscow separatists at the crash sites in eastern Ukraine for their poor treatment of the remains of victims. In an interview with NBC News, he angrily said, "Drunken separatists have been piling bodies into trucks and removing them from the site...What's happening is really grotesque and it is contrary to everything President Putin and Russia said they would do." Kerry's counterpart in the United Kingdom, Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond, issued the following warning in an interview with Sky Television; "Russia risks becoming a pariah state if it does not behave properly." Dutch Prime Minister Rutte said he was "furious" about the disrespectful treatment of the corpses of the victims.

By July 20, 2014, there was some progress at the crash site with emergency workers being allowed to place dozens of bodies in bags and prepare them for removal. However, there was concomitant anxiety that the priority of pro-Russian separatists was to hide evidence related to the downing of Flight 17. To that end, Andriy Lysenko, a member of Ukraine's Security Council, accused the pro-Russians of a cover-up as he said in an interview with Ukrainian media, "The terrorists are doing everything to hide the evidence of the involvement of Russian missiles in the shooting down of that airliner." The announcement from the self-declared leader of Donetsk, Aleksander Borodai, that the Boeing 777's "black boxes" were now in his hands did little to assuage those concerns. According to international law, that flight recording equipment technically belonged to Malaysia and should have been immediately turned over to that country. On July 21, 2014, with international pressure on the rise, pro-Russian separatists finally turned over the "black boxes" to the International Civil Aviation Organization.

Meanwhile, at the United Nations Security Council, a draft resolution condemning the missile attack against Malaysian Airlines flight 17 was under consideration. The resolution would reportedly demand that emergency personnel be allowed access to the crash site, and call on all regional parties to cooperate with an international investigation. Because such a basic resolution was not imbued by controversy, all expectations were that it would be adopted. However, it was to be seen if further action at the Security Council would include determining responsibility for the tragedy, given the fact that Russia held veto power on that body.

As discussed here, one likely avenue of action involved even harsher sanctions by the West against Russia. The Obama administration had already announced punitive sanctions against major Russian firms with close ties to Putin only days before. Now, the United States could well intensify those measures unilaterally without having to deal with the United Nations Security Council, which in recent years has metamorphosed into an impasse-ridden body without any productive means to resolve major global conflicts.

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With some 300 innocent civilians now paying the price in blood for the conflict in eastern Ukraine, and with the problematic behavior of pro-Russian separatists at the crash site, it was possible that the rest of the international community might close ranks and present a unified front in confronting Russian interference into Ukrainian affairs. Stated differently, the tragedy could well be a tipping point of sorts in the Ukrainian conflict.

Outrage from families of the victims was certainly intensifying, particularly from the Netherlands, which endured the heaviest death toll. In an address to the United Nations, Dutch Foreign Minister H.E. Frans Timmermans drew attention to the shocking treatment of the bodies of the crash victims in eastern Ukraine, saying: To my dying day I will not understand that it took so much time for the rescue workers to be allowed to do their difficult jobs and that human remains should be used in a political game. I hope the world will not have to witness this again, any time in the future." Foreign Minister Timmermans promised that the day of accountability would come in the future, saying, "Once the investigation ascertains who was responsible for the downing of the flight MH17, accountability and justice must be pursued and delivered. We owe that to the victims; we owe it to justice; we owe it to humanity. Please, provide full cooperation, so that justice can be served. My country will not rest until all facts are known and justice is served."

The mission to find who was responsible for the deaths of the victims was being augmented by the United States. President Barack Obama visited the Dutch embassy in Washington D.C. to offer his condolences personally and promised to "stand shoulder to shoulder" with the Netherlands in its time of need. To this end, United States Secretary of State John Kerry was stepping up his country's claims that Russia was complicit in the downing of Flight 17 by providing the separatists with sophisticated anti-aircraft systems.

In the last week of July 2014, Ukrainian forces were making strides in the eastern part of the country, recapturing territory in Torez and Shakhtarsk and certainly challenging pro-Russian separatists who have held sway there for months. In fact, Ukrainian forces were bearing down on the very area where Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 went down as a result of a Russian-supplied Buk missile system. But because of fighting in the region, the area of the crash was yet to be secured and emergency personnel and investigators were yet to complete their work, which included the recovery of human remains. At the same time, the conflict was yielding a price in blood with both Ukrainian soldiers and pro-Russian fighters dying as battles intensified in eastern Ukraine.

Among pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine, the self-proclaimed leader of Donetsk was tacitly admitting that they were enduring tactical losses in the period following the downing of Malaysian Airline Flight 17.

Borodai retreated to Moscow for "consultations" and re-emerged in eastern Ukraine with reinforcements in the form of Vladimir Antyufeyev (also known as Vadim Shevtsov), who was immediately named "deputy prime minister." A native Russian,

Antyufeyev was a major player in Russia's effort to support pro-Russian separatists in the breakaway territory of Trans-Dnestria in Moldova.

These moves indicated that Moscow was at the center of the eastern Ukrainian separatist movement -- not only symbolically, or even practically in terms of providing heavy military weaponry (which the United States said was arriving in greater quantity in eastern Ukraine from Russia), but also tactically and politically as it was quite literally directing the separatist movement. Indeed, Ukrainians with pro-Russian sensibilities were being shifted out of leadership roles in favor of Russians. As such, there could be no illusions about Russian centrality in the Ukrainian crisis. Indeed, there could be no illusions about the fact that the mission to "protect" Russian speakers in eastern Ukraine was just a proxy cause for a Russian war with Ukraine for daring to move out of Moscow's orbit. Ultimately, this engagement in Ukraine was aimed at reconstituting what Vladimir Putin's vision of "new Russia."

Accountability, responsibility, culpability, and new sanctions against Russia --

United States Secretary of State John Kerry was on the record on July 20, 2014, saying that separatists in eastern Ukraine used a surface-to-air missile from Russia to shoot down Malaysia Airlines flight 17.

In an interview with CNN, Kerry said that the United States had evidence of heavy weapons material being transferred from Russia into eastern Ukraine. The weapons and equipment at stake included a 150-vehicle convoy of armored personnel carriers, tanks, and rocket launchers, which were given to the separatists. Kerry also noted that the United States had access to intercepted conversations about the transfer of the Russian radar-guided SA-11 missile system to the pro-Russian separatists, saying, "It's pretty clear that this is a system that was transferred from Russia into the hands of separatists." In a separate interview with CBS News, Kerry said, "There's enormous amount of evidence, even more evidence that I just documented, that points to the involvement of Russia in providing these systems...training the people on them."

Kerry also dismissed separatists' accusations that Ukraine was behind the downing of the Boeing 777, noting that the United States knew "with confidence" that the Ukrainian government had no Buk missile launcher in the area of the attack.

Accordingly, the United States' top diplomat echoed President Obama's challenge to Europe that it act more aggressively. John Kerry said, "It would help enormously if some countries in Europe that have been a little reluctant to move would now recognize this wakeup call and join the United States and President Obama in taking the lead, and also stepping up."

By July 22, 2014, United States officials had confirmed that the missile that brought down Malaysian Airline flight 17, leading to the deaths of 298 innocent civilians, was fired from an area in eastern Ukraine under pro-Russian separatist control. United States authorities stopped short of accusing Russia of being behind the firing of the fatal missile; however, the Obama administration said its rationale for the latest tranche of sanctions was motivated by the fact that Russia continued to arm the pro-Russian separatists. Moreover, the Obama administration was adamant in noting that even after the tragedy of Flight 17, there continued to be a steady flow of arms from Russia into eastern Ukraine -- including heavy weaponry such as missile systems.

With the people of the West demanding a stronger response from their leaders in regard to the downing of Malaysian Airline Flight 17, including accountability for those responsible, attention refocused on wider sanctions against Russia. As noted by United Kingdom Prime Minister David Cameron, "The latest information from the region suggests that even since MH17 was shot down, Russia continues to transfer weapons across the border and to provide practical support to the separatists." Cameron argued that harsher measures against Russia were necessary as he said, "Leaders agreed that the international community should therefore impose further costs on Russia and specifically that ambassadors from across the EU should agree a strong package of sectoral sanctions as swiftly as possible."

To that end, on July 29, 2014, the United States and Europe imposed wider sanctions on Russia's financial, defense, and energy sectors. The sweeping punitive measures by the United States included accentuated sanctions against Russian banks, including the Bank of Moscow and the Russian Agriculture Bank, as well as defense firms. The measures also included a ban on technology sales to the Russian oil industry, which would negatively impact the future development of the energy sector. Across the Atlantic, Europe moved from limited sanctions against individuals to restricting the trade of equipment for the energy and defense industries, and to limiting "dual use" technology that would employ civilian and defense purposes. Also included in the new sanctions regime was a ban on Russia's state-run banks from raising funds in European capital markets.

The new sanctions would be future tracked and thus not affect "in process" contracts such as France's sale of military carriers to Russia. Nevertheless, there would still inflict pain on certain European firms, such as British Petroleum, which had a significant stake in the Russian oil company, Rosneft. Also affected would be a slate of European banks holding Russian credit accounts. German Chancellor Merkel had long been reluctant to go down

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the road of harsh sanctions due to the potential harm to Germany manufacturing firms; but now she deemed the punitive measures against Russia to be "unavoidable." To be sure, the deleterious consequence of sanctions had been weighed in the European capitals since the start of the Ukrainian crisis; but they were ultimately deemed worth the price in the face of so many deaths on Flight 17, and in the interests of long-term regional security.

Also at stake was the matter of Western credibility. To that end, the complementary measures from the United States and Europe stood as the strongest international action against Russia. They certainly constituted a show of solidarity from the West in the face of escalating Russian engagement in the crisis in eastern Ukraine.

For its part, Russia lashed back rhetorically, accusing the United States of a "slander campaign," and warning that there would be decreased cooperation on regional security while members of parliament were drafting counter-measures to be levied against "aggressor countries." As well, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov was already on the record dismissing the measures. At a news conference, Lavrov said, "We will overcome any difficulties that may arise in certain areas of the economy, and maybe we will become more independent and more confident in our own strength."

In truth, however, the Russian economy was not in the best of health and the added pressure posed by this harsher tranche of sanctions would not aid Russia. In fact, unlike the targeted sanctions already in effect, these sectoral sanctions could potentially inflict notable damage on the already-weak Russian economy. As noted by United States President Obama in an address after the new sanctions against Russia were announced, "The sanctions that we've already imposed have made a weak Russian economy even weaker." President Obama also promised further action against Russia saying, "If Russia continues on this current path, the costs on Russia will continue to grow."

While the new sanctions regime would undoubtedly ensure that Russia felt a strong dose of economic punishment, there was also the question of whether there would be a penalty to be paid in the realm of international jurisprudence. While Russia appeared to have escaped unscathed from violating Ukrainian sovereignty and annexing Crimea, Russia's active continued engagement in the conflict in eastern Ukraine, as well as Russia's culpability in the downing of Malaysian Airlines Flight 17, were still matters demanding a response. At the humanitarian level, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, noted that the downing of the Malaysian airliner by pro-Russian separatists using a Russian missile system would likely be classified as a war crime.

For its part, Russia parried Western sanctions with some of its own. On Aug. 6, 2014, Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered that restrictions be placed on agricultural and food imports from Western countries for one year. While the impact on Western trade would be felt, there would also be an impact at home in Russia, which relied on food imports. Presumably, Russia would look to friendlier countries for food imports, such as the leftist autocratic regime of Venezuela, or perhaps Asia to the east.

## Military Note:

At the start of August 2014, Ukrainian government forces advanced on the eastern part of the country, forcing pro-Russian separatists into fierce battles on the outer perimeter of the separatist stronghold of Donetsk. Already, Ukrainian government forces had surrounded Luhansk. By the second week of August 2014, Ukrainian fighter jets were carrying out strikes on Donetsk, although the government of Ukraine made it clear that it was not **bombing** any populated areas. While Russia retained control over Crimea, it was evident that the momentum was now with Ukraine as it fought to retake the rest of its eastern territory from pro-Russian fighters. It should be noted that, according to sources from Kiev, almost all these fighters were being "led" not by local eastern Ukrainian separatists but, instead, Russian citizens.

The fighting, however, was making it difficult for responders to do the job of collecting the human remains of the victims of the tragic downing of Malaysian Airline Flight 17. To this end, United Kingdom Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond called on to Russian President Vladimir Putin to persuade the rebels to stop interfering with the international experts who were carrying out the difficult recovery effort at the site Flight 17's wreckage. He said, "It is an unspeakable abomination that, two weeks after this crash, there are still bodies on the crash site unrecovered and the Russians have not used their influence with the separatists." He continued, "I said last week that there is one man who can snap his fingers and make this happen and he hasn't done so. He must now do so." But in fact, that work was brought to a halt by Aug. 7, 2014, as the fighting in the region increased. As noted by Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, "It doesn't make sense to continue the repatriation in this manner."

On Aug. 10, 2014, the Ukrainian military was pounding targets in the major pro-Russian rebel stronghold of Donetsk. A spokesperson from the Ukrainian military, Oleksiy Dmytrashkivsky, said that several strikes on enemy pro-Russian positions were being carried out. He said, "A large number of enemy hardware and personnel was destroyed. Panic and chaos have been noted among the terrorists." The offensive by Ukrainian forces was so intense, creating some degree of a siege scenario, that up to 300,00 residents had fled the city. As well, several rebel fighters apparently deserted the rebel militias.

Alexander Zakharchenko, the new prime minister of the self-proclaimed Donetsk people's republic (a local who was attempting to ensure the separatist operation remained in the hands of locals and not under Moscow's control), was calling for a humanitarian ceasefire to ensure basic supplies -- such as food, water, and medicine -- could enter the area of Donbass where fighting was going on. He said, "We are ready for a ceasefire to prevent the proliferation of a humanitarian disaster in Donbass." However, he was adamant in noting that a humanitarian ceasefire was not a surrender and the effort would continue to defend Donetsk for pro-Russians. Soon, the notion of a ceasefire was abandoned and Zakharchenko was claiming his forces would launch a counter-offensive against Ukrainian forces. But by Aug. 11, 2014, Ukrainian authorities said they were in the "final stages" of recapturing Donetsk.

Elsewhere in the other rebel stronghold of Luhansk, which was closer to the Russian border, many residents had left or were living under desperate conditions since the electrical power system was no longer functional, while food and health supplies were scarce. As well, Ukrainian military forces had gained control over the road between Luhansk and Donetsk, essentially restricting the flow of separatists' weapons in the region.

While Ukrainian military forces were clearly on the offensive, Russia was not about to quietly retreat with the consolation prize of Crimea alone.

In an apparent response to the momentum from Ukrainian government forces, Russia reportedly placed tanks, artillery, air defense systems, aircrafts, and special forces along Ukraine's border. NATO warned that up to 20,000 combat-ready Russian troops were now amassing along Ukraine's border. In a statement, NATO spokesperson Oana Lungescu, said, "We're not going to guess what's on Russia's mind, but we can see what Russia is doing on the ground — and that is of great concern. Russia has amassed around 20,000 combat-ready troops on Ukraine's eastern border." NATO also added that Russia could well use the same argument of "protecting" the Russian ethno-linguistic population to move into eastern Ukraine in a ground assault. Indeed, Russia had a record of exploiting that rationale as shown by its actions in Georgian enclaves in 2008 and as illustrated by the annexation of Crimea from Ukraine months earlier in 2014.

As of mid-August 2014, heavy fighting was reported to be going on close to Donetsk with Luhansk under the proverbial gun. Given the landscape in Donetsk and Luhansk, there was rising anxiety that Russia would use the situation and the notion of a humanitarian mission to intervene in eastern Ukraine.

NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen reminded the global community that Russian troops remained amassed on the Ukrainian border and said in an interview with Reuters interview that there was "a high probability" of a Russian military intervention. He said, "We see the Russians developing the narrative and the pretext for such

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an operation under the guise of a humanitarian operation, and we see a military build-up that could be used to conduct such illegal military operations in Ukraine."

Likewise, United State President Barack Obama said that any form of Russian intervention into Ukrainian territory without the consent from the Ukrainian government in Kiev would constitute a violations of international law. The European Commission also delivered its own warning with President Jose Manuel Barroso during a phone call with Vladimir Putin. In a statement, the European Commission summarized the conversation as follows: "President Barroso warned against any unilateral military actions in Ukraine, under any pretext, including humanitarian."

There was little actual hope that Russia was heed these messages and, the Kremlin made it clear that it would deploy a convoy to eastern Russia purportedly carrying humanitarian aid.

By Aug. 13, 2014, the movement of that Russian convoy was slowed when Ukrainian officials made it clear that they would not allow the trucks to move into Ukrainian territory. Via his Russian Facebook page, Ukrainian Interior Minister Arsen Avakov wrote, "Provocation by a cynical aggressor is not permissible on our territory." Reports from the ground said that the convoy had stopped in the area of Voronezh area, while other reports indicated that the convoy had diverted to the south. Prime Minister Arseny Yatsenyuk characterized the Russian aid convoy as a measure of "boundless cynicism." He said, "First they deliver tanks, Grad rocket launchers, terrorists and bandits..., and then they deliver water and salt."

A day later on Aug. 14, 2014, Ukrainian forces were bearing down on Donetsk, quite literally encircling the city. As well, for the first time, shelling hit the city center. As well, Ukrainian forces took control of the settlement of Novosvitlivka, the remaining route used by the separatists to travel between Luhansk and Donetsk. It was a clear strategic gain for Ukraine.

Meanwhile, two leading separatist commanders aligned with Moscow resigned from their posts. Of note was the resignation of the well known Colonel Igor Strelkov (also known as known as Igor Girkin) who was regarded as the defense chief in the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic, but who was also believed to be a Russian intelligence officer. As well, Valery Bolotov, the head of the self-proclaimed rebel government in Luhansk, announced he was stepping down due to injuries. These two moves seemed to suggest the pro-Russian leadership in the two rebel separatist strongholds of Luhansk and Donetsk was in shambles, presumably because of the Ukrainian military offensive.

Ukrainian forces enjoyed a victory in the former separatist stronghold of Luhansk, which continued to be under siege as of Aug. 18, 2014. While street fighting was still apparently going on in the city, Ukrainian forces were able to raise their national flag over the Zhovtneviy police station in Luhansk. Control over Luhansk would be regarded as a crucial development since it is a major venue along the supply route from Russia into eastern Ukraine. Not all the news was postive for Ukraine as, once again, pro-Russian separatists were able to shoot down a Ukrainian warplane in eastern Ukraine.

The action was also intensifying in Donetsk where the prime minister of the self-declared republic, Alexander Zakharchenko, expressed his confidence in holding the area. He pointed to the fact that his fighters would soon have access to 150 armored vehicles, including 30 tanks, and 1,200 Russian-trained fighters, who would aid in a major counter-offensive intended to stave off ascendant Ukrainian forces. His remarks should put paid to continuing claims by Russia that it was not supplying pro-Russian separatists with arms and armies. Yet despite Zakharchenko's declaration on video that "they are joining at the most crucial moment" a spokesperson for Russian President Putin, Dmitry Peskov, issued the following statement: "We have repeatedly said that we don't supply any equipment there."

Note that as of Aug. 19, 2014, Dontesk stood at the center of the battle between Ukrainian government forces and pro-Russian separatists. A gun battle in the middle of the city actually forced residents to flee the scene, as the

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fight to reclaim eastern Ukraine was now situated in the most significant stronghold for pro-Russian separatists. Regardless, the fighting in Donetsk had deadly consequences with artillery fire striking apartment buildings, and killing and wounding residents as a result.

In Yasynuvata, to the north of Donetsk, Ukrainian forces took control there by recapturing a railway junction. However, fighting between the two sides continued elsewhere in the town. Fighting was also reported in Ilovaisk and Torez, with both sides issuing competing claims that they had the advantage.

While fighting continued in eastern Ukraine, the foreign ministers of Ukraine, Russia, France, and Germany had been meeting to try to achieve a ceasefire. For Ukraine, France, and Germany, a main issue at the gathering was the problem of fighters and arms crossing over the border from Russia into Ukrainian territory. However, it was unclear how that objective would be achieved when, as indicated above, Russia has refused to fully acknowledge its active involvement in the Ukrainian crisis. Also of note has been the fact that as Ukrainian forces achieve military victories against pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine, the incentive to forge any kind of deal with Russia has been lessened to some extent.

Still, it was to be seen if some diplomatic breakthrough could be reached at a summit in Belarus set for Aug. 26, 2014. While that event was aimed at discussing relations between the European Union and the eastern European customs union, it would nonetheless be attended by both Russian President Putin and Ukrainian President Poroshenko, with the Ukrainian crisis at the center of the agenda.

Ahead of that meeting in Belarus, Ukraine marked its independence celebration on Aug. 24, 2014, with a military parade in Kiev. As well, President Poroshenko offered a passionate national address in which he said his country was fighting "a war against external aggression, for Ukraine, for its freedom, for its people, for independence." He warned of a future in which Ukraine would have to defend itself against that external aggression from Russia, saying, "It is clear that in the foreseeable future, unfortunately, a constant military threat will hang over Ukraine. And we need to learn not only to live with this, but also to be always prepared to defend the independence of our country."

Pro-Russian separatists retaliated by marching captured Ukrainian troops through their stronghold of Donetsk. Residents both heckled and threw bottles at the prisoners of war who were presented in the public square for ridicule. But Donetsk was soon returned to a site of conflict with fierce fighting reported on Aug. 24 and 25, 2014.

NATO accuses Russia of violating Ukraine's sovereignty amidst rising fears of Russian invasion:

In the last week of August 2014, Russia again announced it would be sending another "humanitarian" convoy into Ukraine. This gesture -- like the previous humanitarian convoy -- was likely to be interpreted by the Ukrainian government as an invasion of Ukrainian territory.

Meanwhile, fighting in eastern Ukraine was not limited to the two main fronts of Donetsk and Luhansk. The Ukrainian military said that it engaged armored vehicles that crossed into Ukraine from Russia and were moving in the direction of the port city of Mariupol on the Azov Sea. The Ukrainian military said the pro-Russian separatists might be attempting to open a new front in the conflict and accordingly intercepted the column of armored vehicles at Novoazovsk. Ultimately, however, pro-Russian separatists were able to seize control of Novoazovsk. Elsewhere -- in the village of Markyne -- dangerous clashes were reported to be taking place. Meanwhile, Russian forces reportedly destroyed almost every home in the town of Novosvitlivka close to the separatist stronghold of Luhansk.

As August 2014 was drawing to a close, there were fierce battles going on in Mariupol as separatists clearly were moving to open up a third major front. However, Ukrainian government troops were determined to hold control on Mariupol and deny the pro-Russians a foothold there. Andriy Lysenko, a military spokesperson, said that Ukrainian forces would rally to defend Mariupol. He said, "Fortifications are being built. Local people are coming out to help our troops, to stop the city being taken. We are ready to repel any offensive on Mariupol."



But even with the defensive effort at Mariupol, Ukraine was being subject to Russian aggression. On Aug. 29, 2014, NATO accused Russia of violating Ukraine's sovereignty and becoming embroiled in military operations in support of pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine. In truth, the Russian presence and involvement in the eastern Ukraine conflict had been well-known for some time. However, rather than a clandestine effort, now the Russian engagement was a far more direct operation. At issue were satellite images released by NATO showing columns of Russian armed forces inside Ukrainian territory. NATO warned that more than 1,000 Russian troops were now operating inside Ukraine.

NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen made it clear that "despite hollow denials," Russia had illegally crossed Ukraine's border and violated Ukraine's sovereignty. Rasmussen said, "This is not an isolated action, but part of a dangerous pattern over many months to destabilize Ukraine as a sovereign nation." He continued, "This is a blatant violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. It defies all diplomatic efforts for a peaceful solution."

For his part, Ukrainian President Poroshenko warned that his country was "close to a point of no return" with "full scale-war" in the offing. Speaking from Belgium where he was attending a meeting with European Union leaders, Poroshenko explained that Ukraine was a victim of "military aggression and terror."

In response to Russian aggression, Ukraine declared its intent to apply for membership in NATO. Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseny Yatsenyuk said he would introduce a bill in parliament that would call for the cancellation of Ukraine's non-aligned status, and thus set the path for Ukraine to join NATO. It was a move sure to anger and outrage Russia, which has long been concerned about Ukraine's alignment with the West. Ironically, though, it was precisely Russia's aggression and interference into Ukrainian affairs that was driving Ukraine westward -- out of Russia's orbit and towards Europe and the United States.

As August 2014 drew to a close, Russian President Vladimir Putin seemed determined to reverse that westward drift by force or will, if necessary. On Aug. 31, 2014, Putin called for negotiations on the "statehood" of southern and eastern Ukraine – underlining his stance that portions of Ukrainian territory should be removed from Kiev's jurisdiction. Around the same time, during a visit to a youth camp, he declared that Ukrainians and Russians were "practically one people, " essentially dismissing the particular historic legacy and cultural heritage of the Ukrainian nation.

Before the arrival of Russian troops and columns in eastern Ukraine, the conventional wisdom had been that Russian President Vladimir Putin would use the organic gains for Ukrainian forces to gently back away from his "New Russia" ambitions, and instead rest his imperial laurels upon the annexation of Crimea. But the apparent invasion of Ukraine by Russian troops suggested that Vladimir Putin was not about to retreat quietly from his visions of "New Russia."

It should be noted that while Putin was enjoying high approval ratings for his nationalist agenda at home in Russia, in the wider world, Russia's reputation internationally had suffered a cataclysmic meltdown. According to data compiled by Pew Research, a majority of respondents in Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East viewed Russia unfavorably. In Poland, for example, only 12 percent of people had a favorable view of Russia. The increase in hostility towards Russia from 2013 to 2014 was conceivably connected to Russia's lack of respect for Ukraine's territorial integrity, compounded by fears from European neighbors that they too might suffer at the hands of Russian aggression.

Would this global view have an impact on Russian policies? Governments in European capitals would no doubt take note of the unfavorable way in which their citizens now viewed Putin's Russia. Those governments could well be spurred to hold steady with the sanctions regime against Russia as a result. With Russia oil trading at \$100 a barrel and with the Russian budget being based on \$114 a barrel standard, and given the fact that Russia would

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now have to deal with increased military spending, the effects on the Russian economy at home would eventually be felt. It was to be seen if the effect would extend to Putin's domestic popularity.

Outside of Russia, however, Russian aggression in Ukraine was evoking negative reactions across Europe. Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaitė said Russia was "practically in a war against Europe." Recognizing the vulnerability of any eastern European country, she said: "We need to support Ukraine, and send military materials to help Ukraine defend itself. Today Ukraine is fighting a war on behalf of all Europe." Meanwhile, Poland denied permission for Russia's defense minister to fly over its air space following a trip to Slovakia.

The harshest condemnation of Russian aggression to date emanated from the president of Estonia. President Toomas Hendrik Ilves said: "Ukraine is under attack by the armed forces of the Russian Federation. This military aggression should finally dispel any doubts that Russia's words fail to match its actions." A statement from the office of the president issued the following declaration: "It is not possible to speak seriously of a diplomatic process or of ceasefire negotiations while one country has brought without permission its armed forces de facto into another, while refusing formally to admit its involvement in the conflict. The destabilization of Ukraine by Russia has continued for too long. Today, in addition to terrorists, clearly identifiable Russian military forces are operating in Eastern Ukraine. In other words, this is an undeclared war. Russia's actions are a clear violation of the United Nations Charter, the Helsinki Final Act and the Paris Charter. Western allies should agree on their part on the need to intervene in an even more determined way to protect Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity."

For its part, the European Union appeared poised to move forward with harsher sanctions against Russia. German Chancellor Angela Merkel said, "I have to say there is also an impact when you are allowed to move borders in Europe and attack other countries with your troops...Accepting Russia's behavior is not an option. And therefore it was necessary to prepare further sanctions."

Regardless of these excoriations and warnings, Russia for the time being remained undeterred by its global pariah status. Instead, Russian President Vladimir Putin was thrusting forward with his vision of "New Russia" irrespective of the actual sense of self-determination felt by the Ukrainian people, or the rebuke being issued by the international community.

NATO announces rapid reaction force and military exercises in eastern Europe:

On Sept. 4, 2014, at a NATO meeting in Wales, member states of the West agreed to form a new rapid reaction force intended to respond to crisis scenarios in NATO countries. Included in the rapid reaction force would be an agile and precise "spearhead" force consisting 4,000 to 5,000 troops, and capable of being deployed within 48 hours to any location across the Northern Atlantic alliance.

The head of NATO, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, said Russia's invasion of Ukraine's sovereignty had been the catalyst forcing NATO to move forward with the formation of the rapid-reaction force.

NATO also moved to intensify joint exercises in eastern Europe.

These actions were aimed at delivering reassurances to eastern European countries fearful of suffering a similar fate as Ukraine at the hands of Russian aggression. Of particular note were the Baltic states; these countries were particularly worried that Russian President Putin would use the same tactics -- the defense of ethno-linguistic Russians in the region -- as he used to justify Russia's invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea.

On Sept. 5, 2014, NATO followed up with its warning of intensifying joint exercises in eastern Europe by staging major military exercises in Latvia. The exercises were aimed at simulating a crisis deployment of NATO forces in a member state. It was an act intended to remind Russia that NATO was committed to defending all member states, especially those in the Baltics, from Russian aggression.

However, General Hans-Lothar Domrose, the commander of the NATO military command in the Netherlands, noted that the Latvian exercises were only part of the process as other NATO military exercises were set to take place in Estonia, Lithuania, Poland and Germany as well. Domrose explained, "We want to assure our people that we are able to protect them." He continued, "Certainly on top of this we send a clear message to everyone who wants to threaten NATO, that it's not a thing you should do. NATO will always defend and protect its people."

Predictably, Russia reacted unfavorably to NATO's announcements and promised that there would be increased tensions as a result. A statement from the Russian foreign ministry declared: "The essence and tone of [NATO] statements on the Ukraine situation, and the plans announced to hold joint NATO exercises with Kiev on the territory of that country before the end of 2014, will inevitably lead to heightened tension."

For his part, Russian President Putin reacted to the actions by NATO by claiming that the Northern Atlantic alliance was using the crisis in Ukraine to "resuscitate itself."

Fragile truce established and quickly violated in eastern Ukraine:

Meanwhile, as NATO enacted the aforementioned measures, negotiations were going on between Ukraine and pro-Russian separatists in Belarus to try to forge a ceasefire. Ironically, the ceasefire was being negotiated at a time when clashes were taking place in Donetsk and Mariupol.

Around the same time as the ceasefire negotiations were ongoing, the European Union was preparing fresh sanctions. The new measures included restrictions on the ability of Russian state-owned oil companies to raise money in European financial markets. Russia's so-called "leading" oil company, Rosneft, as well as Gazprom Neft, the oil component of the Gazprom natural gas monopoly, and the Transneft pipeline operator would all be affected; on the other hand, the natural gas sector was left out of this tranche of measures. The new sanctions also expanded on existing visa bans and asset freezes on Russian officials and pro-Russian activists in Ukraine. The timing of the implementation of the sanctions was left vague -- presumably to give time for a ceasefire to take either take root or dissolve.

Note that later in September 2014, the United States also expanded its sanctions against Russia. The United States' moves targeted oil and defense industries, while intensifying sanctions that have limited access of major Russian banks to United States debt and equity markets. (Of note was the fact that the financial sanctions targeted Russia's Sberbank.)

Meanwhile, on Sept. 5, 2014 after five months of fighting, thanks to the negotiations brokered by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the two sides were able to sign on to a truce in Belarus. The agreement, known as the Minsk Agreement, did not expressly deal with the positions of Ukrainian authorities and pro-Russian separatists -- namely, Kiev's right to holding onto its territorial integrity, or the separatists' breakaway aspirations. Still, the truce would bring an end to the fighting, and thus offer time for the two sides to work out a roadmap of sorts for longer term regional stability plan. Included in the agreement were provisions for an exchange of prisoners of war and the establishment of a humanitarian corridor for the transportation of aid and displaced persons.

For his part, Ukrainian President Poroshenko said he welcomed the ceasefire. Poroshenko said he and Russian President Putin had shared a phone call in which they agreed that "overall the ceasefire was being implemented" and that there was a need to make it more durable. Poroshenko noted, "It is very important that this ceasefire lasts long, and during this ceasefire we continue the political dialogue to bring peace and stability." Both President Poroshenko and United States President Barack Obama noted that the ceasefire was accomplished, at least partially, because of the sanctions imposed on Russia.

On Sept. 6, 2014, despite the prevailing ceasefire, pro-Russian separatists fired artillery at Ukrainian government forces close to the city of Mariupol. For several days leading up to the ceasefire, pro-Russian separatists had been targeting the strategic port city. Now, irrespective of the ceasefire, Mariupol -- which was under Ukrainian control -- was emerging as the new flashpoint city and one that could very well derail the new ceasefire agreement. For the rebels, it seemed that taking control over Mariupol, which was located on the highway to Crimea, was a strategic goal for pro-Russian separatists. However, for Ukraine, there was a high priority on holding that city and not ceding any further territory to Russia and pro-Russian separatists. Given Ukraine's determination to hold Mariupol, President Poroshenko himself traveled to the strategic city, where he promised that Mariupol would be reinforced and defended, and that any separatist attempt to advance on the city would be met with a "crushing defeat."

As of Sept. 7, 2014, less than two days after the establishment of the truce, shelling continued in Mariupol and at least one death had been reported there. Meanwhile, sporadic clashes were also being reported in rebel-held Donetsk. The Red Cross said shelling in Luhansk prevented the movement of humanitarian aid vehicles.

As the next few days went on, there were further sporadic violations of the ceasefire in eastern Ukraine. The area of the Malaysian Airlines crash as a result of a pro-Russian missile continued to be a conflict zone. There was also an increasingly complex scenario unfolding in the region of eastern Ukraine with the arrival of Chechen fighters eager to exact "revenge" on Russia and Russian fighters.

That being said, in keeping with the ceasefire agreement, pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine released 1,200 prisoners. As well, Ukrainian President Poroshenko said that most of the Russian forces that had penetrated Ukrainian territory had been withdrawn. He said, "According to the latest information I have received from our intelligence, 70 percent of Russian troops have been moved back across the border." Now, it should be noted that Russia has never actually admitted that its forces violated Ukraine's sovereignty irrespective of the evidence to the contrary. That being said, as noted by President Poroshenko, "This further strengthens our hope that the peace initiatives have good prospects."

On the other side of the border, Russia also lauded the truce -- as fragile as it might be. According to the Kremlin, Russian President Vladimir Putin was satisfied that the ceasefire was still in place several days later after its establishment.

Ukrainian parliament grants more autonomy to the East; Minsk peace plan laid out --

With an eye on the future, Ukrainian President Poroshenko laid out a plan for the future of Ukraine that would preserve its sovereignty and territorial integrity, while offering greater autonomy to the eastern part of the country under an uprising from pro-Russian separatists.

President Poroshenko noted that his proposal was consistent with the provisions of the ceasefire agreement that was forged in Belarus. He said, "The Minsk protocol envisages the restoration and preservation of Ukrainian sovereignty on all the territory of the Donbass (in eastern Ukraine), including that controlled by the fighters."

By mid-September 2014, the parliament of Ukraine passed legislation granting greater autonomy to the two flashpoint areas of eastern Ukraine -- Donetsk and Luhansk - for a three year period. As well, the legislation granted amnesty to pro-Russian separatist in those two regions. It should be noted that the amnesty provision would not apply to separatists believed to have committed grave crimes, such as the shooting down of the Malaysian Airline passenger plane carrying mostly Dutch citizens.

It was not clear that eastern Ukraine separatists would accept these gestures. Indeed, a pro-Russian leader from Donetsk, Andrei Purgin, as quoted as saying, "Ukraine is free to adopt any law it wants. But we are not planning any federalism with Ukraine." It was apparent that for many separatists, their notion of creating a new independent state known as "Novorossiia" remained the central goal.

As September 2014 entered its final week, the government of Ukraine and pro-Russian separatists met for peace talks in the Belarusian capital of Minsk. There, in the city where the initial ceasefire was announced at the start of the month, more details were furnished regarding the path forward to end the conflict in eastern Ukraine.

While the ceasefire has continued to endure intermittent violations, it remained in effect. This agreement at the end of September 2014, however, was intended to add more detail to the ceasefire deal, with an eye on ensuring it would be a sustainable plan for regional stability.

The agreement included provisions for the establishment of a buffer zone, the removal of heavy artillery from the front lines, a ban on overflights by military aircraft in the newly-established security zone, a ban on offensive operations, and the withdrawal of "foreign mercenaries" on both sides from the conflict zone. Also included in the plan was the implementation of an OSCE monitoring mission in eastern Ukraine. Left outside of the agreement, according to separatist leader, Alexander Zakharchenko, was the status of Luhansk and Donetsk. He said, "We have our opinion on it while Ukraine has its own."

In fact, as noted above, the parliament of Ukraine passed legislation granting self-determination and greater autonomy to Donetsk and Luhansk for a three-year period, thus garnering the condemnation of Ukrainian nationalists. But even those measures were regarded as insufficient by pro-Russian separatists who continued to demand a fully independent state (known as "Novorossiya" as noted above).

In another complication, Ukraine was soon refusing to pull back from the front lines in eastern Ukraine and, instead, calling for a new buffer zone deal. Ukraine said it would not withdraw its forces until the ceasefire was fully implemented, with Andriy Lysenko, a spokesperson for Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council, noting that two government soldiers had been killed, at least eight others had been injured, and pro-Russian separatists had fired at Ukrainian government forces in 22 different locations – and all within 24 hours of the signing the Minsk agreement. He emphasized that the pro-Russian separatists were hardly abiding by the terms of the deal, thus Ukraine's decision to hold its positions.

Ukraine's stance was backed by NATO with top military commander United States General Philip Breedlove charging that the ceasefire of Sept. 5, 2014, existed "in name only."

Ukrainian parliament ratifies deal with EU; President Poroshenko unveils reforms aimed at securing EU accession -

Meanwhile, Ukraine strengthened its relationship with the West when the parliament ratified an Association Agreement with the European Union. It was the Association Agreement that sparked the Ukrainian uprising in the first place, when now-ousted former President Yanukovich decided to shelve the pact in favor of a customs agreement with Russia. Now, after an uprising, an annexation of Crimea, a war, and a fatal plane crash, not to mention the loss of countless lives, the Association Agreement had returned to the fore.

This move was likely to upset Moscow, which has throughout been dismayed about Ukraine slipping out of its orbit. The ratification of the Association Agreement quite literally underlined the passage of Ukraine from Russia's realm to the European sphere. The price paid in blood for this movement from east to west was illustrated by President Poroshenko's words: "No nation has ever paid such a high price to become Europeans."

That thrust to become European was accelerated on Sept. 25, 2014, with Ukrainian President Poroshenko unveiling a package of social and economic reforms aimed at ultimately securing accession to the European Union. Speaking of the package, he said, "This program foresees about 60 reforms and special programs that will allow Ukraine to prepare for submitting in six years a bid for membership of the European Union."

Putin calls for withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukrainian border; Poroshenko strengthens defense posture --

In the first part of October 2014, Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered Russian troops to withdraw from their positions along the Ukrainian border and return to their permanent bases. While the news was welcomed, Western powers warned that they would not take the announcement as a genuine commitment until they saw actual evidence of the announced withdrawal from the border. Of course, the fact of the matter was that most Western powers also believed that Russian forces remained across the border in eastern Ukraine.

It should be noted that the call by Putin to withdraw Russian troops from the border occurred in the aftermath of military exercises that took place in the region of Rostov region. The move was being regarded as a cautiously optimistic sign that tensions between Russia and Ukraine were easing to some degree.

This lessening of tension came at an opportune *time* -- ahead of a meeting between Russian President Putin and Ukrainian President Poroshenko set to take place in mid-October 2014 in Italy on the sidelines of a scheduled summit of Asian and European leaders. With that summit underway, however, there was no sign that the two leaders had made any significant strides.

Meanwhile, Ukrainian President Poroshenko moved to strengthen the defense system of his country. At issue was his appointment of National Guard Chief Stepan Poltorak as the new defense minister and the ensuing ratification of that move by the parliament. Poltorak would replace Valery Heletey, who faced scathing criticism for his military leadership against Russian-backed separatists in August 2014. A series of defeats during that period around Donetsk compelled the newly-elected President Poroshenko to back away from a military mission to defeat the pro-Russian separatists in the east, and instead move towards the negotiating table.

While peace negotiations remained a priority for the Ukrainian leadership, President Poroshenko wanted to strengthen his military infrastructure. To that end, Poroshenko was looking towards the appointment of the well-respected Poltorak at the helm of the defense ministry as one who would be well-positioned to "create a powerful system of defense for Ukraine."

As October 2014 was coming to a close, that defense strategy remained a key consideration given NATO's warning that Russian troops remained in eastern Ukraine and had substantial forces amassed on the border, despite claims of a withdrawal (mentioned just above). NATO's new Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, the former leader of Norway, said of Russia and Russian forces: "They are still violating the sovereignty and the territorial integrity of Ukraine by having Russian forces in Ukraine."

United States Air Force General Philip Breedlove, NATO's supreme allied commander, said in an interview with international media, "We've seen a pretty good withdrawal of the Russian forces from inside Ukraine but, make no mistake, there remain Russian forces inside eastern Ukraine." Breedlove continued, "But the force that remains and shows no indications of leaving is still a very, very capable force." Breedlove noted that the continued presence of a "large coercive force" on the Ukraine border was not conducive to the implementation of the Minsk ceasefire agreement, and a complete withdrawal of Russian forces from inside Ukraine and along the border with Ukraine would be needed to take Russian commitments to peace seriously.

The only bright spot in the realm of Russian-Ukrainian relations was forging of a short-term agreement at the start of November 2014, which was aimed at securing Russian gas for Ukrainian use through the duration of the winter.

Elections and effects on Russian-Ukrainian relations --

In the last week of October 2014, Ukrainians went to the polls to vote in parliamentary elections. Ukrainian President Poroshenko was looking for allies to be elected to the parliament in the elections so he would gain legislative support and a mandate for his aforementioned defense strategy against pro-Russians in the east. The president was also looking for an endorsement from the citizenry for his Westward push for the country, as he advocated Ukraine's closer ties with Europe, and ultimately, accession to the European Union. President

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Poroshenko received that mandate on election day (Oct. 26, 2014), following a strong showing at the polls by his own party, and other pro-European and allied nationalist parties. As such, President Poroshenko was well-positioned to move forward not only with his security agenda, but also with his pro-Europe moves.

But at the start of November 2014, the eastern portion of Ukraine (which had not participated in parliamentary elections mentioned here due to separatist inclinations) was moving forward with illegal elections of their own. The big winners of the vote in the pro-Russian east were Alexander Zakharchenko and Igor Plotnitsky who respectively claimed victory as the new leaders of the self-declared Donetsk and Luhansk "people's republics" of "new Russia."

As expected, these results of these elections that took place on Nov. 2, 2014, were rejected by Ukraine and the larger international community, while (unsurprisingly) being backed by Russia.

In a move sure to heighten tensions between the two countries, Russia made clear that it would recognize the results of the elections of pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine. The Ukrainian Foreign Ministry blasted Russia for this decision, declaring in a statement: "The Kremlin is consciously making the situation worse ... In such an extraordinarily fragile situation, this is an irresponsible step by Russia which can threaten the peace process."

Meanwhile, the Obama administration in the United States made clear to Kiev that it would not recognize any elections held in areas of eastern Ukraine under the control of pro-Russian separatists. Likewise, the governments of other Western countries, including Germany and France, made it clear that the vote in eastern Ukraine would be treated as illegitimate.

The vote among pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine prompted Ukrainian President Poroshenko to act in the political arena. He called on the newly-elected parliament of Ukraine to repeal the law that was passed granting greater autonomy for the separatists regions. That legislation moved forward despite the objections of nationalists for the purpose of advancing peace, and as an act of good faith in the Minsk ceasefire process. However, the elections in eastern Ukraine constituted a flagrant violation of the spirit of the peace process. There was now no reason for the Ukrainian president to go against his nationalist allies in parliament to appease separatists in the east who clearly had no intention of being appeased.

On the ground in eastern Ukraine, the situation appeared to be devolving. At issue was the flare of renewed violence between Ukrainian government forces and pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine, with shelling intensifying around Donetsk, the main separatist stronghold. President Poroshenko addressed the shelling between government forces and pro-Russian separatists in the eastern Donetsk and Luhansk regions, saying that there was no need to panic. He explained, "If events begin to unravel in spite of the peace plan, Ukrainian armed forces today are ready and capable of repelling."

Meanwhile, the government of Ukraine in Kiev said that there was mounting evidence of continued Russian support for the separatists in the east, in clear violation of the Minsk ceasefire agreement. Of note was the fact that the pro-Russian separatists received fresh stores of ammunition and other military equipment.

The Kiev government also accused Russia of sending mercenaries to the front lines in the east and further charged that there had been Russian incursions into its territory. Kiev authorities said that a column of tanks and troops crossed the border from Russia and crossed into eastern Ukraine in the first week of November 2014. This claim was backed by observations reported by both the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe as well as Reuters News correspondents. Radio Free Europe also pointed out that there was no shortage of videotaped clips of the convoy available on the Internet.

For its part, Russia denied the accusations despite the evidence to the contrary. Nevertheless, Ukraine was deploying reinforcements to the region in response to apparent threats of Russian aggression. The truth of the matter was that the movement of troops from both sides on the Ukrainian-Russian border suggested that Ukraine and Russian-supported separatists were preparing for renewed conflict.

In many senses the fragile ceasefire agreement discussed above was on the brink of collapse. As noted by United States Air Force General Philip Breedlove, NATO's supreme allied commander, the conditions were clearly in place for a so-called "frozen conflict" between Greater Ukraine under the control of Kiev and the pro-Russian east under the protection of Moscow. Still, with heavy bombardment and shelling of rebel-held Donetsk in the second week of November 2014, and with reports of a build-up of pro-Russian reinforcements in eastern Ukraine, it was fair to say that the conflict retained many traits of a "hot" war.

Indeed, Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseny Yatseniuk said on Nov. 14, 2014, that the top priority for his country would be to strengthen the army so it would be able to stop Russian aggression. Days later, he also dismissed Russian calls that Ukraine engage in direct talks with separatists leaders, making clear that his government would take no action aimed at legitimizing "terrorists."

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Given this landscape, it was perhaps not surprising that the West was telegraphing no end to the sanctions against Russia. In fact, the European Union was hinting that it might intensify its sanctions regime against Russia given the clear violations of the Minsk Agreement.

At the G20 summit in Australia in mid-November 2014, Western leaders placed pressure on Russian President Putin for continued backing of pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine. In one particularly marked exchange, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper said: "I guess I'll shake your hand but I have only one thing to say to you: You need to get out of Ukraine." According to Reuters News, Putin's response contained the same kind of mendacious denial that has come to characterize Russia's official stance on Ukraine. Putin said: "Unfortunately, this is impossible to do because we are not there."

President Barack Obama noted that the United States was leading the charge of "opposing Russia's aggression against Ukraine, which is a threat to the world, as we saw in the appalling shoot-down of MH17." (MH17 was the Malaysian airliner shot down by pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine in July 2014.)

The United States was joined by Australia and Japan in issuing a joint statement expressing solidarity in "opposing Russia's purported annexation of Crimea and its actions to destabilize eastern Ukraine."

Even outside the summit, the mood was distinctly anti-Putinesque, with protesters accusing the Russian leader of murder, while others wore headbands with the words "Putin, Killer" emblazoned on them. The summit thus highlighted Putin's isolation and estrangement from the rest of the world's leading nation states.

Ultimately, Putin left the summit early, returning to Russia before other G20 leaders had completed their sidebar meetings. He explained his early departure as follows: "It will take nine hours to fly to Vladivostok and another eight hours to get Moscow. I need four hours sleep before I get back to work on Monday. We have completed our business." However, the general consensus was that the Russian leader was likely departing the summit in order to avoid further unpleasant exchanges with world leaders.

Given his alienation from the world's leading Western nation states, Putin was looking for new allies. To that end, he was hoping to improve Russian ties with the paranoid and pariah nation state of North Korea. The leaders of the two countries were apparently interested in working together to improve regional security. With a United Nations resolution in the offing regarding North Korea's human rights violations and possible action at the International Criminal Court, no doubt Pyongyang was looking to cultivate a better relationship with a veto-wielding country (other than China) on the United Nations Security Council.

Meanwhile, Moscow was on the hunt for new friends.

#### Status Update



In December 2014, fighting had intensified at the Donetsk airport in eastern Ukraine - a violation of the Minsk ceasefire agreement. The government of Ukraine accused Russia of providing special operatives to bolster support for the pro-Russian separatists there, as well as of smuggling heavy artillery ammunition into its territory.

With the fighting going on irrespective of the Minsk agreement, and with signs of continued Russian involvement in eastern Ukraine, the United States and the European Union telegraphed that they would be working to intensifying their sanctions against Russia, while simultaneously working to shore up European energy security. One measure in that direction would be the export of United States liquefied natural gas to Europe to diversify supplies on the other side of the Atlantic. To date, Europe has been concerned that tougher sanctions against Russia would create negative consequences, given that region's reliance on Russian energy supplies. United States President Barack Obama urged patience in regards to the sanctions against Russia, noting that it would take some time before Russian President Vladimir Putin's foreign policy choices would ultimately create economic pain for Russia, which would have to be transposed into domestic political pressure before Putin could be persuaded to change course. With an eye on creating that economic pain, in the third week of December 2014, President Obama said that he had signed onto a new Russian sanctions bill that had been signed by the United States Congress.

As December 2014 drew to a close, there was a prisoner exchange between the Ukrainian government and pro-Russian separatists. This action was regarded to be a positive step in tamping down the tensions in eastern Ukraine, and may have been - at least partially - driven by economic pressures on Russia due to the combination of lower oil prices and economic sanctions imposed by the West.

Around the same period of late 2014, Ukrainian President Poroshenko said he intended to meet with his Russian, French, and German counterparts on Jan. 15, 2015, in the Kazakh capital of Astana for discussions on the restoration of peace in the eastern part of the country -- now a hotbed of pro-Russian separatist activity. Poroshenko described the priority for the meeting as follows: "The most important thing is to turn a fragile ceasefire into a stable peace and return previously occupied territories under the control of Ukrainian authorities." That imperative could prove difficult because Ukraine regarded its territorial integrity and sovereignty to be of paramount importance while Russia was unlikely to cede control of Crimea back to Ukraine.

Meanwhile, on the domestic political landscape in Ukraine, a new government was approved by parliament in the aftermath of the parliamentary elections. The new cabinet, led by Prime Minister Arseny Yatseniuk, included technocrats and made clear that no major shifts in policy were in the offing.

In the realm of foreign policy, on Dec. 23, 2014, Ukraine's westward drift was emphasized when President Poroshenko signed legislation revoking Ukraine's status as a neutral country. The bill, which nullified Ukraine's official "non-aligned" status, effectively set the path towards the pursuit of NATO membership at some point in the future. It was a move sure to raise the ire of Russia, which has opposed Ukraine's alliances with Western multilateral powers, such as the European Union and NATO.

Not surprisingly, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov expressed disapproval for these latest developments, casting the decision to revoke Ukraine's neutrality as "counter-productive" and warning that it would only amplify regional tensions. But Ukraine was undeterred; Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin noted Ukraine was determined to intensify its alliances with Europe and the West. He said: "This will lead to integration in the European and the Euro-Atlantic space."

It should be noted that the entire crisis in the region was precipitated by Russia's desire to prevent Ukraine from aligning more closely with the European Union. Now, in the aftermath of Russian aggression in eastern Ukraine, including the annexation of Crimea, not only was Ukraine looking to join the European Union, but it was also looking potentially towards NATO, which Russia has long regarded as a threat to its power in the region. In truth, NATO was not necessarily interested in having Ukraine join its body; however, Ukraine's ambitions along these lines were

likely enough to enrage Russia and imperil prevailing efforts to end the conflict in eastern Ukraine. Of note was Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev's Facebook post warning that Ukraine's rejection of neutrality augured "negative consequences." He posted, "In essence, an application for NATO membership will turn Ukraine into a potential military opponent for Russia."

In January 2015, there was no end in sight as to the conflict in eastern Ukraine. In fact, fighting was still going on at the international airport in Donetsk. As noted by a presidential adviser, Yuri Biryukov, via the social media outlet, Facebook: "They (the separatists) launched a full storm from this morning. We have wounded on our side. There is hot combat going on there and the tension and the situation there is the worst I have seen." Not surprisingly, attempts to revive peace talks had ended in failure and the prevailing Minsk ceasefire agreement could be regarded as effectively defunct. But in some good news for Ukraine, on Jan. 19, 2015, their forces were successfully able to regain control over the Donetsk airport and the surrounding territory in eastern Ukraine, which had been lost to the pro-Russian separatists over the course of weeks. Ukrainian military spokesperson, Andriy Lysenko, said, "We succeeded in almost completely cleansing the territory of the airport, which belongs to the territory of Ukrainian forces as marked by military separation lines."

With Russia increasing its support of the separatists in the east, the Ukrainian parliament in mid-January 2015 voted affirmatively to rotate its forces on the front lines and resume conscription into its military. Oleksander Turchynov, secretary of the national defense council, said in an address to parliament that 8,500 Russian regular forces were now deployed in eastern Ukraine. He said, "Russian aggression is continuing. There has been a significant surge in the intensity of firing." He also made note of the fact that Ukrainian positions were fired on more than 100 times in mid-January 2015, and that several Ukrainian soldiers had been killed, while even more had been wounded.

In addition, 12 civilians died at an army checkpoint due to shelling of a passenger bus. Thus the need for Ukraine to be ready to respond militarily. To this end, Turchynov said, "There is an urgent need to strengthen the combat and mobilization readiness of our forces and other military forces up to a level which guarantees an adequate reaction to threats to national security from continuing Russian aggression."

Meanwhile, with Russia continuing to play a central role in the eastern Ukrainian crisis (despite claims to the contrary), the West made clear that there would be no easing of sanctions, and the alienation of Russia would continue. To that end, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who was to host the next meeting of G7 countries, made it clear that Russian President Vladimir Putin would not be invited to the summit of the world's economic superpowers. In an interview with the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung newspaper, Merkel said, "The G7 and former G8 group has always viewed itself as a community of values. The annexation of Crimea, which is a blatant violation of the principles of international law, and the events in eastern Ukraine are serious violations of these common values." She explained that, as a result, there was "no chance" that the Russian president would be invited to attend the summit in Bavaria scheduled to take place in June 2015. Merkel also noted that given Russia's continued aggression, sanctions would remain in place as she said, "In spring we will discuss the question how to deal with the sanctions that we decided to impose after Russia's annexation of Crimea. Given the current situation, they will remain in place." Accordingly, Russia's pariah status remained unchanged.

In the third week of January 2015, pro-Russian separatists were able to send Ukrainian forces into retreat from the Donetsk airport where a lengthy battle had been ongoing for weeks. However, Ukrainian President Poroshenko insisted that despite that obvious setback due to an intensified effort from the pro-Russian rebels, his country's troops were holding the line. He said, "Across all front lines we are firmly holding our positions." Still, there were casualties with at least 10 Ukrainian soldiers being killed in the period of the third week of January 2015. There was also a trolleybus attack in Donetsk that left eight civilians dead, which both sides blamed on one another.

Around the same period, NATO released a report noting that in violation of the Minsk ceasefire agreement, fighting in separatist territories was actually more intense than it had been prior to the ceasefire being announced in September 2014. Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseny Yatseniuk said the increased violence and bloodshed should be

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blamed on pro-Russian separatists, who were being supported by Moscow despite Russian President Putin's claim to the contrary. For his part, Putin appeared determined to sow the seeds of mischief as he suggested that, in fact, NATO troops were fighting alongside Ukrainian forces. NATO dismissed this claim by the Russian president as ludicrous.

Pro-Russian separatist aggression was highlighted on Jan. 23, 2015, when Alexander Zakharchenko, the head of the self-declared Donetsk People's Republic, dismissed the notion of further peace talks with the government of Ukraine in Kiev, saying his forces would instead launch a new offensive into the eastern regions not yet under separatists' control.

Making good on this threat, on Jan. 24, 2015, pro-Russian separatists launched an offensive against the strategic port city of Mariupol located on the Sea of Azov. The city administration of Mariupol said the pro-Russian separatists fired rockets using long-range GRAD missile systems, killing at least 30 people and injuring scores more. In an interview with Russia's RIA news agency proudly took responsibility for his rebels' attack on Mariupol saying it was intended to avenge the deaths of his people. He said, "Today an offensive was launched on Mariupol. This will be the best possible monument to all our dead." He added that his separatists fighters intended to target the town of Debaltseve, to the northeast of Donetsk, next in its war campaign.

At home in Kiev, President Poroshenko promised to protect Ukrainian's territorial sovereignty and convened an emergency meeting of his country's security council on Jan. 25, 2015. He issued a statement that read as follows: "We are for peace, but we accept the challenge of the enemy. We will protect our motherland."

As January 2015 came to a close, scores of people were killed as fighting raged on between Ukrainian troops and pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine. The pro-Russians were now penetrating the town of Debaltseve, consolidating pre-Russian separatist control of the region.

Also in late January 2015, cracks began to form in the normally strong Russia-Belarus alliance. With Russia backing pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine and annexing Crimea a year earlier, Belarus -- like many of Russia's neighbors -- was suddenly wary of Russia's imperial ambitions, and Russian President Vladimir Putin's apparent hopes to reconstitute the Soviet empire. Once one of Russia's closest allies in the region, Belarus was suddenly shifting its stance with Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko declaring in vociferous language that his country would never be part of the "Russian world" -- a term adopted by the Russian Kremlin as Moscow seeks to draw its former republics back under its umbrella.

It should be noted that Belarus has played a key regional role in the Ukrainian crisis, hosting talks that led to the (now collapsed) Minsk ceasefire agreement of 2014. But as Russia has sought to extend a controlling hand over Belarus' assets, the Belarusian president was keen to draw the proverbial line in the sand. For Belarus, suspicion of Russia was sparked when Moscow tried to restrict exports in violation of the regulations ensconced within the Eurasian Economic Union, which includes Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. Belarus warned that if the rules of the Eurasian Economic Union were not observed, it would withdraw from the alliance.

President Lukashenko made it clear that Belarus' independence would have to be respected as he declared, "Those who think that the Belarusian land is part of what they call the Russian world, almost part of Russia, forget about it!" He continued, "Belarus is a modern and independent state." Lukashenko went one step further, noting that he wished to normalize ties with the West. It was a move certain to infuriate Moscow, which seeks the opposite outcome. However, as Russian aggression in eastern Ukraine exists, it has stood as a reminder to surrounding countries of their own vulnerability, and concomitantly driven stalwart allies, such as Belarus, in a Westward direction.

By the start of February 2015, fighting in the Ukrainian east was fierce and the death toll was increasing around the transport hub of Debaltseve, while pro-Russian rebels had not only advanced on the nearby town of Vuhlehirsk.

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Indeed, on Feb. 4, 2015, pro-Russian rebels appeared to be in full control of the garrison town. The fall of Vuhlehirsk was a clear blow to the Ukrainian government in Kiev.

Surrounding towns were also suffering the effects of heavy shelling with residents of Avdiivka saying that large swaths of that town had been completely destroyed.

It was a clear fact that fighting in eastern Ukraine had escalated at an alarming level in the first part of February 2015, prompting the United Nations to warn that the violence was reaching "catastrophic" levels with civilian casualties on a marked increase. Flashpoints included the Donetsk and Luhansk regions as well as the town of Debaltseve. United Nations human rights chief, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, said there had been a "clear breach of international humanitarian law which governs the conduct of armed conflicts." To this end, he noted that public venues, such as bus stops, marketplaces, schools, and hospitals had become battlegrounds.

Meanwhile, talks in Belarus aimed at reviving truce ended in failure. Ukraine's representative, former Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma, said the negotiations were "thwarted" by the actions of pro-Russian rebels. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which took part in the talks in Minsk, along with envoys from Ukraine and Russia, shared the view that pro-Russian rebels had sabotaged the peace negotiations. The OSCE said that pro-Russian separatists were simply not interested in serious discussions pertaining to a peace plan. Furthermore, as noted in an OSCE statement: "In fact, they [pro-Russian separatists] were not even prepared to discuss implementation of a ceasefire and withdrawal of heavy weapons."

Given this landscape, as well as the increase in Russian-aided aggression on Ukrainian territory, the West was warning of consequences to come. Speaking from a state visit in India, United States President Barack Obama said his country was looking at a wealth of options, just short of military action, to isolate Russia. He said, "We are deeply concerned about the latest break in the ceasefire and the aggression that these separatists -- with Russian backing, Russian equipment, Russian financing, Russian training and Russian troops -- are conducting. I will look at all additional options that are available to us short of military confrontation and try to address this issue. And we will be in close consultation with our international partners, particularly European partners."

The European Union convened an emergency meeting of foreign ministers, headed by the European Union foreign affairs chief, Federica Mogherini. But the sharpest language came from the new leader of the European Council, Former Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk, who delivered harsh rebuke not only of Russian aggression, but of Europe's response to it. Tusk conjured up memories of World War II, as he condemned the "appeasement" of Moscow. Via the social media outlet, Twitter, he said: "Once again, appeasement encourages the aggressor to greater acts of violence. Time to step up our policy based on cold facts, not illusions." Ultimately, the European Union opted to extend the sanctions regime against Russia in response to continued Russian aggression and support for separatists in eastern Ukraine.

Debate over arming Ukraine --

On Feb. 2, 2015, the New York Times in the United States reported that President Barack Obama was considering additional support for Ukrainian forces -- possibly in the form of defensive weapons and equipment -- for the purpose of protecting Ukraine from the pro-Russian offensive. United States officials said that no decision had been made on the matter. In fact, in an interview with CNN, Ben Rhodes, the deputy national security adviser to President Barack Obama, said: "We're not going to bring the Ukrainian military into parity with Russia's military, certainly not in the near future. We have to keep the perspective that the best tool that we have to apply pressure on Russia is that economic pressure through the sanctions."

On Feb. 5, 2015, Ukrainian President Poroshenko called on NATO states to provide additional weaponry to his country, saying, "The escalation of the conflict that's happening today, the increasing number of civilian casualties, especially after the terrorist attacks in Volnovakha and, Donetsk as well as the bombardment of Mariupol... should

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move the alliance to provide Ukraine with more support." In his interview with the publication, Die Welt, he said, "(That) includes, among other things, delivering modern weapons for protection and for resisting the aggressor." Poroshenko added that while his country aspired to peace, Ukraine nonetheless had to be defended.

While NATO was not expected to assent to this call easily, there was nevertheless a plan afoot for the establishment of new command and control NATO units in eastern Europe. According to NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, the units would be made up of about 50 officers and would be established in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Bulgaria, and Poland. Ultimately, they would be geared to the rapid deployment of NATO forces in the region. It was a plan sure to cause consternation for Russia, which has eschewed NATO's footprint in its east European backyard.

Also on February 5, United States Secretary of State John Kerry was in Ukraine to show solidarity with that country and to announce \$16.4 million in new humanitarian aid to help Ukrainians affected by the war raging in the east. During a news conference, Secretary of State Kerry was asked if he believed Russia was active militarily in Ukraine despite Russian claims to the contrary. He referred the question to Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk, who said: "It is crystal clear that (the) Russian military is on the ground...We are not fighting so-called rebels or guerrillas. We are fighting with the Russian regular army." The Ukrainian prime minister also mocked Russia and its leader for denying this reality as he sarcastically declared that the only country denying Russian military boots are on the ground was the Russian Federation. In a dramatic flourish, Yatsenyuk removed his glasses and offered to lend them to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Some Western think tanks were suggesting that a stronger Ukrainian military -- once capable of confronting Russian-backed separatists -- could help push the separatists into peace talks that they recently eschewed. Emboldened by their success on the battlefield, pro-Russian rebels have become more aggressive rather than less so; it was conceivable that some reversals on the battlefield might make a truce look more attractive. To this end, the Atlantic Council said that Ukraine would benefit from military aid, such as anti-armor missiles, drones, and armored Humvees. In a report, the Atlantic Council noted: "A stronger Ukrainian military, with enhanced defensive capabilities, will increase the prospects for negotiation of a peaceful settlement."

Of course, the obvious counter-argument was that military aid from the West, and specifically from the United States, might spur Russia to retaliate by amplifying its own military footprint in eastern Ukraine, thus escalating the war. As well, there was the political aspect, which was that the West likely preferred a united approach rather than one by which a country was acting out of sync with NATO. That type of disunity would certainly provide an opening for Russian President Putin to exploit.

It was clear that the issue of arming the Ukrainian military was soon becoming an issue of contention within the countries of the West. At issue was German Chancellor Angela Merkel's objections to the notion of sending arms to Ukraine to help that country's military battle Russian-backed separatists. To this end, she said, "I understand the debate but I believe that more weapons will not lead to the progress Ukraine needs. I really doubt that."

While the Obama White House remained reticent about actually moving forward on this front, key Republican politicians from the United States accused Germany of turning its back on Ukraine. Senator John McCain said, "The Ukrainians are being slaughtered and we're sending them blankets and meals. Blankets don't do well against Russian tanks."

Senator Lindsey Graham added, "At the end of the day, to our European friends, this is not working...Stand up to what is clearly a lie and a danger."

U.S. Vice President Joe Biden, speaking on behalf of the Obama administration was far more restrained in his view, saying that the effort should be made to resolve the conflict in eastern Ukraine peacefully. However, Biden noted

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that Russian President Putin was not to be trusted, as he said, "Too many times President Putin has promised peace and delivered tanks, troops and weapons."

Meanwhile, making it clear that Ukrainian-Russian relations were at a new low, the Ukrainian government in Kiev introduced new laws requiring Russians to present a passport (vis a vis internal identity documents) to enter Ukrainian territory.

Ukrainian President Poroshenko reiterated his country's right to defend itself, saying, "We are an independent nation and we have a right to defend our people." He did receive European support from Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaitė, who declared that Ukraine should be supported "with all means necessary to defend, not to attack, to defend its people and its territory."

But the peace path was not yet abandoned. The leaders of Ukraine, Russia, Germany, and France were set to meet in Belarus' capital city of Minsk in the second week of February 2015 to discuss a resolution to the violence in eastern Ukraine. The proposal on the table was not actually new -- it seemed to build upon the now-defunct Minsk ceasefire agreement of September 2014, and focus on the establishment of a 40 mile demilitarized zone around the current front lines of the conflict. In an act of good faith in anticipation of the Minsk meeting, the European Union opted to impose further sanctions against pro-Russian separatist, Russians, and key organizations, but to delay the proposed assets freeze and visa bans until after the peace summit had taken place. The intent was to give the talks a chance to yield results and implement them on the basis of the results of the meeting.

As noted by French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius, "The principle of these sanctions remains but the implementation will depend on results on the ground."

Meanwhile, German Chancellor Merkel was by-passing the contingent of United States politicians advocating the arming of the Ukrainian military and, instead, conferring with the president of the United States, Barack Obama, on the details of the new peace plan. A meeting between the two heads of government was held on Feb. 9, 2015, ahead of the Minsk meeting with the leaders of Ukraine, Russia, and France on Feb. 11, 2015. Speaking of the meeting between Obama and Merkel, the spokesperson for the United States National Security Council, Mark Stroh, paid tribute to the German chancellor on behalf of the United States president, saying, "The President values the Chancellor's judgement, and appreciates her strong efforts in marshalling European support and maintaining Transatlantic unity throughout the Ukraine crisis. She has been tireless in her pursuit of a diplomatic solution to the crisis, and the President anticipates a useful and informative discussion about this and other issues."

Even as discussions about a new ceasefire were ongoing, the reality was that pro-Russian separatists were interested only in war as they prepared for fresh assaults on Debaltseve and Mariupol. In fact, on Feb. 8, 2015, reports from eastern Ukraine indicated that pro-Russian separatists were making repeated attempts to attack government positions in Debaltseve, with massive shelling reported in that town. The commander of a squadron that captured the town of Vuhlehirsk close to Debaltseve told international media that his forces had no interest in a truce.

On Feb. 11, 2015, the leaders of Ukraine, Russia, France, and Germany convened peace talks in the city of Minsk in Belarus. Of note was a televised handshake between Ukrainian President Poroshenko and Russian President Putin. However, the meeting was immediately overshadowed from the news in eastern Ukraine that pro-Russian separatists' assaults close to Debaltseve had left as many as 20 Ukrainian soldiers dead. A separate incident resulted in the deaths of several people when a shell hit a bus station in Donetsk.

#### New Minsk Ceasefire Agreement --

On Feb. 12, 2015, following close to 24 hours of marathon talks, French President François Hollande announced that an agreement for peace in eastern Ukraine had been forged to end the fighting and ultimately stabilize the

region. The ceasefire was to go into effect at midnight on Feb. 14, 2015 (technically 00.01 on Feb. 15, 2015) and was to be observed by international monitors.

There were provisions for a forthcoming concord that would end the war, and settle difficult issues such as disarmament, the withdrawal of heavy weaponry, amnesty for all fighters, prisoner exchanges, and border control. There was also a roadmap for constitutional reforms that would facilitate the decentralization of separatist-dominated regions of the east. There was also the matter of self-determination in the flashpoint pro-Russian separatist regions of Donetsk and Luhansk. As indicated here, under the terms of the concord, the territory in the east would be returned to Ukraine, but only after the holding of fresh elections in Donetsk and Luhansk under the aegis of Ukrainian law, and on the basis of the aforementioned constitutional reforms that would deal with decentralization.

President Hollande of France hailed the truce, saying, "It is a relief for Europe." German Chancellor Merkel was more restrained, saying that the ceasefire offered a "glimmer of hope." President Poroshenko made initially accused Russia of making "unacceptable" demands of his country but said that Ukraine has stood strong in the face of "ultimatums." Russian President Putin said in an interview with Russian media, "It wasn't the best night for me, but it's a good morning."

Across the Atlantic in the United States, the United States government noted the "significant step" constituted by the agreement, but pointed out that continued fighting in eastern Ukraine was "inconsistent with the spirit of the accord." In truth, it was to be seen if the new Minsk ceasefire agreement would end more positively than the last one. At issue was the ongoing fighting in Debaltseve, where pro-Russian fighters were on the offensive and Ukrainian forces were under pressure. Would the truce be observed there? The rebel leader of Luhansk, Igor Plotnitskiy, issued a more promising note, saying, "We hope that thanks to our efforts today, Ukraine will change and stop firing at civilians, hospitals and socially important facilities." The rebel leader of Donetsk, Alexander Zakharchenko, said the blame would be placed on Ukraine if the ceasefire collapsed, and ominously warned that in that event, there would "be no meetings and no new agreements."

On Feb. 16, 2015, the new Minsk ceasefire agreement appeared to be a conceptual notion rather than a reality as fighting continued in some parts of eastern Ukraine. In truth, the truce did indeed seem to be in place in significant portions of eastern Ukraine; however, in the flashpoint town of Debaltseve where intensive fighting had gone on for weeks, there was no sign of peace. In fact, pro-Russian separatists who were advancing on the town and assaulting Ukrainian forces made clear that there would be no ceasefire in Debaltseve.

By the third week of February 2015, Debaltseve was under pro-Russian separatist control and Ukrainian forces were in retreat. As well, Ukrainian authorities said that pro-Russian were attacking government-held positions in eastern Ukraine -- including the area around the strategic port of Mariupol.

Anatoly Stelmach, a spokesperson for the Ukrainian military, said, "The number of attacks show the terrorists do not want to completely silence their guns."

Ukrainian authorities then went further, accusing Russia of dispatching more troops and tanks to the region, specifically in the direction of the town of Novoazovsk on the southern coast. As noted by another Ukrainian military spokesperson, Andriy Lysenko: "In recent days, despite the Minsk (ceasefire) agreement, military equipment and ammunition have been sighted crossing from Russia into Ukraine." Of note was the movement of 20 Russian tanks, 10 missile systems, and deployment of troops into the eastern Ukrainian conflict zone. These moves appeared to hint towards a new battlefield in the war, irrespective of the fact that a new ceasefire agreement was supposedly in place.

Meanwhile, a year after the original Maidan uprising in Kiev ousted former pro-Russian President Yanukovich from power, the one-year anniversary was marked by a somber remembrance in the capital of the lives and territory lost

as Ukraine has sought to hold onto its sovereignty in the face of pro-Russian aggression and imperialistic expansion.

But on Ukraine's second largest city of Kharkiv, the situation took a dark turn as citizens marked the occasion. On Feb. 22, 2015, a **bomb** exploded at a rally for national unity near the city's Palace of Sport, killing two people and injuring 10 more. Four individuals with alleged ties to Russia were detained in connection with the attack. The reality was that Ukraine was still being plagued by conflict despite the latest Minsk ceasefire agreement. Ukrainian President Poroshenko characterized the attack as "a bold attempt to expand the territory of terrorism" and vowed that justice would be served.

As February 2015 came to a close, pro-Russian separatists attempted to win the public relations debate over who was responsible for the latest Minsk ceasefire not taking hold, as they invited journalists to witness the withdrawal of heavy weapons from the eastern Ukrainian front line. Ukrainian authorities dismissed the move, saying that the gesture was intended to obfuscate the reality that the pro-Russian were simply preparing for a fresh offensive.

Nevertheless, the fact of the matter was that in eastern Ukraine at the end of February 2015 was marked by increasing calm. Of course, it was quite possible that pro-Russians were willing to ease up on the fighting now that the railway hub of Debaltseve was under their control. Regardless of the actual cause for the slowing activity in the battlefield, it was to be seen if this sense of calm would prove sustainable.

In the third week of March 2015, amidst the ongoing -- but fragile -- ceasefire agreement, fighting was reported in Donetsk. Of concern was the Spartak district of the city which has seen no cessation of hostilities since the **time** of the announcement of the new Minsk ceasefire deal. Still, the rest of the region was enjoying some calm, albeit of an uneasy variety.

Western leaders have said that more resources would be needed for monitors to oversee the truce, while warning of further sanctions, should Russian-backed separatists advance further into Ukrainian territory.

Indeed, German Chancellor Angela Merkel has warned that any significant violation of the new -- but fragile -- ceasefire in eastern Ukraine would spur Europe to move forward with further sanctions against Russia for its support of pro-Russian separatists. She said, "So far we've got a fragile ceasefire which needs to be stabilized. But if the Minsk agreement is seriously violated, European leaders and the (European) Commission stand ready to prepare and impose further sanctions."

Then, in the last week of March 2015, leaders of European Union countries said that they intended to link the lifting of economic sanctions on Russia with the full implementation of a Ukraine ceasefire agreement. According to the president of the European Council, Donald Tusk, "The duration of economic sanctions will be clearly linked to the full implementation of the Minsk agreement. We have to maintain our sanctions until the Minsk agreement is fully implemented." This stance made clear that while the European Union was not officially extending its sanctions regime, which was due to expire in mid-2015, without clear benchmarks being met as regards the implementation of a sustainable peace in eastern Ukraine, sanctions would, in fact, be continued.

Meanwhile, the United Kingdom announced it would deploy military forces to Ukraine to help train that country's military in the fight against Russian-backed rebels aiming to establish a "new Russia."

In the first part of April 2015, there was a flare of violence in eastern Ukraine. In the aftermath of the death of one Ukrainian soldier and the wounding of several others, Ukraine accused Russian-backed separatists of using weapons, such as heavy weapons and artillery, that were banned under the terms of the Minsk ceasefire agreement. As stated by a Ukrainian military spokesperson, Oleksandr Motuzyanyk, "The rebels have not stopped firing at Ukrainian positions ... Over the past day, the enemy has used weapons banned under the Minsk



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agreements." On the other side of the equation, Russian-backed separatists blamed Ukrainian attacks on the injuring of two journalists close to the flashpoint city of Donetsk.

As the spike in violence ensued in eastern Ukraine, foreign ministers from Ukraine, Russia, France, and Germany held talks and agreed to move forward with a plan to remove weaponry from the frontlines of the conflict. The list of items targeted for withdrawal included heavy caliber weapons, mortars, tanks, and armored vehicles.

Note:

To date, as many as 5,000 people have died in a year of war marked by violence and bloodshed.

Could Russian encroachment into Ukraine be part of an economic plot?

In a separate development in late February 2015, the Russian independent newspaper, Novaya Gazeta, published an apparent strategy document showing Russian plans to annex Crimea and integrate other portions of eastern Ukraine. The plan was supposedly presented to the leadership in the Russian Kremlin leaders in early February 2014 -- a period preceding the ousting of pro-Russian President Yanukovich from power in Ukraine and suggestive of an entrenched imperative to get Ukraine under the de facto control of Moscow. Novaya Gazeta characterized the document as an "analytical note" that outlined the economic failures of the Yanukovich regime and the costs to continued support from Moscow. The note also warned against the economic costs to Russia as regards the Ukrainian energy market and control over Ukraine's gas pipelines, which would ultimately redound negatively on Russia.

Key excerpts from the document included the following quote: "The V. Yanukovich regime finally went bankrupt. For the Russian Federation to continue to support it politically, diplomatically, financially and informationally no longer makes any sense" and suggestions that Russia risked "losing not just the Ukrainian energy market, but what is much more dangerous, even indirect control over Ukraine's gas transport system."

But the document went further, as it mused over the benefits of integrating eastern Ukraine into the Russian fold either in a de facto economic alliance or in a more explicit geopolitical manner. A key quote was as follows: "Russia... should attempt to enter into cross-border cooperation agreements and then establish direct inter-government relations with those Ukrainian territories, where there is stable pro-Russian electoral support." The document continues by noting that although the integration of eastern Ukrainian territories into Russia would be costly, the benefits would be "invaluable" from "a geopolitical point of view," since Russia would "gain access to new demographic resources" and "highly qualified personnel in industry and transport."

There was no official response from Western powers, although a NATO military official acknowledged that the contents of the document were consistent with the perception that Russia was "directly involved" in the destabilization of eastern Ukraine. In a report published by Voice of America, that NATO official was quoted as saying, "NATO does not have any comment on the forthcoming publication of an alleged Kremlin strategy document. But it comes to no surprise to NATO that Russia has been directly involved in destabilizing military activities in Ukraine and Crimea from the outset."

While the veracity of the contents of the "analytical note" was yet to be established, it certainly presented a calculating rationale as to why Russia would back pro-Russian separatists in a bid to control eastern Ukraine.

For its part, the Kremlin dismissed the document as nonsense; however, in March 2015, a new dimension of Russia's territorial ambitions in Ukraine emerged when Russian President Putin said in an interview on the Rossiya-1 state television channel that he ordered officials in his government to look at ways to take control over Crimea as early as February 2014. Putin said that he convened an emergency with the commanders of his special forces to discuss the overthrow of pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich, and to secure the ousted Ukrainian leader's safe passage to Russia. At the end of that meeting, according to Putin, he signaled his ambitions in Crimea. To

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this end, Putin said, "This was on the night of Feb. 22 through to Feb. 23. We finished around 7 in the morning. And, while saying goodbye, I told all the colleagues: We have to start the work on Crimea's return into Russia."

Of note was the fact that until this interview with Putin, Russian authorities had insisted that the decision to annex Crimea only occurred after the referendum in the Black Sea peninsula, which ensued on March 16, 2014 and resulted in ratification of the initiative to join Russia. Now, however, Putin was advancing quite a different account. Regardless of the rationale, the fact of the matter was that Crimea was now under Russian control.

Moreover, by the third week of March 2015, Russia made clear that it had no intention of returning Crimea to Ukraine. A spokesperson for the Kremlin, Dmitry Peskov, refused to even acknowledge that Ukraine had any right to the territory, emphasizing that Crimea was now a Russian region. He said, "There is no occupation of Crimea. Crimea is a region of the Russian Federation and of course the subject of our regions is not up for discussion." In truth, however, the vast majority of the countries of the world did not recognize Russia's annexation of Crimea as legitimate, given the flagrant and illegal violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Undeterred by world opinion, and interested only in advancing his national popularity, Russian President Putin intensified his hawkish and aggressive rhetoric, saying in an interview that he had been ready to put nuclear weapons on standby during the Crimea crisis. The Russian president's willingness to play the nuclear threat card was being regarded as a dangerous development, especially since Russia was soon carrying out major military exercises across northern Russia involving more than 45,000 troops, in what was a clear show of military strength intended to intimidate its neighbors. As well, Russian President Putin was flexing his aggressive and hawkish muscles in the region as he ordered the Russian Northern Fleet to be on a state of full combat readiness in the Arctic.

For its part, Ukraine has reminded the world that the annexation of Crimea was illegal and that there would be no normalization of ties with Russia in the future without the return of Crimea to its fold and respect for its sovereignty and territorial integrity. Ukrainian Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin was on the record saying, "There could be no slightest way of normalizing or getting back to business in the relations between Ukraine and Russia without returning to status quo and establishing full Ukrainian sovereignty over Crimea." He continued, "The ultimate precondition for any effective, final settlement is to fully close down the Ukrainian-Russian border... Because everything that has been destabilizing the situation in (the Ukrainian cities of) Donetsk and Lugansk - mercenaries, money, weapons, heavy weaponry, and of course Russian rebel troops - came through the Russian-Ukrainian border."

#### Latest Developments

At the start of June 2015, irrespective of the prevailing Minsk ceasefire agreement, the pro-Russian stronghold of Donetsk in eastern Ukraine was mired by fierce fighting between Ukrainian forces and pro-Russian separatists. Battles were also said to be taking place in the nearby areas of Maryinka and Krasnohorivka. Journalists on the ground reported that it was the worst flare of violence in the region since the signing of the new ceasefire in the Belarusian capital of Minsk months prior, with a significant death toll likely to be calculated.

As before, the government of Ukraine, several Western powers, and NATO repeated their accusation that Russia was playing an active role in the conflict, even supplying both weaponry and troops to the separatists. For its part, Russia dismissed these claims and even registered discontent over the term "annexation" as regards its seizure of the Ukrainian region of Crimea, insisting that Crimea was simply "reunited" with Russia. These stances by Russia made clear that there was no consensus between the various parties about the basic events that transpired in eastern Ukraine over the course of the last year.

As regards the latest flare of violence in eastern Ukraine, the Russian Kremlin placed the blame on the Ukrainian military, claiming that those forces had acted provocatively. But the Ukrainian government had a different view and said that Russian-supported separatists were responsible for launching a fresh offensive to the west of Donetsk.

Regardless of the veracity of the respective claims being made by either side, the fact of the matter was that this eruption of violence could not be simply be regarded as simple skirmishes that might blight any peace accord. Instead, the use of heavy weapons made clear that these fresh battles augured a shift in the landscape.

Indeed, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko went so far as to call on his military to prepare for a possible "full-scale invasion" by Russia. He said, "There is a colossal threat of a renewal of large-scale military operations from the side of the Russian-terrorist groups. The military must be ready as much for a renewal of an offensive by the enemy in the Donbass as they are for a full-scale invasion along the whole length of the border with Russia. We must be truly ready for this."

The Ukrainian president also noted that rather than reducing its military footprint in the border zone, instead there were more Russian troops in the region than a year before. He said, "The concentration of Russian troops near the state border is one and a half times greater than a year ago."

Unsurprisingly, Russian authorities dismissed this claim with a Russian defense ministry spokesperson, Igor Konashenkov, insisting, "There are no regular Russian troops, let alone tactical combat groups in Ukraine." However, journalists in the field have made note of the buildup of Russian troops and heavy weaponry along the border with Ukraine in the late spring of 2015.

Nevertheless, the West was warning of fresh sanctions against Russia, if needed. United States Treasury Secretary Jack Lew offered support to Ukraine by saying that the United States and its allies from other G7 countries would be prepared to impose more sanctions, should Russia act in an aggressive manner in eastern Ukraine.

But financial repercussions were not the only possible consequences on the table. By mid-June 2015, the United States Pentagon indicated it would move heavy weaponry, such as battle tanks and other infantry fighting vehicles, and even United States troops, to Eastern European and Baltic countries. The move, should it come to pass, would be the first time the United States has placed heavy military equipment on the territories of young NATO states in the region since the end of the Cold War. As such, it was sure to anger Russia, which has been trying to increase its hegemonic presence in the region while driving the countries in the region from the NATO orbit. Instead, Russian aggression in eastern Ukraine was having the opposite effect.

For its part, Russia warned that it would react by ramping up its own forces in the region. In an interview with the Interfax news agency, Russian General Yuri Yakubov said, "If heavy U.S. military equipment, including tanks, artillery batteries and other equipment really does turn up in countries in eastern Europe and the Baltics, that will be the most aggressive step by the Pentagon and NATO since the Cold War. Russia will have no option but to build up its forces and resources on the Western strategic front."

#### Key Developments in the second part of 2015 --

In mid-2015, Ukraine's parliament was moving forward with constitutional reforms aimed at establishing temporary self-rule in the eastern part of the country under pro-Russian rebel rule. The changes to the constitution were aimed at meeting Ukraine's obligations under the prevailing Minsk peace accord. The main provisions contained in the constitutional changes centered on plans for decentralization of power, granting the pro-Russian rebels autonomy in key areas, such as financial and local administration. Ukraine would retain control in areas of defense, foreign policy, national security, rule of law, and civil liberties.

While the legislative progress in Ukraine signaled to some that the government in Kiev was adhering to its Minsk peace accord commitments, Russia objected to the changes, arguing that they did not go far enough to fulfill the obligations of the Minsk. Russian President

Vladimir Putin also argued that the constitutional changes were conceived without consulting the Russian-backed rebels in eastern Ukraine. But there were objections at home in Ukraine where nationalists railed against the move to grant autonomy to pro-Russian rebels, arguing angrily that it constituted political surrender to Russia.

In late August 2015, as legislation on the constitutional reforms granting eastern Ukraine greater self-rule were being debated, violent clashes erupted outside the parliamentary building in Kiev. Nationalist protesters hurled grenades, firecrackers, and smoke **bombs** at the parliament as the so-called "decentralization" legislation was being advanced for a first reading in the legislative chamber. The ensuing melee resulted in the deaths of at least two Ukrainian national guardsmen charged with protecting the building, as well as injuries to another 100 people -- most of whom were security personnel.

Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseny Yatseniuk as well as Interior Minister Arsen Avakov placed the blame for the violence on the hardline nationalist party, Svoboda (Freedom), which they said was fomenting unrest.

For his part, Ukrainian President Poroshenko concentrated on the political aspect, warning that if the decentralization legislation was not passed by parliament, in keeping with the commitments required by the Minsk Agreement, Ukraine would be at risk of losing its Western support. To this end, President Poroshenko said, "There would have been a real possibility of us being left alone with the aggressor." Heeding this warning, the Ukrainian parliament passed the bill although some hardline nationalist member of parliament railed against the move, screaming "Shame" as the vote was going forward. But this was just a first reading vote with further parliamentary measures to go before the bill actually became the law of the land. It was to be seen if it would survive the heated political environs in Ukraine.

In September 2015, the schedule for local elections in the pro-Russian eastern part of Ukraine was the cause of consternation. Under the terms of the prevailing Minsk peace agreement, local elections in the pro-Russian separatist regions of eastern Ukraine were to be held at the same **time** as elections across Ukraine. But due to continuing unrest in eastern Ukraine, the government in Kiev said that the vote would have to be postponed. Angered by the prospect of delayed elections, the pro-Russian separatists decided to schedule local polls for October and November 2015 anyway.

The government of Ukraine responded to this act of defiance by the separatists by declaring that it would not view those polls as legitimate and thus not recognize the results. As noted by Ukrainian President Poroshenko: "These aren't elections, they're not free, they will not meet the standards of the OSCE. This directly and severely contradicts the Minsk agreements." The imbroglio was thus threatening to erode and even upend the Minsk peace agreement.

Given these deteriorating conditions, Russia entered to fray in October 2015 and urged the pro-Russian separatists to postpone the local elections. With the polls now set for February 2016 instead, both sides were given some breathing room and necessary **time** to craft a scheduling solution that would be mutually acceptable. The West applauded Moscow for playing a constructive role and effectively saving the Minsk peace agreement from collapse. More skeptical observers suggested that Moscow's shift to being a more cooperative player in the Ukrainian crisis was likely driven by its impending financial woes that might require external assistance as well as its new pre-occupation with the Syrian quagmire.

Meanwhile, tensions between Ukraine and the pro-Russian elements continued to be an issue in the region, with Ukraine clearly alarmed about the potential collapse of the peace deal. Of note was Ukraine's request that NATO provide military weaponry to help that country defend itself from Russian-backed rebels. As noted by Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseny Yatseniuk, "Defense capabilities are essential to us in the face of a nuclear country, which has spent tens of billions of dollars on modernizing its army."

Not keen to be drawn into the conflict and threatening the already-fragile Minsk peace accord, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg signed an agreement to help modernize the Ukrainian armed forces, but stopped short of agreeing to directly provide Ukraine with military weapons. In an interview with Reuters News, Stoltenberg said, "NATO does not provide or supply weapons." He added, "The main focus now is the implementation of the Minsk agreement."

In another sign that the Minsk ceasefire -- fragile as it was -- remained in tact was the fact that both pro-Russian rebels and Ukrainian forces withdrew their light weapons.

Given this development, it was perhaps not entirely surprising that NATO was not interested in sparking a fire that was now simmering instead of blazing. Overall, the developments in eastern Ukraine in October 2015 were being cautiously regarded as hopeful signs for a more enduring peace.

Update on Malaysian Air shoot-down disaster:

In mid-2015, a year after Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 was shot down over an eastern Ukrainian war zone, killing close to 300 people, there was a call for justice as evidence began to mount against Russian-backed rebels. Of particular note was a proposal for a United Nations tribunal to prosecute suspects of Malaysian Air shoot-down disaster over eastern Ukraine, as well as a legal case seeking compensation for the families of victims. As July 2015 came to a close, Russia vetoed that proposal when it came before the United Nations Security Council, raising questions that its action was politically motivated. Those suspicions were raised more acutely when, in August 2015, Dutch investigators said fragments of a Russian missile system were found at the crash site, essentially implicating Russia more directly in the shoot-down disaster, which had been generally attributed to pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine. Now, with physical evidence of a Russian missile system being found at the scene of the crash, the Russian veto of the proposal for a United Nations tribunal to prosecute suspects stood out as an example of Russia acting in its own self-interest.

Going back to mid-2014, the landscape in eastern Ukraine was beset by crisis as Russian-backed separatists were at war with the Ukrainian forces in what was becoming a bloody and violent conflict. The already-dire geopolitical landscape took a disturbing turn on July 17, 2014, when a civilian passenger aircraft traveling from Amsterdam in the Netherlands to Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia went down in eastern Ukraine. All 298 people aboard the on board the Boeing 777 airliner -- 283 passengers, including 80 children, and 15 crew members -- perished when Malaysian Airlines flight 17 crashed in the rebel-held territory of Donetsk close to the Russian border.

That event augured a geopolitical landmine when it was revealed that the Malaysian Airlines flight was shot down and blame was soon placed on pro-Russian separatists battling Ukrainian forces. Of particular significance was the mounting evidence pointing to the fact that the aircraft was struck by a Russian-supplied missile, which was likely fired by pro-Russian rebels operating in the area.

Indeed, a preliminary report released in September 2014 made note of the fact that the damage to the Flight 17's fuselage and cockpit indicated that it had been impacted by high-energy objects from outside the aircraft. This finding was consistent with the theory that Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 was hit by a missile of some kind. This theory was further bolstered when the Office of the Director of National Intelligence in the United States reported that there was a "solid case" that a SA-11 missile -- also known as the Buk surface-to-surface missile -- was fired from eastern Ukraine and likely struck the airliner, causing it to crash and killing all those on board. Other evidence involved voice recordings of pro-Russian rebel commanders admitting they had shot down the airliner.

The tragedy soon transposed into something of a scandal when the Russian-backed rebels prevented emergency responders from gathering the remains of passengers, and in fact treated both the human remains and the belongings of victims with grave disrespect. As such, in the aftermath of the tragic downing of the Malaysian

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Airlines flight, and because the majority of the victims with Dutch nationals, Europe's stance against Russia hardened. Accordingly, the West -- including the United States and the European Union -- intensified its sanctions regime against Russia. For its part, Russia has throughout denied any responsible for the tragedy.

A year later in mid-July 2015, the Dutch Safety Board, which was leading a multinational investigation into the tragedy, was in the process of compiling a report on the shoot-down disaster. While the final report was not due to be released until October 2015, preliminary findings indicated the following: 1. There was "no evidence of technical or human error" ; 2. The flight data recorder showed that "all engine parameters were normal for cruise flight" until the recording "stopped abruptly" at the time of the crash; 3. Evidence pointed to the fact that the Russian Buk surface-to-surface missile was fired from a village in eastern Ukraine under pro-Russian control and struck Malaysian Air Flight 17, precipitating the crash.

The report also chided Malaysian Airlines for continuing to fly over a dangerous war zone despite other countries' dispatches and warnings, known as "notices to airmen" or NOTAMs.

As these preliminary findings began to circulate in the public sphere, Malaysia -- one of the countries involved in the multinational inquest -- demanded that the United Nations authorize a tribunal to further probe the crash. This call was echoed by Prime Minister Mark Rutte of the Netherlands -- the country that bore the brunt of the tragic death toll in the downing of Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 -- as he argued that an international tribunal would be needed to ensure justice was served. For his part, Russian President Vladimir Putin dismissed this call for the establishment of such a prosecutorial United Nations tribunal, casting the move as "premature." But his stance was not finding resonance across the world.

Meanwhile, relatives of the Flight 17 victims were wasting no time seeking legal recourse and financial reparations as they filed a \$900 million lawsuit against a Russian-supported rebel leader believed to be responsible for the shoot-down disaster over the eastern Ukrainian warzone. The legal writ filed in the United States alleged that a Russian national, Igor Strelkov ( also known as Igor Girkin) was functioning as a rebel leader in eastern Ukraine, and was acting with the "actual or apparent" authority of Russian government when Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 was shot down over eastern Ukraine. Court documents made available to Agence France Presse included the following assertion: "Flight 17 flew over the airspace of the area in which the aforesaid rebel army was waging its war activities and the rebel army under the command responsibility of defendant Girkin shot down the subject Boeing 777-200 aircraft."

Floyd Wisner, the attorney who advanced the lawsuit on behalf of the victims' families said the legal action had "nothing to do with the money." Instead, he made clear that it was intended to pressure both the United Nations and Russia to bring those responsible to justice. Wisner said, "The relatives want answers, and we believe Girkin has answers. This lawsuit could shed light on the families' concerns, particularly over slow-moving diplomatic measures."

Note that as July 2015 came to a close, Russia -- a permanent and thus veto-wielding member of the United Nations Security Council -- vetoed a draft resolution calling for a United Nations tribunal to be established to prosecute suspects of Malaysian Air shoot-down disaster over eastern Ukraine.

The proposal was rewarded with 11 of the 15 members of the United Nations Security Council voting in its favor, and with Angola, Venezuela, and China abstaining from the vote. But even that overwhelming tally was not enough to save the draft from surviving Russia's veto.

Given Russia's apparent complicity in the disaster, the general consensus was that the veto was a measure of self-interest by Moscow.

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Ukrainian Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin made this point himself as he said, "There can be no reason to oppose this [ unless you are a perpetrator yourself." For his part, Russia's Ambassador to the United Nations, Vitaly Churkin, dismissed the claim that his country's was attempting to stymie the process of accountability. He noted that criminal prosecutions would have been carried out in a "closed fashion" and blamed the media for "aggressive propaganda."

Despite this defense, Russia's veto was decried internationally and vociferously. United States Ambassador to the United Nations, Samantha Power, condemned Russia's veto of the draft proposal seeking, as she declared, "Russia has callously disregarded the public outcry in the grieving nations." Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop cast the Russian veto as "an affront to the memory of the 298 victims of MH17 and their families and friends." Foreign Minister Bishop also intimated that the Russian veto was not the end of the matter. Instead, she said that her country would be joined by Malaysia, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Ukraine in seeking an alternative pathway to prosecution mechanism.

By August 2015, suspicions about the Russian veto at the United Nations Security Council and Russia's eagerness to evade accountability were heightened more acutely when Dutch investigators said fragments of the Russian Buk surface-to-air missile system were found at the crash site.

Fred Westerbeke, a spokesperson for the Dutch Prosecutor's Office, made clear that the fragments were very clearly not parts of the downed aircraft, and that examinations had shown that they were likely from a missile system. He said, "We are going to need more investigation to really find out what exactly this is and if it is part of a possible system that took down MH17. If we can establish that, then we can say that it is a breakthrough."

In a statement, the Joint Investigation Team (JIT) -- led by the Netherlands, but also including representatives of Ukraine, Belgium, Malaysia and Australia -- announced that seven missile fragments had been "secured during a previous recovery mission in eastern Ukraine." The JIT added that further investigation was thus in the offing, noting, "The parts are of particular interest to the criminal investigation as they can possibly provide more information about who was involved in the crash of MH17. For that reason the JIT further investigates the origin of these parts."

It was expected that the JIT would prevail upon the expertise of weapons experts and forensic specialists to refine its examination.

The investigators stopped short of outright accusing Russia of being behind the shoot-down disaster, noting in careful terms that they had not yet proved a "causal connection" between Russia and the crash of Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 that killed close to 298 people on board.

The discovery of physical evidence of the Russian missile system essentially implicated Russia more closely in the shoot-down disaster, which had been generally attributed to pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine. But in truth, the main question going forward would be whether or not the fatal missile was fired by Russian-backed separatists, or, if the Russian military had played a more direct role in the disaster.

A concluding note --

Ukraine's "Maidan" uprising of 2013 and 2014, resulting in the removal of the pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovich from office and the dismantling of his authority in 2014, were signs that Ukraine was actively resisting influence from Moscow. They were also clear signals that Ukraine was determined to set its own course -- and quite likely in the direction of Europe. The people of Ukraine were delivering Russia a clear message that they would be the agents of their own self-determination. However, Russian President Vladimir Putin was not in a mood to receive that message.

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The invasion and de facto annexation of the Ukrainian territory of Crimea by Russia, under the guise of "protecting" the Russian ethno-linguistic population, showed that Russia felt entitled to stake a claim on Ukraine.

For the wider world, this action recalled alarming memories of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, under the aegis of the Brezhnev Policy, to subdue the independence-minded Prague Spring . It also evoked suggestions that Putin was attempting to recraft a Cold War Russian quasi-empire in the mold of the former Soviet Union.

While the "Maidan" or Independence Square in the Ukrainian capital of Kiev would be stamped in the history books as "Ground Zero" of Ukraine's 2014 unrest, the battleground had clearly move eastward with Crimea as a new flashpoint. But with fighting going on elsewhere in eastern Ukraine, and with "new Russia" enclaves been declared in Donetsk and Luhansk later in 2014, it was evident that Russia would not end its Ukrainian adventure at the borders of Crimea.

In much the same way as the Turks annexed northern Cyprus from that country in 1976, claiming it was protecting the rights of the Turkish ethnic population in Cyprus, which was home to an ethnically Greek population, Russia has done the same in eastern Ukraine. To date, Cyprus has remained divided by the so-called "Green Line," with an internationally recognized Cyprus encompassing most of the island, and a Turkish enclave to the north, which does not enjoy international recognition. A similar Ukraine/Crimea division could materialize as the likely outcome of this unfolding crisis.

But with an alternative scenario unfolding that takes Russian ambitions beyond Crimea, possibly in pursuit of the gas pipelines that traverse wider Ukrainian territory, a tidy solution was unlikely.

At stake were Russian ambitions to regain territory lost following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The reality was that Russia was attempting to destabilize Ukraine by supporting pro-Russian cabals in eastern Ukraine, and with an eye on establishing southern and eastern Ukraine as part of Vladimir Putin's "new Russia."

It was to be seen if the landscape in eastern Europe represented the foundation for a renewed Cold War between the East and West. Given the geopolitical and geostrategic stakes, the outcome was clearly being textured by bloodshed and tears. Russian President Putin was banking on the West's rationality and its reluctance to be drawn into another conflict -- especially one on European soil.

From the point of view of United States President Barack Obama, the very notion of a Cold War being in the offing was to be dismissed. According to President Obama, Russia was no longer a superpower and was now operating from a position of weakness as it intimidated neighbors such as Ukraine. But the tragic downing of a commercial airliner in eastern Ukraine in July 2014 raised the geopolitical stakes, and has since spurred the West to apply economic sanctions to Russia.

Economic pressures may have played a hand in forcing Russia to the negotiating table and the forging of two separate ceasefire agreements in the Belarusian capital of Minsk. But, to date, neither Minsk ceasefire agreement has managed to stem the flow of blood, and the encroachment of pro-Russian forces into eastern Ukrainian territory.

In the long run, the outcome to this story was yet to be written.

Special Entry: Russia launches military exercises in disputed territories of Georgia

In the backdrop of Russia's encroachment into eastern Ukraine, and its annexation of Crimea in 2014, surrounding countries have watched warily, wondering if its territories would be similarly affected. In March 2015, Russia's Defense Ministry confirmed that large-scale military exercises involving 2,000 Russian troops had commenced in the southern part of the country, along contested borders and even in disputed regions.



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The areas affected included the federal districts of Southern and North Caucasus, as well as the recently annexed Ukrainian region of Crimea. Military drills were also taking place on Russian military bases in Armenia, and in the Georgian separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The moves were being regarded as a symbolic illustration of Russian hegemony and influence in the region, irrespective of global outrage over Russia's backing of separatists in eastern Ukraine and the ensuing war that has rocked the region since 2014.

In fact, while global attention has focused on Russia's annexation of the Ukrainian region of Crimea, Russia has been quietly working towards subsuming the semi-autonomous Georgian territory of South Ossetia into its fold. In fact, a treaty, known as the "Treaty of Alliance and Integration" was drafted in December 2014 with the intent of integrating the Russian speaking enclave, irrespective of Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity or its legal claim on South Ossetia. At the end of January 2015, the leader of South Ossetia, Leonid Tibilov, dispatched finalized documents to Moscow. In February 2015, Russia and South Ossetia signed the "Treaty on the State Border," which was being viewed as a first step towards the signing of the broader "Treaty of Alliance and Integration." Once that integration accord was signed, South Ossetia would be absorbed by Russia over a period of months.

A similar process has been underway as regards the other Georgian semi-autonomous breakaway region, Abkhazia, which was also home to a Russian-speaking population. The alliance and integration measures related to Abkhazia, however, were not regarded as comprehensive as the integration accord at stake for South Ossetia.

Note that on March 18, 2015, Russian President Putin signed the aforementioned Treaty of Alliance and Integration," which (illegally) integrated the breakaway territory with Russia. The government of Georgia in Tbilisi cast the development as a provocation with the aim of stealing Georgian territory. As noted by Georgian Foreign Minister Tamar Beruchashvili, "It's a cynical and provocative step by Russia ... We consider it a move aimed at annexation." Meanwhile, leading Western countries said it was a dangerous threat to regional stability.

As with the annexation of Crimea, the integration of Georgian territories had no chance of gaining international recognition, and instead, Russia's territorial encroachment has been widely condemned. Indeed, the United States and the European Union condemned the new treaty with South Ossetia. Jen Psaki, the spokesperson for the United States Department of State said, "The United States' position on South Ossetia and Abkhazia remains clear: these regions are integral parts of Georgia, and we continue to support Georgia's independence, its sovereignty, and its territorial integrity." Federica Mogherini, the European Union's foreign policy head, said the treaty was "yet another step" intended to undermine "ongoing efforts to strengthen security and stability in the region."

Of course, as noted above, the loudest outrage as regards South Ossetia and Abkhazia has come from Georgia, which already fought a war with Russia in 2008 over these very issues of control. Nevertheless, Russian President Vladimir Putin was not expected to curtail his expansionist ambitions. In fact, the Russian leader was flexing his aggressive and hawkish muscles in the region as he ordered the Russian Northern Fleet to be on a state of full combat readiness in the Arctic. As well, Russia commenced major military exercises across northern Russia involving more than 45,000 troops, in what was a clear show of military strength intended to intimidate its neighbors.

#### Special Entry: Death of opposition leader and Putin critic Nemtsov

On Feb. 27, 2015, Boris Nemtsov, a Russian opposition leader and well-known critic of President Vladimir Putin, was shot to death in central Moscow in close proximity to the highly-fortified Russian Kremlin. Nemtsov served as the governor of Nizhny Novgorod Oblast and as a vice premier in the waning years of the presidency of Boris Yeltsin in the late 1990s. As Putin gained prominence in the post-Yeltsin period, Nemtsov evolved into a sharp anti-government critic.

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For his part, Russian President Vladimir Putin condemned the killing of his political nemesis, and in a telegram to Nemtsov's mother, promised that the killer(s) would be brought to justice. However, Western powers were not about to easily accept Putin's gestures and instead called for an open investigation into the killing of Nemtsov.

Adding an ominous dimension to the mystery surrounding his death was Nemtsov's own anxieties about being the subject of a political assassination. In a recent interview, Nemtsov mused about his fears that Russian President Putin might have him eliminated over his objections to the Russian military's activities in eastern Ukraine. In fact, Nemtsov was murdered just hours after he gave an interview in which he urged Russians in Moscow to participate in an opposition rally to protest Putin's "mad, aggressive, and deadly policy of war against Ukraine."

Of note has been the fact that Russian authorities have suggested that Nemtsov's murder was aimed at destabilizing the country, with some pro-Putin Russian politicians saying that the killing of Nemtsov was a "provocation" against the state. Left outside the "official" discussion in Russia, however, has been the glaring reality that Nemtsov himself speculated about being killed for his views in opposition to the Russian government.

On March 1, 2015, tens of thousands of Russians took to the streets in Moscow to rally in protest of Nemtsov's death.

On March 8, 2015, two individuals were charged in connection with the murder of Nemtsov. Russian authorities said that Zaur Dadayev admitted his involvement in the shooting death of Nemtsov close to the Kremlin in Moscow a week earlier. Dadayev and the other alleged assailant, Anzor Gubashev, -- both of whom were of Chechen origin -- were said to have been the organizers of a plot to kill Nemtsov. Three other suspects were in police custody while a sixth individual reportedly committed suicide during an altercation with authorities in the Chechen capital Grozny.

Russian authorities were advancing the theory that the suspects were opposed to Nemtsov's defense of satirical cartoons, of the type published by the French entity Charlie Hebdo, which portrayed the Islamic prophet Mohammed in an unflattering light. Stated differently, Russian authorities were suggesting that the assailants were motivated by their adherence to political Islam.

Some of Nemtsov's supporters, including the well-known opposition leader, Alexei Navalny, have rejected this narrative. They have suggested that the men in custody were actually hired to assassinate the opposition leader, with the Islamist extremist explanation refocusing attention away from Putin and the Kremlin.

#### Special Note on Russian Economy

In April 2015, it was apparent that Western sanctions against Russia were having an effect as the Russian economy contracted by two percent in the first three months of the year. Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev made it clear that Western sanctions, along with the low price of oil, were the causes of the first contraction in the Russian economy since 2009. He also intimated that more economic pain might be in the future, but insisted that Russians could cope with the hardship. He also reminded Russians that the sacrifice was necessary, given the imperative of regaining control over Crimea. Indeed, the Ukrainian territory of Crimea resided at the heart of the matter with the Russian support for pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine and the illegal annexation of the Ukrainian territory of Crimea being the very reason the West imposed sanctions on Russia in the first place.

Economic pressure on Russia had been building for several months. Indeed, in December 2014, Russia was faced with economic calamity due to the decreasing price of oil. As a result, the Bank of Russia raised its key interest rate to 17 percent from 10.5 percent. The interest rate hike was being interpreted as a desperate move by Russia to bolster its currency, the Ruble, and to ultimately help revitalize its ailing economy.

Western sanctions, led by the United States and the European Union, against Russia for its aggression in eastern Ukraine and its seizure of Crimea, have taken a destructive toll on the Russian economy. Of note was a new

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round of Western sanctions in September 2014, which included restrictions on key Russian companies from financial markets, as well as limits on the imports of some technologies.

One tangible consequence was the collapsing Russian currency. Indeed, the value of the Ruble sank about 50 percent since the start of the year. That falling currency value promised to escalate inflation in Russia, trigger consumer panic and a possible run on the banks, thus causing further damage to the economy.

The assertive move by the Bank of Russia was intended to guard against these deleterious consequences. Most specifically, there were hopes that a rise in interest rates would coax investors to keep their funds in Russian banks. But even with these moves, it was difficult to tell if they would be enough to rescue Russia. A higher interest rate would stymie growth, and almost guarantee that Russia would be heading into a recession -- as reflected in the Russian government's own decision to downgrade its forecast for the next year.

Meanwhile, the fact of the matter was that the Russian energy economy was reliant on the average price of a barrel of oil, which has dropped below \$56 from a high mid-year of \$107. With oil and gas occupying as much as two thirds of Russian exports, and with Russian public expenditure being largely supported by energy-related revenues, Moscow could expect a significant -- and unsustainable -- deficit on its trade and financial engagement with the global market place. With this path ahead for Russia, it was not surprising that investors were not enthused about keeping their funds in Russian banks, and the result was a precipitous slide in the value of the Ruble.

President Vladimir Putin's rivals took the opportunity to place blame on the Russian president for the economic woes facing the country. Former Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov -- a one-time Putin stalwart who was now an opposition chief -- made the following charge in an interview with Reuters News: "Russia is going into decline. 2015 is a year in which Putin must make a principle decision." That decision, according to Kasyanov, would be in the political realm as he called for Putin to either resign or hold early elections. He said that Putin he should have "just a quiet departure through presidential elections." He continued, "I don't believe he will win presidential elections if they are free and fair."

In truth, however, Putin's popularity was actually bolstered by his decision to violate Ukraine's sovereignty and annex Crimea. Thus, despite Kasyanov's claims, early elections might serve simply to ratify Putin's mandate. Of course, the next scheduled elections were not due until 2018, and continued external pressure in the form of sanctions and low oil prices could significantly change the political climate in the future.

For his part, Russian President Putin has sidestepped any serious discussion of the economic ills facing Russia, instead blaming the West during an annual address at the end of 2014. He said, "Sometimes I think, maybe they'll (the West) let the bear eat berries and honey in the forest, maybe they will leave it in peace. They will not. Because they will always try to put him on a chain, and as soon as they succeed in doing so they tear out his fangs and his claws." Putin's rhetoric -- bereft of an actual economic plan of action -- indicated that he intended to rely in nationalist sentiment to ride out the negative economic climate. It was to be seen if this approach would actually be effective.

Meanwhile, United States President Barack Obama entered the equation, saying in an interview with National Public Radio in December 2014 that Putin made a "strategic mistake" when he annexed Crimea. Pushing back at his conservative critics in the United States who have intimated that the Russian president had outplayed the West by flexing his military muscle in eastern Ukraine, Obama said that the burgeoning economic calamity in Russia had proved those critics wrong. The United States leader said, "You'll recall that three or four months ago, everybody in Washington was convinced that President Putin was a genius and he had outmaneuvered all of us and he had bullied and strategized his way into expanding Russian power." Obama continued, "Today, I'd sense that at least outside of Russia, maybe some people are thinking what Putin did wasn't so smart." President Obama noted that

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sanctions had left the Russian economy vulnerable to the volatility of the energy market. Comparing the Russian scenario to the relative stability of the United States economy, Obama said, "The big advantage we have with Russia is we've got a dynamic, vital economy, and they don't. They rely on oil. We rely on oil and iPads and movies and you name it."

By April 2015, it was reported that Western sanctions against Russia were having an effect as the Russian economy contracted by two percent in the first three months of the year. Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev made the announcement during an address to members of the Russian parliament, and made clear that Western sanctions, along with the lower price of oil, constituted the reasons for the the first contraction in the Russian economy since 2009.

Those Western sanctions were imposed because of Russia's actions in eastern Ukraine, including the annexation of Crimea. Prime Minister Medvedev addressed this reality head on, saying, "the the weightiest pressure on the Russian economy had come from 'the main political decision last year -- the return of Crimea to Russia.'" He intimated that this was a necessary process, noting that the return of Crimea to Russia was vital, and comparing it to the "reunification of Germany or the return to China of Hong Kong and Macao."

Of course, the cost of that "vital" reunification was likely to increased, with the Russian Central Bank warning that the economy could shrink even further through the year to four percent, if the price of oil stayed around \$50 a barrel. Still, the Russian head of government also insisted that Russia would weather the economic storm. Prime Minister Medvedev said, "If external pressure intensifies, and oil prices remain at an extremely low level for a long time, we will have to develop in a new economic reality. I am convinced that we will be able to live even in such a reality. The experience of the recent period has shown that we have learnt how to do this."

Note: The prospects of a Russian economic calamity will likely be somewhat mitigated by the reality that it still retains significant currency reserves that the International Monetary Fund has said would account for about one year's worth of imports.

Special Entry: Russia questions 1991 recognition of Baltic states' independence

In mid-2015, Russia was questioning the recognition of the independence of the Baltic nation states of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia.

The office of Russia's chief prosecutor announced plans to examine the legitimacy of the former Soviet Union's recognition of the three Baltic countries in 1991, and to specifically consider whether the action was legal. The action was spurred by letters by two members of parliament, who alleged that the decision to recognize the independence of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia has been taken "by an unconstitutional body."

Not surprisingly, the governments of the Baltic countries reacted with outrage. Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaitė reacted by declaring: "Our independence was gained through the blood and sacrifice of the Lithuanian people. No one has the right to threaten it." Her country's Foreign Minister Linas Linkevičius characterized the investigation as "a provocation to say the least" and also an "absurd provocation." In an interview with Reuters News, Estonian Foreign Minister Keit Pentus-Rosimannus offered a similar assessment. Pentus-Rosimannus said, "The entire issue is legally absurd. It serves as yet another example of the resurgent imperialistic mood that unfortunately exists in Russia."

That sense of concern over Russia's imperial aspirations was real, given that country's recent actions in eastern Ukraine, and in particular, the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Faced with international condemnation for its annexation of the Ukrainian territory, Russia's chief prosecutor justified the move by declaring that Crimea was illegally transferred from Russia to Ukraine in 1954. Now, there were fears that Russia was using the same type of

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justification in regard to the Baltic countries, which were under Soviet control from 1940 until the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991. Indeed, this suggestion by Russia that Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia may have been granted independent recognition illegally was raising the alarm that Russia was now looking to return the Baltic nation states to its fold, as part of Russian Vladimir Putin's recent penchant to reconstitute the Soviet Union.

While Russia has sought to quiet these concerns, with the Kremlin casting the investigation as simply a formality with no legal consequences, there remained prevailing anxieties about these moves, even if they proved to be perfunctory. The fact of the matter was that if Russia did, in fact, seek to re-absorb the three Baltic countries, there would be consequences in terms of global security. With Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia being NATO member states, an attack on their sovereignty would spur a defensive response by NATO.

Special Entry: Russia encroaches into semi-autonomous Georgian territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia

-- Some portions of this entry replicated from entry above due to relevance --

In the backdrop of Russia's encroachment into eastern Ukraine, and its annexation of Crimea in 2014, surrounding countries have watched warily, wondering if its territories would be similarly affected. In March 2015, Russia's Defense Ministry confirmed that large-scale military exercises involving 2,000 Russian troops had commenced in the southern part of the country, along contested borders and even in disputed regions.

The areas affected included the federal districts of Southern and North Caucasus, as well as the recently annexed Ukrainian region of Crimea. Military drills were also taking place on Russian military bases Armenia, and in the Georgian separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The moves were being regarded as a symbolic illustration of Russian hegemony and influence in the region, irrespective of global outrage over Russia's backing of separatists in eastern Ukraine and the ensuing war that has rocked the region since 2014.

In fact, while global attention has focused on Russia's annexation of the Ukrainian region of Crimea, Russia has been quietly working towards subsuming the semi-autonomous Georgian territory of South Ossetia into its fold. In fact, a treaty, known as the "Treaty of Alliance and Integration" was drafted in December 2014 with the intent of integrating the Russian speaking enclave, irrespective of Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity or its legal claim on South Ossetia. At the end of January 2015, the leader of South Ossetia, Leonid Tibilov, dispatched finalized documents to Moscow. In February 2015, Russia and South Ossetia signed the "Treaty on the State Border," which was being viewed as a first step towards the signing of the broader "Treaty of Alliance and Integration." Once that integration accord was signed, South Ossetia would be absorbed by Russia over a period of months.

A similar process has been underway as regards the other Georgian semi-autonomous breakaway region, Abkhazia, which was also home to a Russian-speaking population. The alliance and integration measures related to Abkhazia, however, were not regarded as comprehensive as the integration accord at stake for South Ossetia.

On March 18, 2015, Russian President Putin signed the aforementioned Treaty of Alliance and Integration," which (illegally) integrated the breakaway territory with Russia. The government of Georgia in Tbilisi cast the development as a provocation with the aim of stealing Georgian territory. As noted by Georgian Foreign Minister Tamar Beruchashvili, "It's a cynical and provocative step by Russia ... We consider it a move aimed at annexation." Meanwhile, leading Western countries said it was a dangerous threat to regional stability.

As with the annexation of Crimea, the integration of Georgian territories had no chance of gaining international recognition, and instead, Russia's territorial encroachment has been widely condemned. Indeed, the United States

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and the European Union condemned the new treaty with South Ossetia. Jen Psaki, the spokesperson for the United States Department of State said, "The United States' position on South Ossetia and Abkhazia remains clear: these regions are integral parts of Georgia, and we continue to support Georgia's independence, its sovereignty, and its territorial integrity." Federica Mogherini, the European Union's foreign policy head, said the treaty was "yet another step" intended to undermine "ongoing efforts to strengthen security and stability in the region."

Of course, as noted above, the loudest outrage as regards South Ossetia and Abkhazia has come from Georgia, which already fought a war with Russia in 2008 over these very issues of control. Nevertheless, Russian President Vladimir Putin was not expected to curtail his expansionist ambitions. In fact, the Russian leader was flexing his aggressive and hawkish muscles in the region as he ordered the Russian Northern Fleet to be on a state of full combat readiness in the Arctic. As well, Russia commenced major military exercises across northern Russia involving more than 45,000 troops, in what was a clear show of military strength intended to intimidate its neighbors.

By mid-July 2015, the European Union was warning that while world attention remained on Russia's land grab in Ukraine, Russia was doing the same in the Georgian semi-autonomous regions.

Of note was the fact that Russia had installed its own border signs inside South Ossetia, as it continued its quiet absorption of the Georgian territory.

As the European Union had warned, Russia was intent on redrawing the regional map, effectively expanding its territory in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, to the detriment of Georgian sovereignty. A statement by the European Union foreign policy chief, Federica Mogherini, aimed to remind Russia that it was acting in violation of international law and read as follows: "The EU reaffirms its full support for Georgia's territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders."

Meanwhile, the political landscape in Georgia was tense due to Russia's moves in South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

On July 18, 2015, thousands of demonstrators were on the streets of the Georgian capital of Tbilisi to register their outrage over what Russia's so-called "occupation" of the two semi-autonomous regions. In an interview with Agence France Presse, Tamara Chergoleishvili, a leading protest organizer, explained the mass action as follows: "The Kremlin continues to use both hard and soft power in its efforts to subjugate Georgia. We gathered here to show that Russia's aggressive policy doesn't belong to the 21st century."

#### Special Note on Russian engagement in Syrian Crisis

Since early 2011, anti-government protests have spread and escalated across the Arab world; Syria emerged as an addition to the list of countries experiencing unrest in March 2011. At first, protesters stopped short of demanding the resignation of President Bashar al-Assad, instead demanding greater political freedom and efforts to end corruption. For his part, President Assad announced he would advance a reform agenda, which would include lifting the emergency laws that had been in place for decades, and increased rights to the country's disenfranchised Kurdish population. These moves were aimed at quelling the rising climate of unrest gripping the country. But over time, as protests continued, and as the Assad regime carried out a hardline crackdown on dissent, tensions escalated between the government and the protesters.

In mid-2011, the United Nations Security Council and the Arab League respectively issued condemnations of the violence in Syria. As well, the United Nations Human Rights Council called for an independent inquiry into the violent crackdown on dissent. Meanwhile, global leaders were calling for President Assad to step down from power, given the brutality of the Syrian regime's crackdown on protesters. In 2012, the bloody crackdown by the Assad regime on anti-government protesters was ongoing. In fact, the crackdown appeared to become more relentless in places such as Homs and Aleppo. Despite widespread condemnation from the West, a United Nations Security

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Resolution on the situation in Syria was subject to veto by Russia and China. A subsequent vote in the United Nations General Assembly overwhelmingly condemned Syria for its brutal crackdown. A prevailing truce, brokered by the joint United Nations/Arab League envoy, Kofi Annan, was established in the interests of preventing further bloodshed; however, it was revealed to be an exercise in theory rather than practice and eventually the United Nations monitoring mission ended in failure.

Syria has meanwhile been subject to sanctions by various countries and was sliding into pariah status in the international community. Assassinations, alleged massacres, geopolitical tensions with Turkey and Israel, and suspicions about the use of chemical weapons, have since mired the Syrian landscape. Indeed, with it was increasingly clear that with President Bashar al-Assad using brutal tactics to quell the uprising served only to create an even more tumultuous landscape, and eventually set the path for a full-blown civil war.

That civil war pitted the Assad forces, backed by Lebanon-based Hezbollah, against a disparate cabal of anti-government entities, ranging from the rebel Free Syrian Army to several Islamist terrorist enclaves.

At the same *time*, Syria was facing a devastating humanitarian crisis. That crisis reached new heights in August 2013 with claims that Syrian forces launched a chemical attack on the outskirts of Damascus. Although this was the clear sign that United States President Barack Obama's "red line" had definitively been crossed, the international community remained reticent about becoming more involved in the Syrian crisis. Ultimately, an ensuing chemical weapons deal with Syria between the United States and Russia quieted the war drums.

In the meantime, though, a highly anticipated peace summit in Geneva ended without yielding any productive results and the civil war in Syria raged on and on.

By mid-2014, while Syria had shown progress in its disposal of chemical toxins, in keeping with an international agreement intended to avoid intervention by the West, the country was dealing with an ascendant "Islamic State." Previously known as Islamic State of Iraq and Syria or ISIS as well as Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant or ISIL, this group self-declared a caliphate extending from Syria to Iraq.

It was apparent that the power vacuum from the Syrian civil war provided a breeding ground for extremism that Islamic State could exploit and use to both challenge the Assad regime and function as a recruitment tool for Jihadists. Whereas the West and regional powers in the Middle East had earlier called for an end to the Assad regime, suddenly the geopolitical stakes were quite different as extremist terrorists were now posing the most dangerous threat to regional stability.

The barbaric beheadings of two American journalists by Islamic State in their stronghold in Syria changed the calculus and the Obama administration in the United States -- initially reticent about re-engaging in the Middle East -- was now looking at a targeted anti-terrorism strategy in the Syrian-Iraqi landscape of Islamic State. As such, a Western coalition, led by the United States, was soon carrying out air strikes on Islamic State targets in Syria and Iraq. Of note was the fact that the United States-led coalition expanded to include Japan and Jordan when citizens of their countries that were being held by Islamic State were also brutally killed.

As of 2015, Syria was beset by two sets of intersecting challenges -- the ongoing civil war between the Assad regime and rebel forces on one end, and the horrific dangers posed by the notorious terror group, Islamic State, which had seized wide swaths of territory in Syria and left an appalling death toll. It was generally understood that the civil war conditions in Syria, to some extent, facilitated the emergence of Islamic State in that country. Syrian President Assad's priority to hold onto power, and thus the center of power in Damascus, had allowed a power chasm to flourish in other parts of the country, which Islamic State has been able to exploit. The result has been a

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mass exodus of Syrians fleeing the country and seeking refuge in Europe. The so-called migrant influx in Europe has raised questions as to how to legally and humanely deal with a burgeoning humanitarian refugee crisis.

At the political level, Russia signaled it would be entering the Syrian crisis militarily in September 2015 although it was unclear if Moscow's goal was to bolster and preserve Bashar al-Assad's hold on power, or, to go after Islamic State. The geopolitical landscape was complicated in October 2015 with the news that the United States would be deploying special operations teams to Syria. The scene in November 2015 was grave as Russia and France intensified their efforts to go after Islamic State targets in Syria following devastating terror attacks by the Islamist terror network that killed hundreds of Russian and French citizens.

Russia, France, and the United States were now respectively changing their respective calculations, cognizant that the Islamist terror group was no longer simply seeking to build its Caliphate but, instead, transposing its goals to more of an Islamic Jihadist orientation. The result was a global security crisis.

See "Foreign Relations" for more details.

## Special Entry

Russia acknowledges that bomb brought down jet carrying vacationers from Egyptian resort town of Sharm el-Sheikh; promises retribution against Islamic State

## Summary

The crash of a Russian airliner in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula resulted in the deaths of all 224 persons on board. The Russian Metrojet Flight KG9268 departed the Red Sea resort city of Sharm-el-Sheikh and was bound for the Russian city of St. Petersburg but crashed before the tourists and flight crew could arrive at their destination. The notorious terror group, Islamic State, claimed responsibility for the downing of the flight but

Egyptian officials dismissed the claim on the basis of their belief that the terror group did not have the capability to bring down a jet. The Russian government was, likewise, reticent to accept terrorism as explanation. Nevertheless, both the United States and the United Kingdom made clear that intelligence pointed to a bomb being planted on the aircraft and exploding shortly after taking off from Sharm-el-Sheikh.

With an affiliate of Islamic State active in the Egyptian Sinai in recent years, and with intelligence pointing in the direction of terrorism, that group's claim of responsibility was being viewed by the countries of the West as credible.

Russia joined that group's conclusions two weeks after the crash, pointing to explosive material found on crash debris, while Russian President Vladimir Putin promised that those responsible would face justice. The international dimension of the tragedy catapulted the global security threat posed by Islamic State to new heights.

## In Detail

On Oct. 31, 2015, a Russian airliner carrying 224 people crashed in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula about 20 minutes after taking off from the Egyptian resort town of Sharm el-Sheikh, killing all the persons on board. While most of those aboard were Russian citizens, there were also four Ukrainians and one Belarussian national among the victims.

The Russian Metrojet Flight KG9268 departed the Red Sea city and was bound for the Russian city of St. Petersburg but crashed before the tourists and flight crew could arrive at their destination.



It was the deadliest crash of the French-made Airbus A321 airliner in recent times.

According to the Egyptian authorities, the aircraft disappeared from radar approximately 20 minutes after its departure from Sharm el-Sheikh while flying over the central Sinai Peninsula at an altitude of 31,000 feet. The Egyptian military aircraft later located the wreckage of the aircraft in an area of the Sinai called Hasna, just south of the Mediterranean coastal town of el-Arish. Russian officials confirmed that the aircraft split into two in mid-air but refrained from immediately drawing conclusions about the cause of the disaster.

With both of the aircraft's flight recorders, known as "black boxes," recovered, along with no shortage of forensic evidence, there would be a good foundation for investigators to determine what happened to Metrojet Flight KG9268.

To that end, Egypt would be leading the investigation, which would involve the participation of an international group of aviation experts. The Russians were expected to assist with the inquiry given the fact that its citizens made up the vast majority of the appalling death toll. Because the aircraft was a French-made Airbus A321, France would also be involved in the investigation into what went wrong.

As well, an Irish delegation would be part of the investigation since the actual aircraft was registered in Ireland.

Although Egyptian officials initially indicated that there was nothing irregular about the doomed flight and suggested either human error or a mechanical malfunction, Islamist terrorists in the Sinai aligned with the notorious terror group, Islamic State, claimed responsibility for downing the flight via a Telegram messaging application.

Egyptian Prime Minister Sharif Ismail immediately dismissed the claim, asserting that the terror group did not have the capability to bring down an aircraft from the type of high altitude Metrojet Flight KG9268 reached at the time it disappeared from radar.

But in the days after the crash, authorities in the United States and United Kingdom respectively indicated that intelligence pointed to the likelihood that Metrojet Flight KG9268 was brought down by a bomb. Clearly, this assertion by two Western countries would vitiate the notion that an Islamic State affiliate in the Sinai used some sort of missile to target the aircraft. Instead, attention was settling on a more conventional methodology for the conduct of terrorism -- the use of a bomb, which was likely planted on the aircraft by an airport insider, and which was very likely programmed to explode when that aircraft reached a certain altitude.

United Kingdom Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond did not prevaricate in any way as he made the following declaration: "We have concluded that there is a significant possibility that the crash was caused by an explosive device on board the aircraft." Moreover, the government of the United Kingdom moved to suspend all flights to and from Sharm-el-Sheikh, while putting plans into place for providing transportation to bring British nationals home from Egypt, but only after new and stringent security protocols had been put into place. The office of United Kingdom Prime Minister David Cameron explained the government's decision with the following statement: "The evidence we received suggested there was a credible threat with regard to Sharm al-Sheikh airport which is why we have taken the actions we have." The prime minister's office stopped short of providing information about what types of security actions would be taken.

Across the Atlantic, unnamed officials in the United States revealed to various news agencies that a bomb "was a highly possible scenario" and that terrorism was the likely cause of the crash. Subsequently, United States President Barack Obama himself noted that there was a possibility that the Russian airliner was brought down by a

**bomb** that was planted on board. To that end, President Obama said, "We're taking that very seriously." President Obama's head of homeland security, Jey Johnson, later noted that new and more stringent security measures would be implemented at certain airports across the world for aircraft flying into the United States.

Of note was the fact that no United States-registered airlines fly in and out of the Sharm al-Sheikh airport due to enduring concerns about poor security. As such, the United States Transportation Security Administration has not been at that airport in recent **times** to actually evaluate security there.

Perhaps eager to protect its vital tourism industry, Egypt again dismissed the **idea** that Islamic State terrorists within its own borders might be responsible for the tragedy. Indeed, the Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Sisi went so far as to disparage Islamic State's claim of responsibility as mere "propaganda." But on Nov. 4, 2015, another claim of responsibility had been advanced by Islamic State in the Sinai -- this **time** via an audio message posted on Twitter. In that message, the speaker said: "We, with God's grace, are the ones who brought it down, and we are not obliged to disclose the mechanism of its demise."

Meanwhile, Russia was likewise distancing itself from the Islamic State and terrorism angle. With Russia now actively participating in the civil war in Syria against both anti-Assad rebels and Islamic State, it was not keen to admit that it might be suffering so quickly from what is generally known as "blowback" from its Syrian engagement. Still, the truth of the matter was that if the cause of the crash was ultimately determined to be terrorism at the hands of Islamic State, Russia would have to confront the reality that its heavy military footprint in Syria quite possibly was yielding deleterious consequences. Of note was the fact that airplanes from various European countries depart to and from Sharm-el-Sheikh daily, yet of all the aircraft available, it was a Russian jetliner which may have been selected by Islamic State terrorists as a target.

Regardless of its hesitation in accepting the terrorism explanation for the crash of Metrojet Flight KG9268, Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered all flights to and from Egypt to be halted.

Putin made that decision after a meeting with Alexander Bortnikov, the head of Russia's security service, in which he recommended that Russia suspend passenger flights to Egypt until the precise cause of the crash was determined. Bortnikov explained the move saying, "Until we know the real reasons for what happened, I consider it expedient to stop Russian flights to Egypt. Above all, this concerns tourist routes." Arrangements were also made to repatriate Russians stranded at the Egyptian resort town.

Several other airlines were also taking precautions by grounding flights scheduled to traverse that route, rerouting aircraft flying over the Sinai, while several Western governments released travel warnings expressly stating that their citizens should not travel to the Egyptian Sinai.

Note that as the first week of November 2015 came to a close, authorities in the United States and United Kingdom made clear that their intelligence assets had intercepted communications, known in intelligence circles as "chatter," from suspected terrorists. This revelation only bolstered their view that Russian Metrojet Flight KG9268 was the target of terrorism.

While this view would yet have to be proved via forensic evidence and a thorough assessment of information on the flight recorders, the working theory at this **time** was that a **bomb** had been hidden in luggage and stowed in the hold of the aircraft. The general belief was that the **bomb** was quite likely planted by an insider working at the Sharm-el-Sheikh airport. That insider was believed to have worked in some form or fashion with Islamic State in the Sinai.

In the second week of November 2015, Russia and Egypt continued to officially resist the terrorism explanation for the crash of the Russian Metrojet airliner in the Egyptian Sinai. For Russia, there was no willingness to publicly

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admit that it was suffering from blowback as a result of its military engagement in Syria. For Egypt, there was no desire to taint its tourism industry by admitting that the resort city of Sharm-el-Sheikh may have suffered from lax security; Egypt was also not eager to confront the reality that despite its hardline measures against Islamist militants, a likely act of international terrorism had quite possibly occurred on its soil. As such, Russia and Egypt continued to publicly insist that it was too soon to draw conclusions about what happened on Oct. 31, 2015.

In the same period (the second week of November 2015), Islamic State -- which had already claimed responsibility for bringing down the Russian jet -- was now promising further attacks on Russia.

To this end, Islamic State was vowing via a videotaped threat to attack Russians "very soon" on Russian soil for that country's heavy involvement in the Syrian crisis.

On Nov. 17, 2015, after two weeks of avoiding the terrorism explanation for the downing of the Metrojet flight, Russian authorities finally acknowledged that "an act of terror" in the form of a **bomb** brought down the plane over the Egyptian Sinai.

Russian authorities reportedly informed President Putin that "traces of foreign explosives" were identified on the debris from the aircraft. Publicly, the head of Russia's security service, Alexander Bortnikov, said, "We can unequivocally say it was a terrorist act."

It should be noted that the government of Egypt continued to insist that it would not arrive at premature conclusions and would let the the investigatory process be fully completed. Egyptian Prime Minister Sherif Ismail said, "The Egyptian authorities affirm they will take into consideration the investigations that the Russian side reached ... in the comprehensive investigation." Egyptian Interior Minister Magid Abdel Ghaffar went slightly further, noting that there would be consequences if the investigation indicated security lapses at the Sharm el-Sheikh airport. He said, "Regarding Sharm al-Sheikh airport, when we discover that there have been security lapses action will be taken, but up to now we have no information about lapses in the search and security procedures." Egypt's Civil Aviation Minister Hosam Kamel, however, would not even concede that anything nefarious had occurred, as he said, "Up until this moment, there is no evidence of crime."

Note that on Nov. 18, 2015, Islamic State released details regarding their claim of responsibility in the Russian Metrojet disaster. In the terror group's Dabiq magazine, Islamic State explained that its operatives used its liquids **bomb** manufacturing capability, hidden in a canned Schweppes soft drink, to bring down the doomed jetliner. That liquids **bomb** making capability has been known to global anti-terrorism experts since 2006 following an investigation by MI6 experts from the United Kingdom, which has led to regulations on carry-on liquids belonging to aircraft passengers.

In this message from Islamic State, the terror group said, "The divided Crusaders of the East and West thought themselves safe in their jets as they cowardly bombarded the Muslims of the Caliphate. And so revenge was exacted upon those who felt safe in the cockpits."

## Russia's Official Response

With Islamic State claiming responsibility for the fatal crash, Russian President Vladimir Putin promised to "find and punish" those responsible for the attack over the Sinai peninsula. He said, "We'll look for them everywhere, wherever they are hiding. We'll find them in any corner of the planet and punish them." The Russian leader warned that those who carried out the attack that led to the deaths of more than 200 Russians, or were in anyway complicit in helping them, would face justice as he declared, "We must do this without any statute of limitations and we must

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find out all their names. Anyone who tries to help the criminals should know that the consequences for trying to shelter them will lie completely on their shoulders."

President Putin also made it clear that his country's military engagement in Syria would not only continue, but that Russian air strikes "must be intensified so that the criminals understand that retribution is inevitable."

To that end, Russian warplanes wasted no time before stepping up its air campaign in Syria. The Russian government was also signaling its interest in working with France, which was also struck with a spate of terrorist attacks at the hands of Islamic State in the French capital of Paris. Indeed, both countries were reported to be carrying out sustained air strikes on Islamic State targets in Syria. As well, despite strained relations with the United States, as a result of their shared interest in defeating Islamic State, Russian and United States forces were said to be more closely coordinating their respective strikes on Islamic State targets in Syria.

## Special Entry

Ties between Turkey and Russia erode after Russian-Turkish jet shoot down crisis

In the last week of November 2015, the geopolitical complexity of Syrian civil war grew more complicated when Turkey shot down a Russian fighter jet on the basis of accusations that the Russian aircraft violated Turkish air space.

When the crew ejected from the doomed aircraft, one pilot was shot to death by extremists on the ground in Syria as he parachuted to the ground. There was another fatality as a Russian special operations officer dispatched to rescue the crew was also killed by extremists on the ground. Only the pilot of the doomed jet survived the ordeal.

According to Turkish authorities, the Russian aircraft was notified multiple times of its territorial violation before it was shot down. In an attempt to bolster its account of the tragic events, Turkey released an apparent audio recording of its warnings to the Russian jet before it was shot down.

On the recording, the following warning was stated: "Change your heading."

Turkey also explained that its protocols in cases of territorial encroachment had been followed and its personnel attempted to rescue the Russian pilots.

For his part, Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan issues no apology for the downing of the Russian jet. Instead, Erdogan declared that his country was defending its own security and sovereignty.

Russia disputed Turkey's claim, insisting that the jet was operating in Syrian air space as part of the fight against Islamic State. Russian President Vladimir Putin referred to the tragic incident as a betrayal administered by "the accomplices of terrorists," and warned that Moscow's relations with Ankara would suffer as a result. He said, "Today's loss is linked to a stab in the back delivered to us by accomplices of terrorists. I cannot qualify what happened today as anything else."

He added, "We will of course analyze everything that happened and today's tragic events will have serious consequences for Russo-Turkish relations."

Soon thereafter, the Russian government instituted sanctions against Turkey. Russia also remained defiant, making clear it would continue its effort in the Syrian crisis and against Islamic State. A spokesperson from the

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Russian Kremlin, Dmitry Peskov, noted that Russian jets would continue to fly missions close to the Turkish border because that was simply where the Islamist extremists were located.

It should be noted that the Russian president also blasted Turkey for being lax in its border controls, essentially allowing Islamic State terrorists to move across the Turkish border to and from Syria with virtual impunity, benefiting from its transportation and sales of oil revenues. Putin said, "We established a long time ago that large quantities of oil and oil products from territory captured by Islamic State have been arriving on Turkish territory. And now we get stabbed in our back and our planes, which are fighting terrorism, are struck. This despite the fact that we signed an agreement with our American partners to warn each other about air-to-air incidents and Turkey ... announced it was allegedly fighting against terrorism as part of the U.S. coalition."

With Turkey being a NATO member, Russia's wrath could potentially affect all Western countries participating in the United States-led coalition fighting Islamic State in the region. Hopes for greater cooperation between the West and Russia against the terror group were thus dimmed. In a small positive sign, however, both Moscow and Ankara made clear that they were not interested in escalating tensions and facilitating the path of war.

As well, despite being NATO allies, France and the United States called on Turkey to do a better job of monitoring its borders which Islamic State terrorists were using to traverse in and out of Syria. Of particular note was a stretch of the Syrian-Turkish border north of the Syrian city of Aleppo where Turkey had not closed and was being used by the terror group to transport militants and supplies.

Of course, the truth of the matter was that neither Turkey nor Russia has been involved in the Syrian civil war for the principal purpose of fighting Islamic State in the first place. Turkey was one of the initial voices calling for Bashar Assad to go and has directly supported Sunni rebel groups fighting the Assad regime in Syria. At the same time, Turkey has exploited the excuse of fighting Islamic State to instead go after Kurdish extremists, which it deems to be a political threat. On the other side of the equation, Russia has been a long-time backed of the Assad regime, and has often treated Syria like a client state. Russia entered the Syrian quagmire on the basis of claims that it was fighting Islamic State but it, instead, hit rebel targets in Syrian territory that were opposed to the Assad regime. In many senses, Turkey and Russia were already in opposed political "camps" with regard to the Syrian crisis before the latest contretemps over Turkey shooting down a Russian jet.

In December 2015, in the aftermath of Turkey's decision to shoot-down a Russian jet, ties between the two countries eroded further. At issue was Turkey's claim that a marine aboard a Russian naval ship was aggressively displaying a missile launcher as the Caesar Kunikov vessel sailed through the Bosphorus in Istanbul. Turkey summoned the Russian envoy for consultations as a result. As well, the Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu cast the incident as a provocation, saying, "The showing off of a missile by a soldier on a Russian warship, or other things such as anti-aircraft weapons, is pure provocation." The Russian Foreign Ministry dismissed Turkey's concerns, with spokesperson, Maria Zakharova, citing the 1936 Montreux Convention, which regulates ship movements through the Bosphorus Straits, and declaring that "the protection of a ship is the legal right of any crew."

Meanwhile, a Russian news crew was arrested in Turkey's Hatay province on the border with Syria and subsequently deported. That action was not expected to help improve already-damaged bilateral ties between the two countries.

Special Entry

Public inquiry concludes ex-spy Litvinenko likely poisoned with Russian President Putin's approval

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In January 2016, a public inquiry into the death of a former Russian clandestine agent, Alexander Litvinenko, concluded with some disturbing findings. It should be noted that after unveiling an alleged plot to assassinate a Russian oligarch Boris Berezovsky, Litvinenko sought asylum in the United Kingdom, and went onto to work for the British MI6 intelligence service.

He died in a London hospital in 2006 where it was confirmed that he succumbed to polonium-210-induced acute radiation syndrome.

An inquest was launched in the United Kingdom where Litvinenko was killed, and was chaired by Sir Robert Owen. It came to a conclusion with the production of the 300-page Litvinenko report. Of significance in the so-called "Sir Robert report" was the assessment that Litvinenko was poisoned to death with radioactive polonium-210 at the hands of Andrei Lugovoi and Dmitry Kovtun, who were working under the aegis of Russia's Federal Security Service, and quite likely at the behest of Russian President Putin.

Indeed, the report also "antagonism" between Putin and Litvinenko, which may have been part of the motivation for the killing.

Kovtun denied the alleged role in the death of Litvinenko. For his part, Lugovoi, who had since gone on to serve in the Russian parliament and thus would enjoy immunity from prosecution, dismissed the conclusions of the report. In fact, he cast the findings as "invention" and "supposition," and accusing Sir Robert of having "gone mad."

Both men, however, would see their assets frozen by the United Kingdom government, while British officials indicated that the matter would also be brought up with Russian President Putin.

## Special Note

## Peace Progress and Obstacles in Syria

At the start of 2016, the United Nations announced that the Syrian peace talks had commenced in the Swiss city of Geneva, with delegates from the opposition and representatives from the Assad regime meeting with United Nations Envoy Staffan de Mistura. The two sides were not at the same table for these negotiations; instead, these "proximity talks" were ensuing in separate rooms. It should be noted that the peace talks occurred even as Syria's pro-Assad forces, backed by Russian air strikes, were carrying out a massive offensive operation close to Aleppo. Syrian rebels pointed to the fact that this operation was going on despite the understanding that such actions should cease in order to give the peace process a chance.

In mid-February 2016, United States Secretary of State John Kerry announced that an agreement had been forged to seek a cessation of hostilities in Syria, and which would set the path for humanitarian aid to be transported to war-torn cities. Despite this favorable development, the fact of the matter was that Russian air power continued to strike targets in Syria deemed to be enemies of the Assad regime. As well, Syrian President Assad was intensifying his forces' efforts to regain control over Aleppo, which he indicated would only be the start of a national campaign to retake control of the country. Secretary of State Kerry thus warned that the aforementioned agreement to end hostilities would only remain relevant if Syria and its Russian and Iranian allies made good on their commitments.

By the last week of February 2016, the United States and Russia appeared to have reached some concurrence and issued a joint statement announcing that the ceasefire would commence on Feb. 27, 2016 and would apply to all parties in the Syrian conflict, with terrorist groups such as the Islamic State and al-Nusra being the exceptions.

## Special Entry

Russian build-up in Ukraine raises questions about military and geopolitical ambitions

In mid-August 2016, questions were surfacing about Russia's ambitions in Ukraine. At issue was a build-up of forces and military equipment in Crimea, which Russia annexed in 2014 following Ukraine's Maidan revolution that ended in the ouster of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich -- a stalwart of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Also at issue was the intensifying fighting in the predominantly Russian-speaking eastern region of Donbas.

By the third week of August 2016, up to 2,500 Russian military forces were carrying out "logistical exercises" on the Crimean Peninsula. Russian state media indicated that the drills were for training purposes and aimed at transposing troops and military equipment from Russia to Crimea. The drills would also serve as a precursor for more massive war games to be carried out in September 2016.

Russia was explaining its stronger military presence in the region as a preventative move against acts of terrorism by Ukrainians.

However, the Ukrainian government has denied any such possibility, insisting that Russia was aiming for aggressive action, as it said, "The enemy is planning large-scale provocative actions."

Observers were speculating whether Russia would use the increased tensions in the region as a justification to carry out an assault there, capture the port city of Mariupol, and thus secure a route through to Crimea. Such a route would be of strategic value to Russia, given the land access to the Black Sea.

There was also political value in spurring an altercation with Ukraine ahead of elections due to take place in Russia. Experts noted that a military victory for Russia against Ukraine would bolster nationalist sentiment that would simultaneously boost Putin's political cachet.

Yet another theory centered on the view that the threat of an offensive into Ukraine might be a strategy from Moscow. That strategy would aim to place pressure on the international community, thus compelling them to lift some of the economic sanctions that were imposed on Russia after the annexation of the Crimea. Such a move would certainly advance trade relations -- something needed to repair Russia's ailing economy.

Special Entry

Ukraine investigating charges of corruption involving top Trump Adviser

In mid-August 2016, the New York *Times* -- in a bombshell story -- reported that handwritten ledgers were found in the Ukrainian capital of Kiev that linked Paul Manafort, the chairman of Republican Donald Trump's presidential campaign, to more than \$12 million in undisclosed cash payments.

The payments in the so-called "black ledger" appeared to have been dispatched during a period when Manafort served as an adviser to the government of the ousted Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich. The documents also seemed to link Manafort with the Russian oligarch, Oleg Deripaska. There was also a dubious connection involving the purchase of Ukrainian cable television assets.

As such, Ukraine's National Anti-corruption Bureau was investigating the ledgers to see if they constituted evidence of corruption within the former Yanukovich regime. Of note was the fact that Yanukovich was considered a stalwart of the Russian Kremlin.

By the third week of August 2016, a Ukrainian member of parliament, Serhiy Leshchenko, indicated that payments to Manafort were made by the Party of Regions -- the political party of Yanukovych. According to Leshchenko, the payments to Manafort were geared towards financing technological equipment, research services, and election polling.

During a news conference, Leshchenko, a member of Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko's parliamentary bloc, said, "Manafort didn't work for free in Ukraine, he served the Party of Regions for over 10 years and it is clear that his work was paid." He elaborated, "The money was transferred in cash and it is impossible to trace the transactions, but I have no doubt as to the authenticity of these documents."

For his part, Manafort denied the allegations about him. He declared, "I have never received a single off-the-books cash payment as falsely reported by The New York Times, nor have I ever done work for the governments of Ukraine or Russia." But Leshchenko reacted to this assertion by stating, "If Mr Manafort denies any allegations, I think he has to be interrogated into this case and prove his position that he was not involved."

Around the same period -- the third week of August 2016 -- the Associated Press (AP) said it has obtained emails indicating that Manafort's company, which had lobbied for Yanukovych, likely did not meet legal requirements. At issue was the lack of disclosure by Manafort in regard to its efforts to advocate and lobby public opinion on behalf of Yanukovych. According to the AP, United States law would require Manafort's firm to register and disclose in detail its role as a foreign agent to the Justice Department.

Note: In the background of these developments were accusations that Russia had interfered with the 2016 elections in the United States. Please see section below for details.

#### Primer on parliamentary elections in Russia

A parliamentary election in Russia was scheduled to take place on Sept. 18, 2016. Although the Russian Federal Assembly, known as the Federalnoye Sobraniye, was a bicameral entity composed of the Sovyet Federatsiyi (Federation Council) and the Gosudarstvennaya Duma (State Duma), in fact, only the 450 seats in the State Duma were up for election. Typically, members of the State Duma are elected by popular vote to serve four-year terms.

It should be noted that the United Russia Party of President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin have dominated Russian politics and hoped to continue their ascendancy in 2016.

The last elections were held in December 2011. Clearly, United Russia hoped to continue its reign on supremacy and won the most votes in 2011 -- albeit just shy of 50 percent of the vote share, but still managing to control 238 of the 450 seats at stake. The closeness of that contest produced rare dissent in Russia with a rare show of street protests. Anti-government demonstrators were claiming that the elections were flawed and subject to both vote rigging and ballot box stuffing.

Nevertheless, in 2016, with a burst of nationalist sentiment -- much of it emanating from the conflict in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea -- the political landscape in Russia was quite different. Indeed, the ruling powers were riding high with greater popular support, even if that expressed support was produced from some degree of an increasingly autocratic and propaganda-ridden political climate. Of note was the role of the state media in reinforcing President Putin's Russian leadership as a counterpoint to Western influence, along with a genuine nationalist zeal for Putin's vision of reconstituting the Soviet empire in some form or fashion.

Not surprisingly, once the ballots were counted in 2016, Putin's ruling United Russia party had secured about 75 percent of the parliamentary seats and 343 seats of the total of 450 in the Duma, according to the Central Election Commission said. This result was a significant consolidation of power at the legislative power for the ruling party.



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This result also translated into the augmentation of Putin's power and influence over the entire Russian political scene.

The opposition reacted by declaring that the vote had been neither free nor fair -- a view backed up by international monitors. Meanwhile, Reuters News reported that its reporters on the ground in Russia witnessed ballot-stuffing, inflated turnout figures, and repeated voting by people at various polling stations.

Claims from the opposition and warnings from the international community that the vote may not have been free or fair would have little bearing on the internal political landscape where Putin was entrenching his autocratic leadership.

Russian ambassador to Turkey assassinated in Ankara; Russia and Turkey form fragile Syrian ceasefire

In December 2016, the Russian ambassador to Turkey, Andrei Karlov, was assassinated in the Turkish capital city of Ankara. The assailant was identified as a Turkish policeman, Mevlut Mert Altintas, who was reportedly protesting Russia's involvement in the Syrian regime's bombardment of the flashpoint city, Aleppo.

The gruesome scene of the assassination was recorded on video and showed Karlov being shot to death by Altintas, who screamed "don't forget about Aleppo, don't forget about Syria." He was shot to death by Turkish police shortly thereafter.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said in a telephone conversation with Russian President Vladimir Putin that the act was one of "provocation" intended to damage ties between their two countries.

In his own address at home in Russia, Putin appeared to echo that sentiment, starting that the killing of Karlov was aimed at disrupting bilateral ties and the peace process in Syria.

It should be noted that in the week after the horrific assassination of Karlov, Russia and Turkey agreed to a ceasefire plan for Syria.

The plan was announced on Dec. 29, 2016 and involved a truce between the Syrian government and rebel opposition, with Russia and Turkey acting as the guarantors. Significantly, the United States was not a party to the agreement.

Special Report: U.S. officials accuse Russia of trying to interfere in and influence presidential election

- Russia accused of hacking of election databases and DNC in order to influence U.S. election
- U.S. intelligence investigating ties between Trump advisers and Russian Kremlin
- U.S. officials promises proportional response to Russian hacking activity
- Intelligence indicates inference from Russian government in the political affairs of the United States
- U.S. President Barack Obama sanctions Russia for interfering in 2016 presidential election
- U.S. intelligence notifies Obama and Trump of allegations that Russia holds compromising information about Trump

Russia accused of hacking of election databases and DNC in order to influence U.S. election --

In late August 2016, it was reported that two state election databases had been penetrated and United States officials indicated that Russian hackers were responsible.

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While the two states were not formally named, media outlets indicated that Illinois and Arizona were the targeted states. In the Illinois case, the voter registration system was breached as hackers stole personal information on approximately 200,000 voters. In the Arizona case, the voter registration system was subject to malicious software. These cybercrimes were the latest in a stream of many attributed to Russia.

By October 2016, United States officials were saying that Russia had hacked into the Florida state electoral system.

Going back to July 2016, the United States government said that cyber attacks on the Democratic National Committee were likely carried out by the Russian government.

While Russia has denied any such activity, United States officials made clear that Russia appeared to be trying to influence the United States 2016 presidential election.

Note that in an interview with Bloomberg News, Russian President Vladimir Putin denied his country's involvement in the hacking of the Democratic National Committee. He said, "I don't know anything about it...and on a state level Russia has never done this." Putin added, "Listen, does it even matter who hacked this data?"

U.S. intelligence investigating ties between Trump adviser and Russian Kremlin --

At the close of September 2016, United States media reported that intelligence officials in that country were investigating whether an American businessman had spurious ties to the Russian Kremlin. Carter Page, a former investment banker and an adviser to Republican presidential nominee, Donald Trump, was believed to have engaged in communications with high ranking Russian government officials. These communications involved discussions of the lifting of economic sanctions against Russia under a Trump presidency but also extended to suspected efforts by Russia to influence the United States presidential election. On the record, Page was known to have made no shortage of pro-Russian statements that undermined the Obama administration's policy regarding Russia, particularly with regard to the Russian annexation of the Ukrainian territory of Crimea.

Of concern for United States legislators who were briefed on the matter was the possibility of a Trump insider working with Russia to undermine United States foreign policy. To this end, two ranking Democrats in Congress, Senator Dianne Feinstein and Representative Adam Schiff released a joint statement asserting that their briefings did, indeed, indicate an effort by Russian influence to play a role in the United States election. Their joint statement read, "Based on briefings we have received, we have concluded that the Russian intelligence agencies are making a serious and concerted effort to influence the U.S. election." They added, "At the least, this effort is intended to sow doubt about the security of our election and may well be intended to influence the outcomes of the election."

U.S. officials accuse Russia of seeking to interfere with U.S. election; promises proportional response --

At the start of October 2016, United States intelligence officials issued an unprecedented announcement, asserting that Russia was seeking "to interfere with the U.S. election process" by hacking political organizations and key individuals. As discussed in Section 1 of this report, United States officials had already indicated that Russia was likely behind the hacking of state election databases and the Democratic National Committee. Now, they were going further to make it clear by "naming and shaming" Russia for its role in violating the privacy of internal communications systems and seeking to influence the United States election.

The issue had political implications with the Democratic Party's presidential nominee, Hillary Clinton, saying during the second presidential debate, "We have never in the history of our country been in a situation where an adversary, a foreign power, is working so hard to influence the outcome of the election." Her rival, Republican nominee, Donald Trump, had a different view and instead appeared to defend Russia, as he said. "She doesn't know if it's the Russians doing the hacking. Maybe there is no hacking." It was possible that Trump genuinely did not believe that Russia was behind the interference into the United States system due to his allegiance to Russian President Vladimir Putin. However, as a presidential contender, Trump received classified intelligence briefings, which undoubtedly included evidence of the Russian hacking scheme.

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His continued advocacy on behalf of Russia has thus raised questions about the Republican nominee's commitment to United States national security interests.

There remained some debate as to whether the Putin government in Russia was merely seeking to undermine the public's trust in the United States system with its hacking activity, or, if it was outright seeking to facilitate a Trump presidency. There was some suggestion of the latter motivation in three arenas. Stated differently, there were signs that Putin and Russia favored a Trump presidency and were willing to nudge things in that direction.

First, leaked emails and speech excerpts clearly aimed at damaging Clinton, such as that of her campaign chairman John Podesta, have been linked to Russia through the WikiLeaks website. The **timing** of the leaks seemed geared towards hurting Democrats, and particularly the Democratic nominee, with no equivalent leaks related to the Republican nominee. This, in and of itself, suggested that Wikileaks was hardly an entity championing modern transparency but one with a particularized political agenda. Second, an ultra-nationalist stalwart of Putin, Vladimir Zhirinovsky, made clear in an interview with Reuters news that Trump was the only person able to ease tensions between Moscow and Washington. By contrast, he suggested a Clinton presidency could spark World War III. Zhirinovsky's stance could well be interpreted as a proxy opinion from the Putin regime itself that it favors a Trump presidency. Third, Trump himself in the second presidential debate expressed a foreign policy on Syria, for example, that was in lockstep with that of Putin, while eschewing that of his own running mate, Mike Pence.

Intelligence indicates inference from Russian government in the political affairs of the United States --

In December 2016, United States intelligence officials concluded that with "a high level of confidence" that Russian President Vladimir Putin was personally involved in a clandestine Russian operation to interfere in the United States presidential election.

As reported by NBC News, intelligence findings indicated that Putin was personally involved in deciding how hacked material on Democrats was leaked and exploited to harm the prospects of Democratic presidential contender, Hillary Clinton.

According to United States intelligence, Putin's motivation was sparked by a "vendetta" against Hillary Clinton. That revenge impulse was due to her criticism of parliamentary elections in Russia that resulted in a close result for the Russian president's party years earlier. But that vendetta was soon transformed into a wider effort to create divisions with United States allies, undermine American influence and authority on the global scene, while fomenting dissension at home in the United States by creating the impression of a corrupt political system in the United States. All of these trajectories would have the collective effect of strengthening Russia's hand internationally.

According to CIA reports, the concrete findings were that the Russian government wanted to damage Clinton's candidacy while helping to elect Donald Trump. Knowing that it would only be possible for Russia's highest ranking officials to have authorized these activities, it was clear that Putin was directing the operation.

In interviews with media, Michael McFaul, ambassador to Russia from 2012 to 2014, noted that these findings were consistent with understanding of the Russian leader. He said, "It is most certainly consistent with the Putin that I have watched and used to work with when I was an ambassador and in the government." He added of Putin, "He has had a vendetta against Hillary Clinton, that has been known for a long **time** because of what she said about his elections back in the parliamentary elections of 2011. He wants to discredit American democracy and make us weaker in terms of leading the liberal democratic order. And most certainly he likes President-elect Trump."

In late December 2016, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) co-authored a report with the Department of Homeland Security in which it blamed Russian intelligence services for interfering in the 2016 United States presidential election. Included in the report was evidence in the form of

samples of malicious computer code used in a hacking scheme dating back to 2015.

There was also a linkage between Russian intelligence and the hacking of the Democratic National Committee — a move that was believed to have influenced the 2016 presidential election.

While Russia has throughout denied the hacking allegations, it was apparent that the United States government had a decisive view on the problematic role played by Moscow. Indeed, the issue has come to embody the nadir in U.S.-Russian relations in decades.

U.S. President Obama sanctions Russia for interfering in 2016 presidential election --

On the same day that the aforementioned FBI report was released, United States President Barack Obama announced several retaliatory measures against Russia for its interference activities and warned of more to come. Of note was the sanctioning of Russian intelligence and military services, and the expulsion of 35 Russian intelligence operatives.

As well, in response to the harassment against American diplomats in Moscow, the U.S. closed two Russian intelligence gathering compounds in New York and Maryland.

In a statement, President Obama said, "These actions follow repeated private and public warnings that we have issued to the Russian government, and are a necessary and appropriate response to efforts to harm U.S. interests in violation of established international norms of behavior." He added, "These actions are not the sum total of our response to Russia's aggressive activities. We will continue to take a variety of actions at a time and place of our choosing, some of which will not be publicized." The United States leader also said that his administration would soon deliver a report to the Congress detailing the Russian interference effort in the 2016 election.

Of significance has been President-elect Donald Trump's reticence to accept the findings of Russian interference from U.S. intelligence agencies. Also of note has been Trump's curious effusive praise for Russian President Vladimir Putin — especially at a time when the sitting U.S. President Barack Obama was in the process of sanctioning Russia. Via the social media outlet, Twitter, Trump lauded the Russia president's decision to delay his own retaliatory actions, saying, "Great move on delay (by V. Putin) - I always knew he was very smart!"

For his part, Putin responded to the news by saying, "We will not expel anyone" and indicating he would wait for the incoming Trump administration to react as he said, "Further steps towards the restoration of Russian-American relations will be built on the basis of the policy which the administration of President D. Trump will carry out."

By the start of 2017, a declassified report by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence concludes that Russia undertook an effort sought to help elect Trump by undermining the credibility of Clinton.

Key points of that report were as follows:

"Russian efforts to influence the 2016 U.S. presidential election represent the most recent expression of Moscow's longstanding desire to undermine the U.S.-led liberal democratic order, but these activities demonstrated a significant escalation in directness, level of activity, and scope of effort compared to previous operations."

"We assess Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered an influence campaign in 2016 aimed at the U.S. presidential election. Russia's goals were to undermine public faith in the U.S. democratic process, denigrate Secretary Clinton, and harm her electability and potential presidency."

"We further assess Putin and the Russian government developed a clear preference for President-elect Trump."

Of those three findings above, the writers noted "We have high confidence in these judgments."

The report also declared the following:

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"We also assess Putin and the Russian Government aspired to help President-elect Trump's election chances when possible by discrediting Secretary Clinton and publicly contrasting her unfavorably to him."

Of those findings above, the writers noted "All three agencies agree with this judgment. CIA and FBI have high confidence in this judgment; NSA has moderate confidence."

Further findings of the report were as follows:

"When it appeared to Moscow that Secretary Clinton was likely to win the election, the Russian influence campaign began to focus more on undermining her future presidency."

"Further information has come to light since Election Day that, when combined with Russian behavior since early November 2016, increases our confidence in our assessments of Russian motivations and goals."

In terms of strategy, the writers of the report made the following observation:

"Moscow's influence campaign followed a Russian messaging strategy that blends covert intelligence operations — such as cyber activity — with overt efforts by Russian Government agencies, state-funded media, third-party intermediaries, and paid social media users or 'trolls'."

Read the full report here: [https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICA\\_2017\\_01.pdf](https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICA_2017_01.pdf)

For his part, Trump has dismissed such suggestions, at one point suggesting a technologically savvy teenager may have been responsible for cybersecurity violations, or even China, which was blamed for previous hacking operations. But throughout, Trump has been reluctant to place the blame on Russia, and instead referred to the entire line of inquiry as "a political witch hunt."

Following a briefing from United States intelligence, Trump continued to downplay the role of Russian actors in his election, declaring instead: "There was absolutely no effect on the outcome of the election, including the fact that there was no tampering whatsoever with voting machines."

Meanwhile, outgoing President Barack Obama admitted in an interview with ABC News that he "underestimated" the impact of the apparent Russian campaign of misinformation and computer hacking, as well as its effects on a democracy. President Obama said, "I think that I underestimated the degree to which, in this new information age, it is possible for misinformation for cyber hacking and so forth to have an impact on our open societies, our open systems, to insinuate themselves into our democratic practices in ways that I think are accelerating."

President Obama also warned against the close ties with Russia promised by Trump, as he said, "One of the things that I am concerned about is the degree to which we've seen a lot of commentary lately where there were, there are Republicans or pundits or cable commentators who seemed to have more confidence in Vladimir Putin than fellow Americans because those fellow Americans were Democrats. That cannot be. We have to remind ourselves we're on the same team. Vladimir Putin's not on our team. If we get to a point where people in this country feel more affinity with a leader who is an adversary and view the United States and our way of life as a threat to him, then we're gonna have bigger problems than just cyber hacking."

U.S. intelligence notifies Obama and Trump of allegations that Russia holds compromising information about Trump  
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The issue of Russian interference into the United States political system took a dark and twisted turn on Jan. 10, 2016, when CNN reported that classified documents presented to both President Obama and Trump included allegations that Russian operatives had compromising personal and financial information about the president-elect.

The report also included an explosive suggestion of an exchange of information during the campaign between Trump surrogates and intermediaries for the Russian government.

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These allegations outlined in the intelligence report given to Obama and Trump were derived partially — but not completely — from memos of a former credible British intelligence operative. However, there were indications that there were other sources of the "kompromat" leak.

It was unknown if the salacious details of the "kompromat" leak constituted the reference point for then-Senate Democratic Leader Harry Reid, who dispatched a letter to Director James Comey of the Federal Bureau of Investigation in October 2016 that read as follows: "It has become clear that you possess explosive information about close ties and coordination between Donald Trump, his top advisors, and the Russian government -- a foreign interest openly hostile to the United States." Reid urged Comey to release this information, which the FBI director clearly opted not to do.

For his part, Trump dismissed the claims that Russia had compromising information about him. Via the social media outlet, Twitter, he declared, "FAKE NEWS - A TOTAL POLITICAL WITCH HUNT."

But Trump would have a difficult time maintaining the claim that the allegations outlined by CNN were fake once the Director of National Intelligence (DNI), James Clapper, acknowledged it on the record on Jan. 11, 2017.

The outgoing DNI head released a statement that read: "This evening, I had the opportunity to speak with President-elect Donald Trump to discuss recent media reports about our briefing last Friday. I expressed my profound dismay at the leaks that have been appearing in the press, and we both agreed that they are extremely corrosive and damaging to our national security." In so doing, Clapper was essentially confirming that the "kompromat" information did exist and had circulated through the government, the intelligence agencies, and the media.

Trump picks fight with CIA chief eliciting criticism from Brennan --

Meanwhile Trump was embroiled in a public fight with the head of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Director John Brennan. The conflict was sparked when Trump accused Brennan of leaking the "kompromat" information, detailing tawdry sexual activities in Moscow, to the public. Brennan not only dismissed those charges but also warned Trump that he would have to be responsible about national security and not just tweet about it. Brennan additionally warned that Trump's impulsive tendencies could be a detriment to national security.

Trump retaliated by accusing Brennan of being behind the leaked report of Trump's alleged sexual activities registered by Russia. Via Twitter, Trump asked, "Was this the leaker of Fake News?"

But Brennan had his own advice for Trump, who was again displaying a penchant for public fights on social media. Brennan said in an interview with Fox News of the incoming president,

"Spontaneity is not something that protects national security interests and so, therefore, when he speaks or when he reacts, just make sure he understands that the implications and impact on the United States could be profound." Brennan also expressed doubt that Trump understood the threat to national security posed by Russia, as he said, "I don't think he has a full appreciation of Russian capabilities, Russia's intentions and actions."

In the background of these developments was a bipartisan push by the United States Senate to impose comprehensive sanctions on Russia in response to its alleged attempts to influence the 2016 presidential election. As well, a Senate intelligence committee inquiry was in the offing about the Russian interference angle — a measure likely to take on greater importance given the revelations that Trump adviser, Flynn, had at least five conversations with a Russian envoy.

Foreign Policy Note: Trump says NATO is obsolete; Russia welcomes that assessment

The incoming Trump administration in the United States telegraphed compatible geopolitical interests with Russia, especially with regard to the security alliance NATO. For some time, Russian President Vladimir Putin has signaled distaste for NATO's influence in Europe — particularly in eastern European countries once under the control of the United Soviet Socialist Republic. There was, thus, no secret that Putin wished to see diminished

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NATO power in the region. Trump's repeated disparagement of NATO, including his declaration in 2016 and again in January 2017 that the security body was "obsolete" indicated a merging of interests between the two former Cold War rivals.

In an interview with the media in January 2017, Trump said, "I took such heat, when I said NATO was obsolete. It's obsolete because it wasn't taking care of terror. I took a lot of heat for two days. And then they started saying Trump is right." He also suggested that smaller NATO countries were not paying enough for protection from United States.

He said, "A lot of these countries aren't paying what they're supposed to be paying, which I think is very unfair to the United States." Left unsaid by Trump was the fact that many of those small NATO countries sent forces to Afghanistan to fight al Qaeda after the United States was attacked in 2001.

Meanwhile, Russia welcomed Trump's characterization of NATO as "obsolete." Putin's spokesperson, Dmitry Peskov, reacted by saying, "NATO is indeed a vestige [of the past] and we agree with that." Peskov added, "Considering that [NATO] is focused on confrontation and its entire structure is devoted to the ideals of confrontation, then, of course, this can hardly be called a modern structure meeting the ideas of stability, sustainable development, and security."

The merging of United States and Russian interests was also brought into high relief when Trump suggested that he might end some economic sanctions against Russia in exchange for a nuclear arms reduction deal.

While this notion was being interpreted as a sign of Trump's claimed "deal making" acumen, the Russian Kremlin quickly dismissed the notion of such an agreement. At first, the Kremlin said that it was premature to respond to Trump's offer of such a deal, but later Russian lawmakers indicated that there would be no security concessions made in exchange for sanctions relief.

#### Metro attack in St. Petersburg metro kills 11; suspect believed to be from Central Asia

On April 3, 2017, an explosion on an underground metro train in the Russian city of St. Petersburg left 11 people dead and more than 40 others injured. The blast, which occurred close to the stop at the Tekhnologicheskoy Institut station, was linked with an explosive device discovered at another station, Ploshchad Vosstaniya.

The attack was attributed to a suspect in his early 20s, quite likely from Central Asia and with radical Islamic beliefs. Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev said via the social media outlet, Facebook, that the explosion was a "terrorist attack." Russian President Vladimir Putin noted that the cause of the attack would be investigated. One possible angle was an Islamic State-inspired terror group acting to avenge Russian airstrikes in Syria. A second possible angle was that the attack was carried out by militant Chechen separatists, which have long been active in Russia with regard to terrorism.

#### Prime Minister May retaliates after nerve agent poisoning of former Russian spies in UK

March 2018 was marked by international spy intrigue worthy of a motion picture movie. At issue were the alleged assassination attempt by Russia on Sergei Skripal, a former Russian spy living in the United Kingdom (U.K.), and his daughter, Yulia Skripal.

U.K. Prime Minister Theresa May publicly accused Russia of being behind the attempted assassination, casting it as "an unlawful use of force" by the Russian state against the United Kingdom, and warning of consequences to follow if Russia did not answer for its actions by a specified deadline on March 13, 2018. She declared: "We will not tolerate such brazen attempt to murder innocent civilians on our soil."

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For its part, Russia dismissed the charges and indicated that it would not be adhering to any such deadline to furnish an explanation. Moreover, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov asserted that Moscow was "not to blame" and asked for information about the nerve agent believed to have caused the poisoning of Skripal and his daughter.

It should be noted that the particular nerve agent used against Skripal and his daughter was linked with a constellation of chemical weapons identified as Novichok, which was developed by the former Soviet Union in the 1970s. It should also be noted that the Skripal case was not the first time poisoning of former Russian agents on British soil had ensued. In 2006, the former Russian spy, Alexander Litvinenko, who was poisoned using radioactive tea. A British inquiry into the case found that Litvinenko's death was very likely orchestrated by the Russian state.

Days after Prime Minister May's deadline elapsed, the British head of government announced the expulsion of 23 Russian diplomats from the United Kingdom. There would also be a cessation of high level bilateral meetings with the Russians, as well as a boycott of the World Cup to be held in Russia later in 2018.

Explaining her decision before parliament, May said, "It is not in our national interest to break off all dialogue between the United Kingdom and the Russian Federation. But in the aftermath of this appalling act against our country, this relationship cannot be the same."

The move was the initial gesture of reprisal by the government of the United Kingdom to the poisoning spy fiasco, which was quickly being understood as a quasi-act of state-sponsored terrorism.

But Russia remained undeterred, with the Foreign Ministry issuing a statement that read: "The British government has opted for confrontation with Russia. To be sure, our response will not be long in coming."

Note that Skripal and his daughter remained hospitalized and in critical condition at the time of writing. Also note that as Prime Minister May was speaking about the Skripal case, UK authorities were opening a new investigation -- this time into the mysterious death of Nikolai Glushkov, an associate of the deceased oligarch Boris Berezovsky, who was regarded as quite a rival of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

#### Primer on presidential election in Russia

(March 18, 2018)

A presidential election was set to be held in Russia on March 18, 2018. The president in Russia is elected by popular vote for a six-year term (eligible for a second term); there is no vice president; if the president dies in office, cannot exercise his powers because of ill health, is impeached, or resigns, the premier serves as acting president until a new presidential election is held, which must be within three months. The premier is appointed by the president with the approval of the Duma.

Presidential elections were last held in March 2012 and won by Vladimir Putin. It should be noted that Putin served as president for two terms from 2000 to 2008. At the time, presidential terms were four year stints; they have since been changed to six year terms. In 2008, Putin was succeeded as president by Dmitry Medvedev, but remained in government as prime minister. Medvedev held the office of president from 2008 to 2012 when Putin returned to the fore as president following elections and Medvedev, in something of a role reversal, returned to the post of prime minister.

Now, in 2018, Putin would be seeking re-election for a second consecutive term in office and a fourth term overall.

A first round of voting would take place on March 18, 2018. If no one candidate secured an absolute majority of the votes, then a second round would ensue three weeks later, on April 8, 2018.



Polling data and conventional wisdom indicated that Putin was on track for re-election victory. His main rivals would be Pavel Grudinin of the Communist Party and Vladimir Zhirinovskiy of the Liberal Democratic Party, neither of which was expected to perform strongly at the polls.

Perhaps the only Russian politician with the cachet to really challenge Putin was Alexei Navalny, but he was prohibited from contesting the presidential election due to a corruption conviction that many view as politically motivated.

On election day, following the end of voting, the Russian election came to a conclusion with no mystery about who would emerge victorious.

State-controlled exit polls indicated that Putin was on track to capture 76.6 percent of the vote share. That number was slightly higher than the 70 percent support shown in pre-election polling.

The landslide level of support for Putin was viewed by some as evidence of his successful bid to leverage nationalist sentiment. Even his move to annex the Ukrainian territory of Crimea, which has been condemned as illegal by the international community, was lauded at home as an act of patriotism. Meanwhile, others have pointed to the fact that there was really no fierce competition in the presidential race and many voters saw no point in choosing an alternative.

The truth, however, was that the political climate was not particularly hospitable to rivals of Putin. Indeed, the media itself was under tight Kremlin control. To that end, critics have noted that Russian media is dominated by pro-Putinist sentiment, which bolsters Russian support for him and offer rivals little exposure.

Regardless of these structural limits to challenging Putinism in Russia, the outcome of the presidential election in 2018 was that Vladimir Putin had extended his grip on power in Russia for another six years. In a victory speech, Putin declared, "We are a great big team together and I am a member of your team."

Special Note:

United States intelligence agencies concluded in late 2016 that Russia attempted to influence the 2016 presidential election in Republican Donald Trump's favor by damaging the prospects of the Democratic nominee for president, Hillary Clinton. A full report on the Russian angle, as well as Russian influence on United States foreign policy, please see the Country Review for the United States, Section 6 of the Political Conditions.

-- March, 2018

Written by Dr. Denise Youngblood Coleman, Editor in Chief, [www.countrywatch.com](http://www.countrywatch.com). Supplementary sources used specifically in this section include Reuters, Newsweek, Interfax, as noted in the text. See Bibliography for general list of sources used for research in all Country Reviews.

## Classification

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**Language:** ENGLISH

**Publication-Type:** Web Publication

**Journal Code:** 1652

**Subject:** PRIME MINISTERS (90%); HEADS OF STATE & GOVERNMENT (90%); ECONOMIC POLICY (89%); MUSLIMS & ISLAM (77%); PUBLIC FINANCE (76%); ECONOMIC RECOVERY (75%); APPOINTMENTS (75%); DEMOCRACIES (75%); EMERGING MARKETS (75%); GOVERNMENT & PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION (75%); GOVERNMENT ADVISORS & MINISTERS (75%); PUBLIC POLICY (75%); REBELLIONS & INSURGENCIES (75%); SEPARATISM & SECESSION (75%); PUBLIC FINANCE AGENCIES & TREASURIES (74%); HEADS OF GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS (74%); CIVIL SERVICES (73%); ECONOMIC NEWS (72%); RELIGION (70%); EXTERNAL DEBT (69%); NATIONAL SECURITY (68%); WAGES & SALARIES (66%)

**Industry:** PUBLIC FINANCE AGENCIES & TREASURIES (74%)

**Person:** VLADIMIR PUTIN (79%)

**Geographic:** RUSSIAN FEDERATION (94%)

**Load-Date:** September 2, 2019