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The actions of the Russian Federation from the perspective of individual responsibility

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Abstract

In international relations, each state has historically pursued its own interests by various means. Although these have not always taken a violent form (for example, there are international actors such as the empires of successive Chinese dynasties which, in their relations with their neighbours, emphasized the respect for the emperor and prestige at the expense of violence, or the Ottoman Empire which, after its initial expansion phase, created a concentric system of peripheral actors with varying degrees of autonomy), before the signing of the UN Charter, the use of violence was not definitively forbidden between them either. More precisely, there are actors who, since then and as a result of successive changes in regimes and international orientations, have renounced the use of force or have severely limited it, making it at least predictable, and actors who, regardless of regime and context, adopt the same behaviour. In our view, Russia falls into the second category.

Keywords:

Russia; realism; use of violence; systemic aggressor; directions of expansion; threat perception; individual responsibility.

Introductory Considerations, Methodological Perspectives, and Conceptual Delimitations. Importance and utility of research

Whether we hold true the realism of Hans Morgenthau and his followers or see the world of international relations in the constructivist paradigm of Alexander Wendt¹, somewhat more optimistic and inclusive, Russia's aggressive behavior imposes itself as a reality that is almost impossible to contradict. The dilemma that is taking shape in these moments aims to characterize Russia's aggressive behavior in terms of international relations, as a dominant feature of Russian foreign policy throughout the history of Russian statehood, or as a conjectural feature of this policy, marked by the vision the regime led under President Vladimir Putin on international relations.

Solving this dilemma makes it necessary, in our opinion, to carry out a historical analysis of the behavior of the Russian state in international relations in order to identify its general paradigm, to see if the current dominant aggressiveness can be found throughout successive periods of the Russian state or whether it represents, rather, a characteristic trait of the post-1999 period, the beginning of Vladimir Putin's regime. Of course, our research starts from a series of conceptual premises, which we will detail in what follows.

The first of these is represented by the fact that, by looking at the history of international relations, we can distinguish a tendency to progressively diminish the use of armed forces and the threat of their usage, especially after the signing, in June 1945, of the Charter of the United Nations and the gradual establishment of a balance of nuclear powers, between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics², characterized by mutually assured destruction ([Ray 2022](#)).

Before these moments, war was considered a legitimate tool for pursuing the interests of states³, for a plurality of conceptual, legal and practical reasons, being almost omnipresent in the history of mankind, on an area that coincided, in general terms, with the spread of human societies. Currently, according to specialized literature ([Buzan 2017](#); [Roberts and Westad 2018](#); [Kissinger 2021](#)) the latter represents the exception rather than the rule in terms of international relations, being concentrated within an area that surrounds the world map, but having a limited extent to the north and south of the Equator.

The second premise, which derives from the first, implies that, although the vast majority, if not all states existing at this time, have either consistently

¹ Which presents us with a world where communities of international actors develop, borrow and, in a word, construct their own representation of international relations.

² State that ceased to exist on 26.12.1991, whose main successor, according to public international law, is the current Russian Federation.

³ This concept began to be attacked only with the signing of the Pact of the League of Nations (on 28.06.1919, during the Paris Peace Conference) and, more significantly, by the Briand-Kellogg Pact (on 27.08.1928, also in Paris).

used armed aggression as a tool to pursue their own interests internationally, or are the successors of some states that have behaved this way throughout history, their behavior in international relations has undergone a progressive transition in a period whose beginning we previously identified as roughly coinciding with the end of the Second World War. These results of the major transformations undergone led to the current behavior, characterized predominantly by the non-use, or limited and localized use, of armed force, or the threat of the use of armed force, in relation to other members of the international community.

Another crucial premise is that, even if there are certain exceptional situations, of strict interpretation and application, in which international law considers that armed force can be used, its use only in these situations is sufficiently predictable for the entire international community that international actors acknowledge that, if they do not fall into these situations (for example, if they do not commit acts of genocide that could be the basis for the use of armed force), they will be held accountable. As a result, a state that uses armed force only in such cases cannot be considered a systemic aggressor because its actions are predictable and directed only against actors whose actions generate far more insecurity than armed intervention against them would. Conversely, the use of military force by systemic aggressors is not circumscribed by this condition, being directed against states whose interests diverge from its own, therefore making the use of force difficult to predict, which turns it into a threat to the security of states likely to represent the target of its aggressions.

Finally, the last of the premises from which our study debuts is that Vladimir Putin is, through the power associated with the presidential office of the Russian Federation and through his personal influence, the most representative person for the political and constitutional architecture of Russia, being of the highest degree in a position to influence the conduct of this state externally, compared to other politico-institutional actors in Russia. This fact, which has, in turn, become notorious, has been repeatedly demonstrated in specialized literature ([Saari and Secrieru 2022](#)), alongside the overall role of the Russian head of state over its whole history ([Figes 2018](#)), but it can also be ascertained through an analysis of the role of the President, as it is enshrined by the Constitution of the Russian Federation.

The importance of our study is conferred by the fact that, from an eventual conclusion that Russia represents a systemic aggressor, possible regime changes will not significantly influence its behavior. Conversely, if we find that Russia is not a systemic aggressor, but that its aggressive behavior is mainly caused by the decisions of President Vladimir Putin, regime changes, especially in the sense of democratizing the political and constitutional regime in the federation, could lead to changes in major scope in Russia's behavior in international relations.

Beyond the seemingly binary nature of this dilemma, the existence of an intermediate solution is not only possible but also, given the complexity of the causes of events in

international relations, quite probable. In this case, Russia would remain a systemic aggressor, but the individual contribution of the most representative person within each regime could accentuate or mitigate the tendencies generated by this character.

Such a conclusion could mean actively pursuing both the deterrence of Russia from using its military force in international relations and encouraging possible changes in the dominant characteristics of the power regime in Russia, including in the sense of closer cooperation with international courts in the direction of bringing to justice the persons guilty of generating and supporting wars of aggression or committing crimes against humanity, could lead to diminishing the threat from the actions of the Russian state.

To answer the research question of whether Russia is a systemic aggressor or not, and to open up new possibilities for research development related to using our findings to answer questions about how the threat of a systemically aggressive Russia can be managed, we will use the bibliographic research method and we will start from a historic analysis of Russia's aggressive tendencies. This analysis will be followed by the verification of the perpetuation of these trends in the present in order to, finally, analyze the role of President Vladimir Putin in the light of the command responsibility enshrined in public international law and to conclude by presenting the conclusions of the study in the light of the three possibilities exposed above.

Of course, the determination of the exact starting point of the contemporary period of Russian aggression may be subject to certain debates. However, in our opinion, it is reasonable to identify this moment with the beginning of support for separatist movements in the Russian-speaking East of Ukraine. We have opted for this view mainly because the occupation of the Crimean Peninsula, the other likely "candidate" for this "post", is rather an integral part of Russian aggression against Ukraine and one of its main objectives⁴, and previous actions may easily be considered both as serving the goal of creating frozen conflict, and as part of a disinformation campaign that has induced both public opinion and decision-makers in Ukraine and throughout the Western world to believe in future Russian aggression on a large scale directed against Ukraine from an eastern direction, followed by the unexpected offensive directed against Crimea.

The Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008 can also be considered a defining moment, as the first Russian military aggression directed directly against a sovereign state after the breakup of the Soviet Union (although they also received military support from Russia: for example, the Transnistrian separatist forces in the war against the Republic of Moldova, or the Armenian forces in the conflict against Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh). But, in order

⁴ Along with the creation and, subsequently, the maintenance of a frozen conflict that prevents (not so much theoretically-legally, as practically) Ukraine from acquiring the status of a member state of NATO and the EU.

to facilitate the transmission of the message of the article, we have opted for the fiction of separating the Russian-Georgian conflict from the Russian-Ukrainian one, assuming the fact that the two moments represent as many distinct stages as possible in Russia's international conduct after the breakup of the Soviet Union, even if the pattern and objectives are strikingly similar.

No matter how we look at things, the above also represents the most conclusive proof of the aggressive nature of the behavior of the Russian state in relations with other international actors. What we wish to further assert is, on one hand, the constancy of this aggressiveness and, on the other, the multiple, hybrid forms it currently takes.

1. Brief historical perspective on the expansion of the Russian state, from the reign of Tsar Ivan III (1452-1503 AD) to the present. How far is too far?

By making a short historical excursion, we can state with sufficient certainty that, from the beginning of Russian expansionism, which we can say overlaps, for the most part, with the reign of Tsar Ivan the Terrible, it followed several main directions.

1.1. The northern direction of expansion

One of them concerned the former Duchy of Novgorod, annihilated relatively quickly by the Duchy of Moscow, before the reign of the aforementioned Tsar. Throughout subsequent eras, such as that defined by the reign of Tsar Peter the Great and the Great Northern War, as well as throughout episodes not so dramatic, but by no means without consequences (such as the annexation of Finland in 1812), Russian expansion in this direction led, at its height, to the exercise of control over the Baltic States and Finland. In the contemporary era, the direction in question might seem if not abandoned, then secondary, but we will argue in due course the erroneous nature of this impression.

1.2. The Eastern and southern directions. The Caucasus Mountains, the southern sector of the Volga River, Central Asia and Siberia

In a random order⁵, a second direction is represented by the expansion in the direction of the mouths of the Don and the Volga, of Central Asia and the Far East. In turn, the expansion in this direction can be said to have begun mainly during the reign of Tsar Ivan the Terrible, even if the entire period of coexistence between the Russian states following Kievan Rus and the successor states of the Mongol Empire presents a permanent alternation of conflict and collaboration. Like the first example, the direction in question led to the occupation of Central Asia (defined throughout the 19th century),

⁵ Since neither a hierarchy nor a sufficiently precise chronology can be established between the directions we will list, they are often pursued simultaneously (of course, at different intensities), depending on the opportunities and imperatives of each historical moment.

the colonization of Siberia⁶ and confrontations with China (for control over Mongolia and beyond), as well as with Japan (in main to the conflict that started in 1904).

A secondary direction emerged from this main one (not necessarily from the point of view of importance), represented by the expansion in the Caucasian region⁷. Following confrontations with states such as the Ottoman Empire, Persia, Georgia and more, which count episodes located in three distinct centuries, this direction led to the occupation of a territory that today would include, in the south of the Caucasus mountains, the states of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, but which included, at the height of the territorial expansion of the Russian Empire, a significant part of the Turkish region of Kars, for example.

1.3. The western direction. Expansion to the detriment of the Polish state

Yet another direction of expansion led to a confrontation between the Russian and Polish states in their various forms of existence. If the first confrontations between Russia and Poland⁸ can be identified before this turning point, the defining moment of the Russian-Polish relationship can be said to have been represented by the occupation of Moscow by Poland, during those so-called "Troubled Times" that preceded the accession to the throne of the tsars of the Romanov dynasty. Why have we considered this moment as a turning point? Because, as stated in the specialized literature (D'Encausse 2015), the shock generated in Russian society by the occupation of Moscow irreversibly accentuated the cultural-historical theme of the vulnerability of the "open" borders of the Russian space and, as can be seen from a simple look at the relevant maps, they were not, with rare exceptions, delimited by natural relief elements, such as mountains, rivers, deserts, etc. For example, if Europe is furrowed almost from one end to the other by valleys of rivers and streams, often closed between high mountains, if the Chinese civilization evolved in a space bounded by the Gobi desert, by the mountain ranges of Central Asia (and in especially that of the Himalayas), by the jungles of Indochina and the Pacific Ocean, being open only to invasions from the Mongolian and Manchurian steppes, and if the United States of America occupies an area bordered by two oceans and very little exposed to land aggression, the Russian state has evolved into regions defined by relatively flat landforms, which can constitute an obstacle to possible invasions only by their vast extent and harsh climate. Of course, when the Russian state, in its expansion, encountered a "natural" boundary (represented by the Ural Mountains), it chose to go far beyond to the east and southeast.

Returning to the Russian expansion in the general direction of Poland, although this is not the place for an exhaustive enumeration of the episodes of Russian-Polish confrontation⁹, we mention the fact that, following large-scale

⁶ A colonization that we could, without too much fear of making a mistake, include in the directions of Russia's expansion, because, although it may present a less offensive character compared to the other examples, as a result of the absence of state formations in that territory and the presence in large uninhabited or sporadically inhabited geographical areas, the relations of the Russian settlers with the autochthonous populations took various forms from which conflict and coercion were never absent, being an almost natural corollary of trade relations.

⁷ Since the first confrontations with the Ottoman Empire, placed in the 16th century and the later ones, with Persia, but the real development of this direction will occur only in the 18th century.

⁸ We use these names to simplify the reading, since otherwise we should refer to entities such as the Grand Duchy of Moscow, the Russian Empire, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, etc., for Russia, and the Confederation (Rzeczpospolita Polska) or the Polish Republic, for Poland.

⁹ In fact, one of the objectives of this article is to introduce themes that we intend to develop in the future issues of the journal.

¹⁰ See, in this sense, the three partitions of Poland between the Russian Empire, the Kingdom of Prussia and the Austrian Empire, which led to the demise of the Polish Confederation.

military and diplomatic actions¹⁰, spread over several centuries, the Russian state ended up occupying, at the height of its expansion, an extremely vast territory, which today would roughly correspond to part of the Baltic states, Belarus, the largest part of Ukraine, and almost all of contemporary Poland, including the capital of the Polish state, Warsaw, being, subsequently, forced to suppress, most of the time with extreme violence, the successive uprisings of the Polish freedom fighters (Davies 2014).

1.4. Southeast direction. The Russo-Ottoman Wars

We have left for last what is undoubtedly the most problematic direction of aggressive expansion of the Russian state, at least from our perspective. It is, as the reader has probably already guessed, the one we can call “southeast” (Buşe 2012). It is problematic because, it is a movement that had (missed) its debut in the confrontation between the Russian Empire, led by Tsar Peter the Great, and the Ottoman Empire. This ended with the Ottoman victory at Stănileşti in June 1770 and with a course favorable to the Russian Empire with the Russo-Turkish War of 1768 -1774¹¹, the latter ended up occupying a vast area, bordering the Black Sea and the mouths of the Danube, which today would include, roughly, the south of Ukraine, the Crimean Peninsula, and the entire territory of the historical province of Bessarabia (which, of course, is not limited to the territory of the Republic of Moldova today).

¹¹ Ended, among other things, with the secession of the Crimean Khanate from Ottoman suzerainty and its subsequent occupation by the Russian Empire under the ruling of Catherine the Great. Note how Russia currently invokes historical arguments for the annexation of Crimea, establishing itself where the invoked history begins to flow. In this logic, we do not see why possible territorial claims of Turkey on Crimea would not be more pertinent.

This direction presents, for us, a particular interest, both because of the fact that most of the confrontations between the Russian and Ottoman Empires took place in a theater of war that overlapped almost completely with the principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia, at that time under Ottoman suzerainty, as well as on account of the methods used by those responsible of Russian imperial propaganda and other subversive actions aimed at provoking disputes between the various communities in the Ottoman Empire and, thus, justifying Russian aggressions against the Ottoman state, presenting them as interventions intended to protect the communities allegedly injured.

2. Vladimir Putin as an independent factor of aggression

However, there is a certain idea that must be emphasized when we refer to the conflicts in which the Russian Federation has been involved. It is obvious, since Russia is under an authoritarian regime, that the involvement in a conflict, regardless of the situation, does not arise from the collective will of the nation, but from the singular will of its leader. In the present case, Vladimir Putin can be an independent factor of aggression. A brief look at the post-communist history of Russia may help paint this picture more clearly.

Starting with the year 1991, and implicitly with the mandate of Boris Yeltsin, the Russian Federation has been involved in numerous conflicts, but the long-lasting ones, as well as the most aggressive ones, were during the presidency of Vladimir Putin. In 1991, the first conflicts began, namely the Georgian Civil War, with the Zviadist revolt and the South Ossetian War. Note the Russian duality: if in the Georgian Civil War, Russia supported the Georgian government, in the South Ossetian War, the Russians supported the state of South Ossetia ([Armstrong, Farrell and Maignashca 2006](#)).

The year 1992 marks the beginning of four new conflicts, namely: the War in Abkhazia, with Russia supporting Abkhazia; the Transnistria War, with Russia and elements of the former Soviet 14th Guards Army being among those directly involved in supporting Transnistrian independence. Also, in the same year, the East Prigorodny Conflict begins, with Russia supporting the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania against the Ingush militia; as well as the Tajikistani Civil War against the Islamist-Taliban factions and the Tajik opposition ([Kemoklidze, et al. 2014](#); [Rekawek 2017](#); [Meijer and Wyss 2018](#)). In 1994, Russia would once again begin to fight on multiple fronts, with the outbreak of the First Chechen War, which ended with a defeat in 1996, with the signing of the Khasav-Yurt Accord, being – until now – the only conflict lost by Moscow ([Socher 2021](#)).

In 1999, two interdependent conflicts will begin, namely the War of Dagestan, which will trigger, in the same year, the Second Chechen War. If the conflict in Dagestan ends in the same year, the one in Chechnya will continue until 2009. The same year, 1999, also marks the end of Yeltsin's mandate as, since 2000, the Russian Federation has had a new president in the person of Vladimir Putin ([Brannon 2016](#)). A year before the end of the second conflict in Chechnya, in 2008, the Russian Federation would start the Russo-Georgian War, through which it occupied the republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In 2009, the Insurgency in the North Caucasus would begin, with the Russian Federation, Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, North Ossetia-Alania and Kabardino-Balkaria fighting against the so-called Islamic Emirate of the Caucasus, a conflict that will last until 2017, ending with the defeat of the Islamists ([Schaefer 2010](#)). The year 2014 would mark the Russian annexation of Crimea and would be the precursor of the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The Russian Federation would also get involved in the conflict in Syria, starting in 2015, supporting the government of Bashar al-Assad, on the same side as Iran and Hezbollah. Last but not least, the Russian Federation is actively involved in the Central African Republic (CAR) Civil War, since 2018, supporting the CAR in the fight against the rebels of the Coalition of Patriots for Change ([Slider and Wegren 2022](#)).

From the above, some at least interesting conclusions emerge, namely: even if Russia had several conflicts during the Yeltsin period, they had a much shorter duration. By comparison, the conflicts during Putin's mandates, including those in tandem with Medvedev, were either significantly longer, or have not yet ended. All these things

have a common denominator in the person of Vladimir Putin, and an expansionist policy based on a pan-Slavist type of nationalism, which shows the fact that, at the level of mentality, it was not possible to overcome the moment of the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The continuous and unjustified aggression of a country that seems to be desperately looking for new conflicts is nothing more than the result of an authoritarian policy that wants to restore a status quo from before the 90s ([Đorđević, et al. 2023](#)).

2.1. Putin: an independent factor of aggression in the international law paradigm

It is also important to show why the substantiation of the fact that Putin is an independent factor of aggression can be found not only in the area of geopolitics and international relations, but also in the area of international law. Thus, in the international criminal system, implicitly in international law, command responsibility is a mode of criminal liability aimed at the individual and not the state or organizational actor. Command responsibility is based on the idea that an individual in a position of authority who fails to prevent a criminal act is responsible for doing so. Moreover, this fundamental idea, applying a causal chain will result – in a situational framework – in two consequences that support this paradigm.

The first consequence is that command responsibility, and therefore failure from an authoritative point of view – most of the time at the military level, being the most common case – constitutes a deviation from the military codes, implicitly the laws that govern these sectors.

The second consequence, with an automatic character, is that in case of a failure of authority, implicitly the activation of command responsibility, the individual becomes an accomplice of his subordinates who committed the criminal acts ([Stahn 2021](#), 158-160).

Many discussions were held on the two consequences, of a dualistic type, featuring opinions that supported the change in the framing of command responsibility either in the area of omission or in the participative area – to be determined, on a case-by-case basis, the voluntary or involuntary character – or in the area of general criminal liability, as having a common law character ([Sliedregt 2012](#); [Klabbers 2021](#)). But, considering the theoretical framework in which criminal liability is placed – of course, one can argue in favor of the syncretism between elements related to omission or indirect liability – the justification according to which the individual in the area of authority – on the hierarchical scale – is directly responsible for the acts of his subordinates if they are the result of culpability of the obligations of ([Stahn 2021](#), 159-160; [Browers 2012](#); [Darcy 2007](#)).

The application framework of the command responsibility had to be built precisely in order to be able, on the one hand, to acquire the adaptability necessary for the transfer of context – from the military to the civilian one, and vice versa – and, on the other hand, to avoid the appearance of lacunae or ambiguous areas due to too

broad a meaning that command responsibility could have had. It had to be explained and argued that command responsibility does not mean, given its indirect nature, that the individual in the hierarchical position will suffer the same set of consequences or will have the same degree of responsibility as his subordinates. The proportionality of individual liability will be related to the seriousness of the facts and acts committed by his subordinates (Othman 2005, 253-270; Ghanayim and Shany 2021).

This is the area where certain differences between command responsibility and its applicability in the military versus the civilian setting appear for the first time. If in the military context, things are quite clear, there are still some possibilities of interpretation in the civilian context. Thus, command responsibility being extended to civilians – precisely because of the fluidity of international law and the multitude of situations, or cases encountered – was attached to the concept of authority, be it military or civilian. The argument in favor of this expansion was, in addition to that of fluidity, that the degree of control that a civil authority exercises – at an organizational or societal level – can be counterbalanced – of course, in certain situations such as conflict – with military authority. It also provides an answer to questions about the authority and ability that a civil authority has – and can use – for both prevention and punishment and regulation of potential criminal acts and deeds committed by subordinates (Stahn 2021, 141-142).

In addition to these, there is a relevant case for this discussion, pending before the ICJ, namely *Ukraine v. Russian Federation (2017)*¹². Thus, for this case, arguments were brought according to which the ICJ could apply command responsibility. One idea brought to the table was that, depending on the framing that was to be applied to the conflict, namely either international armed conflict or non-international armed conflict, command responsibility could be applicable at a dualistic level. If the conflict was framed as non-international, then commanders of separatist groups and movements, who were culpable under both Ukrainian and international law, could be held individually, and under command responsibility, responsible. If the conflict was characterized as international, then including the commanders from the side of the Russian Federation were guilty according to the Geneva Conventions (Medvedieva and Korotkyi 2021, 60-65). Therefore, if it is proven – both in the case of the separatist commanders and in the case of the Russian ones – that there was an intention to attack – direct responsibility – and/or knowledge of the imminence of an attack, of the potential damage that would be caused, etc. – indirect responsibility, *ergo* command responsibility – they could be assigned a dual degree of culpability. Thus, the ICJ could invoke command responsibility both for the Ukrainian separatists and for the Russian commanders, something that, up to the current stage of the case, has not yet been applied, collective responsibility being preferred, implicitly the

¹² Application of the International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism and of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.

state one (Klabbers 2021; Medvedieva and Korotkyi 2021, 63-65). Therefore, there are premises, at the level of international law, based on which Vladimir Putin could be seen as an independent factor of aggression.

3. What about today? Is Russia still aggressive?

From a practical point of view, the above description is useful if we can determine a connection, some kind of continuity between Russia's actions in the historical past, within each direction of expansion, and Russia's foreign policy today. In other words, the question that arises at this moment is the following: is Russia still aggressive today? Analyzing the main foreign actions of Russia, in the mentioned directions, from the breakup of the Soviet Union until today, the conclusion we reach almost inevitably is that Russia continues to present itself as an aggressive international actor, in almost the same directions that it has followed since the beginning of its expansion. Although we only wish to present this aspect briefly, a simple analysis of Russia's actions during this period demonstrates the correctness of this statement. Let us therefore analyze the situation of the expansion directions in the order of their presentation.

Thus, as far as the Baltic direction is concerned, the moments when Soviet or Russian submarines penetrated the territorial waters of Sweden are well known, along with many other incidents or elements of diplomatic tension that can be identified with a simple search on the Internet. The same goes with regard to the Baltic States; the tensions and incidents between them and Russia need no introduction, as the 2007 cyber-attack against Estonia that crippled much of that state's government cyber infrastructure is perhaps the most representative example, but by no means the only one. The membership of the Baltic States in NATO represents, however, a sufficient element of deterring some "traditional" offensive actions carried out by Russia, but this does not even remotely exclude the existence, in the future, of elements of a hybrid confrontation, following the model of the cyber-attack mentioned above.

Nor can the eastern direction, towards Central Asia and the Far East, be considered abandoned. If the actual territorial expansion towards the Far East became anachronistic with the consolidation of the Chinese state, after the Second World War, the interests of Russia and China in terms of the exploitation of underground resources in the Siberian area cannot be considered nearly as harmonized as the parties would like to consider them. And, as far as Central Asia is concerned, the interests of Russia and China regarding the markets of the states in the region, the infrastructure projects that China wants done and can be considered not only disharmonized, but quite the opposite. And, if we add to these the ambitions of Turkey or Iran, the result is a picture in which Russia must exert ever greater pressure to try to prevent the ex-Soviet states in the Central Asian region from detaching more and more from on the political-economic orbit of the former imperial power (Popescu and Makocki 2017).

Of course, the branch off of this, the Caucasian one, is as current as ever, even if it takes different forms. Related to Russia's involvement in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, since the end of the Soviet era, enough specialized works have been written that there is no need to revisit the subject in detail; about Russia's involvement in supporting the separatist republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, in Georgia, likewise. The Russian invasion of Georgia, in 2008, is basically the moment that brought the aggressive policy of post-Soviet Russia back to the world's attention. More recently, the stationing of Russian forces in Karabakh, the support given to Armenia in the conflict with Azerbaijan (conditional on the abandonment of negotiations with the European Union and accession to the Eurasian Economic Community), along with the deployment of Russian troops, as peacekeeping forces, in the portion of territory remaining under Armenian control after the recent successful Azeri offensive supported by Turkey, through which Azerbaijan managed to recover most of Karabakh under Armenian occupation, is as much evidence of Russia's continued aggressive involvement in the politics of the states south of the Caucasian mountain range.

The western direction of expansion is, however, perhaps the most obvious for us and not only, since 2013. The episodes of confrontation between the pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine, the frequent threats of armed invasion, the occupation of Crimea, Russia's participation in the Minsk format, in support of the claims of the separatists in the Don basin and the other political-economic actions directed against Ukraine (such as the interruption of the natural gas supply or the threat with this measure) has been occupying the public agenda of Romania, Europe and the United States for over seven years. Therefore, we consider that the persistence of Russian aggression in this direction of expansion is self-evident, an obvious fact whose demonstration in this study risks becoming redundant ([Bantaş and Dumitru 2018](#), 25-47). Similarly, the influence exerted by Russia on its neighboring state, Belarus, which borders on total control, by supporting the Lukashenko regime is, in turn, on record.

We have left, for the end, the southwestern direction of expansion, the one that interests us, perhaps, the most. Of course, it would be easy to say that, apart from supporting the Transnistrian separatist entity, actions with territorial consequences by Russia in this geographical region can be considered anachronistic. But such a conclusion remains valid only as long as Russia or the entities controlled by it do not directly border the territory of the Republic of Moldova (in which we also include the Transnistrian separatist entity). If, through new actions directed against the state integrity of Ukraine, a direct territorial link would be created between Transnistria and Russia, this conclusion could undergo important adjustments.

In addition, nowadays, the conduct of an aggressive policy no longer requires predominantly military means. Campaigns supported by disinformation can be of a similar nature, for example, aimed at instilling civil disobedience, weakening

the cohesion of a society, making it vulnerable to threats of a sanitary nature; or weakening the sense of belonging and popular support for maintaining NATO and EU membership, i.e. exactly those obstacles that, at the moment, stand in the way of direct aggressions by Russia. However, this subject is to be addressed extensively in our future efforts.

Thus, the only possible conclusion is that Russia is still as aggressive today as ever, from Ivan the Terrible through the age of Peter the Great, along the same lines. How can such aggression be stopped? As in the past, through a common and firm resistance of the entire Western world, centered on “*the values common to the European Union, in general, and to each democratic state in particular, as the foundation of economic and social progress and the growth [welfare] of their members*” (Marinescu 2020, 46). How can this resistance be organized and carried out? Well, as already stated above, this study only establishes the framework on the basis of which the articles that will follow will be developed, and the theme of resistance to Russia’s aggressive actions will not be missing from them.

The solution to the threats generated by this character remains, in our view, the promotion of a rules-based international order. Of course, the implementation of an international order based on norms, which debuted with the adoption of the United Nations Charter, is an arduous and still unfinished endeavor, and any such approach will be *achieved gradually, (in line) with the economic and political evolution at national and international level* (Salomia and Mihalache 2016, 166); however, once this objective is achieved, we anticipate the production of what could be characterized as a spill-over effect of integration, from regional initiatives such as the European Union, based on “*ties that go beyond the framework of the nation-state (...), voluntary adhesion (...), peaceful transformation*” (Dumitrașcu 2006, 74).

Conclusions. In the end, what kind of aggressor is Russia?

In the light of what has been presented throughout this study, we believe that Russia’s aggression, like so many other events specific to international relations and life in general, is likely to be associated with a set of causes and characterized by a plurality of features. By the constancy and even by the predictability of its acts of aggression, Russia can be considered a systemic aggressor, a fact demonstrated by the historical analysis carried out. In fact, the permanence of its aggressive behavior is so striking that almost every ruler of the Russian state, from Ivan III to the present day, has been involved in at least one aggressive action externally or internally, including the civil war of Chechnya. Considering the fact that the analyzed period spans almost six centuries, such constancy, such unswerving pursuit of the same general objectives, through the same violent means, represents a performance unmatched by any other contemporary state and comparable, perhaps, with the existence of the great empires of Antiquity.

And yet, the course of history is not inevitable, and the actions of decision-makers, even if they are often severely limited by circumstances, are almost always able to influence, if not their course, at least the overall framework. As we have shown using the comparative examples of the Yeltsin and Putin mandates, the level of aggression is neither inevitable nor constant. Moreover, the inclusion in the research of the mandate of former president Mikhail Gorbachev is likely to demonstrate additionally that the actions of decision-makers can significantly influence the course of events. But, through its exceptional character, it only confirms the rule, and this is, in our opinion, represented by the systemic nature of the aggressiveness of the Russian state.

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