

# Dr. Jekyll or Mr. Hyde?

A qualitative analysis of Russian strategic decision making

# Abstract

The first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have not been lined with the optimism that surged after the fall of the Soviet Union. Instead of pursuing a path of liberalization, Russia has relapsed to authoritarian rule and its view of the west not as an ally, but as an adversary. The war in Georgia, annexation of Crimea and the invasion of eastern Ukraine shows that Russia is once again willing to use military force to pursue its own objectives. There are contradictions though, as Russia parallel to its military aggressions is trying to maintain its interdependence with Europe. Multi-billion Euro pipelines have been built to ensure Russo-European gas trade, generating crucial income to the Russian Federation.

By using models originally designed to explain the Cuban missile crisis, this thesis examines Russian decision making all the way from an inter-state level down to the shadowy corners of the Kremlin. The conclusions will show that there is a small contingent of power brokers lining their pockets at the expense of the Russian people. The contradictory behaviour appears, thus, to be echoes of the interests of Putin's inner circle clashing with the interests of the Russian Federation.

*Keywords:* decision making, Europe, governmental politics, interdependence, neo-liberalism, organizational behaviour, Vladimir Putin, rational actor, Russia, strategic thinking, structural realism

*Word count:* 9599

# Preface

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# Abbreviations

CEO	Chief Executive Officer
DDoS	Distributed Denial of Service <i>A discipline within cyber warfare and cyberattacks</i>
EU	European Union
GDP	Gross Development Product
GWOT	Global War on Terror
INF	Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces <i>Russo-American arms control treaty regulating the dismantling of intermediate and short-range ballistic missiles</i>
ISIS	The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
KGB	Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti <i>The committee for state security of the Soviet Union</i>
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PRC	People's Republic of China
S.G.M.	Stroygazmontazh <i>Russian Infrastructure construction company</i>
SRBM	Short-range Ballistic Missile
U.S.	United States of America
WTO	World Trade Organization
WWII	World War 2

# 1 Introduction

After the fall of the Berlin wall, a Russian Federation reborn appeared to adopt a more western-friendly approach. Their previous despise of the West seemed to have given place to a more liberal and Westphalian view of the world order, with a larger focus on international trade in order to resuscitate its failing economy. Russia's strategic resources are fairly few, but with Europe's rapid expansion the need for energy has skyrocketed, energy of which Russia retains a surplus. In order to meet European demands for natural gas, mainly extracted in Siberia, several pipelines were constructed in the late 1990s and early 2000s with yet another one scheduled to be completed within the year. These ventures have constituted multi-billion Euro investments for Russian state-owned companies, and the proceeds from gas trade accounts for a significant portion of the Russian economy (Girardi, 2018).

Parallel to the seemingly ongoing liberalization of the Russian Federation, events have been stirring that suggest old habits die hard. In 2008, Russia intervened in Georgia under the pretence of looking out for the Russian minority in the country. The West watched the events in stunned disbelief, hoping that this was merely a hiccup in the Russian liberalisation process. During the years that followed, with Russia joining the WTO in 2012 and expanding its gas trade with Europe, through for example the Russo-European venture Nord Stream, Russia was again on a path to become part of the European community (Bershidsky, 2019; Kaylan, 2018, Withnall, 2015).

In 2014 Russia annexed Crimea, followed by an invasion of the eastern Ukraine. Again, the argument was that the Russian minority in the country was mistreated and living under duress from the Ukrainian government. This time however, the West didn't remain a passive bystander but instead imposed massive sanctions upon Russia. These sanctions are still in place today and have a significant impact on Russian economy. The sanctions, in large part, caused one of the latest pipeline construction ventures, South Stream, to be cancelled and diverted to Turkey instead of to Bulgaria. This Russian behaviour, with large scale investments in international trade on one hand, and Cold war era land grabs and acts of military aggression on the other, appears to be an International Relations version of the novel *Strange case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (*ibid.*).

## 1.1 Research problem

There are, as shown in the introduction, a contradiction in Russian behaviour in its relationships toward Europe. On one hand, they invest copious amounts of money in extensive trade agreements and far reaching pipeline ventures, creating interdependence between Europe and Russia. On the other hand, Russia is growing more and more aggressive, flexing its military muscles by coercing, threatening and provoking its neighbours on a Cold war-era scale. This in turn causes Europe to turn away from Russian trade, at the same time as sanctions from the Russo-Ukrainian conflict of 2014 is eating away at their economy. This thesis aims to investigate this contradiction by answering the following research questions:

- Why is Russia willing to risk its hard-earned trade relationships with Europe in order to project its military superiority?
- Is Russia governed by rational actions or by sporadic influences?

The two questions each deal with the inner workings of the Russian decision-making apparatus, but where the first is oriented specifically toward the Russo-European relationship. The second one is more oriented toward investigating whether there is in fact a long term, coherent strategy within the Russian administration or if rational actions have given way to individual power brokers, each seeking to maximize their own gains.

## 1.2 Hypotheses

H1 – The contradictions in Russian behaviour are *coordinated*. Militarily and economically driven decision makers in the Kremlin have a joint and central strategy that aims to coordinate their aggregated resources to drive Europe in the direction that Russia chooses. Russia risking its trade with Europe is part of a long-term strategy.

H2 – The contradictions in Russian behaviour are *uncoordinated*. In the Kremlin there are disagreements between for example militarily and economically driven decision makers and a lack of a joint and central strategy. Russia risking its trade with Europe is the result of decision makers looking out for their own interests instead of the greater good of the Russian Federation.

### 1.3 Purpose and relevance

Countless numbers of analysts have made efforts to understand Russian actions and strategic thinking. One who appear to have solved at least part of the Russian puzzle is Graham Allison. In his book *Essence of Decision – Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, he concluded that events, seemingly unrelated or sporadic, could in fact be an intricate game of chess with carefully weighed moves and countering moves. On the contrary, many actions that were perceived as pure acts of aggression could in fact be merely coincidental.

The purpose of this thesis is to prove that there is a contradiction in Russian behaviour. By then applying the models that Allison used in order to explain the Cuban missile crises might shed new light on Russian strategic thinking, and thus provide explanations to the contradictions in their actions as mentioned above. To some extent, the findings in this thesis might even help predict future Russian actions.

## 2 Theory and earlier research

In order to answer the research questions, a number of theories need to be enlisted. Classical international relations theory is included, as Russian behaviour can be explained in part by both neoliberalism and structural realism, theories which are as contradictory as the behaviour itself. In order to bridge this gap, the theories and models from Allison's book *Essence of Decision*, will be used.

### 2.1 Classical and structural realism

Both classical and structural realists maintain that the world is best described by an anarchic ordering principle. War and inter-state conflict break out as states seek to maximize their own security or power, growing ever more suspicious of each other until a clash is inevitable. The main difference between classical and structural realists are the reasons behind the inter-state conflict. Classical realists maintain that human nature is to blame, while structural realists rather point toward the lack of a world government or international sovereign to keep the states from exercising violence in pursuing their goals (Dunne & Schmidt, 2011).

Structural realism can further be sub-divided into defensive and offensive realism, defensive realists seeing states as security maximisers and offensive realists seeing states as power maximisers. Where the former wants mainly to ensure security in relation to its fellow states, the latter wishes to surpass the balance of power and achieve hegemony (Allison & Zelikow, 1999).

### 2.2 Liberalism and neo-liberalism

Liberal thinkers recognize, just as realists, that there is a state of anarchy in the world, but maintain that anarchy can be overcome by mutual trust. This trust is created mainly by the interdependence that occurs between states through trade agreements and cooperation, but also through the development of international norms and institutions. These norms and institutions will, according to liberals, replace the need for a world government or sovereign to keep states from pursuing their own objectives through violence and instead solve their differences peacefully (Sonnsjö, 2014).

The major divide between liberal and neo-liberal thinkers is found partly in the fact that neo-liberal views are based upon scientific grounds, apart from the liberal ones, that are more ideal- or value-oriented. The other main part of the division is based upon the belief that, in the liberal case, trade and capitalism makes war

unthinkable. Neo-liberals on the other hand, maintain that as much as cooperation and trade makes inter-state war or conflict less likely, it is no guarantee for peace (Dunne, 2011).

## 2.3 Essence of decision

*Essence of Decision* was written by Graham Allison and first published in 1971, with a revised version published in 1999. In the book, the Cuban missile crisis is explained by viewing a set of events, namely the Soviet decision to place nuclear missiles on Cuba, the U.S. decision to respond with a blockade and finally the Soviet decision to remove the nuclear weapons from Cuba. To accomplish this task, Allison uses three models, through which he runs the scenarios, namely the *Rational Actor*, *Organizational Behaviour* and *Governmental Politics*. His conclusions of running the events of the missile crisis through the models is that no one model is complete by itself, but that they need to be combined in order to achieve maximal explanation power (Allison & Zelikow, 1999).

### 2.3.1 The Rational Actor

The first of Allison's models focuses on the perceived goals, threats and opportunities of a particular state or government. The goals can be for example to survive or to maximize its security or power. For a state to achieve these goals, it has to consider the so-called *strategic market*, namely the rival actors or other events in the world that can constitute a threat to accomplishing the objective. These perceived threats include for example presumptions about national leaders, military and economic capabilities and agendas. Hence, the objective must be put into the perspective of the surrounding threats in order to unveil an opportunity to achieve the objective (Allison & Zelikow, 1999).

According to the first model, the state's goals or objectives along with how it perceives the strategic situation will therefor determine the specific course of action that will be taken to achieve the objective through a classic case of risk versus gain. The *Rational Actor Model* is, according to Allison, the model that alone can offer the best big picture explanation of state decision making since it also takes into account some of the factors from the other models. There are however factors not included in the first model that can deepen understanding of events, why two complementary models were designed (*ibid.*).

### 2.3.2 Organizational Behaviour

Allison's second model focuses instead of how the government in question is constructed, what organizations and components it consists of, mainly components that play active parts in achieving the state's objectives. This information is crucial, as it provides an understanding as to how the organization or component effects the political decision making, as it is often these that provide the decision makers with the specific options to achieve the objective (Allison & Zelikow, 1999).

Here one takes a look at the level of autonomy within for example the various branches of the military or the intelligence apparatus, examining who is in command and his or her relationship to the government, as well as their standard operating procedures, special capabilities and organizational culture. Which organizations or components are tasked with providing information to the decision makers, how they attain or produce this information and finally how they deliver it are all factors to be considered in the second model (*ibid.*).

### 2.3.3 Governmental Politics

In the third model, focus is put on the decision makers themselves. After identifying who actually takes part in the decision making, this model looks for significant characteristics such as how the individual perceive the situation, what preferred courses of action the individual has or his or her stance on the question at hand (Allison & Zelikow, 1999).

This model, unlike the previous ones, requires a great deal of detailed information about the construct of the government itself, which individuals partake in the decision making and to what extent, as well as how they have reacted in the past and what factors that influences their decisions (*ibid.*).

## 2.4 Earlier research

In the report titled International Relations and Energy Security, published by the Swedish Defence Research Agency, Hannes Sonnsjö describes energy security in the world through both neo-realism and neo-liberalism. From a neo-realistic standpoint, a state with secured access to energy is to be considered safe, while unsecured access to energy means a state is unsafe. Viewed as a strategic resource, energy is characterized by uneven distribution across the planet, leaving some states naturally supplied and some 'having to import it. Growing demand coupled with growing uncertainty in supply has led to countries trying in different ways to secure their positions in the energy sector, sometimes even through militarization. From a neo-liberal standpoint, on the other hand, focus is directed

at the need for legislation, competing markets, trade and interdependence in order to lessen the importance of the geographical location of the energy sources. Supply and demand will dictate energy prices as it would any other resource, creating a stable market environment. Sonnsjö concludes that the greatest threat to energy security is thus the use of energy as a way of applying political pressure by threat of withholding gas deliveries (Sonnsjö, 2014).

In a study from 2008, requested by the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Maria Löfstrand describes the Russian self-image and how Russia perceives threats and events in its surroundings. These factors are, according to Löfstrand, instrumental in understanding Russian foreign, domestic and security policy. According to the study, consisting of both deep interviews and large-scale polls, there is a correlation between the self-image of the Russian people and the political development. For example, the strong anti-democratic policies of the current Russian government are not a great cause for concern among the Russian citizens, as long as it serves to strengthen the Russian voice and position in the world. Even though this study is from before the Georgian and Crimean conflicts, it provides some understanding as to the division in how Russians and westerners see the world, and thereby it carries some explanations as to Russian decision making, motivations and strategic thinking (Löfstrand, 2008).

In her master thesis, Anastasiia Silakova describes the freeze in Russo-European trade relations that occurred when European sanctions were met with Russian countering sanctions, creating an unprofitable trade environment for both parties. Silakova underscores the fact that the western sanctions work, in that they have slowed Russian growth and have dealt a decisive blow toward the Russian economy and the Russian elite. On the other hand, the sanctions have not succeeded in changing Russian behaviour, but have rather served to sever Russo-European relations further. She also points out that the annexation of Crimea served to, at least temporarily, boost president Vladimir Putin's approval ratings and thus further uniting the Russian people against the West (Silakova, 2017).

## 3 Method

In order to answer the research questions, one needs to collect and analyse a great deal of information that is mainly derived from texts such as newspaper articles and books. The sources of information promote using a qualitative research approach rather than a quantitative one. As research design, the case study is the best applicable, contrary to the comparative study as the thesis doesn't aim to compare Russia's actions to another country (Esaiasson *et al.*, 2017; Teorell & Svensson, 2016).

As multiple theories are in play, the thesis will adopt a theory consuming perspective. The aim is not to falsify a theory, but rather to apply it to a specific case in order to attain a higher understanding of the case itself. One of the alternative perspectives considered was the motive analysis. As it has not yet been established whether there is an actual motive behind the Russian actions or not, this option was discarded (*ibid.*).

The working process for this thesis can be described as follows:

- i. An analysis of the information requirements related to answering the research question and specific requirements for applying the Allison models. Areas that were identified:
  - a. Russian trade investments and acts of aggression, including how they create a contradiction as described in the research question.
  - b. How this contradictory behaviour affects Russia and Russo-European relations, including Russian gains and losses.
  - c. Information about Russian leadership and decision making.
- ii. Fact finding according to the identified information requirements.
- iii. Application of the Allison models using the information collected.
- iv. Drawing conclusions and discussing the results.

### 3.1 Source material, limitations and requirements

The information needed in order to be able to apply the Allison models as explained above is extensive, and will thus require large-scale fact finding. In order to limit the extent of this thesis, only two of Allison's models will be used to explain Russian behaviour. The rational actor (Model I) and governmental politics (Model III) models will likely be sufficient, thus excluding the organizational behaviour model (Model II). This reduces information requirements by eliminating the vast number of organizations and entities at the government's disposal.

Material and information used in this thesis will mainly be derived from sources such as newspaper articles, official reports and analyses. The access to information both abundant and scarce, as there is on one hand a vast number of texts written on for example the annexation of the Crimea and the construction of the Nord Stream pipelines. Reliable and accurate information about the inner workings of Russian decision making will likely prove more difficult to extract however, which might become a limitation when answering the research questions.

## 3.2 Source criticism

Information evaluation and source criticism is of great importance. However, with a subject as politically and emotionally loaded as the one in this thesis, the need for criticism is especially urgent. If encountered, information derived from Russian state-controlled news outlets such as Channel One, Rossiya Segodnya or Tass needs to be thoroughly evaluated, as Russia has proven itself more than capable of using disinformation to throw off its enemies. Some of these media companies are even owned directly by the Russian energy company GAZPROM, a company that will play a pivotal role in this thesis. Even though western news outlets such as the BBC, Reuters and TT are to be considered more trustworthy, the need for source criticism is ever present even in these cases (Persson, 2017; Kovalev, 2017).

## 3.3 Terminology

The term *aggression* has become increasingly complex during previous decades. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, aggression could be narrowed down to the use of arms in overt military conflict. The last decades however, with the development of information technology, have seen the hybrid warfare emerge. Operations of subversion, disinformation, cyberattacks and other deniable and non-kinetic means to destabilize countries and influence popular opinion are today carried out with little or no risks involved. The term aggression will thus be used in a wide sense, including low impact actions such as subversive statements and disinformation as well as high impact actions, such as cyberattacks and invasions. The purpose of using this wide sense is to be able to gather multiple actions under the canopy of military aggression, thus more easily being able to prove an increasing trend (Jonsson, 2018; Radin, 2017).

In order to collect western countries such as the U.S. and the European countries under a single canopy, they will in this thesis be referred to as *the West*. For factual purposes, though, there will at times be a need for distinguishing

between the different constellations of states and the various organizations they adhere to, for example NATO or the EU.

### 3.4 Scope and selection of events

The choice of Russia as subject for this case study can be motivated by the simple fact that it constitutes a *heavy* or *relevant* case, in that the nature of the case motivates itself. There are no other cases like it in the world to this day, even if some loose parallels to China can be drawn. The time span being examined will range from 2008 to 2018, starting off with the outbreak of the Russo-Georgian war that marked a major setback in Russia's nearing the European community. In the analysis and conclusion sections, however, it might prove necessary to expand the time span in order to put Russian actions into context. When it comes to selecting relevant evidence to prove the contradictions in Russian behaviour, the process needs further explanation. In order to include a wider range of acts and events, trade investments will include both economic and political costs, for example the economic cost of building pipelines or the political cost of joining the WTO (Teorell & Svensson, 2016).

The acts of military aggressions are far more numerous and can range from intentional to merely experienced ones. This circumstance requires some attention from a *validity* perspective, as one of the goals is to prove that Russian aggression is actually intensifying. To visualize the problem, Allison mentions a situation during the 1970s, when the Soviet Union replaced its old nuclear missiles targeted towards western Europe with the more modern SS-20 model. From a European standpoint, this was an unprecedented act of military aggression, designed purely to provoke war. From a Soviet standpoint however, the replacement was merely a rational decision, as the old missiles were deteriorated and unsafe. Considering this, it is important to select evidence of intensifying Russian aggression with care, and thus take into consideration whether or not an action is actually intended as military aggression. This might rule out solely using increase in military spending or large-scale military exercises, as these circumstances are not necessarily intended as aggressions. When paired with obvious intended actions however, such circumstances might still be helpful in proving an increase in overall Russian military aggression, and which actually has a negative effect on its trade with Europe and thus on its economy (Allison & Zelikow, 1999; Teorell & Svensson, 2016).

In conclusion, the selection of cases to prove the contradictory Russian behaviour is no easy task. Showing tendencies in Russo-European trade might prove easier, as illustrating the close bonds of trade between Russia and Europe is not categorically event-based, but instead can be proved by quantitative means. The military aggression tendencies are more complex, but as a starting point it is possible to use for example the NATO Association of Canada timeline of Russian aggression or BBC's Russia profile timeline (BBC – Russia Profile, 2018; NAOC – Russian aggression, 2016).

To narrow it down, the acts and events selected will match the following criteria: 1) The action is either intended or perceived as an act of aggression as defined above, 2) the action can be viewed directly or indirectly as a threat to Russo-European relations and 3) the act has triggered a negative response among European leaders. This thus makes it possible to use acts that were not directed specifically at Europe, but still has a negative effect on Russo-European relations. In order to achieve higher credibility, however, there is need for at least one Russian action that is intended or perceived as an act of aggression aimed directly toward Europe. By adhering to these criteria, the selection will generate relevant evidence to carry the thesis forward. A more complete timeline of actions and events will be provided in Annex A, including events that do not match the criteria.

### 3.5 The Eurocentric disclaimer

Except for the problems with validity mentioned in the previous section, there is one other obvious question to address before moving on with this thesis. In the source criticism-section, the problem of the trustworthiness of Russian media, or rather lack thereof, is mentioned. This is something that constitutes a problem for western researchers, as Russian and western news media often paint two different pictures of the same story. Russia is infamous for its use of propaganda to sway national opinion in the favour of the regime, downplaying its failures and exaggerating its victories. In some cases, though, Russian media is likely not lying intentionally, but merely telling the Russian version of the truth, a truth that is no less a depiction of reality than the western one.

With this fact in mind, this thesis will embrace a Eurocentric course, as the information will be collected mainly from sources such as western governments and news outlets. This standpoint serves to limit the scope of this thesis further, as an analysis of Russian versus western discourses is a thesis of itself.

## 4 Russia – Dr. Jekyll or Mr. Hyde?

### 4.1 Promises of Russian liberalization

Finally cracking under the pressure of the Cold War, the Soviet Union disintegrated, allowing large parts of western and central Europe to become sovereign states once again. With the Russian bear down for the count, EU and NATO started its expansion eastward. In 2004, the Baltic nations together with Poland and several other former Soviet states were granted membership in the EU, with the same set up of countries simultaneously joining NATO. The defence alliance arriving at Russia's doorstep created some push back from Russia, primarily protests over NATO rapidly deploying fighter jets to the Baltics as they lacked their own air forces. Other than that, however, Russia seemed to resign to the West's rapid expansion, causing experts to predict a continuing thaw in the frozen relations between the East and the West. (Morris, 2004; Myers, 2004).

Russia has long-standing trade relationships with Europe. While Russia is the EU's fourth largest trading partner, the EU is Russia's by far largest trading partner. Russia mainly imports chemicals, machinery, manufactured goods and medicines from the EU, with the main export goods being natural gas, crude and refined oil. After a peak in trade in 2012, the years since has seen a decline in overall Russo-European trade, the decline escalating since 2014 (European Commission, 2018; Granholm & Malminen, 2014; Sherr, 2016).

The Siberian gas fields are the world's largest source of natural gas. Russia started gas exports in the 1940s, but began on a large scale around the 1960s. Since then, multiple pipelines have been constructed with the latest venture, Nord Stream 2, expected to be completed in 2019. The goal is to supply Germany with a direct connection to the Siberian gas fields instead of via pipelines running through Ukraine, Austria or the Suwalki corridor. Further to the south, the Blue Stream and Turk Stream pipelines deliver gas to southern and central Europe. Though Germany, Italy and Turkey remain the largest importers, countries such as Finland and the Baltic and Balkan states are to a great extent dependent on Russian gas deliveries (Girardi, 2018; Shiryayevskaya & Mazneva, 2018).

The construction of the Russo-European pipelines constitutes multi-billion Euro ventures, often financed by a consort of European and Russian energy companies and external financiers. The total cost of the Nord Stream 1 pipeline ranged well into €14 billion, with its predecessor Nord Stream 2 projected at a total cost of €9.5 billion, making them significant investments even as the economic burden is shared with foreign investors. In total, Russia supplies one

third of the European gas demands, thus also generating vast incomes for Russia through for example the state-owned energy company GAZPROM. In 2017, Europe imported Russian gas to the worth of \$38 billion (Carrel, 2018; Girardi, 2018; Shiryayevskaya & Mazneva, 2018).

In 2012, after nearly two decades of talks and negotiations, Russia finally was granted membership into the WTO. The accession process had been on hold since 2008, when Russia invaded Georgia. A breakthrough in the talks came in 2011, as Georgia was finally persuaded by the EU to allow Russian membership. This event was seen as yet another piece of the puzzle to the liberalization of Russian values, thus bringing it closer not only to the European economy but also to the world (Belton, 2012; von Hall, 2012).

## 4.2 Russia flexing its muscles towards the West

In 2006, the Georgian parliament passed a bill moving forward with integrating Georgia into NATO, leaving its relations with Russia frozen solid. In 2008 Russian forces crossed the border to Georgia, forcing Georgian troops out of the disputed territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, in what has become known as the August war. After the war, which claimed nearly a thousand lives, Russia proceeded to recognize both South Ossetia and Abkhazia as sovereign states. The Russian intervention was met harsh statements from world leaders, calling for restraint and ceasefire on both sides. An EU-backed report would later show that Georgia had triggered the war when Georgian troops attacked the city of Tskhinvali in South Ossetia in an attempt to quell the separatist movements there. The report concluded also, however, that Russia went beyond a reasonable military response when it invaded undisputed Georgian territory (Goryashko, 2018; Hedenskog, 2008; Heritage, 2009).

In the beginning of 2014, the Ukrainian Euromaidan revolution culminated in the ousting of the pro-Russian president Victor Yanukovich. The revolution began as a reaction to Yanukovich refusing to sign an association agreement with the EU that would bring Ukraine closer to Europe. As a response to this possible threat of an expanding EU, Russia executed its plans for the annexation of Crimea, and with it the naval base in Sevastopol. The naval base is the home of the Russian Black Sea fleet and is leased to Russia by the Ukrainian government. The lease, however, was nearing its end date, with little hope of renewal as a more pro-European government was installing itself in Kiev. Within a few days the peninsula was in complete Russian control, and a staged referendum was held. The referendum was condemned by the EU as well as the United States, and the annexation deemed illegal (Hedenskog, 2015; Morris, 2014; Pinkham, 2017)

Following the annexation of Crimea, pro-Russian separatists began an uprising in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in eastern Ukraine, backed by Russian forces. The conflict is still ongoing and has claimed over ten thousand lives. In 2018, the Ukrainian parliament passed a bill defining the regions as “temporary occupied territories”, making it clear in no uncertain terms that

Ukraine will not submit to the Russian aggression. Condemnations from western leaders over the Russian actions escalated as a civilian aircraft, Malaysia Airlines MH17 headed to Kuala Lumpur from Amsterdam, was shot down by a Russian anti-aircraft missile over Eastern Ukraine in 2014. All of the 295 people aboard was killed (Bershidsky, 2018; Granholm & Malminen, 2014; Walker, 2018; Zverev, 2014).

In 2018, Russia deployed Iskander-M SRBM systems to the small Russian enclave Kaliningrad, capable of carrying a nuclear payload. As Russia claims the range to be 500 kilometres, experts suggest that the missiles can easily be upgraded to reach 1500-2000km, thus violating the INF treaty. According to Russian officials, the deployment of the missiles was in response to an increased American military presence in the Baltics. NATO claimed it to be an escalation of the already tense situation, and European ministers called the deployment an elaborate Russian act to display offensive military power and capability. The deployment of Iskander-M, however, is a country-wide phenomenon of phasing out the older Tochka missiles, and Kaliningrad is among the last parts of Russia to receive the missile systems (Gummesson, 2017; Olsson, 2018; Stubbs, 2018).

This section has brought up some of the decisively largest and most talked on events of Russian aggression since 2008. Multiple overt and covert Russian actions with less kinetic impact but with widespread political fallout have occurred, more of which are outlined in Annex A. This more complete account helps underscoring that Russia has not been withdrawing under the pressure of sanctions, but instead has remained on collision course with the West.

### 4.3 Effects on Russo-European relationships

After disputes over payments and increases in gas prices, the Russian energy giant GAZPROM has halted gas deliveries to Ukraine more than once. For Europe, with 20 percent of its total demand of gas inbound from Russia through Ukrainian transit pipelines, this has caused great concern as to the continued flow of gas to the European importers. Although the disputes to this point mainly revolved around pricing, European dependence on Russian gas deliveries became highly apparent. In January 2009 gas deliveries to Ukraine came to a complete stop, nearly creating a humanitarian crisis as gas is used to warm the bulk of Ukrainian households. In 2014, after the Russian annexation of the Crimea, president Putin threatened to cut the gas to Ukraine completely, including the gas transiting to Europe. The threat came in the wake of further Ukrainian payment disputes, but also as European leaders had condemned Russian military actions against Ukraine. With its economy faltering, Putin called on the leaders of Europe to take steps to ensure the rebalancing of Ukrainian finances, also claiming that faltering Ukrainian economy was partly due to unbalanced trade between Ukraine and the EU. He did not mention the fact that Russian gas prices had nearly doubled since the Euromaidan revolution, when the pro-Russian president Victor Yanukovych was removed from power (Anishchuk, 2014; Gorst & Olearchyk, 2009).

Unlike the Russian aggression against Georgia in 2008, the annexation of Crimea and invasion of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions generated more concrete western responses. Sanction packages were imposed upon Russia both by the EU and by the US, increasing after the shooting down of Malaysia Airlines MH17 as previously mentioned. The sanctions have been continuously expanded and prolonged, and are still in effect today. Among the economic sanctions, EU citizens are unable to trade in financial instruments related to Russian banks or energy and defence companies, as well as a ban on exporting goods with dual military and civilian uses and a bar on Russian financial institutions trading on the EU market. The economic sanctions have been added to by blacklisting several Russian citizens and other entities, prohibiting them from entering the EU and freezing assets in European accounts. Furthermore, heavy restrictions are put on trade or other relations with Crimea, as the EU refuses to recognize the annexation. Diplomatic sanctions are also imposed. For example, the G8 summit that was scheduled to be held in the Russian city of Sochi was replaced by a G7 summit in Brussels, from which Russia was excluded. The European sanctions have also been met with countering sanctions on for example European food exports to Russia, generating substantial losses in income for European export companies. (Baczynska, 2018; Hunter Christie, 2015; Rapoza, 2015).

Suddenly coming to terms with the ramifications of being dependent on Russian gas deliveries, many European countries have started to reconsider their relationships with Russia. From across the Atlantic, the U.S. is starting to put pressure on its allies to break free from depending on Russia for energy. One such example is Poland, which have started to search for alternate suppliers such as Qatar and Norway. One of the latest gas ventures, originally called South Stream and bound for Bulgaria via the Black sea, was laden with so many costly and time-consuming restrictions from the EU that Russia eventually cancelled the project and rerouted it to Turkey. The Russo-German venture Nord Stream 2 have created such a divide within the EU that stricter regulations on Russian gas import have been implemented. Even though Europe is still heavily reliant on Russian gas, perhaps per Russian planning, there is doubtlessly a raised awareness as to the dangers of relying on the Kremlin for energy. And as much as Europe relies on Russian gas, Russia is reliant on European money as the sanctions imposed since 2014 are starting to eat away at the Russian economy (Donahue, 2019; Reed, 2019; Richard, 2015).

## 4.4 How Russian behaviour is affecting Russia

Following the intervention in Georgia in 2008 the trend of strong Russian economic growth, peaking at 10 percent in 2000, came to an abrupt halt. In 2009, GDP growth had plummeted to a staggering -7,821 percent, however recovering somewhat until 2010. Since 2011 Russian GDP growth has again been at a steady decline. The annexation of Crimea and invasion of eastern Ukraine in 2014 saw growth falling from 0,739 percent to -2,828 percent. In 2017, growth had once again increased to 1,647 with further small progressions expected in 2018 (Doff, 2018; Harrell, 2019; World Bank, GDP Growth – Russian Federation).

As the world's leading energy exporter, Russia's economy is significantly smaller than it might have been, had Russia not invaded Ukraine. Even though some expert blames this fact on a fall in oil prices, it is more likely the massive sanction packages imposed by the west playing its part. As part of the sanction packages are targeting Russian import of energy-related excavation and refinement technology as well as equipment, the development of Russian energy production is slowing significantly (Doff, 2018; Lewis & Santa, 2014).

There are however also other effects to consider. After a peak of 71 percent in public trust toward president Putin following the annexation of Crimea in 2015, his ratings are now quickly plummeting. In the 2018 presidential election, the public trust rating was down to 55,3 percent, falling to 36,5 percent by the end of 2018. The slumps in the ratings are to some extent due to unpopular domestic reforms, but they also have a clear correlation to Russian aggression and the sanctions that have followed. As Putin still remains the far most trusted politician in Russia, and has recently secured another six years of presidency, his low ratings are likely cause for concern as his opponents are lining up for the 2024 elections (Balmforth, 2019; Dmitrieva, 2018; Kolesnikov, 2018).

## 4.5 What is known about Russian decision making?

Russia is considered an authoritarian regime, where the bulk of the power is concentrated to president Putin. Though democratic elections are allegedly being held, the independent organization Freedomhouse, measuring civil liberties, political rights and overall democracy, considers Russia to be *not free*. By controlling state media, the loyalist security forces and the judicial system, the ruling party can effectively keep political opposition at non-concerning levels. Even with the executive power in his hands, it is unlikely that Putin is allowed free reign over the Russian Federation, but that he rather serves at the ruling *United Russia* party's discretion. The exact inner workings of the party's decision making is largely covered in shrouds for logical reasons. By examining that which

the media sometimes refers to as Putin's *inner circle*, one might however obtain some measure of understanding on how Russian policy is put into action (Freedom House – Country Report Russia, 2019; Kampfner, 2014).

The inner circle is thought to consist of a number of businessmen, politicians and a former KGB official turned CEO, many of whom are old personal friends of Putin and were given their prominent positions after his rise to power. Among the businessmen, prominent characters are Gennady Timchenko, who runs one of the largest oil trading companies in the world and Yuri Kovalchuk, also referred to as “Putin's banker” and the largest shareholder in the Bank of Russia. The brothers Arkady and Boris Rotenberg co-owns S.G.M., Russia's largest pipeline and powerline construction company and Igor Sechin is CEO of the oil giant Rosneft (Burrows, 2017; Heritage, 2014; Kampfner, 2014; Parfitt, 2017).

Some of the businessmen in the inner circle have current or previous political engagements in the Russian government parallel to their business ventures. The group also includes the Russian prime minister Dmitry Medvedev and the speaker of the Russian duma, Vyacheslav Volodin. What this consort of old friends, business colleagues and old confidants have in common is that they have all been made millionaires, if not billionaires, by their association with the Russian president. Some estimates put the inner circle net worth at as much as \$24 billion. It has come with a price though, as many of these same men and their companies have been targeted by U.S. sanctions with regards to their ties to the Russian regime, following the Russian aggressions of 2014 (*ibid.*).

## 5 Analysis

Thus far, the contradictions in Russian behaviour has been established. Proof of both investments in trade and an increase in Russian aggression has been laid out, alongside information on the implications of this contradictory behaviour and on Russian decision making. Russian efforts to favour trade points toward neo-liberal tendencies, whereas their build-up of military power and increasingly aggressive stance toward Europe rather points toward structural realistic ones. Table 1 below serves to illustrate and summarize the above-mentioned contradiction.

Desired effect	Desirable actions	Non-desirable actions
Maximize economic gain (Neo-liberalism)	Good foreign relations Transnational cooperation Trade and interdependency	Cyberattacks, invasion Aggressive posture, subversion Ignoring treaties and conventions
Maximize military power (Structural realism)	Demonstrations of power Deterrence Destabilization of enemies	Display weakness Becoming dependent on others Appeasement

*Table 1*

### 5.1 Russia – A rational actor?

#### 5.1.1 Russia's perceived post-Cold War strategic environment

Central to the application of Allison's first model and to understand the goals and objectives of the Russian Federation, it is imperative to account for its perceived strategic environment. Having suffered a massive blow through the disintegration of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, Russia likely found itself in a state of disarray. Both military, political and economic ramifications shattered the country, at the same time as the victorious West engaged in trying to win over former Soviet satellites to EU and NATO. This environment was likely perceived as incredibly hostile, Russia possibly fearing NATO to take advantage of the situation and finish the job permanently.

In the early 2000s, NATO finally expanded to Russia's western doorstep by granting membership to the Baltics, Poland and several other central European states. In the same period, the U.S. launched large-scale combat operations with the GWOT in Afghanistan and later Iraq. To the south east the PRC, former communist ally turned expansive economic superpower, was on the rise. To the south west, the prospect of Georgia and Ukraine joining the EU and NATO would further serve to encircle the Russian Federation.

### 5.1.2 Russia's strategic goals

Russian strategic goals have likely evolved over the course of the previous two decades. In the immediate wake of the fall of the Soviet Union, it is probable that Russia's main concern was merely to ensure state survival. With crumbling military power, it was forced to instead conform, at least partly and temporarily, to the western world order. As no follow-up western invasion came and the chaos and turmoil finally settled, Russia was granted pause and thus given the opportunity to regroup. With this, its strategic goals likely turned from survival to security maximizing, possibly even reverting back to the power maximizing end of the spectre as its economic and military power recuperated.

### 5.1.3 Objectives and options

Achieving the most fundamental goal of the state, to ensure its survival, was made possible by the decision to dissolve the Soviet Union, as a continued arms race might have ended in the complete obliteration of Russia and its satellites, as well as of its western adversaries. In the aftermath, appeasement and liberalization was likely seen as the best option. This made it possible for Russia to co-exist with the West, creating interdependence by trade and thus proving Russia to be a reliable neighbour to Europe. With it came the necessity of democratic reform within Russia, further underscoring Russian willingness to join ranks with the West.

Having achieved survival, Russia started pursuing the next objective. It had managed to rebuild its economy through adopting a version of authoritarian capitalism. Former Soviet power brokers, officials and old friends of the president-to-be Putin assumed command over both privately and state-owned businesses, putting the Russian industrial machine into high gear by constructing pipelines for gas export to the west. These efforts boosted the economy enabling Russia to modernize its society, with the added benefit for the Russian elite and oligarchs to be able to line their pockets.

As the EU and NATO began further eastward expansion toward Georgia, Russia found itself at a crossroads. Caught between the option of being further encircled by the west or to use its regained military and political capital to quell the expansion, Russia chose to intervene with military force. The political profit of this intervention far outweighed the downsides, as Russia once again showed the world that it possessed the means to claim its place as a world power, and with negligible political fallout. When faced with the same set of options six years later, the lessons learned appears to have been that offence is the best defence. As the EU and NATO once again tried to expand eastward, Russia repeated its actions by annexing Crimea and invading eastern Ukraine. This time, however, the response from the West was a massive blow to the Russian economy.

From a western perspective, the sanctions were meant to cause Russia to withdraw or back down from its military aggression, primarily in eastern Ukraine. It did not have that desired effect though, raising the question of why Russia, when given the choice to withdraw, instead insists on remaining involved in a

stalemate with the Ukrainian armed forces. With the conflict entering its fifth year, and with sanction packages mounting, there are no signs of Russia backing down from the fight. This seemingly irrational behaviour is difficult to explain from the rational actor perspective, but some degree of explanation can perhaps be found in the Russian self-image. After suffering the disgraceful loss of the Cold War, Russia finds itself unwilling to once again surrender to western superiority but will rather ride out the storm.

As a testament to this fact, Russia has not only remained involved in Ukraine, but has also amped up its aggressive posture toward the west. As the final part of a country-wide systems upgrade, Iskander-M SRBMs were deployed to the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad in 2018, with the possibility of reaching the better part of the Baltic states, Poland and parts of Sweden. As the replacement of the older missile systems is completely rational, the choice of saving the Kaliningrad deployment for last indicates that Russia might have wanted to make a political statement. Studying the timeline provided in Annex A, it becomes apparent that Russia have no intentions of backing down any time soon but will continue on its offensive path, leading it head to head with the West.

## 5.2 Russian governmental politics – Who plays?

### 5.2.1 The setup of Russian decision making

In the previous sections, Russian actions from a state perspective have been presented. There is however another dimension to account for. Even though the exact mechanisms of Russian decision making have not been established within the confines of this thesis, there are conclusions to be drawn from what is known about Putin's inner circle. There is not sufficient material to analyse the members on an individual level, but viewing them as a decision-making collective can likely offer some further insights into Russian strategic thinking.

As Russia is an authoritarian regime, the influence of the people through political representation is marginal, and the decision making is instead concentrated to the presidential office. It is likely, however, that Putin receives both advice and to some extent orders from power brokers in his vicinity, for example from his cronies within the inner circle. Studying this selection of men, one will find that the members are approximately the same age as Putin himself, meaning that they all experienced the disgrace of losing the Cold War. They are also primarily businessmen or authorities within the Russian political system, all having amassed vast fortunes while under the protection and grace of Putin. This having been said, there are likely other influences that Putin adhere to, such as his appointed ministers and other political officials outside the circle. The influence

of these people, however, is likely limited as they are appointed by and serves at the discretion of Putin himself.

Authoritarian regime or not, Putin is still in large part dependent on the approval of the Russian people. In order to stay in power, he is known for using nationalistic and populist agendas, conveyed through state-controlled media in order to rally the people toward his objectives. He has likely learned from other failed dictatorships, as well as from Russia's turbulent past, that the people are a force to be reckoned with. Thus, even though Putin and his cronies ultimately decides what actions to take, they are also faced with the realpolitik of the modern world, having to adhere to some degree to the will of the people.

### 5.2.2 Preferred courses of action and its effects

As Russia amped up its trade efforts with the West, Putin carefully positioned his cronies in political and corporate positions from where they would do his bidding, while at the same time being able to make vast personal economic profits. Some were put in charge of state media while others were given positions as CEOs for large energy companies. This way, a small contingent of Russian elite was able to siphon into the vast wealth of strategic resources within the country, using state capital to build their corporate empires. Russia pouring state funds into building infrastructure, supporting excavation and export of for example natural gas, has of course contributed to Russian GDP growth, creating job opportunities stimulating the economy. A large portion of the income, however, appears to have gone straight toward the inner circle's approximated \$24 billion fortune.

It appears also as if the Russian government is experimenting with militarizing the economic sector, using gas export as a trade weapon toward the West by threatening to cut the deliveries when challenged. This might be effective in short term, but as a long-run strategy, the idea is flawed. The results are instead that Russia's appearance as a reliable trade partner is undermined and that its customers seek solutions elsewhere.

Intervening with military force in Georgia and Ukraine has initially served both the inner circle and Russia as a whole, strengthening the Russian position as a major power broker in the world while at the same time creating business opportunities through infrastructural contracts in Crimea. It thus appears that the latter is somewhat of a prerequisite for the Russian leadership to engage in military ventures. As the inner circle appears to be to a large extent economically driven, they are likely unwilling to support decisions that have a long-term negative effect on their personal fortunes. As much as they try to keep business and politics separated, an increasingly hostile stance toward its largest trade partner Europe is having negative effects on trade. This indicates that other factors than economical are at play.

One such factor might be, as mentioned before, the Russian people. For as authoritarian a leader Putin might be, he serves at the pleasure of a political party. Should his approval ratings prove unsatisfactory, there are likely plenty of candidates ready to take his place as president. Building pipelines and entering

trade agreements with the West is good for the economy, but it is unlikely to peak the interest of the Russian people. Easy military gains such as the annexation, or from the Russian standpoint, liberation of Crimea initially generated record approval ratings for Putin. He appears, therefore, to be caught between his economically driven cronies within the inner circle, and the Russian people, demanding the reestablishment of Russia as a modern world power both on the international scene and through domestic welfare.

The decision to remain involved in eastern Ukraine, however, appears to be the one piece of the puzzle that doesn't fit this description. As it is both negative for Russian economy, and apparently has generated plummeting approval ratings for Putin, this suggests that there are other unseen powers at play. This thesis has not accounted for the influence of the military, in which there might be sub-structures influencing decisions. The thesis has also not investigated the full impact of the Russian self-image, perhaps being a compelling enough reason for Putin not to back down from what he thought would be a decisive victory in eastern Ukraine.

## 6 Conclusion and discussion

There are of course differences in using Allison's models for analysing a specific event such as the Cuban missile crisis, as opposed to using them to explain Russian strategic thinking spanning over a decade. Using them as a framework, however, allows the analyst to see the event from a variety of viewpoints and thus helps creating a more detailed picture.

### 6.1 What does the application of the models tell us?

Applying Allison's models have shown that the actions of the Russian Federation are not necessarily driven by rationality from a state perspective, but can also be attributed to personal agendas within the Russian elite. As that elite appears to be to a large extent economically driven, as mentioned before, economic gain for the leadership appears to be a prerequisite for Russian action. Paired with the will of Putin's inner circle, he also needs to tend to his approval ratings. Despite lack of free and fair elections and uncorrupted political representation, the Russian people still maintain some form of quasi-political influence.

Russia's trade investments can easily be explained from both a rational actor and a political governance perspective. There are economic gains in the equation for both Russia as a whole as well as the Russian elite. Likewise, the military interventions in Georgia and Ukraine have at least initial positive effects for both sides. By asserting itself as military powerful, Putin won increasing approval from the people, thus cementing his presidential power and thereby also continued influence for his inner circle. Had he not intervened in Ukraine, Russia would likely have been forced to surrender the naval base in Sevastopol, effectively being shut out from the Black sea. Not intervening in Georgia would also have led to the further encircling of Russia by the West, effects that could have cost Putin his presidency and Russia its place as a world power. This fact likely overruled any economic objections from the inner circle, as some of them would also have been left outside in the cold had Putin been dethroned.

### 6.2 Why then risk trade relations?

The aim of this thesis is to answer the question of why Russia is risking its trade relations with Europe in order to project military superiority, as well as to establish whether Russian decision making is coordinated or uncoordinated. To

address the first question, the answer is found mainly through the rational actor model. The interventions in Georgia and Ukraine can be attributed to Russia maximizing its security. Having to choose between its trade relations with Europe and being further encircled by the West, Russia chose the latter. With its geographical position, Russia doesn't appear to have the luxury of both, as for example the U.S. that is protected by the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. The long-term negative effects on Russian economy was considered necessary, even though they likely turned out worse than initially predicted.

The upkeep of Russian aggressive posture against the West can also be explained by the first model. In order to further maximize its security, Russia flexes its muscles to deter any further attempts by the West to keep expanding eastward. The fact that Russian actions are not merely of a defensive, but also of an offensive character as seen in Annex A, suggests that Russia is furthering its ambitions, taking steps to instead maximize its power, exploiting the weaknesses it observed in the western response to the military interventions in Georgia and Ukraine.

As to the second question, Russian actions appear to be primarily coordinated. This thesis has not produced any evidence of large-scale rival factions within the Kremlin that has any decisive negative effects on Russian decision making. The one exception is the decision to remain engaged in eastern Ukraine, where the application of Allison's models fail to reveal a viable explanation. Even though it is possible that the application of Allison's organizational theory model might have shed some light on the matter, there is no way of fully understanding the mechanisms of Russian decision making. History will likely reveal the answer to this puzzle, perhaps making it necessary to revisit this thesis in a couple of decades much as Allison did with his book.

### 6.3 Is the West to blame?

One can make the argument that NATO made a somewhat reckless expansive push with the fall of the Berlin wall, incorporating Poland, the Baltics and several other central and eastern European countries. Their joining the alliance, however, speaks to the fact that they did not share the world view of their previous communist masters, but wished to pursue more liberal and open ideals and with it the means to protect themselves. These liberal wishes and goals were shared by Georgia and Ukraine. Instead, Russia is using a western-liberal argument against the west in order to set the agenda, claiming the responsibility to protect Russian nationals living in these countries against false oppression from the governments.

In this modern day and age, the former Soviet satellites are sovereign states, thus allowing them to pursue memberships in any organizations they desire. There is no modern argument strong enough for Russia to interfere with the politics of its neighboring countries by military force. Over the course of this research, it has become apparent that the rational actions of the Russian Federation are based on outdated conceptions of the world order and imagined mandates to guide and steer its neighboring countries in a pro-Russian direction.

## 6.4 What comes next?

Russia is showing no signs of reverting back to its wave of liberalization seen in the beginning of the 2000s. Since his first inauguration, Putin has taken careful steps to ensure his continued reign over the federation, effectively controlling the political opposition and keeping it at arm's length.

The Russian engagement in Ukraine will likely come to an end, either by a decisive military offensive in the wake of the Ukrainian presidential elections, or by silently withdrawing. Indicating the former option is the fact that Russia has not withdrawn already, thus appearing to have strong reasons not to back down without a victory. The argumentation against this is that this would likely trigger a stronger response from the West, further isolating Russia by heavier sanctions and possibly even military interventions. From a rational actor perspective, Russia will likely choose the latter option, enabling it to withdraw, regroup and rebuild its economy to the point where it has amassed enough political, military and economic capital to pursue its next objective. What this objective might be is open for speculation, but the world has likely not seen the last of Mr. Hyde.

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# Annex A

## A Timeline of Russian aggression

September, 2006	As the Georgian parliament passes a bill moving the country further along toward a membership in NATO, relations with Russia deteriorates. In response, Russia imposes sanctions on Georgia and thus deports hundreds of Georgians from Russia.
April, 2007	In response to Estonia wanting to move Russian WWII war monuments and graves, Russia stages a DDoS attack Estonian governmental and financial institutions, temporarily disabling internet throughout Estonia.
November, 2007	Russia withdraws from a 1990s arms treaty limiting deployment of heavy military equipment across Europe. Russia claims that the withdrawal is in response to the U.S violating the same treaty.
January, 2008	Claimed to be in response to a new U.S missile defence program as well as the eastward expansion of NATO, Russia conducts extensive military manoeuvres in the Bay of Biscay and near the U.S coast.
April, 2008	Russia increases its efforts at halting Georgian NATO ambitions by supporting rebel factions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russia threatens Georgia by saying that by joining NATO, Georgia will become an adversary of the Russian Federation.
August, 2008	The Russo-Georgian war begins, initially by Russia ousting Georgian forces from Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The war escalates with Russian air strikes toward targets in undisputed Georgian territory. The war also saw the first Russian combined kinetic and cyber warfare, coupling ground and air attack with using cyberattacks to cripple Georgian communications.
January, 2009	In response to unsettled Ukrainian gas debts, Russia halts gas to Ukraine, thereby also cutting the flow to the entire south eastern Europe for 13 days. The halting of gas nearly caused a humanitarian crisis and started raising concerns with European leaders as to the dependency on Russian gas, especially gas transiting through Ukraine.

March, 2013	Russian Tu-22 bombers conduct simulated nuclear attacks on Swedish targets near the island of Gotland.
February, 2014	A revolution in Ukraine removes the pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich in response to him refusing to sign a declaration of intention, moving Ukraine further toward a membership in the European Union. This triggers Russia to perform an illegal annexation of the Crimean Peninsula. The annexation is followed by a staged referendum, where the Crimean population voted nearly unanimously for a decision to join the Russian Federation.
April, 2014	Russia increases its military actions by invading the Luhansk and Donetsk regions in eastern Ukraine under the pretence of supporting pro-Russian separatists. Tensions increase in July, as a Russian anti-aircraft missile shoots down Malaysia Airlines MH17 over eastern Ukraine, killing everyone aboard. Massive sanction packages are imposed on Russia by the U.S and the EU, met by countering sanctions from Russia.
May, 2014	A few days prior to the Ukrainian presidential election, a Russian cyberattack was directed at the primary and back-up systems of the election commission. Systems were restored on election day.
May, 2015	German intelligence services reveal evidence that Russian hackers have breached the German Bundestag network, searching for information about NATO and German politicians.
September, 2015	Russia enters the Syrian civil war, joining the al-Assad regime in the fight against ISIS. Russian airstrikes are according to observers aimed not mainly at ISIS strongholds, but rather at the western-backed anti-Assad opposition forces.
March, 2018	The former Russian spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia are poisoned in the British city of Salisbury. The United Kingdom and the U.S accuses Russia for the poisoning, generating further western sanctions.

(Baczynska *et al.*, 2015; BBC – Russia Profile; Larsson & Olsson, 2016; NAOC, 2016; Reuters – Occupation of Crimea; Windrem, 2016)