

# NATO'S MISTAKES THAT PAVED THE WAY FOR RUSSIA-UKRAINE CRISIS

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## Özet

Rusya-Ukrayna krizi NATO ile Rusya arasında son beş yılda yaşanan ikinci büyük kriz olmuştur. Rusya 2008 yılında NATO üye adayı Gürcistan'ı işgal etmiş ve ülkenin toprak bütünlüğünü tehdit ederek iki ayrılıkçı bölgeyi resmen tanımıştır. Beş yıl sonra ise Kırım'ı yasadışı bir şekilde ilhak ederek ve ülkenin doğusundaki ayrılıkçı grupları destekleyerek diğer bir NATO üye adayı olan Ukrayna'nın toprak bütünlüğünü tehdit etmektedir. Batı dünyası ve NATO Rusya'yı krizdeki sorumluluğundan dolayı eleştirmeye devam etmektedir. Krizde Rusya'nın sorumluluğuna ilişkin kuşku bulunmamaktadır. Ancak NATO 2008 Rus-Gürcü savaşı sırasında ve sonrasında yaptığı hataların yeni krizde önemli rol oynadığını kabul etmek durumundadır. NATO'nun 2008 savaşında Rusya'ya karşı tavrı Rusya'yı İttifak'a ve tüm Batı dünyasına meydan okumaktan ve karşı karşıya gelmeden caydıracak kadar güçlü olmamıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** NATO, Rus-Gürcü Savaşı, Rusya-Ukrayna Krizi, Kırım.

## Abstract

The Russia-Ukraine Crisis has been the second biggest crisis between NATO and Russia in five years. Russia occupied Georgia, a NATO candidate, in 2008 and officially recognized two breakaway regions threatening Georgia's territorial integrity. Five years later, Russia threatened the territorial integrity of Ukraine, another NATO candidate, illegally annexing Crimea and supporting separatists in the Eastern part of the country. The Western World and NATO have been condemning Russia because of its role. There is no doubt about Russia's role in the crisis. However NATO has to admit that its mistakes during and after the 2008 Russia-Georgia War played an important part in the new Crisis. NATO's posture with regard to Russian behaviour during the 2008 War was not strong enough to deter Russia from again challenging and confronting the Alliance and the whole western World.

**Keywords:** NATO, Russia-Georgia War, Russia-Ukraine Crisis, Crimea.

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## **Introduction**

Most western officials, media and academics blamed Russia and especially Vladimir Putin as the sole source of the crisis in Ukraine in 2014. They argued that Russia violated international law by illegally annexing Crimea and disrespected the choice of the Ukrainian people to overthrow Yanukovich with protests. On the other hand, a few academics like John Mearsheimer underlined the role of western countries and NATO in the crisis arguing that the liberal delusion of the western world provoked Putin regarding the Ukrainian crisis (Mearsheimer, 2014).

The Ukrainian crisis initiated a new phase in the relationship between NATO and Russia, as well as in NATO's view of Euro-Atlantic Security. The Alliance implemented various measures to assure, especially in Eastern European countries, that NATO is ready to defend them in the context of common defence. Furthermore, NATO declared additional measures at the Wales Summit to adapt the Alliance to confront the new strategy of Russia, called hybrid warfare, and emerging challenges that likely will threaten the security of Alliance. These adaptation measures include a variety of plans, from enhancing the effectiveness of the NATO Response Force (NRF) system to acquiring critical capabilities.

The Ukrainian crisis is one of the most significant crises for NATO with Russia in the post-Cold War era. Russia challenged NATO during the 2008 Russia-Georgia war which resulted in the suspension of activities in the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) for more than one year. The crisis caused Georgia to lose control over two of its breakaway regions, and NATO lost its eagerness to give Membership Action Plan (MAP) status to Georgia. Most of all, it resulted in the questioning of NATO's credibility, solidarity and willingness deterring Russia from threatening the security of the Euro-Atlantic Area.

Russia's behaviour in the Euro-Atlantic area depends on the posture of NATO as the main deterrence force. The Ukrainian crisis showed that the posture of the Alliance during the Russia-Georgia war was not strong enough to deter Russia. NATO's inability to deter Russia from illegally annexing Crimea and covertly supporting separatists in Ukraine, despite all its political pressure on Moscow, highlighted that NATO did not or could not adapt itself to the new security challenges posed by Russia, based on the lessons learned after the Russia-Georgia war.

This paper analyses NATO's reaction to the Russia-Georgia conflict and NATO's mistakes which paved the way for the crisis in Ukraine. It argues that the situation in Crimea and Ukraine would be different from today if NATO had used the Russia-Georgia war as an opportunity for a wake-up call. NATO's mistakes encouraged and provoked Russia to challenge the Western World on Ukraine and illegally annex Crimea. It also argues that NATO's deterrence will be the main factor to shape future actions of Russia with regards to the security of the Euro-Atlantic area.

### **The Reaction of NATO for Russia-Georgia War**

NATO's relation with Georgia started in 1992 when Georgia joined the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC), which was replaced by the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC) in 1997. In 2002 Georgia declared its aspiration for membership and its intention to develop an Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) with NATO. Georgia was the first country in the South Caucasus to articulate its desire to join the Alliance and became the first country to agree on IPAP with NATO, for which implementation started in 2004.

The 2008 Bucharest Summit became a cornerstone for the membership process. Leaders "welcomed Ukraine's and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO and agreed that these countries will become members of NATO." However, the Summit experienced a strong struggle over giving MAP status to Georgia and Ukraine. Against the will of President Bush and several East European states, a group of members including France, Germany, Hungary, Italy and the Benelux countries, opposed granting MAP to these two countries, largely in response to Russia's staunch opposition (Pouliot, 2010: 222). Despite strong support by most of the NATO countries, including the US, MAP status decision has been postponed to December 2008.

The decision taken at the Bucharest summit pushed the limits of Russian flexibility. The risk, in Moscow's eyes, was that the candidacies of Georgia and Ukraine would now start to gain momentum and become unstoppable (Asmus, 2010: 118). Moscow was angered by the decision at NATO's Bucharest summit and the Kremlin subsequently increased its cooperation with Georgia's separatist territories and unilaterally bolstered the number of troops deployed in Abkhazia (German, 2011: 229). The reaction was reflected in the statements of Russian leaders. President Dimitri Medvedev issued a statement emphasizing that Russia will provide effective assistance to South Ossetia and Abkhazia because of NATO's decision. The head of the Russian Military Staff stated that Russia will do everything (necessary) to prevent Georgia from joining NATO. Lavrov highlighted that "Russia would do its utmost not to allow Georgia and Ukraine into NATO" (Illarionov, 2009: 67). Russia declared Georgia and Ukraine's membership process as red line. On April 16th 2008, Putin signed a decree establishing direct legal and diplomatic ties with Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Asmus, 2010: 147).

The fighting between Georgian and S.Ossetian troops on August 1st invoked a crisis resulting in the Russia-Georgia war that lasted for five days. French President Nicholas Sarkozy's mediation as EU President ended the fight but Russia stationed troops in both of these breakaway regions resulting in the complete lose of Georgian control. Recognition of independence of S. Ossetia and Abkhazia by Russia on 26 August started a new phase in the region. On October 2008, the Russian parliament ratified treaties with S.

Ossetia and Abkhazia allowing Moscow to emplace thousands of additional troops in these territories. Finally Russia and Abkhazia signed an agreement on 24 October 2014 that envisages closer military and economical ties and calls for the formal development of a joint Russian-Abkhazian military force and gives Russia a role in Abkhazia's foreign affairs.

Georgia is a partner country of NATO without a binding political or military support mechanism for the Alliance. Therefore NATO did not even consider a military response to Russia's action in the Alliance mechanism. Political and military support and measures happened in the context of NATO-Georgia's bilateral relations. When the war broke out, the North Atlantic Council (NAC) managed to hold one meeting and issue a statement. Secretary General Scheffer interrupted his summer holiday for a single day. The SACEUR (Supreme Allied Commander Europe), the highest military authority of NATO, did not even bother to break his vacation. Moreover the Military Committee only managed to meet when the fighting had all but stopped. For an Alliance that has claimed for itself the role of crisis manager across Europe as a whole, it was not an impressive performance (Asmus, 2010: 145).

The only firm decision made by NATO ministers was their declaration stating that they are not to continue with business as usual (NATO Statemnt, 19 August 2008) and the cooperation in the NRC was suspended until Russia withdrew its armed forces from Georgia. There was no immediate military measure to support Georgia during war by NATO except several exercises in the Black Sea which did not have any effect in stopping Russian activities. The main concrete activity of NATO was establishing of a NATO-Georgia Commission (NGC) on 15 September 2008 to supervise the process set in hand at the Bucharest Summit, to oversee NATO's assistance to Georgia following the conflict with Russia. NGC has been the main political body to deepen political dialogue and cooperation between NATO and Georgia at all appropriate levels.

NATO's weak reaction despite its firm declaration received a harsh and unexpected response from Russia. NATO stated on 21 August 2008 that it had received a note from Moscow saying that Russia would break off military cooperation with the West's military alliance. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov suggested that NATO needed Moscow more than Moscow needed NATO. But he stated that Russia will not shut all doors with the Alliance. (Russia Suspends Military Cooperation with NATO, 2008) Medvedev, on the other hand, warned that Russia could sever all ties with NATO and stated that they will take any decision up to terminating relations entirely, and that cooperation is above all in the interests of NATO, if NATO is not willing to cooperate with Moscow (Medvedev Says Russia Ready to Cut Ties with NATO, 2008). Moscow suspended all peacekeeping operations and exercises with NATO and its participation in Partnership for Peace (PfP). However cooperation with NATO in Afghanistan continued.

NATO's reaction toward Russia softened gradually over time. During the informal Defence Ministers meeting in September 2008, NATO expressed its willingness to continue cooperation with Russia on subjects such as counterterrorism, Afghanistan, the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) and nuclear weapons. During the meeting Secretary General De Hoop Scheffer indicated that Georgia may remain a contentious issue between Russia and the West for some time, but it should not prevent cooperation with Russia "wherever their interests converge." He pointed to the example of Afghanistan and said that continued Russian-NATO cooperation in Afghanistan "is a clear indication that common interests can transcend disagreements in other areas." (Porth, 2008).

The Foreign Minister's meeting in December 2008 became a cornerstone for relations with Russia. The Ministers agreed on a measured and phased approach mandating the Secretary General to re-engage with Russia at the political level. The ministers also agreed to start informal discussions and requested the Secretary General to report them prior to any decision to engage Russia formally in the NRC. Although NATO ministers have not revived NRC, Secretary General de Hoop Scheffer said that they had agreed to a resumption of lower-level dialogue (NATO to Resume Ties with Russia, 2008). The relations gradually went back to normal in a short time while refraining from giving MAP status to Georgia during this period.

The ministers reached agreement on 05 March 2009 to formally resume the NRC meetings, including at Ministerial level, as soon as possible after the Strasbourg/Kehl Summit, even though Moscow had not complied with the 12 August 2008 armistice plan including withdrawal. During the April 2009 Strasbourg-Kehl summit NATO praised the importance of NATO-Russia relations and stated their hope regarding the reconvening of formal NRC meetings, including at Ministerial level, as soon as possible before summer 2009, although the summit declaration explicitly highlighted that Russia did not fully meet its commitments. NATO's inconsistent policy encouraged Russian leaders to move forward. On April 30, in less than one month after the summit, Russia signed joint border protection agreements with Abkhazia and S. Ossetia, allowing Russian border troops to secure the borders of the regions.

In June, NATO and Russia agreed that the Corfu meeting marked the beginning of the return to high-level political consultations suspended after the dramatic events of August 2008. Ministers also decided to give a green light to restarting military cooperation in the framework of the NRC. The sides tried to focus on common interests instead of disagreements. Secretary General Rasmussen made a speech on 18 September 2009 with the title, "NATO and Russia: A New Beginning," and addressed NATO's intention to enhance cooperation with Russia, even not mentioning Russia's responsibility in the crisis or the process for Georgian membership (NATO and Russia: A New Beginning, 2009). With the US Reset Policy in 2009, the Russia-

Georgia war and the membership process of Georgia lost its priority for the Alliance.

The Wales Summit declaration, which happened during the crisis in Ukraine, did not bring any breakthrough on the table and the Summit Declaration repeated the same hopes for membership process. NATO's decision not to invite Georgia for MAP was regarded by most media as an attempt to avoid a confrontation with Russia (Croft, 2014). Georgia's hopes of achieving full membership of NATO were set back as the alliance vowed to stop short of approval, avoiding possible confrontation with Moscow over an expansion to Russia's neighbours (NATO Steps Back From Giving Georgia Full Membership Of Alliance, 2014).

### **NATO's Mistakes**

Mikhail Saakashvili, the president of Georgia during the Russia-Georgia war, pointed out "that Ukraine would never have happened if the west reacted properly to Georgia" (Saakashvili, 2014). However that can not be proved based on current circumstances. But it is clear that NATO's posture and reaction against the Russia-Georgia war was extremely weak and did not radically change the course of Russia's strategy for Georgia nor deter Russia from confronting the Alliance in Ukraine. NATO made several mistakes during and after the Russia-Georgia war that paved the way for the Ukrainian crisis.

NATO's first and biggest mistake has been the lack of cohesion of member countries and the different reactions of major Allies, which caused NATO to fail to adopt a strong posture toward Russia. Some Allies wanted not to provoke Russia for the sake of Georgia's membership and they prevented NATO from reacting strongly enough to deter Russia. The French Prime Minister's statement that "they are opposed to the entry of Georgia and Ukraine because France thinks that is not a good answer to the balance of power within Europe and between Europe and Russia" (Pouliot, 2010: 223) highlights the policy of opposition of some European countries.

The struggle started especially during the Bucharest Summit in 2008. Before the Summit the US intensified its efforts to grant MAP to Georgia. US President Bush's position with support of new members that Ukraine and Georgia should be welcomed into a MAP, that prepares nations for NATO membership, directly contradicted the German and French Government positions (Erlanger and Myers, 2008). Apparently Putin's warning before the summit that bringing Georgia into NATO was Russia's red line (Stent, 2014: 165) played an important role in discouraging some European countries. The Alliance avoided granting MAP to Georgia but made a strong commitment to eventual membership. Europe's rejection of President Bush's proposal to start Ukraine and Georgia towards NATO membership was the real provocation to Russia, because it exposed western weakness and timidity (Bolton, 2008). The hesitation of Berlin and Paris to provide MAP

to Ukraine and Georgia because of their concerns about Moscow's reaction brought into question alliance unity and highlighted an inadequate understanding of Russia's tactics and strategies (Bugajski, 2010: 62).

The Alliance seemed to have a strong posture against Russia with the beginning of the war, however, the hesitation and uncertainty of some countries resulted in the early dissolution of this strong posture after the crisis, and NATO opened the door for reengagement with Russia although Russia did not meet its commitments. During the December 2008 Meeting, just five months after the Crisis, ministers tasked the Secretary General to politically engage with Russia. After the decision by Foreign Ministers in March, the NRC formally met in December 2009 and it represented a resumption of formal relations with Russia.

Additionally, just a few months after the war, the narrative began to shift in the west, and a more critical view of Georgia's role in the conflict emerged (Stent, 2014: 174). Unwilling to confront Russia directly, western leaders instead blamed the recklessness of Mikheil Saakashvili (Georgia and Russia: Dreams Deferred, 2014). Some European countries criticized Georgia to provoke Russia. Finally, a fact-finding report prepared for the EU blamed Georgia for starting the war in August 2008, highlighting that the use of force by Georgia in South Ossetia was not justifiable under international law (Waterfield, 2009). NATO's failure of having strong and consistent posture during the crisis encouraged Russia to challenge NATO again in Ukraine.

The second mistake was the ignorance of Russia's concerns by western countries, including its strong reaction against NATO's enlargement process. "The Alliance frequently has been insensitive to Russian fears and pride in the manner in which Brussels has pursued enlargement, and has been rather inept at accurately gauging Russia's significance" (Braun, 2009: 45). NATO was not eager to see and consider Russia's objection to independence of Kosovo, NATO's enlargement, and the US missile defence project. That caused strong resentment among the Russian elite and especially Putin. The Russia-Georgia war was largely a response to the NATO Summit in Bucharest at which the west confirmed its readiness to discuss procedural matters for including Georgia and Ukraine in NATO, completely ignoring Russia's concerns (Sukhov, 2014). NATO's posture in this respect did not change much after the Georgian crisis and western countries insistence on the membership of Ukraine despite Russian sensitivities that led to the crisis in Ukraine.

The ignorance of Russia's power and threat resulted in the negligence of responsibilities of Article 5 and in focusing on other areas such as partnership and crisis management. Some Allies and NATO authorities underlined the vulnerabilities of the Alliance in the face of a Russian attack, and requested NATO focus more on its core tasks after the crisis. Countries that feel a Russian threat is imminent, such as Poland, the Czech Republic, and

the Baltic countries, demanded that the Alliance again look seriously into its resources for collective defence comprising military assistance upon attack. However, most of the countries in the Alliance ignored these requests and NATO continued to distance itself from its main foundation.

Surprisingly, this course did not change even after the Georgian crisis. In October 2008, NATO's highest military commander, General James Craddock, requested the authority to draw up full defense plans for Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania in the event of attack (Lobjakas, 2008). It seems that the process started only in the early beginning of 2010 upon the proposal of SACEUR Admiral James Stavridis (Traynor, 2010). It is not clear if the plans are prepared and endorsed by Allies, but slow progress is a signal of NATO's reluctance and its ignorance of Russia's threat.

NRF, the Alliance's main reaction force, is a high readiness and technologically advanced force comprising of land, air, sea and special forces units capable of being deployed quickly on operations wherever needed. The deployment of the NRF, which takes 30-90 days, is too slow compared to five days Russia-Georgia war. The decision at the Wales Summit in 2014 to enhance the effectiveness of NRF and to establish a Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), that can be deployed in 3-5 days upon a crisis, revealed that there has not been any major improvement in NATO reaction process since the Russia-Georgia war.

The shift from core tasks also is reflected in defence spending of the members. Considering the 2008 economic crisis, most NATO countries have been neglecting their financial commitments for NATO, such as the defence expenditure of 2% of GDP. Based on the Secretary General 2013 Report, only three countries, US, UK and Greece, have meet this commitment. Rasmussen also revealed that in the last five years, since the Georgian War, NATO allies have on average cut defence spending by 20% while Russia has increased its defence budget by 50% (Rasmussen, 2014). The Leaders promised to meet this criteria at the Wales summit because of the crisis in Ukraine.

The Ukrainian crisis showed that Russia continues a new type of strategy, called hybrid warfare, a combination of military action, covert operations, and an aggressive program of disinformation, as Secretary General Rasmussen defined (Lander vd., 2014). The Wales Summit declaration focused on the Russian hybrid warfare strategies and its implications for NATO. The Alliance started to work on the Reaction Action Plan (RAP) that aims to adapt NATO to counter Russia's hybrid warfare threat in the future. Although NATO has been analyzing hybrid threats since 2009 (Burd, 2011) there has not been any concrete development regarding hybrid warfare issue. Even the 2010 Strategic Concept even did not mention hybrid threats or hybrid warfare. NATO focused mostly on asymmetric hybrid threat despite warnings that hybrid threats are not exclusively a tool of asymmetric

or non-state actors, but can be applied by state and nonstate actors alike (Aaronson vd., 2011).

One of the main elements of hybrid warfare is irregular warfare. Russia deployed soldiers wearing uniform without national markings play a main role in invading a country or in confronting regular forces, which SACEUR Philippe Breedlove called "little green men" (NATO Would Respond Militarily to Crimea-Style infiltration: General, 2014). Actually Russia used similar tactics during the Georgian crisis. As Saakashvili pointed out for months prior to August 2008, "unidentified troops" masquerading as local insurgents grabbed more and more control over Georgia's separatist regions (Saakashvili, 2014). It is also well known that Russia sent 400 Russian troops under the name of "railway workers" to Abkhazia before the crisis (Wagstyl, 2008). During the crisis, the Ukrainian government released photos that reportedly were endorsed by the Obama Administration, showing the same heavily bearded gunmen taking part in militant operations in Kravatorsk and Sloviansk during the Ukrainian crisis, and in an operation in Georgia in 2008 (Ukraine Crisis: What The 'Russian Soldier' Photos Say, 2014).

Another important element of hybrid warfare is cyber warfare, which Russia has used on several occasions, including the crises in Georgia and Ukraine. A report prepared by the US Cyber Consequences Unit concluded that cyber attacks were carried out by Russian civilians during the Georgian crisis. David Hollis from the unit analysed in his article "Cyberwar Case Study: Georgia 2008" (Hollis, 2011) how Russia used cyberwar tactics during the crisis and showed that the cyber war dimension of hybrid warfare is not new for the US and NATO. Although NATO has been working intensively on cyber war and cyber defence, recent developments, such as Russia's activities in spying on NATO using Windows operation systems deficiencies since 2009, (Nakashima, 2014) reveals that NATO systems has been sensitive to Russian cyber war strategies.

In sum it is evident that Russia used hybrid war tactics during the Georgian crisis. However NATO neglected adapting itself to meet challenges caused by Russian hybrid warfare. It is not clear if NATO's preparedness for hybrid warfare based on the lessons learned during the Georgian crisis could have prevented the Ukrainian crisis in the region, but most probably the situation on the ground would be different than it is today.

## **Conclusion**

Deterrence depends on what one can do, not on what one will do (Waltz, 1979) and credibility is one of the main elements of it. Deterrence, mainly based on nuclear weapons, shaped the relationship between US backed NATO and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The tacit acknowledgement of red lines prevented NATO and the Soviet Union to confront each other and to interfere with their sphere of influence to some extent.

The post-Cold War era and the collapse of the Soviet Union changed the relationship between Russia and NATO, and partnership and cooperation prioritized the deterrence. However their perception about the security of the Euro-Atlantic area differed gradually over time and that resulted in the change of their policies. NATO practically neglected the basics of deterrence while ignoring the sensitivities and the red lines of Russia. On the other hand, Russia focused mostly on bolstering the sphere of interest even without refraining from challenging and confronting the Alliance.

Russia, based on the lessons learned in Kosovo, declared Georgia as part of its sphere of interest and as one of its red lines in reference to NATO's expansion. The Alliance which ignored Russia's warnings was not able to deter Russia to confront the western world in Georgia and tacitly acknowledged Russia's power in the region. The deterrence of NATO neither secured the territorial integrity of Georgia, a partner and candidate of NATO, nor the security of the Euro-Atlantic Area. Moreover, NATO tended to ignore the violation of international law and the fundamental rights of Georgia normalising the relationship with Russia in a short time before Russia fulfilled its commitments to the ceasefire.

NATO's mistakes during the Russia-Georgia crisis paved the way for the Ukrainian crisis. The Russian illegal annexation of Crimea, and its activities in eastern Ukraine, have been considered by most people and officials as a wake-up call for NATO which should have been considered after the 2008 crisis. The Wales Summit became a cornerstone for NATO's reaction regarding the crisis, whereby NATO leaders agreed on adaptation measures that will result in changes for NATO's military reaction process, especially in confronting the Russian hybrid warfare threat. The leaders decided to deter Russia while adapting the Alliance to the new threats.

The main factor will be the solidarity of member countries and the duration of NATO's solid posture towards Russia. The Ukrainian crisis will depend on Europeans, especially "Old European", members' policies. The Georgian crisis showed that some European countries, in close relation with Russia, tend to soften their position toward Russia, despite pressure by some Allies, including the US. Europe's trade relation with Russia and especially its energy dependence will be major factor for European members. Time will tell if NATO will be able to reverse the loss of credibility it suffered in the Georgian crisis. However, it is evident that deterring Russia in the future will be extremely difficult if NATO repeats the mistakes it made in 2008.

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