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1. Abstract

Vladimir Putin, president of the Russian Federation, during his annual address to the Federal Assembly on 25 April 2005 stated that “the collapse of the Soviet Union was a major geopolitical disaster of the XX century”. This sentence appears to be one of the most frequently used quotations in the literature about the politics and the international relations of the Russian Federation still to this date. The objective of the following work is the analysis of a series of examples of articles, papers and studies that quoted this sentence, the description of the meanings that have been attached to it and the study of the internal and foreign politics that have characterised Putin’s regime and that have been tied to the words the president pronounced in 2005.

Many articles and publications that appeared in the West, especially in the United States, employed the famous quotation as an emblematic starting point for the denunciation and the description of an alleged Russian imperialist thrust, characterised by the willingness to establish and strengthen a Russian zone of influence that would incorporate the former Soviet republics. According to this perspective, the attractiveness of the Soviet Union from the conceptual point of view materialises in the willingness to restore the Soviet regime in both its legal and constitutional forms (a perspective that today seems unrealistic), and in the project aimed at the re-establishment of economic and political control over the countries of Eastern Europe. These instances constitute one aspect of the critiques addressed to the Kremlin claims about the establishment and the safeguard of its “own sphere of” influence, in which Russia has “special interests” that extend in the territory of CIS countries.

In particular, these claims seem to be related to the rejection of recognise the entry into NATO of every former Soviet Republic. The Atlantic Organisation has often been described by the Russian administration as a military group with an enormous offensive potential available and as an organisation whose action is guided by the stereotype of the partition of the world in blocs. The access to NATO, as well as an alignment with the European Union, of the countries that are described as belonging to the Russian zone of interest appear as a potential vehicle of political and military instability in the region and as a danger for the value of the collaboration of CIS members.

One of the motivations at the basis of these claims about a Russian sphere of influence regards the protection of the Russian ethnic communities that after the Soviet collapse were dispersed in the territories of the new independent republics, especially those in which the number of native Russians seems to be higher, as for example Latvia and Estonia. In addition, Putin’s administration has demonstrated to be ready to resort to armed intervention, as in the cases of Georgia and Ukraine. Many scholars share the point of view according to which the violence of the Russian initiative in these two conflicts is related to the willingness to limit the effects of

the so-called “coloured revolutions, which in the years 2003-2004 had brought at the government of some former Soviet republics individuals supporting the economic and institutional instances typical of the West. Subsequently, in Ukraine, the higher echelons of the Kremlin decided to exploit the wave of discontent that erupted in Crimea (then part of the territory of Ukraine but inhabited for the most part by Russian ethnics) after the Euromaidan protests. It has been argued that the skilful hand of the Russian government was able to canalise the dissatisfaction of the Russian ethnics living in the peninsula, who perceived the events that forced Ukrainian president Yanukovich to leave the country as an attack to their interests, until the implementation of a referendum in favour of the secession of Crimea from the territory of Ukraine and its recognition as part of the Russian Federation, while the armed clashes in the Donbass region continued. The Kremlin did not hesitate to recognise the juridical and legal validity of the vote, even most of the international community still do not accept it.

If on the one hand those events can be considered as a demonstration of the fact that it is possible to attach to the definition of the fall of the Soviet Union as a geopolitical tragedy the willingness to establish a Russian space of influence, to reconstruct the grandeur of the Russian state, to protect the territory inhabited by Russian ethnics from the influence of the West, on the other hand it is possible to identify different point of views, according to which such a statement could represent the truth to a certain degree. According to an analysis focused more on internal dynamics, the collapse of the USSR represented a derangement of unimaginable proportion not only for the élites of the government and the intellectuals, but also for the common Soviet citizen.

In particular, in some descriptions of the events of 1991 it is possible to find the rising of a true identity crisis and the difficulty to re-establish a narrative stemming out from a common geopolitical culture that could identify the role of the country in the world. It is important to understand that at the moment of its demise the Soviet Union was an ensemble of more than fifty ethno-territorial units, organised in a complex administrative structure that had been created through many stratifications and assimilation processes. Some scholars underlined that it was exactly the Russian core to have experienced in the most complex way the process of de-sovietisation started in 1991: according to the last census of the Soviet Union conducted in 1989, when the Soviet system collapsed almost 25 million of Russians found themselves outside the Russian borders, a figure that is even higher if we take into account those who spoke Russian as their first language. Therefore, this discrepancy between the frontiers of the new Russian state and those of the alleged Russian ethnographic space, fragmented within the surrounding new state entities, in many cases led to harsh territorial and ethnic tensions. These tensions characterised the years that immediately preceded and followed the disappearance of the USSR in many former Soviet Republics and determined the complexity of the process of territorial adjustment.

From the point of view of the economy, millions of Soviet citizens and workers experienced the collapse of the Soviet system with as much dismay. It has been observed that the years immediately after 1991 had been characterised by a consistent reduction of production, of the standard of living, and by a rising of unemployment. In general, the process of adaptation to the market economy of the enterprises was extremely complex and led a large number of workers and executives to adapt to the new conditions of the socioeconomic structure of the country and to the change in the power relations within the firm.

Those years were characterised also by extremely high unemployment, not-paid forced holidays and the reduction of the working hours. In addition, it has been observed that the Russian administration and the new proprietors of the various firms adopted a tactic aimed at the reduction of the salaries, in the attempt to reduce the level of unemployment and the potential social tensions that could have ensued. However, those practices led to a decrease in the living standard of the population and the recurrence of “informal” economic activities, undermining the general development of the country.

The task of the first part of work is therefore the analysis of these instances inserting them within a synthesis of the most significant historical moments that characterised the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation, while the last section will focus on the effects that Putin’s famous sentence had on the Russian society and on the public opinion, especially in relation to the Soviet times, according to the data that have been collected in the surveys regularly conducted from 1991 to this date. The data collected can appear surprising at the eyes of the western observer, since a general sense of nostalgia for the Soviet regime, a tendency to exalt its positive features and to knowingly neglect its negatives ones, a celebration of the historical tradition and the fundamental values of the Soviet system and the creation of a myth around the personalities that characterised its history are all real phenomena. However, these tendencies of the Russian public opinion appear less surprising if we analyse the filtering of the ideological instances conveyed to the population and the adoption by the Putin regime of initiatives aimed at emphasising the importance of the Soviet heritage within the history of contemporary Russia.

The famous 2005 declaration of the president and the resonance it had at the international level incarnate effectively the multiple facets of the geopolitical role of the Russian Federation and allow to foreshadow its objectives and its concerns. The meanings attached to the collapse of the Soviet Union therefore give the opportunity to draw a comparative analysis of the perceptions that the politics, the actions and the declarations of the Kremlin raised in different actors, be they the United States or the European Union, or the citizens of the Russian Federation itself.

2. Introduction

Il presidente della Federazione Russa Vladimir Putin nelle prime battute del suo discorso alla nazione del 2005 ha affermato che “Il crollo dell’Unione Sovietica è stato una delle più grandi tragedie geopolitiche del ventesimo secolo”¹. Negli anni successivi e ancora al giorno d’oggi questa frase risulta essere una delle citazioni impiegate più di frequente nella letteratura sull’analisi della politica e delle relazioni internazionali per quanto riguarda la Russia; l’obiettivo delle seguenti pagine è quello di passare in rassegna una serie di esempi di articoli, trattazioni e studi che citano la dichiarazione, di descrivere i significati che le sono stati attribuiti e di analizzare le diverse prospettive emerse dalle analisi delle politiche sia interne che esterne che hanno caratterizzato il regime di Putin e che sono state ricollegate alle sue parole del 2005.

Una serie di articoli e pubblicazioni di provenienza prevalentemente statunitense si servono della famosa e controversa frase come punto di partenza emblematico per la denuncia e la descrizione di una sorta di spinta imperialista russa e della volontà di stabilire e rafforzare una zona di influenza russa che includa le ex-repubbliche sovietiche². L’Unione Sovietica viene descritta da alcuni commentatori occidentali come il punto di riferimento concettuale di Putin, sia dal punto di vista dell’estensione geografica che da quello di un rimpianto status di superpotenza a livello mondiale. Sebbene questo tipo di tensione verso un passato mitizzato in alcuni casi sia stato interpretato come la volontà di restaurare il regime sovietico nelle sue forme legali e costituzionali, l’informazione americana in passato ha enfatizzato come questo sentimento si possa materializzare nella volontà di riconquistare il controllo economico e politico dei paesi dell’Europa orientale³. Tutto ciò viene riflesso nelle critiche rivolte alle pretese del Cremlino di stabilire e salvaguardare una propria “sfera di influenza” in cui la Russia detenga degli “interessi speciali” nel territorio dei paesi del CIS, interessi che non intende tralasciare.

In particolare, questo tipo di rivendicazioni sembra essere indirizzato verso il rifiuto, o il non riconoscimento a priori, dell’ingresso da parte di qualsiasi ex repubblica sovietica nella NATO⁴. Quest’ultima spesso è stata descritta dall’amministrazione russa come un raggruppamento militare che detiene un enorme potenziale offensivo e come un’organizzazione pervasa dallo

¹ <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931>

² Hannes Adomeit, “Putin’s Greater Russia: Misunderstanding or Mission?”, in www.raamoprusland.nl, 27 Febbraio 2017. Robert Kagan, “Putin Makes His move”, *Washington Post*, 11 Agosto 2008. A. Basora, A. Fischer, “Putin’s Greater Russia - The Dismemberment of Ukraine”, *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, May 02, 2014. Katie Sanders, “Did Vladimir Putin call the breakup of the USSR ‘the greatest geopolitical tragedy of the 20th century?’”, in *Politifact.com*, March 6, 2014. J. C. Scull, “If NATO goes, Russia will swallow up Central Europe risking World War III”, *Medium*, July 26, 2016

³ John Bolton on Monday, March 3rd, 2014 in comments on Fox News Channel (<https://rmsmcblog.wordpress.com/2014/08/03/>)

⁴ R. Kagan, 2008, cit.

stereotipo del mondo come suddiviso in blocchi. L'accesso alla NATO di paesi che vengono descritti come appartenenti alla zona di interesse della Russia appare come un potenziale veicolo di instabilità politico-militare della regione. Questo tipo di mentalità "esclusiva" non riguarda soltanto la NATO, ma viene estesa anche al possibile allineamento delle ex repubbliche sovietiche più vicine alla Russia con l'Unione Europea, che appare come un progetto di integrazione economica regionale dal potenziale dannoso per la valenza della collaborazione tra i paesi del CIS.⁵

Una delle motivazioni che stanno alla base di questa affermazione di una zona di interesse della Russia è quella che riguarda la tutela delle componenti etniche russe che dopo il crollo dell'URSS si sono trovate disperse nei territori delle nuove repubbliche indipendenti, soprattutto quelle in cui la percentuale di nativi russi sembra essere più consistente, come ad esempio Lettonia ed Estonia. In aggiunta, l'amministrazione di Putin ha dimostrato di non rinunciare al ricorso all'intervento militare, come nel caso della Georgia prima e dell'Ucraina poi. Per quanto riguarda il primo caso, sullo sfondo del conflitto armato scoppiato nell'agosto del 2008, il Cremlino decise di riconoscere come indipendenti le regioni dell'Abkhazia e dell'Ossezia del sud, che da lungo tempo avevano esternato delle forti tendenze separatiste⁶. Il pretesto per un intervento da parte delle forze armate russe è stato individuato nell'attacco sferrato dall'allora presidente georgiano Mikheil Saakashvili contro i gruppi ribelli in una città dell'Ossezia meridionale, ma gli studiosi tendono ad attribuire la veemenza dell'iniziativa russa alla volontà di contrastare gli effetti delle cosiddette "rivoluzioni colorate" che nel corso degli anni 2003-2004 avevano portato al governo figure favorevoli alle istanze di governo ed economiche tipiche dell'Occidente, non solo in Georgia, ma anche in Ucraina. Proprio l'avvicinamento del governo ucraino all'Europa occidentale ha provocato un forte senso di pericolo nelle alte sfere del Cremlino, le quali hanno deciso di sostenere l'ondata di malcontento scatenatasi nella penisola della Crimea, territorio dalla storia controversa, allora parte del territorio ucraino, ma la cui popolazione risulta per la maggior parte composto da gente di etnia russa. La crisi si scatenò in Ucraina nel 2014, quando l'allora presidente Viktor Janukovyč rinviò la firma di un accordo di collaborazione economica con l'UE, apparentemente sotto la pressione dell'amministrazione di Putin, provocando un'ondata di proteste nel paese che successivamente, dopo aver assunto caratteri nazionalistici in misura sempre maggiore e avendo scatenato repressione violenta e sanguinaria, hanno portato il presidente ucraino a dimettersi e ad abbandonare il paese. La mano abile della Russia fu quindi in grado di canalizzare il malcontento dell'etnia russa della Crimea, che percepiva questi avvenimenti

⁵ G. Toal, "Near Abroad: Putin, the West and the Contest over Ukraine", Oxford, Oxford University Press 2017, Introduction

⁶ R. Allison, "Russia Resurgent? Moscow's Campaign to Coerce Georgia to Peace", International Affairs 84: 6, 2008. <http://www.pravdareport.com/russia/kremlin/26-08-2008/106214>

come una lesione ai loro interessi, fino all'attuazione di un referendum a favore della secessione della Crimea dal territorio dell'Ucraina e del suo riconoscimento come parte integrante della Federazione Russa, mentre gli scontri armati tra contingenti militari dei due paesi proseguivano nella regione del Donbass⁷. Il Cremlino non esitò a riconoscere la validità giuridica e legale della votazione, anche se gran parte della comunità internazionale tutt'ora non la accetta.

Se da una parte questi eventi hanno possono essere considerati come dimostrazione del fatto che si possa attribuire alla definizione del crollo dell'Unione Sovietica come tragedia geopolitica un senso di volontà di affermazione di uno spazio di influenza russo, di una ricostruzione di grandezza dello stato russo, di una tutela del territorio e dell'etnia russa dall'influenza dell'Occidente, dall'altra parte è però possibile identificare anche punti di vista per i quali un'affermazione di questo tipo potrebbe quanto meno presentare un fondo di verità. Secondo un'analisi rivolta maggiormente alle dinamiche e alle percezioni interne, la caduta dell'URSS è stato uno sconvolgimento di proporzioni inimmaginabili non solo per le élite dell'amministrazione e per gli intellettuali, ma anche per il comune cittadino sovietico. In particolare, è possibile riscontrare in alcune descrizioni degli avvenimenti di quegli anni l'insorgere di una vera e propria crisi di identità e la difficoltà a ristabilire una narrativa che facesse riferimento ad una cultura geopolitica omogenea, che fosse in grado di identificare il ruolo del paese del mondo⁸. È importante riconoscere il fatto che l'Unione Sovietica al momento della sua disfatta si presentava come un aggregato di più di cinquanta unità etno-territoriali, organizzati in una struttura amministrativa complessa che si venne a creare attraverso molteplici stratificazioni e modalità di assimilazione. Alcuni studiosi evidenziano come sia stato proprio il nucleo russo a subire in maniera più complicata il processo di de-sovietizzazione che ebbe inizio dal 1991: secondo l'ultimo censimento dell'Unione Sovietica condotto nel 1989, al momento della dissoluzione quasi 25 milioni di russi si sono ritrovati fuori dai confini della Russia, numero che risulta anche maggiore se si considerano coloro la cui prima lingua era il russo⁹. Dunque, è possibile parlare di una vera e propria discrepanza tra i confini del nuovo stato della Russia e quelli del presunto spazio etnografico russo che si è frammentato all'interno delle nuove unità statali circostanti. Questo tipo di situazioni in molti casi ha portato ad aspre tensioni etniche e territoriali che hanno caratterizzato gli anni a cavallo

⁷ Edwin Bacon, "Inside Russian Politics", London, Biteback Publishing 2017, cap. 8

⁸ Gerard Toal, cit. Andrei P. Tsygankov, "Mastering Space in Eurasia: Russia's Geopolitical Thinking after the Soviet Breakup", *Communist and Post-communist Studies*, n.36, 2003. O'Loughlin, Tuathail, Kolossov, "Russian Geopolitical Culture in the Post 9/11 Era: The Mask of Proteus Revisited", *Transaction, Institute of British Geographers*, n. 30, 2005

⁹ Barbara A. Anderson, Brian D. Silver, "Growth and Diversity of the Population of the Soviet Union", *Annals, AAPSS*, July 1990, see table p.158

della scomparsa dell'URSS in gran parte delle ex repubbliche sovietiche e hanno determinato la complessità del processo di aggiustamento territoriale¹⁰.

Milioni di cittadini e lavoratori sovietici hanno vissuto in maniera altrettanto catastrofica il crollo del regime sovietico anche dal punto di vista economico. È stato riscontrato come gli anni immediatamente successivi al 1991 sono stati caratterizzati da una consistente riduzione della produzione, della produttività, del tenore di vita e da un aumento della disoccupazione¹¹. In generale, il percorso di adattamento delle imprese all'economia di mercato è stato un processo articolato e complesso, che ha portato un gran numero di lavoratori e dirigenti ad un adattamento difficoltoso alle nuove condizioni della struttura socioeconomica del paese e al cambiamento delle relazioni di potere all'interno dell'impresa¹². Per quanto riguarda la disoccupazione, questa raggiunse livelli altissimi che spesso non vengono registrati nelle statistiche ufficiali del periodo, che non tengono conto della cosiddetta disoccupazione nascosta, la riduzione delle ore di lavoro e le ferie forzate non retribuite¹³. Inoltre, è stato evidenziato come la dirigenza e i nuovi proprietari russi adottarono una tattica di riduzione complessiva dei salari per cercare di mantenere basso il livello di disoccupazione e ridurre le potenziali tensioni sociali che ne sarebbero scaturite, provocando d'altra parte l'abbassamento del tenore di vita della popolazione e il ricorso ad attività di tipo "informale" e alla crescita dell'economia sommersa che non ha contribuito allo sviluppo generale del benessere del paese¹⁴.

L'obiettivo di questo lavoro dunque è quello di analizzare questi temi inserendoli all'interno di una sintesi dei momenti storici più significativi che hanno caratterizzato l'Unione Sovietica e la Federazione Russa, mentre l'ultima sezione si concentra sul riflesso che la famosa affermazione di Putin ha nella società russa, sull'opinione pubblica generale in relazione al periodo sovietico e all'Unione Sovietica così come è stata registrata nelle inchieste e nei sondaggi condotti con regolarità dal 1991 fino al giorno d'oggi. In particolare, i dati raccolti appaiono quantomeno sorprendenti all'osservatore comune occidentale, che riscontra un generale senso di nostalgia per il regime sovietico, una generale tendenza ad esaltarne le caratteristiche positive e a tralasciarne volutamente quelle negative, un'esaltazione della tradizione storica e dei valori fondanti del sistema sovietico e una mitizzazione delle

¹⁰ Rogers Brubaker, "National Minorities, Nationalising States and External National Homeland in the New Europe", *Daedalus*, 124, 2(1995), p.107-132

¹¹ Jan Winiecki, "The Inevitability of a Fall in Output in the Early Stages of Transition to the Market", in *Soviet Studies*, n.4, 1991

¹² B. Ickes, P. Murrel, R. Ryterman, "End of the Tunnel? Effects of Financial Stabilization in Russia", in *Post-Soviet Affairs*, n.2, 1997

¹³ Российский статистический ежегодник, 1998, Официальное издание, Госкомстат РФ
<https://it.tradingeconomics.com/russia/unemployment-rate>. Lev Gudlov, Viktor Zaslavky, "La Russia da Gorbaciov a Putin", Il Mulino, 2010

¹⁴ Lev Gudlov, Viktor Zaslavky, 2010, cit. S. Aukstionek, R. Kapelushnikov, "Labour Hoarding in the Russian Industry", in *The Russian Economic Barometer*, n.2, 1996

personalità che ne hanno scandito la storia, anche quelle più aberranti come quella di Stalin¹⁵. Questo tipo di orientamento dell'opinione pubblica tuttavia appare meno sorprendente se si analizza il lavoro di filtraggio delle istanze ideologiche trasmesse alla popolazione e l'adozione da parte del regime di Putin di iniziative volte a enfatizzare l'importanza dell'eredità sovietica nella storia della Russia contemporanea.

Al giorno d'oggi determinare con chiarezza il ruolo della Russia nel panorama internazionale sembra essere un obiettivo complesso da raggiungere, tenendo conto delle innumerevoli sfaccettature nei rapporti tra il governo russo, i suoi vicini dell'Europa orientale e l'Occidente, e le caratteristiche del governo di Putin che sfuggono una classificazione chiara e precisa all'interno delle categorie attraverso le quali siamo abituati a ragionare. La famosa dichiarazione del presidente russo del 2005 e la risonanza che ha avuto a livello internazionale cristallizzano con efficacia le molteplici sfaccettature del ruolo geopolitico che ha la Federazione Russa al giorno d'oggi, e permettono di intuire i suoi obiettivi e i suoi timori che inevitabilmente si intrecciano con le aspirazioni e i timori dei paesi confinanti e delle altre potenze mondiali. I significati attribuiti al crollo dell'Unione Sovietica dunque forniscono l'occasione per delineare un'analisi comparativa sulle percezioni che le politiche, le azioni e le dichiarazioni del Cremlino suscitano in attori diversi, siano essi gli Stati Uniti o l'Europa, o i cittadini della Federazione Russa stessa.

¹⁵ Sarah E. Mendelson, Theodore P. Gerbert, "Failing the Stalin Test", in *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2006. Steven White, "Soviet Nostalgia and Russian Politics", in *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 1 (2010), p. 1-9. Denis Volkov, "Memory Trap", in *Intersection*, 22 Dicembre 2016. Charles J. Sullivan, "Missing the Soviet Motherland, Nostalgia for the USSR in Russia Today", Centre on Global Interests (CGI), Rising Experts Task Force Working Paper, March 20, 2013

3. Russia in the XX Century: the Soviet Union

2.1 War and Revolution

The Soviet Union was a federative state extended over an enormous territory that went from Eastern Europe to the Pacific Ocean. During its existence it has been the largest country in the world; it can be described also as the specific political system and the socio-economic complex that politically dominated the Eurasian continent for the most part of the XX century. It was characterized by an extremely complex web of different territories, ethnic groups, nationalities, languages and religions, fact that makes the analysis of its history and its structure an extremely complex task.

The USSR was born in the territory of the former Russian empire, whose history can be traced back for hundreds of years. It has been governed by the tsarist regime for many dynasties and in the XIX century it was characterized by a situation in which it was possible to observe the contrast between the cities and the urban culture, extremely florid and lively, and the countryside, where still almost the 90% of the population lived. The people living outside the urban areas constituted a world with its specific characteristics, that on the one hand were extremely differentiated because of the various cultures and religious creeds, while on the other presented many common features: the core of the rural world was the patriarchal family company, the *dvor*, around which there was the rural community, which in some, but not all the areas of the empire was based on the principles of collective property and the periodic redistribution of the land, favoured by the state as an instrument for the control of society and the fiscal administration of the communities. In many cases the cities exercised a strong degree of attractiveness for the countrymen, which were extremely eager to take the chance to get new forms of employment, to elevate their living standards and to develop a degree of literacy. The homogeneity of the rural areas was of course a relative factor, due to the vastity of the imperial territory: for example, as Andrea Graziosi notes, the institution of the redistributive common did not exist in Ukraine, while in Siberia farmers never had to submit to the system of servitude, were free and relatively wealthy, and consequently responded to different types of pressures and necessities¹⁶.

However, the living standard for the rural population was far from acceptable, and the system of the servitude, which obliged the farmers to devolve the products of their works to the landowners, the figure in charge of the redistribution among all the other families who worked under his supervision, often caused episodes of unrest, when not outright revolts, that occurred in great number in the mid-1800s and in most of the cases were repressed violently¹⁷.

The tsar Alexander II, who succeeded his father Nicholas I in 1855 as the ruler of the Russian

¹⁶ Andrea Graziosi, "L'URSS di Lenin e Stalin: Storia dell'Unione Sovietica 1914-1945", Il Mulino, 2007

¹⁷ R. Pipes, "Russia under the Old Regime", London, 1974

empire, opened a period of reforms, intended to launch the modernization of the country. His most important measure was the abolition of the rural servitude in 1861, which caused a massive change in the economic and social structure of the countryside. Now the freed farmers could permanently obtain the land they used to work, but they did not become proprietors of this land and were at the same time compelled to pay a lease to the old landowner; in many cases the payment was too demanding, and the farmers were obliged to give the land away to the richer class of farmers, the so called *kulaki*, losing their primary source of self-sustenance¹⁸.

The modernization efforts also aimed at the improvement of the commercial relations of the Russian empire with other countries: in fact, its general conditions of economic backwardness rendered it dependent on Western countries for machineries and industrial products, while it exported only cereals and raw materials. From the 1870s many efforts for the modernization of the national industry were undertaken, and also thanks to the arrival of foreign capital (especially from France, Germany and Great Britain), the State was able to promote the development of the steel and railway industry. The industrial production developed incredibly in the last two decades of the XIX century and many industrial plants were erected around many important cities of the empire, but, conversely, the vast majority of the production activity was in the hands of foreign agents and a new Russian managerial class was not born¹⁹.

However, the industrial development and its social consequences, with the creation of the working class, proved to be extremely important in the constitution of a branch of intellectuals that embraced the Marxist ideology, rising next to the other ideological currents with the objective to determine the best path for the Russian state towards a complete modernization. The main features of Marxism adopted by this new group of intellectuals were those in favour of a socialist revolution based on a bourgeois liberal-democratic revolution, with the proletariat as the starting point for the development of a revolutionary conscience, the true instrument for the struggle²⁰.

In 1898 the Russian Social Democratic Party was born and it soon experienced the internal division of its members in two distinct and rigidly opposing currents: the Bolsheviks on the one hand, guided by Vladimir Uljanov, known as Lenin, who wanted a party formed by political professionals who would guide the workers towards the abolition of private property and the collectivisation of the means of production, and the Mensheviks on the other, guided by Ilij Chederbaum, called Martov, who wanted the creation of a mass party following the example of the German social-democratic party, and emphasized the fact that the principle of the revolution through the working class was not applicable in Russia, since it still was a primarily

¹⁸ P. A. Zaionchkovsky, "The Abolition of Serfdom in Russia", Gulf Breeze, FL, 1978

¹⁹ H. Rogger, "Russia in the Age of Modernization and Revolution, 1881-1917", London, Longman, 1983

²⁰ G. Plekhanov, "History of Russian Social Thought", New York, 1967

agricultural country²¹.

The year 1905 was characterized by conflicts and unrest both within and outside Russia. The Russian fleet was heavily defeated by the Japanese fleet near port Arthur, and this event triggered an intense crisis that at first involved the western and southern provinces of the empire, where national ethnic groups saw the difficulties in the East as the occasion to claim their independence, for example in Poland. A series of riots and protests occurred also in the territory of Ukraine, Belarus, the Baltic region and Transcaucasia, promoted and conducted by the farmers who were constantly living in extremely hard conditions and did not obtain anything positive from the politics of modernization, but also the Russian cities experienced unrest and violence. In St. Petersburg a parade of workers marching towards the residence of the tsar asking for protection and recognition was brutally repressed by police agents, who shot at the demonstrators, killing many of them. This bloody repression caused a series of strikes and riots across the entire country, both within production facilities and the peasant bourgeoisie, while the call for the recognition of individual liberties, universal suffrage and the creation of a constituent assembly became the programmatic basis of a new party of liberal inspiration, the Constitutional Democratic party, whose members became known with the name of cadets²².

Nicholas II decided to make a series of concessions in order to mitigate the dissatisfaction that was spreading like wildfire in the empire, and new political liberties were introduced, together with the first elections of a parliamentary assembly, the Duma, that nonetheless was dissolved some months later due to internal divisions in relation to an agrarian reform²³. In October, a general strike in St. Petersburg led to the creation of the first soviet of workers, a new kind of administrative unit of government, which was presided by the Menshevik Lev Davidovich Bronstein known as Trotsky. In the middle of these political changes, right after the failure of the first Duma, Petr Stolypin became prime minister and adopted a two-fold program: on the one hand he continued with the violent repression of every form of manifestation of discontent, while on the other he attempted to address what he perceived to be the main problems of the country. He extended the political and juridical liberties for the inhabitants of the countryside but was ultimately unable to attain what he had planned since in 1911 he was assassinated in mysterious circumstances²⁴.

The following years saw a constant improvement in the overall economic conditions of the country, both in the agricultural sector and in the industrial production, even though the path towards modernization was still lagging behind and in the period immediately preceding the

²¹ L. H. Haimson, "The Russian Marxists and the Origins of Bolshevism", Cambridge, MA, 1955

²² A. Asher, "The Revolution of 1905", Stanford, 1988-1992

²³ T. Emmons, "The Formation of Political Parties and the First National Elections in Russia", Cambridge, 1983

²⁴ A. Ascher, "P.A. Stolypin. The Search for Stability in Late Imperial Russia", Stanford, 2001

first global conflict the Russian empire was still dominated by unsolved contradictions: it was extremely lively and dynamic, thanks primarily to an economic and cultural boom, but it remained to a large extent weaker than other European nations and it was plagued by mainly four lines of fracture that had been exacerbated by the modernization process and the policies of Nicholas II, one between the villages and the state, one between non-Russian nationalities and the empire, one between the newly born civil society and the court, and the last one between the new worker classes and the state and the bourgeoisie.

The outbreak of the war in 1914 deeply influenced the subsequent events in the continent and was characterized by a sharp devolution of the economy as well as of the ideology, a phenomenon that involved every social class. The use of violence became both one of the few means to survive, and a motive of distinction among ruling elites and the military apparatus. The war soon started to drain the countryside of resources, food provisions and men, while the economy of the country as a whole and the territories closer to the front experienced a massive degree of tensions, especially Galicia, core of the contrasts between the Ukrainian nationalists, the German and Jewish ethnic groups and the Russian army. The army conducted a series of pogrom and deportation against those groups that were considered hostile and the overall number of victims amounted to almost one million²⁵.

In 1915, the military successes alternated with heavy defeats and loss of important territories, in particular Galicia, Bucovina and the control of some parts of Eastern Poland, until the population started to develop a strong sense of dissatisfaction towards military officials, who were perceived as wasting the heroic efforts of their soldiers.

The necessity to devolve the economic resources in the development of war industry led the administration to adopt the first forms of planned economy and statist policies, while the inflation continued to rise, an increasing part of the population was not able to buy first necessity goods and the use of practices like forced labour and forced transfers increased. In the meantime, the different branches and parties of the government were unable to reverse the negative trend that was dragging down their country and seemed to be stuck in their ideological struggles and attempts to prevail one on the other²⁶.

The February revolution of 1917 burst out suddenly when a group of workers of S. Petersburg, which during the war was renamed Petrograd engaged in an uprising protesting against the inflated costs of living and asking for the end of the war and the establishment of a democratic government. The tsarist army refused to suppress the revolt and the movement spread to include Moscow and other important cities, until on March 2, 1917 tsar Nicholas II abdicated²⁷.

²⁵ P. Holquist, "Making War, Forging Revolution: Russia's Continuum of Crisis, 1914-1921", Cambridge, MA, 2002

²⁶ A. N. Antsyferov, "Russian Agriculture during the War", New Haven, Yale University Press, 1930. M. I. Tugan-Baranovskij, "Cartamoneta e metallo", Napoli, ESI, 1987

²⁷ E. N. Burdzhakov, "Russia's Second Revolution: The February 1917 Uprising in Petrograd", Bloomington, 1987

Subsequently, a republican system was established with two centres of power, a temporary government with the Duma chaired by Georgy Evgenevich L'vov and the Petrograd soviet, formed by representatives elected in the factories and the military, guided by the Social Revolutionaries and the Mensheviks, with Alexander Fyodorovich Kerensky, at first the only socialist minister of the government, acting as *trait d'union* between the two formations. This kind of division eventually proved to be detrimental to the stability of the government, and the great number of ideological divisions even within each political current further complicated the situation²⁸.

In the meantime, Lenin was developing its ideological foundations for his revolutionary theory which entailed a progressive adaptation of the Marxist theory, shifting the focus on the agricultural class as the main engine of change. In April 1917 he published the "Thesis of April", where he stated that in order to save the country it was necessary to give the power to the soviets, to end the war and to redistribute the land to the farmers²⁹; this program on the one hand was criticised even by some members of the Bolshevik party, who accused Lenin of anarchism, but on the other hand it attracted the consensus of the poorer classes of the population.

In June 1917 the first Pan-Russian Congress of the Soviets was held in Petrograd and the Bolsheviks found themselves to be in a minority position against the Social Revolutionaries and the Mensheviks. However, a series of subsequent events proved to be decisive in the reversal of the situation: the continuous military failures of the temporary government, that eventually caused soldiers to refuse to fight due to the lack of preparation, the disorders in Petrograd, strongly supported by Bolshevik leaders, aimed at preventing the departure to the front of some battalions, and the failure of the attempted coup d'état guided by general Kornilov in September, that the temporary government of Kerensky was able to endure also thanks to the support of the Bolsheviks, who gained a great number of adherents³⁰.

In October Lenin was feeling that the situation was ripe for his revolutionary project, and the Bolsheviks with a group of members of the Revolutionary Military Committee occupied the strategic points of Petrograd, the Winter Palace and the telecommunications infrastructures, and arrested the ministers of the temporary government without any form of organized resistance and with extremely limited recurrence to violence. The revolutionaries declared the opening of the second Pan-Russian Congress of the Soviets and after a few days the weak resistance of those parts of the army that remained faithful to the republican government was overcome. Then Lenin acted with great determination and issued a series of decrees, the most

²⁸ E. Acton, W. G. Rosenberg, V. Chernaiev, "Critical Companion to the Russian Revolution 1914-1921", Bloomsbury Academic, 2001

²⁹ Lenin, "Tesi di Aprile", marxist.org

³⁰ J. Burbank, "Intelligentsia and Revolution, Russian View of Bolshevism, 1917, 1922", Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986

important of which were the decree on peace, supporting the immediate conclusion of military hostilities without further territorial annexations, the decree on the land, abolishing private property and establishing the subsequent confiscation of large properties, and the decree on the equality and the sovereignty of the people of the former empire, recognising their right to self-determination and secession³¹.

At the same time a new revolutionary government was created, the Council of People's Commissars, guided by Lenin and the Bolsheviks, who were able to obtain the support from large parts of the rural areas and the cities, where the workers had been extremely positive about the institution of the worker control on production facilities. In addition, also the different nationalities of the former empire expressed their support for the revolution and a peculiar situation was created, a situation that Cinnella called the "misunderstanding" of the October, characterised by the coexistence of a double Bolshevism, the one of the farmers, the farmer-soldiers and the workers on the one hand, with strong local (and national) instances and bitter distaste for hierarchies, militarisation and centralisation, and the one of the very little but at the same time very effective political élite on the other hand, with statist objectives³². This same misunderstanding is deemed to have been at the basis of the crisis of the Bolshevik regime and of the rise of Stalin some years later.

The first signs of uncertainty in relation to the nature of the October revolution became apparent after the election of the Constituent Assembly, held in November 1917: the results indeed proved to be not favourable to the Bolsheviks, that took the 24% of the votes gaining 175 seats out of 700, a number that can appear significant if compared to the seats obtained by the Cadets and the Mensheviks, but at the same time much lower than the 400 seats obtained by the Socialist Revolutionaries, who were voted for the most part by the rural population³³. The Assembly was disbanded in January 1918.

Lenin and his party were obliged to take some initiatives in relation to the global conflict and while a group of the Bolsheviks proposed the continuation of the war in order to extend the revolution to the Western states, even though this would have meant the defeat of the Russian state, eventually the administration decided to reach peace with Germany and on March 3, 1918 the Brest-Litovsk accord was signed. The conditions for peace imposed on Russia were extremely aggravating, since it was obliged to recognise the independence of Ukraine, to surrender many territories between Belarus and the Caucasus and to relinquish its territorial claims in the Baltic states and in Poland. The humiliation felt after Brest-Litovsk was so strong that the recovery of the lost territories became one of the main objectives of Russian foreign

³¹ R. Service, "Lenin. A Biography", Pan Books, London, 2002

³² E. Cinnella, "La Tragedia della Rivoluzione Russa, 1917-1921", Milano, Luni, 2000

³³ O.E. Radkey, "The Election of the Russian Constituent Assembly in 1917", Cambridge, Harvard University Press

policy, and it transformed socialist Russia and the USSR in a “revisionist” power³⁴.

As far as the economy is concerned, at the time the Bolsheviks seized the power the economic conditions of the country were extremely dire and the farmers that after the adoption of the decree on the land had created a system of little farms produced almost exclusively goods for self-consumption, and the cities did not receive any kind of supplies. The government at first tried to adopt some initiatives aimed at the gradual transition to a socialist economy and decided to enforce a nationalisation of all the banks of the country that were afterwards incorporated in the “bank of the people”, the Norbank. However, the circulation of money throughout the country was increased in order to sustain the war efforts and the revolution, and consequently the levels of inflation soared unopposed, aggravating the problems that tormented the cities and causing many workers to ask for the nationalisation of the industry or to abandon the cities.

2.2 Civil War and the USSR

The year 1918 was characterised by a major confrontation between the Bolsheviks and the counter-revolutionary forces. The latter in the months that immediately followed the October Revolution started to organise themselves in the Don region, in the Caucasus and in the Baltic region, with armed groups guided by former officials of the tsarist army and Cossacks, that had sworn their loyalty to the temporary government overthrown by the Bolsheviks. In January 1918 the Army of the Volunteers was officially created, guided by generals Alekseev, Kornilov and Anton Ivanovich Denikin. The counter-revolutionary forces started their offensive towards Rostov-on-Don; consequently, the government decided to mobilize the Red Army under the direction of Trotsky and inflicted a heavy defeat to the whites in the region of the lower Don³⁵. In addition, the Bolshevik government undertook a series of initiatives of aggression against some territories of the empire which had previously declared their independence: one of them was the Republic of Ukraine, and its invasion was decided by Lenin and Stalin, who at the time was Commissioner for the Nationalities, and was conducted after the help request issued by a puppet government established by the Bolsheviks in Charkov. This mechanism, used in this occasion for the first time, allowed to formally overcome the contradiction between the invasion and the respect for the self-determination. Similarly, in Central Asia the local Bolsheviks received the necessary support to overthrow the Kokand government and to establish a new regime³⁶.

After the signing of the Brest-Litovsk peace treaty, which entailed huge territorial losses for the Russian state, also the Mensheviks and the Social Revolutionaries decided to join the fight

³⁴ Andrea Graziosi, 2007, cit.

³⁵ E. Mawdsley, “The Russian Civil War”, Birlinn Limited, Edinburgh, 2017

³⁶ E. H. Carr, “The Bolshevik Revolution, 1917-1923”, London, 1950-53

against the Bolsheviks, and the government decided to intensify the practices of political repression carried out by the political police after the personal attacks conducted against revolutionaries' leaders, including Lenin (who survived the attack). Furthermore, the control on commerce and production was tightened, the compulsory conscription and the militarisation of society were established, and the requisition of agricultural storages became suffocating for farmers, who saw the reversing of the instances contained in the land decree.

The weakness of the Bolshevik power in the Eastern lands became apparent when a series of anti-revolutionaries episodes occurred, the most important of which had been the uprising of the Czechoslovak Legion. The legion, that had remained blocked in the Trans-Siberian railway, could not be stopped by the Bolsheviks and it soon seized some extremely important cities in Western Siberia. In reaction to the danger represented by the Czechoslovak, the Soviet of the Urals issued the order of the execution of former tsar Nicholas II and his family in Ekaterinburg. In this way the last prerogative of the old Russian empire disappeared³⁷.

In the meantime, the dissolution of the German Empire after the armistice of Compiègne revitalised the Bolsheviks who on the one hand started to be thrilled by the idea of an expansion of the revolution to the West, involving also the nations of the Alliance, while on the other hand they saw this as an opportunity to take some decisive steps in the Russian conflict. In the meantime, the disorders continued, and a series of new counter-revolutionaries figures rose to power in different regions, Symon Vasylyovych Petljura in Ukraine and Alexander Vasilyevich Kolchak in Siberia; Kolchak in particular proved to be extremely aggressive and organised a three-front offensive against the Bolshevik forces. He eventually was able to seize the cities of Perm, Ufa, and to advance further in the direction of Kazan', approaching the Volga river. The Kolchak offensive was supported by a series of anti-Bolshevik revolts that occurred in many cities of the region and the Red Army was forced to withdraw considerably, at least until the first signs of weakness started to show up on the part of the "white" army, since soldiers were extremely fatigued, and supplies were more and more difficult to gather. At the end of April 1919, the Red Army launched its counteroffensive and was able to recapture part of the territories lost in the previous months, crossing the Urals line³⁸.

On the Western side, the Bolsheviks tried to take advantage of the withdrawal of the German forces in order to get back Belarus and the Baltic region, but, especially in the latter, they found the strenuous resistance of independentist forces and irregular German troops that were able to push away the Red Army. In the meantime, the forces of Denikin continued their counter-revolutionary offensive in the South and the Bolshevik divisions allocated between the Don and the Caucasus, alarmed by the situation, decided to execute mass extermination of the

³⁷ H. Rappaport, "The Last Days of the Romanovs: Tragedy at Ekaterinburg", St. Martin's Griffin, 2010

³⁸J. Smele, "Civil War in Siberia, the Anti-Bolshevik Government of Admiral Kolchak, 1918-1920", Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996

Cossack population, adopting a policy that the Central Committee named as “de-cossackisation”, arming and inciting against them also the Chechens, who considered them their historical enemies. In this way, the North-Caucasus became the place where the bloodshed and violence of the war reached one of its culminations³⁹.

In Ukraine the clashes between the forces of the government of Petljura, the pro-Bolshevik factions and the counter-revolutionary forces guided by Denikin continued in the middle of a series of revolts of farmers and nationalist movements as well as the explosion of brutality against the Jews, which gave way to a series of pogroms, the most terrible pogroms that Europe had ever seen in centuries⁴⁰. However, in that phase of the conflict the upper hand was gained by the anarchist forces, composed for the vast majority by the Ukrainian farmers guided by Nestor Makhno⁴¹. The situation was further complicated once again when the Political Bureau of the Bolshevik government, composed by Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, Kamenev and Krestinsky decided to send the Red Army in Ukraine in order to enter the war and defeat the army guided by Denikin. But Trotsky decided to focus his attention first of all against the forces of Makhno, allowing Denikin to push forward within the country, taking advantage of the many insurrections that were rising uncontrolled throughout the country, and to take control of Kiev.

In the meantime, another leader of the counter-revolution, Yudenich, started to advance towards Petrograd and this phase of the internal conflict marked the most dangerous moment for the Bolshevik state. The Kremlin experienced a serious crisis with Stalin firmly criticising the choices of Trotsky in the conduction of the military operations. In addition, the Bolsheviks started to exalt even further the use of violence as a solution to their problems and Lenin himself proposed the elimination of hundreds of bourgeois and workers as a demonstration for the masses. In October, the Red Army inflicted a heavy defeat to the counter-revolutionary army near the city of Orël and the troops of Denikin started to retreat confusedly towards South (afterwards Stalin and Ordzhonikidze claimed the merits of this success, once again pointing out the mistakes made by Trotsky and deepening the fractures and the tensions within the party)⁴².

Trotsky however was one of the main figures that conducted the resistance of the Red Army against the troops of Yudenich near Petrograd concluded with the victory of the Bolshevik troops on October 1919 and the flight of Yudenich. This turning point, together with the advancement of the Red Army towards East, with the Kolchak forces unable to stop it, in a way marked the beginning of the victory of the Bolshevik regime. In the beginning of 1920, the

³⁹ P. Kenez, “Civil War in South Russia, 1918-1920”, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1977

⁴⁰H. Abramson, “A Prayer for the Government, Ukrainians and Jews in Revolutionary Times, 1917-1920”, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1999

⁴¹ P. Arshinov, “History of the Makhnovist Movement, 1918-1921 (1923)”, Detroit, 1974

⁴² E. Mawdsley, cit.

Bolsheviks entered in Transcaucasia forming an alliance with commander Ataturk and occupied Azerbaijan, threatening Armenia and the Menshevik government in Georgia. In the meantime, the Polish and the Ukrainian attempted once again to take Ukraine off the Bolshevik hands and the Red Army attempted a massive offensive that was designed to bring the revolution even to Warsaw. However, the operations were not sufficiently well prepared, and the front was too much wide, so the counteroffensive guided by Pilsudski inflicted a heavy loss to the Red Army. Nevertheless, the peace negotiation proved to be advantageous to the Bolshevik state, which reobtained with the signing of the Riga treaty in 1921 some of the territories in Ukraine and Belarus that had been seized by the Polish troops. In the meantime, in September 1920 Armenia was divided between Turkey and the Bolshevik state, with the region of Nagorno-Karabakh assigned to Azerbaijan, and a very similar fate was experienced by Georgia. The last outbreaks of resistance were extinguished when the Red Army defeated in Crimea the last lines of the counter-revolutionary army, and when the Socialist Soviet Republic of Kazakhstan and the Socialist Soviet Federative Transcaucasian Republic were formed, in 1920 and 1921 respectively⁴³.

The end of the danger represented by the counter-revolutionary forces, the militarisation, the war communism and the defeat in Poland provoked the explosion of the unrest of the farmers that reached outstanding dimensions and intensity and involved different regions of the Bolshevik state, for example Tambov, Western Siberia, part of Ukraine, Donbass, Dagestan, Central Asia, Chechnya, Kuban and the Eastern shore of the Black Sea. Both the revolts and the repression were extremely brutal, and the revolutionaries started to consider normal an extraordinary level of violence against their own population, in a phenomenon of elevation and distortion of some of the principles of the traditional Bolshevik ideological heritage⁴⁴. The élite group of the party, which was continuously perturbed by the internal contraposition of the faction of Trotsky on the one hand and the faction of Lenin and Stalin on the other, was forced to face the agitations that had involved also the cities and the industrial facilities. Even in Petrograd the workers engaged in protests and strikes, gaining the support of the sailors of the naval base of Kronštadt, that had been one of the bulwarks of Bolshevism during the revolution. The operations for the reconquest of the island, conducted by Trotsky and Tukhachevsky, lasted for days of ferocious fights and caused thousands of victims. Thousands of sailors were arrested and executed after the defeat.

At this moment, the options available to the party were two: engage in an outright civil war with the rural areas or reinforce the social base of the soviet power through the adoption of

⁴³ E. H. Carr, 1950-1953, cit.

⁴⁴ R. Stites, "Revolutionary Dreams. Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution", New York, Oxford University Press, 1989

economic concession to the rural population⁴⁵. Thanks to the pressure of Lenin, the second solution was adopted and the New Economic Policy (NEP) was introduced; it was presented by Lenin as a “retreat” imposed by circumstances, as it represented a sort of reversal of many of the economic politics that had been undertaken during the revolution and the civil war. One of the first reforms that were established regarded the substitution of the requisitions with a tax in kind, together with the re-introduction of a relative degree of freedom of trade. The policy was welcomed by the farmers, but overall the first year of NEP was a failure: the massive requisitions of the 1920 left a harsh retinue and the drought and great famines of 1921-1922 hit around twenty-million people and caused around a million and a half victims in the Volga region, North Caucasus and East Ukraine⁴⁶. The famine was used by the regime in order to move an offensive towards the churches and the religions, especially orthodoxy, and with the pretext to help the poor and hungry population many religious treasures were expropriated. Some months later the coin was re-introduced but the government was soon obliged to issue massive emissions of money which made clear the necessity of a monetary reform.

At the political level, a purge of the member of the party was conducted in 1921 and the number of its members was reduced almost by half⁴⁷, and in the month before the XI Congress of the party Lenin created the office of the “secretary general” of the party and entrusted the office to no other than Stalin.

On December 30, 1922 the Union of the Socialist Soviet Republics was formally established, symbolising the ultimate victory of the Bolshevik communism in the Russian civil war. Some historians emphasised the fact that the Bolsheviks established themselves at the head of the country in wartime, a factor that shaped both their practical approach to the idea of government and their philosophy; in particular, the experiences of the Civil war strengthened in Stalin, the future leader of the Soviet dictatorship, the instinctive mistrust towards the “bourgeois specialists” and the fear of plots, while the requisitions of wheat in the South and the organisation of a popular army in Ukraine determined his propension to the adoption of intimidatory strategies in the conduction of the economic activity⁴⁸. The Civil war is considered to have accustomed the Bolsheviks to blood and ruthlessness⁴⁹.

2.3 NEP, the Stalin regime and the economic crisis

From an economic standpoint, the years that followed the civil war were crucial in the determination of the Soviet economy. In the context of the New Economic Policy, the

⁴⁵ A. Graziosi, “L’Unione Sovietica, 1914-1991”, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2011

⁴⁶ S. Malle, “The Economic Organization of War Communism, 1918-1921”, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002

⁴⁷ T. H. Rigby, “Lenin’s Government. Sovnarkom, 1917-1922, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1979

⁴⁸ V. P. Danilov et al., “Tragedija Sovetskoj Derevnji”, vol. 3, Rosspen, Moscow, 2000

⁴⁹ O. V. Chlevnjuk, “Stalin. Biografia di un Dittatore”, Mondadori, Milano, 2016

compromise with the market was expressed by the adoption of a new monetary reform started in May 1922 that introduced a new banknote whose value was regulated by the state. In addition, the state held the monopoly on foreign trade, designed to stabilise the foreign course of the soviet currency, protect the internal purchasing power from the movements of the balance of payments, direct import and export fluxes according to the interest of the state and conduct a political economy that was independent from the global market. For some time, a system of double currency was established in the soviet economy, a situation that favoured the adoption of inflationary policies by the government. As far as the investments were concerned, the main focus was directed towards the support of the heavy industry, taking away resources from the markets⁵⁰.

The NEP soon started to raise a great number of doubts within the party leadership, also because of its politics in favour of national minorities that caused a degree of discontent among the Russians, and the fact that the farmers were taking advantage of the concessions in order to adopt their own logic of development of the lands. Lenin himself started to reflect on the NEP soon after its adoption, but the advancement of his illness made necessary to begin the discussion about his succession; the question was extremely complicated, especially after the controversy between him and Stalin on the National question (according to the latter the Soviet republics should have become autonomous republics within the Russian one, while according to the former all the main republics should have been equal parts of a new federal state)⁵¹. The tensions were explicated in the "Testament" of Lenin, read during the XIII Congress of the party, where he did not reserve a positive judgement for any of the main leaders, and refused to point out his successor. The candidates for the succession then gathered in different factions and Stalin soon established his pre-eminence, while on the other hand Trotsky created with a group of supporters the opposition, that was soon able to gather a broad consensus with coherent proposals for the solution to internal problems, challenging the group of Zinovev, Kamenev and Stalin, the leading force of the party. In January 1924 Lenin died and Stalin, after having instituted the worship of the dead leader, took advantage of the moment in order to introduce in the party thousands of men without any political experience, that he could have used against his opponents. Indeed, the confrontation with the opposition continued until, during the following Congress, Trotsky was removed from the guide of the Revolutionary Military Committee, marking the victory of the majority⁵².

In the meantime, the NEP was showing some positive effects even at the international level: between the end of 1923 and the spring of 1924, the USSR was formally recognised by all the state that won World War I, with the exception of the United States, and the Soviet Union held

⁵⁰ A. Baykov, "The Development of the Soviet Economic System", The MacMillan Company, Cambridge, 1950

⁵¹ O. V. Chlevnjuk, 2016, cit.

⁵² E. H. Carr, "Storia della Russia Sovietica. La morte di Lenin, L'interregno, 1923-1924", Torino, Einaudi, 1967

positive relations with Turkey and the government of Ataturk, with Germany, its main economic partner at the time, with which it had signed the Rapallo agreements in 1922, and even in the East, with China⁵³. Internally, the NEP gave way to an incredibly fast (but not free from contradictions) economic recovery: especially in the villages the growth was extraordinary, based on the work of millions of families of farmers, who after the drought that ruined their expectation of abundant harvest in 1924 remained incredibly active and had an excellent harvest in 1925. However, the state was not able to take advantage of this growth to the extent it had wanted to, since the farmers preferred to sell to market prices, that were sensibly higher than those that had been established for the deposits. Also the urban areas knew a period of intense growth and enthusiasm, with the opening of many commercial activities, the recovery of real wages and occupation, the adoption by the Supreme Soviet of the National Economy of a policy of capital centralisation, that in a first phase contributed to the economic recovery, and the emergence of a class of *nouveaux riches*. These class however was looked with distrust and despised by the party and suffered a number of repressions and destructions of its private capital. At the level of the working class, protests and demonstrations were a recurrent phenomenon and were provoked primarily by the decision of the regime to push for an increase of the productivity, adopting the only source of surplus that was incorporated in the Marxist theory, the exploiting of the labour force⁵⁴. The worker protests were overall ineffective and in most of the cases entailed negative consequences for the protestors.

The Soviet Constitution of 1924 concentrated in Moscow many government powers, especially in the areas of the economy, the foreign policy, security and transport and communications, but on the other hand the other republics received a wide range of formal rights, like for example the right to maintain the signs of statehood (a president, a flag, a language, etc.), and even the right to secession. So, the USSR essentially was an archipelago of republics, regions and districts that retraced the existence on the Soviet territory of many islands of different nationalities; certainly, there were centralist forces who opposed the supporters of national and local interests and were irritated by the pacification of Russia with the other republics, the rights conceded to minorities, and the emergence of a "Russian national question" that was extremely difficult to solve⁵⁵. In Central Asia a number of national states was created in 1924: Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, that at the time comprehended Tajikistan as an autonomous republic, were declared federal republics, and Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan became autonomous republics of Russia. The policies favourable to the nationalities however did not prevent the regime to adopt brutal forms of repressions in case of rebellion, as it happened in

⁵³ A. B. Ulam, "Expansion and Coexistence: Soviet Foreign Policy, 1917-1973", Praeger Publisher, New York, 1974

⁵⁴ W. J. Chase, "Workers, Society and the Soviet State. Labour and Life in Moscow, 1918-1928", Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1987. A. M. Ball, "Russia's Last Capitalists. The NEPmen, 1921-1929", Berkeley, University of California Press, 1987

⁵⁵ A. Graziosi, "L'Unione Sovietica, 1914-1991", Bologna, Il Mulino, 2011

Georgia in 1924.

As far as the development of the NEP is concerned, its effects were paradoxical, because they were considered by the party leaders as reinforcing the “little-bourgeois” mass, and soon the turn in favour of the farmers was reversed in favour of the industry: the government decided to double the export of wheat and to multiply the capital investments, starting the process of forced industrialisation. The excessive growth of the industrial sector caused in 1925 the first crisis due to excess of demand of the Soviet system, characterized by the shortage of consumer goods, excess of state demand for investments and control on prices⁵⁶. Stalin subsequently explained the shortage of consumer goods with the increase of the wealth of the mass of the population (this became the official explanation of the regime) and continued to exalt the development of the heavy industry that would have guaranteed the independence of the Soviet economic development.

During the following years, the situation continued to be characterised by inflation and a series of problems linked to the balance of payments, that worsened the weakness of the currency and caused an increase of the exports and of the research for foreign loans. The crisis increased especially the frustration of the farmers, that reacted with the boycott of the deposits and the reduction of the sowing of arable crops. In 1926-1927 the pression on the rural areas and on the industry was even extended and the attacks towards private capital were resumed. In the meantime, the administration was willing to defeat the opposition, using all sorts of methods, recurring to slanders, teams of intimidators and the political police. The tension was particularly high after the Pilsudski coup d'état in Poland in May 1926 when Stalin feared that the Polish policy could influence Ukraine⁵⁷. In addition, the diplomatic relations between Moscow and London came to a halt after the finding of a web of Soviet agents in the English territory. The Soviet capital fell in a war hysteria smartly exploited by Stalin to destroy the opposition and convince the party about the necessity to adopt strong measures against the enemies and the farmers. During the XV Congress of the party, the political opposition was definitively eliminated, with executives fleeing form the country, supporters arrested, and Trotsky exiled in Alma-Ata, and other leaders, as Pyatakov, passing to the majority. Stalin's personal regime was rapidly taking shape. One of the main elements of the dictator's *modus operandi* was the creation of little groups composed by his supporters, which would have been used to govern the country; as Stalin's biographer Oleg V. Chlevnjuk points out, this informal groups were given the highest authority, while the official state and party apparatuses were acting as regular bureaucratic structures in charge of the daily management of the country, according to a scheme dividing the activities of the government between official and officious

⁵⁶ R. W. Davies, “From Tsarism to the New Economic Policy: Continuity and Change in the Economy of the USSR”, London, Macmillan Press, 1990

⁵⁷ J. Rothschild, “Pilsudski Coup d'état”, New York, Columbia University Press, 1967

institutions, kept together by terror⁵⁸. The modality for the exercise of power of the Secretary General, founded on a combination of bureaucratic institutions and patrimonial power, had led the historian Yoram Gorlizki to create the expression “neo-patrimonial state”⁵⁹.

Hundreds of thousands of officials constituted the foundation of the system and the pillar of the dictatorship; Stalin did not have direct contacts with many of them and the apparatus of the state-party enjoyed a relative degree of freedom from inferences from above, a characteristic that allowed the officials to constantly look for ways to bypass the strict centralising regulations. Some historians have even been supporting the idea according to which the Stalin regime was an unstable dictatorship, and the worst aspects of the Stalinism, such as the mass repressions, in some cases have been attributed to spontaneous initiatives from below, but the idea of a “weak dictator” does not seem to correspond to the mainstream analyses of the figure of the Soviet leader⁶⁰. In fact, the dictatorship elaborated a series of extremely effective methods to manipulate and exercise pressure on society and the apparatus, allowing Stalin to firmly hold the power in his hands and to implement all the important decisions; the cyclical wave of epuration and repression of the government staff kept the society and the apparatus in a constant state of tension and mobilisation.

In order to reach its objectives, the regime did not need its apparatus to work with extreme efficiency, and the impossibility to attain a perfect centralisation in such a large country was compensated by a wide use of political campaigns; those campaigns, which constituted the cornerstone of Stalin political practice, followed more or less always the same scheme, starting with the indication of a series of objectives and the assignment of specific tasks, and unfolding with the mobilisation of the executives in charge of attaining the stated objectives. The second phase was usually characterised by the recurrence to extraordinary means and the suspension of every form of legality, thus making each political campaign assume the characteristics of a crisis, which was destined to reach a breaking point, forcing a peremptory back down. This turning back used to take the form of a “counter-campaign” that entailed the elimination of some of those that had worked in the implementation of the original campaign. The swing of the pendulum led to the destruction of countless material resources and human lives, but within the framework of the Stalin system, such campaigns constituted an effective way to mobilise an exterminated country towards a central objective. Stalin himself did not need to exercise a rigid control on every party and government organism in order to maintain his dictatorial power, since it was sufficient to hold tightly the main control levers, in particular the control on the political police. This can be considered a key feature of his success⁶¹.

⁵⁸ O. V. Chlevnjuk, 2016, cit.

⁵⁹ Y. Gorlizki, “Ordinary Stalinism: The Council of Ministers and the Soviet Neopatrimonial State, 1946-1953”, in *Journal of Modern History*, 74, 4(2002). O. V. Chevnjuk, cit.

⁶⁰ For example, see: J. Harris, “Was Stalin a Weak Dictator?”, in *The Journal of Modern History*, 75, 2(2003)

⁶¹ O. V. Chlevnjuk, 2016, cit. A. Avtorkhanov, “Stalin and the Soviet Communist Party: A Study in the Technology

The internal attack continued involving farmers, with the imposition of strict measures for the extraction of the agricultural provisions, specialists, often accused of sabotage and collaboration with the enemy, labour unions and workers, described as idle, thieves, drunkards and responsible for the collapse of the discipline in the workplace. Conversely, with the internal nationalities, Stalin remained more cautious and the compromise remained in place for a longer time, except for the case of Central Asia and Kazakhstan, where the process of indigenization was firmly opposed, the respect for tradition was declared illegal, the mosques were closed, and the Slavic immigration was favoured⁶².

The use of severity and determination in the state intervention as the resources necessary to face the crisis and continue along the path taken were the cause of the failure of the NEP, that was economically and socially producing positive results, but needed more and more space left by the state to society and the economy, while the intentions of the majority of the Bolshevik administration and its leaders were the opposite⁶³.

The beginning of the economic crisis of 1929 in the West confirmed to the Soviet administration the necessity to adopt their own means of development and helped to build the myth of the ability to create a new world in the face of a liberalism that was dying. The new stance of the party was incarnated in the restricted group composed by those that have been described as the “true revolutionaries” of the XX centuries, who believed that everything was possible, and reality could be bended through the use of force, strongly despised bureaucracy, felt a strong sense of militancy, supported policies of “positive discrimination” in favour of the youth of the proletariat, exalted class hate, criticised and opposed religion and fought against bourgeois behaviours⁶⁴. At the end of year 1929 the construction of the dictatorship was concluded with the myth of the infallible Stalin and of the worker as the “heroic founder of socialism”, that reversed the previous anti-worker rhetoric⁶⁵. The ideology took shape in the process of “dekulakisation”, that caused the spreading of violence, arrests, deportations and the destruction of resources in the main wheat-producers regions of the Union, mainly Ukraine, Western Siberia, the Volga region, and North Caucasus. The fight against the *kulaki*, term used to indicate the wealthier peasants, and the expropriation of the farmers goods were taken to their extreme consequences; the lands were confiscated, and the farmers were transformed into workers of agricultural firms owned and administered by the state. The method used to implement such changes went down in history with the name of “collectivisation” and consisted

of Power”, Munich, 1959. S. Fitzpatrick, “Stalinism: New Directions”, London, Routledge, 2000

⁶² S. Keller, “To Moscow, not Mecca. The Soviet Campaign against Islam in Central Asia, 1917-1941”, Westport, Praeger, 2001

⁶³ Andrea Graziosi, 2007, cit.

⁶⁴ N. Valentinov, “The New Economic Policy and the Crisis of the Party After the Death of Lenin”, Stanford, Hoover Institution Press

⁶⁵ N. Lampert, G.T. Rittersporn, “Stalinism, Its Nature and Aftermath: Essays in Honour of Moshe Lewin”, Armonk, NY, 1992

in the forced transfer of entire agricultural communities within the collective agricultural firms (the so-called *kolchozy*)⁶⁶. The farmers responded with a series of revolts that in some cases threatened seriously the Soviet power and assumed national connotations forcing Stalin to recede and denounce the violence perpetrated as initiative of the lower cadres of the party. Nevertheless, the collectivisation constituted one of the cornerstones of the Stalin regime, to the point that many other aspects of his government have been considered as a derivation from it⁶⁷. The systematic violence against the larger class of the country required a repressive apparatus of enormous dimensions and reach, with a system of prison camps and exile localities. Other than showing that fear and terror constituted the fundamental instrument of government, it has been observed that the collectivisation immediately chopped off many traditional social ties, accelerated the disintegration of society and facilitate the ideological manipulation. The limitless and unstoppable drainage of human and material resources from the countryside authorised the pursuit of madly ambitious economic objectives.

From an economic standpoint, the rising of the inflation and the problems related to the instability of the credit were addressed through a reform that aimed at the improvement of a situation in which the financial economy was completely out of control and the accounting system was disrupted. A system of the distribution of resources based on a set of priorities established by the state and the hunt for the currency held by privates were enforced. Subsequently, it was created the system of the working days (*трудодень*) that would have regulated for decades the retribution for the farmers of the collective farms, conceived as theoretical units that did not represent real working days but rather an estimate of the average produce of a working day. In the production facilities the pressure for the realisation of the reduction of the costs was increasing and the real wages were collapsing, forcing the population to adapt and resort to small thefts and the black market. In those years, the Soviet society experienced a defeat of the working class, that suffered deterioration of living and working conditions, a cultural and psychological eradication, the loss of status and of the legislative and social guarantees and the establishment of a climate of abuse. The society as a whole became extremely stratified⁶⁸.

In the meantime, Stalin intensified his ties with the political police that was used by the Soviet leader to influence the leadership group of the party and proceeded with the concentration of the political decisional power in his hands. The main focus of the regime was once again directed towards the concentration of resources and efforts in those sectors that were considered the most strategically important and the Soviet Union assumed the connotations

⁶⁶ R.W. Davies, "The Socialist Offensive: The Collectivisation of Soviet Agriculture, 1929-1930", vol. 2, London, Macmillan, 1980

⁶⁷ O. V. Chlevnjuk, 2016, cit.

⁶⁸ S. Schwartz, "Labour in the Soviet Union", New York, Praeger, 1951. D.R. Shearer, "Industry, State and Society in Stalin's Russia, 1926-1934", New York, Ithaca, 1996

of a hierarchical country whose policies were based on priorities determined by the top management and once and again revised and reduced in scope⁶⁹. The excessive simplification of reality, according to which the different phenomena were explained in terms of historical conflict, characterised one of the main orientations of the Soviet regime even after the death of Stalin. A model of the world based on the principle of class struggle allowed the dictator to ignore the complexity of things and to despise his victims; in this way, the most brutal crimes of the regime could be considered as a natural manifestation of historical laws, and innocent mistakes as crimes. Stalin's theoretical paradigm, considered by his critics as excessively simple and inefficient, originated a series of errors and contradictions, but for Stalin every modification to the ideological system that could have entailed some sort of benefit to the country constituted a threat to the stability of his regime. For this reason, he always reacted to the problems of reality with a rigid ideological and political dogmatism, recurring to some minor modifications only in the last instance, when the crisis reached a breaking point. This dogmatism and this rejection of every form of complexity are considered to have posed a serious obstacle to the development of the country⁷⁰.

While in 1931 a reform of the industrial sector was undertaken and implemented by Pyatakov and Ordzhonikidze, who worked to establish a modern military-industrial complex and to devolve even more capital in the heavy military sector, the rural areas experienced the process of collectivisation, that entailed a great number of deportations, hunger, epidemics, migrations and the flight of millions of farmers towards the cities, where the overcrowding problems further lowered the living conditions of the urban population.

Despite all of that, the 1929 crisis proved to be a fertile terrain for the spread of the lies about the validity of alternative socio-economic models, and the Western intellectuals of the left, who did not know the Soviet reality but adopted the theories upon which it was deceptively constructed and remained fascinated by the picture of the Thirties based on the opposition between the crisis of capitalism and the (essentially false) progress of socialism⁷¹.

In the spring of 1932 the first famine outbreaks were spotted, especially in Ukraine, which soon raised the preoccupation of Stalin. The leader linked the economic problems to the sabotage of nationalistic and anti-Bolshevik tendencies that needed to be addressed firmly, and these preoccupations seemed to be confirmed by the data about the extremely scarce deposits. The shortage of wheat was followed by the shortage of woods and other export goods, the worsening of the balance of payments crisis and a currency crisis. The situation hit even the military production and the regime encountered the dissatisfaction arising from members of

⁶⁹ N. Lampert, G.T. Rittersporn, 1992, cit.

⁷⁰ O. V. Chlevnjuk, 2016, cit. E. A. Rees, "The Nature of Stalin's Dictatorship. The Politburo, 1924-1953", Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. G. Gill, "Stalinism", Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003

⁷¹ L. Cortese, "Il Mito dell'URSS nella Cultura Occidentale", Milano, Angeli, 1990. M. Flores, "L'Immagine dell'URSS", Milano, Il Saggiatore, 1991

the party itself.

The Great famine of the year 1932-1933 threatened seriously the survival of the regime but Stalin was able to use it to his advantage, applying his models of collective and punitive repression of the national and social groups that he considered to be dangerous⁷². The Stalin terror followed two principal lines, one linked to the requisitions in the main wheat producer regions, and the other one of political nature: where these two instances overlapped, as in Ukraine and Kuban, this led to the reversal of the nationality politics of 1923. While in the cities the measures aimed at limiting the breakdown of the productivity and regaining the control of the industrial facilities entailed a series of repressive measures against the workers, like firing, revocation of the right to the rationing and eviction, in 1932 Hitler rose to power in Germany. His first deed in relation with the USSR regarded the renegotiation of the value of promissory notes that the Soviets used to import consumer goods and were not able to pay back, but after that the relations between the two countries soon worsened.

In 1933 the famine had caused the death of 150 thousand farmers deported in the designated villages and the starvation hit also the prisons and the camps of the Gulag system, where the deaths were around 70 thousand. But the most dramatic situation had been observed in the rural areas of Ukraine, around 3,5 million deaths, in the North Caucasus, in the lower Volga, in Kazakhstan and other Russian regions⁷³.

However, it can not be ignored the fact that this period was characterised by the rise of a modern industry, the progress of urbanisation and a relative social promotion of some millions of individuals, in a modernisation process that had its own specific characteristic and dynamics, that laid the foundations for an original political model and socio-economic system. The USSR modernised and urbanised itself, even if at a great cost, and the large and modern heavy industry sector was linked to the big military-industrial complex. The main problems regarded the imbalances between heavy industry and light industry, industry in general and agriculture, accumulation and consumption, vertical control and individual autonomy, the absolute pre-eminence of the politics on the economy, the simultaneous existence of different markets and the perpetual conditions of excess of demand⁷⁴.

From the cultural point of view, the years 1928-1935 saw the establishment of a new orthodoxy, represented by the current of the socialist realism consolidated with the tightening of censorship occurred in 1934⁷⁵. At the same time, the development of mass instruction, the needs of the new modern sectors and the opening of new privileged channels of social and

⁷² R.W. Davies, S.G. Wheatcroft, "The Years of Hunger: Soviet Agriculture, 1931-1933", New York, 2004

⁷³ J. A. Poljakov, "Naselenie v Rossii v XX veke, 1900-1939 gg", Moskva, Rosspen, 2000. S. V. Kulchytsky et al., "Collectivisation and Famine in Ukraine, 1929-1933", Kyiv, Naukova Dumka, 1992. K. Aldažumanov et al., "Forced Collectivisation and Famine in Kazakhstan, 1931-1933", Almaty, 1998

⁷⁴ D.R. Shearer, "Industry, State and Society in Stalin's Russia, 1926-1934", New York, Ithaca, 1996

⁷⁵ L. R. Graham, "Science and Philosophy in the Soviet Union", New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1972

cultural mobility for determined social and ethnic groups caused the explosion of university education, but the rapidity of this expansion was inevitably paired with a qualitative degradation of the studies.

Externally, the increasing frictions with Japan and Germany called for the adoption of a cautious stance in the foreign policy and the Soviet government started to dismiss the theory according to which every international tension was favourable to the USSR, while economic and political stability were detrimental. This new position supporting the maintenance of international stability was one of the causes that made possible the diplomatic recognition of the Soviet Union from the American president Roosevelt, and this trend continued with the entering of Moscow in the Society of Nations, from which it was expelled in 1939. Within the party the criticism towards Hitler was becoming more resolute, but Stalin declared that until an open anti-Soviet policy was undertaken, the relations with Germany remained stable.

Internally, the stabilisation progressed also thanks to the success of the deposits in 1934, and one of the most noticeable signs of the change was the abolition of the rationing system in 1935, that was considered to prevent the reaching of an equilibrium both in the market and in the state finances. In the rural areas the regime adopted a sort of little “compromise” with the farmers when the free land was divided, with one portion, the largest one, assigned to the agricultural communities and the other one to the farmers, in the form of small plots for private use. The small plot soon became the core of the life in the countryside and proved to be fundamental in the survival of millions of families during and after the war⁷⁶.

Another important aspect was the progress of the rehabilitation of the Russian nationalism, conducted through the re-reading of the past and the depiction of the October as a patriotic act that allowed Russia to save itself from defeat and lay down the basis for the national regeneration. According to Hans Kohn, communism was in this way nationalised by the figure of Stalin, who added the Russian nationalism to the pieces of his imperial puzzle; the concept of “the people” (*народ*) was put in the centre of the official discourse, and it had been consistently employed for mobilisation and regime legitimation purposes⁷⁷. Also the “great and powerful Russian language” was magnified and the russification of the various national alphabets was started. In the meantime, in February 1936 the popular fronts won the election both in Spain and in France and the communists that sustained them presented themselves as the resulting adversaries of fascism.

Starting from 1936 Stalin began to accelerate the confrontation with his opponents and the purges involved a large part of the management group, even members of the old guard like Bukharin and Pyatakov; indeed, the Soviet leader felt like he had been betrayed by the party

⁷⁶ A. Nove, “An Economic History of the USSR, 1917-1991”, London, Penguin Books, 1992

⁷⁷ H. Kohn, “Living in a World Revolution”, New York, Trident Press, 1964

and the repressive wave was extremely hard even though it did not spread outside the political élite, at least in a first phase. The repression entailed also the liquidation of the majority of those leaders that nonetheless had remained faithful to the general line of the party, of the management group of the industrial sector, and of a group of military officials⁷⁸. In a second phase, the terror was extended to the national and social groups that the leader considered hostiles, through the carrying out of a social surgery intervention that lasted around fifteen months and was conducted according to special dispositions on the number and category of people to be arrested, executed or sent to the camps. The two repressive campaigns, one against the “anti-Soviet elements” and the other against the national minorities, constituted the Great Terror. It was a strongly centralised initiative that started during the summer of 1937 and concluded in November 1938. On the basis of the most recent data, around 1.6 million people were arrested, 700.000 of which were executed, while an unspecified number of victims died during the tortures of the political police⁷⁹. It is rational today to share the point of view of those historians according to whom none of the other crimes perpetrated by Stalin against his population stand comparison, and few other episodes in the history of humanity can be considered at the same level. The figures explain why the Great Terror has been elevated to the rank of symbol of Stalin’s dictatorship⁸⁰.

Events like those occurred in 1937-1938 have caused the scholars to question themselves about the nature of the leader and his regime. It is important not to forget that the Soviet Union was the product of war; the country was constituted after the first global conflict and, after having prevailed in a bloody civil war, constantly prepared itself to the next war. Once they had seized power through the clash of arms, the Bolsheviks leaders were invariably convinced that they would have lost it because of the conjoined efforts of a foreign enemy and internal counter-revolutionary forces. Being ready to fight implied two components: a strong military economy and the security of the national front. In particular, the latter required the elimination of the internal enemies⁸¹.

With the disappearance of his old comrades from the highest spheres of the regime, new and more fresh figures were introduced; such replacements constituted one of the most important factors of the consolidation of Stalin’s authority, since these young officials, without any of the revolutionary credential of the previous generation, owed their position directly to the leader. The reshuffles operated within the Politburo have been considered as only one manifestation of the hidden processes that led to the disappearance of the formal aspects of the collective

⁷⁸ W.J. Chase, “Enemy within the Gates? The Comintern and the Stalinist Repression, 1934-1939”, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2001

⁷⁹ O. V. Chlevnjuk, “Storia del Gulag: dalla Collettivizzazione al Grande Terrore”, Einaudi, 2006

⁸⁰ R. Conquest, “Il Grande Terrore”, Milano, Rizzoli, 2006. O. V. Chlevniuk, “Stalin e la Società Sovietica negli Anni del Terrore”, Perugia, Guerra, 1997

⁸¹ Z. Brzezinski, “The Permanent Purge”, Cambridge, MA, 1956

leadership and to the establishment of new unofficial or semi-official institutions adjusted to the administrative and political exigencies of the dictatorship and to the life-style of Stalin himself. This process was taken so far that the Politburo ceased to exercise its functions of official organ, when in the years of the Great Terror it was substituted by a narrower structure, the secret "group of five", comprehending Molotov, Voroshilov, Mikoyan, Kaganovich, and was presided by Stalin in person.

From the point of view of the foreign policy, during the XVIII Congress of the party the problem of the Soviet isolation was emphasised, together with the fear that a war would start with an aggression of the USSR operated by Germany with the support of France and Britain. Furthermore, the Kremlin had to face the failure of the politics of the popular fronts in Spain that were not able to stop the advancement of Fascism, and consequently Stalin decided to launch to Germany a series of signals about the opening of a new political phase. After the closing of the Congress, the interests showed by the Western powers in Poland made it clear to Stalin that Hitler as well as London and Paris needed the support of the Soviet Union, which had become the guarantor of the equilibrium in Europe⁸².

2.4 The Great Patriotic War and the construction of the Soviet superpower

On August 23, 1939, the famous Molotov-Ribbentrop accord was signed in Moscow, declaring the convergence of the German and the Soviet interests and allowing the USSR to dismiss the hypothesis of an aggression from Germany backed by the Western powers. At this point Moscow could foreshadow his role of arbiter of a conflict that would have consumed its adversaries and at the same time would have created a security zone around its borders. Determining precisely what have been Stalin's priorities in this period has not been straightforward, since the basis for a German-Soviet alliance appeared fragile and the material that could help us in determining the thoughts of the Kremlin leader can be interpreted in multiple ways; on the one hand, Stalin showed appreciation for the Nazi purges in 1934 and the first step towards a direct contact between the two dictators was undertaken by Stalin himself. On the other hand, some historians observed how Stalin in reality did not show a high degree of trust towards Hitler, especially if we look at the violent internal propagandistic campaign against Nazism and the systematic repression on the German minorities⁸³. The fact is that the approaching of the two states eventually occurred and it caused a degree of confusion and resentment in the international communist movement opening new opportunities for the opposition campaign of Trotsky. Nevertheless, the Germans and the Soviets had established a collaboration relationship not only in the economic sector, but also

⁸² S. Pons, "Stalin e la Guerra Inevitabile, 1936-1941", Torino, Einaudi, 1995

⁸³ A. I. Mikoyan, "Tak Bylo. Razmišlenija o minuvšem", Mosca, 1999. S. Z. Sluch, "Stalin i Gitler, 1933-1941: Raschety i Proschety Kremliya", in *Otechesvennaya Istorija*, 1(2005)

in the political one, with the NKVD (the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs) and Gestapo exchanging prisoners of the respective nationalities, including German communists, also of Jewish origin⁸⁴.

After the first military operations in Mongolia, Stalin decided to move war against Finland; in a first phase the Soviet troops were stopped, but the attack was resumed soon after and Finland was forced to conclude a peace that nonetheless proved to be quite moderate, since Moscow was only interested in occupying those territories necessary for the defence of Leningrad. In the meantime, in the territories of Poland under the Soviet regime the Polish élite suffered an attack, while in Galicia Stalin appealed to the Ukrainian nationalism in order to further promote the sovietisation of the territory. In Europe, after the fall of Paris, Hitler in the grip of enthusiasm for the surrender of France ordered to start the preparations for an offensive against the Soviet Union, and the German victory persuaded Stalin to accelerate the annexation of other territories like Bessarabia and North Bucovina. The Kremlin wanted also to promote the sovietisation of the Baltic states, pairing the imperial revanchism with the idea of extending the socialist system taking advantage of the increased soviet power, but here the policies adopted reversed the traditional pro-Russian feelings of the local populations, who started to see in the Germans the lesser evil⁸⁵.

In January 1940, Stalin responded to the production crisis and the necessity to prepare for war tightening the rules for workers and establishing that absenteeism was considered as a criminal offence, causing the arrest of hundred of thousands of people; also the arrests for political crimes increased, especially in relation with the policies implemented in the annexed territories. The concentrationist web in 1941 included around 4 million people and was changing its composition due to the arrive of the deportees from the new lands.

In this phase, the management group was constantly thinking about the war, but it seemed to be lacking the initiative in relation to the actual preparations; in particular, Stalin proved to be particularly thick-skinned to the information of an imminent attack from Germany, that started to be heard from the last weeks of 1940. The Kremlin leader was convinced that Britain was anxious to find another enemy for Germany and that the British authorities had built an enormous counter-information operation in order to persuade Moscow to move war against Berlin, which would have been forced to split its forces on two fronts. In 1941, war had to be avoided at all costs and in summer Stalin even forbade Zhukov, the chief of staff, to put the troops on alert. On June 22, 1941 Germany started the invasion of the Soviet territory and the commanders of the Red Army had been warned of the situation only few hours before, leading to the incomprehension of the enemy strategy and to the failure of the first counter-attacks.

⁸⁴ R. J. Sontag, J. S. Beddie, "German Soviet Relations, 1939-1941", Washington D. C., Dept. of State, 1948

⁸⁵ A. Graziosi, 2011, cit.

The German assault at the Soviet borders was a hard blow on Stalin, who felt deeply his inability to prevent the conflict, and his first responses to the military offensive were extremely ineffective. His close collaborators described the figure of the dictator in the first days of the war as depressed, apathic, a man who lost control of himself and of the event that were occurring⁸⁶. Then, Molotov, Malenkov, Beria and Voroshilov decided to take the initiative and created a supreme body with the task of supervising the war effort, the State Defence Committee, that would have been presided by Stalin himself. The episode has been interpreted as the sign of a temporary change in the characteristics of the dictatorship and the appearance of a wartime political compromise, a sort of re-equilibration of the power within the Politburo⁸⁷. A week later the Germans had seized the city of Minsk and surrounded many contingents, and Stalin, that in the meantime had recovered from the initial shock, decided to speak to the nation; on July 3 he pronounced on the radio the famous speech that reversed the trend adopted since 1929 in the relations with the population and the Orthodox church, which was in this way saved by the war⁸⁸, and soon after cooperation agreements with London and Washington were signed.

With the advancement of the German troops in Soviet territory, the State Defence Committee (GKO) engaged in massive evacuation operations, that involved the moving of thousands of factories and millions of workers towards East, leaving behind kilometres and kilometres of empty land. At the same time, in many of the territories that had been occupied by Moscow in 1939-1940 the arrival of the Germans was welcomed by a good part of the population, and even the inhabitants of those regions that belonged to the Soviet Union from its creation did not express disdain for the entering of the Nazis (many Estonians and Latvians accepted the occupation and even provided the Germans with a good amount of soldiers). However, in Ukraine and in Belarus, the attitude of the German authorities in relation to the colonisation of those territories by a "superior" people, together with the dismay caused by the Jewish extermination soon reversed the posture of the population⁸⁹.

At the end of August, the advance continued and Hitler decided to move part of his strategic units in order to outflank the Soviet troops and attack from behind in Ukrainian territory. Stalin, believing that the Germans would not have renounced to attack Moscow, denied the permission to retreat to the threatened troops, and in what became one of the major Nazi victory in the war, the Soviet lost at least 600 thousand units, including the entire command

⁸⁶ G. K. Zhukov, "Vospominaniya i Razmyshleniya", Mosca, 2002. Chadaev Memoirs, in *Otechesvennaya Istoriya*, 2(2005)

⁸⁷ O. V. Chlevnjuk, 2016, cit.

⁸⁸ <http://www.portalestoria.net/w%20w%20i%20discorsi%20stalin.html>. S. M. Miner, "Stalin's Holy War. Religion, Nationalism and Alliance Politics, 1941-1945", Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2003

⁸⁹ Y. Boshyk, "Ukraine During WWII: History and Its Aftermath", Edmonton 1986. R. W. Thurston, B. Bonwetsch, "The People's War: Responses to World War II in the Soviet Union", Urbana, IL, 2000

group, with the exception of commissary Nikita Khrushchev. The year 1942 was for the most part characterised by a series of heavy defeats suffered by the Red Army, and it has been recognised a degree of obduracy by the Kremlin in repeating the same strategic mistakes over and over again; but Stalin did not admit any fault by the supreme command and continued to ascribe the failures to the cowardice, perfidy or incompetence of his subordinates. One of the most direct expressions of this logic was the Order n. 227, issued in July 1942, when the progress of the Germans in the South seemed unrestrainable. The order proclaimed that all the “alarmists and cowards” had to be eliminated and established the creation of punitive battalions composed by individuals arrested for infringement of the code of conduct that would have been used as a screen against the enemy artillery. In addition, anti-retreat bodies were implemented as regular army departments. The fight against “alarmists”, “cowards” and “saboteurs” is recognised as constituting one of the main elements of Stalin’s military policy of the 1942 summer⁹⁰. The German army continued its march and started its assault to the city of Leningrad, that became an actual siege, causing the death of thousands of people, and transforming the city in the symbol of the pain suffered by the civilians in the territories still not occupied by the enemy. Consequently, Hitler decided to start moving also towards Moscow and in the capital panic began to be felt. The evacuation of foreign diplomats and part of the government caused an escalation, with shops assaulted and the streets packed of cars and people fleeing towards east, dragging with them what they could take with themselves. The panic was however limited by the firmness of Stalin, that did not leave the city, and by the growing in the people of a sense of patriotism, that had been observed also in Leningrad. In addition, also the endurance to suffering of the soldiers at the front and the firmness of their commanders proved to be fundamental in saving the country⁹¹.

On December 5, while the Japanese fleet was moving towards Pearl Harbour, the Soviet troops attacked the Germans near Moscow and broke through them, in what according to Zhukov remained the most important episode of the war⁹². The jubilation was great, and the sense of imminent defeat disappeared also due to the Americans joining the war and the Italian defeat in Africa, in Tunisia; all of this confirmed that the war was at a turning point. The new sense of optimism allowed Stalin to think that he could strike the final blow to the German strategic units and the victory of December was turned in the first Soviet strategic offensive. However, the Kremlin decided to organise the operations across multiple fronts causing a dispersion of forces, and most of the offensives launched remained incomplete or ended miserably⁹³.

⁹⁰ V. A. Zolotarev, “Russky Archiv. Velikaya Otechesvennaya Stabka VGK, 1942 g.”, vol. XVI (5-2), Moscow, 1996

⁹¹ H. Salisbury, “1 900 Giorni. Assedio di Leningrado”, Milano, Bompiani, 1969. M. Broekmeyer, “Stalin, the Russians, and Their War, 1941-1945”, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 2004.

⁹² Andrea Graziosi, 2007, cit.

⁹³ A. Seaton, “The Russo-German War, 1941-45”, Praeger, 1970

The German crisis soon ended, and some months later Hitler troops took Rostov and split their forces in two axes, one directed towards Stalingrad and the other directed towards the Caucasus. The battle for the defence of Stalingrad was long and violent and the Red Army, despite some moments of discomfort and lack of discipline and the dire situation of the country in general, managed to resist, also thanks to the political leadership of Khrushchev. Time was an ally of Moscow and the invaders started to pay the error of deciding to focus on two objectives simultaneously. November, when Rommel was defeated in el-Alamein, Egypt, the forces of Eisenhower landed in Morocco forcing Hitler to reinforce his European defences, and the Soviet troops surrounded Stalingrad, was the decisive month. At the end of 1942, after 18 months of war, the USSR had lost more than 11 million people, dead, dispersed or imprisoned and wounded⁹⁴.

What rendered possible the victory of 1942? In 1946 Stalin advanced as the main reasons the role of the party, the Marxist theories, the Gosplan, that, thanks to socialism, allowed to manipulate the laws of the economy. Other explanations to be considered regard the Russian cold, the extension of the territory, the resources of the country, Stalin himself, the support from the Americans, the tolerance capacity of the population and the quick learning of the military leaders. What appears most outstanding remains the size of the Soviet mobilisation, especially in relation with the poverty of those that had been mobilised and with the defeats of the first months of war. Indeed, the already wounded population had been continuously subjected to an intense mobilisation effort; as far as the war production was concerned, this effort was conducted through an accounting system that included all the human resources of the country and demonstrated the mobilisation capacity of the soviet administrative apparatus. The contribution of women was essential, since they assumed a very important role in the internal front, constituting still in 1944 a great percentage of the workforce of the villages strained by the war that suffocated them also from the demographic point of view⁹⁵. The urban population and part of the rural population should have lived with the rationing that had been reintroduced during the wartime, but the cards were not sufficient for everyone and the survival of the population, that accepted the effort imposed upon itself by the state, rested on unofficial and in most of the cases illegal economic relations⁹⁶.

The German troops attempted a last assault on Kursk, on July 5, 1943, but they found in front of them a solid defensive formation and the defeat of the Wehrmacht marked the end of Germany offensive capabilities in the Eastern front.

⁹⁴ M. Ellman, S. Maksudov, "Soviet Deaths in the Great Patriotic War. A Note", in "Europe-Asia Studies", 44, 4(1994)

⁹⁵ M. Harrison, "Accounting for War. Soviet Production, Employment and the Defence Burden, 1940-1945", Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996

⁹⁶ W. Moskoff, "The Bread of Affliction. The Food Supply in the USSR During World War II", Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990

On November, the Teheran conference was held, and Stalin enjoyed a position of pre-eminence: he was able to obtain the dismissal of the Churchill plan on the opening of a second front in the Balkans and the recognition of the Soviet-Polish frontier obtained with the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact⁹⁷. In the meantime, the Red Army was starting the campaign that in less than two years would have conducted them in Berlin. In the re-conquered territories, the Soviet conducted a great number of operations of mass punishment towards all those people that had lived under the Nazi occupation and that for this reason were considered potentially suspicious, in Ukraine, in the North Caucasus and in Crimea, where the republics or the autonomous regions were dissolved and the selected nationality was deported, together with those belonging to nationalities considered suspicious because had their own state, lived in border regions or in the shores of the Black sea.

The landing in Normandy and the Soviet successes of 1944 accelerated the negotiations of the Allies on the post war period, and in October Churchill went to Moscow in order to discuss about the organisation of Eastern Europe. The Soviet and the British leader concluded an accord on the division between the two states of the Balkan region according to percentage of influence that seemed to lean in favour of the USSR⁹⁸. The general climate of collaboration that was initiated in this occasion seemed to persist and Stalin decided to cooperate to the establishment of the United Nations and its head office in New York.

Other than the work for the reconstruction, the liberation of the Soviet territories that had been under the Nazi domination posed a series of new political problems. Just like the soldiers that had been imprisoned by the Germans, anyone that had lived in occupied territory was classified by the regime as "suspicious element". The liberated areas needed to be purged from the taint of the occupation, so, with the progressive de-escalation of the war, the dictatorial repression knew a new principle: the collective responsibility for the collaboration with the enemy. Such a principle found its expression in the large-scale internal deportation of various ethnic groups of the country. Some historians have underlined the fact that the decision to exile these communities was in part motivated by the objective findings of collaborationism and missed compliance with the national mobilisation, but that at the same time the principle of collective responsibility and punishment had a broader meaning; even before the war the government had had its significant difficulties in the process of integration of the various population within the Soviet society. The conflict simply confirmed that this process had never been completed. The ethnic deportation of 1943-1944 involved more than one million people⁹⁹.

⁹⁷ V. Mastny, "Soviet War Aims at the Moscow and Tehran Conferences of 1943," *Journal of Modern History*, 47, 3(1975)

⁹⁸ A. Resis, "The Churchill-Stalin Secret 'Percentages' Agreement on the Balkans, Moscow, October 1944", in *American Historical Review*, 83, 2, (1978)

⁹⁹ O.V Chlevnjuk, 2016, cit. A. Statiev, "The Nature of Anti-Soviet Armed Resistance, 1942-1944: The North Caucasus, The Kalmyk Autonomous Republic and Crimea", in *Kritika: Exploration in Russian and Eurasian History*,

On February 1945, Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin met in Yalta, with the Soviet leader convinced of the possibility of basing the relationship with the Westerners, in particular the U.S., on a cooperation that he wanted to exploit to his advantage. During the conference, Roosevelt declared to be ready to concede the territories lost by the Russian empire in 1905 back to the Soviet Union but warned that Stalin could not have maintained his army in Europe after the end of the war. Furthermore, the discussions focused on the punitive nature of the politics towards Germany, its division in occupation zones, the reduction of its territory and the expulsion of German minorities from the Countries of Eastern Europe. Finally, the Soviets and the Allies signed a treaty on the repatriation of the Soviet citizens and Moscow was satisfied with the joining of Ukraine and Belarus in the United Nations¹⁰⁰. Even though some argued that Roosevelt should have been more severe in his concessions to Stalin¹⁰¹, the power relations in Eastern Europe, where the Red Army was flooding, were clearly in favour of the Soviet Union, also because the winner of the war against Nazi-Germany was exactly the Soviet Union.

Two days after the death of the American president, the Soviet troops launched their attack against Berlin, full of revenge feelings after having witnessed the aftermath of the Nazi extermination in the liberated territories. The occupation of the German capital was characterised by a generalised use of violence and depredation, with the implicit authorisation by Moscow. However, the Soviet soldiers, in Riga, Prague, Berlin and Vienna, entered for the first time got in touch with a reality that appeared far different from that described by the Soviet propaganda¹⁰².

The USSR was victorious, but this victory was full of contradictory contents and expectations; even if in mid-1945 the ties among the leader, the system, its bureaucracies and the people were complete, everyone gave a different meaning to the end of the war. The positions of the various populations were widely different: for those that suffered the punishment of 1943-1944, the victory entailed a great deal of suffering, while for the Russians it entailed the redemption of the frustrations of the 30s, and for them the war took the place of the revolution as ideological reference point¹⁰³. As far as Stalin himself is concerned, the victory projected him to a new, unattained prestige, and he even took the title of “generalissimo”. However, the leader knew that the end of the war represented only the first step along the difficult path towards the reconquest of the global power status of his country. In fact, the USSR came out from the

6, 2(2005)

¹⁰⁰ F. J. Harbutt, “Yalta 1945: Europe and America at the Crossroads”, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010

¹⁰¹ J. Deparle, “The Bitter Legacy of Yalta: Four Decades of What-Ifs”, published in *The New York Times*, New York, 1989

¹⁰² J. Erickson, “The Road to Berlin”, Yale University Press, 1975

¹⁰³ A. Inkeles, “Public Opinion in Soviet Russia”, Cambridge, MA, 1951

conflict extremely weakened, with 27 million of deaths and a post-war famine, tragic consequence of the devastations suffered by the agriculture and of the weakness of the distribution system of the previous years¹⁰⁴. In particular, the dictator was aware of the threat represented by the inconsistencies between the symbolic triumph of the victory and the harsh every day reality, in which the Soviet society found itself. Stalin did not address the numerous questions that arose when the guns were put away, nor wanted to clarify the mistakes that could have been committed by the government in the conduction of the war effort. On the contrary, in order to prevent an undesirable debate on the cost in human lives, on the efficiency of the military commands and on the hopes of a post-war liberalisation, he launched a series of ideological counter-attacks. The first of these was the reconsideration of the price paid to the war and of the reasons for the initial defeat, with a manipulation of the figures regarding the number of victims. But if hiding the numbers could have been attained rather easily, the catastrophic retreat of the Red Army was something else. For this reason, Stalin, as some observers have noticed, cautiously and gradually tried to introduce in the propaganda repertoire another idea that would have been able to absolve his work as supreme commander from every accusation; the retreat of the Red Army had been a deliberate move to weaken the enemy. The argument was comprehensible and familiar thanks to a widely known historical precedent, the strategy adopted by general Kutuzov in 1812, when he let the Napoleonic forces penetrate to the heart of the Russian territory and counterattacked only in a second phase. This strategic line was considered to have been fundamental for the safeguard of the army and the salvation of the country¹⁰⁵.

In the meantime, the Kremlin was willing to establish some sort of coexistence with the West, but at the same time it still wanted to solve the questions that had remained open in 1945, especially those relative to Turkey and Iran, where the Soviet Union had not been able to regain the positions lost in 1917. Internationally, the end of the war fuelled the recovery of the communist movement and the strengthening of the myth of the USSR as the winner against Nazism and Fascism¹⁰⁶; both in France and in Italy discussions about nationalisation were started, but those who built a system that truly had many commonalities with the Soviet one were the English Labourers, despite their convinced anti-communist ideology. In this way the USSR could expand its influence abroad, and it became extremely popular even among the Third World, that was crossed by the independence movements and whose élite perceived the Soviet economic model as the solution to their problems. However, Stalin was completely absorbed by Europe and the U.S. and was not able to fully comprehend the possibilities offered

¹⁰⁴ S. J. Linz, "The Impact of the War on the Soviet Union", Totowa, NJ, Rowman & Allanheld, 1985

¹⁰⁵ O. V. Chlevnjuk, 2016, cit. RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 794, ll. 85-89

¹⁰⁶ M. Flores, "L'immagine dell'URSS: l'Occidente e la Russia di Stalin, 1917-1956", Milano, Il Saggiatore, 1990

by the new situation¹⁰⁷.

In the territories that had been annexed with the war, like Poland, Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine, Stalin decided to pursue a policy in favour of the ethnic homogenisation, while in other regions he took different initiatives: for example, in Transylvania he promoted the creation of a Hungarian autonomous region and in Bulgaria and Yugoslavia he talked about people's brotherhood rather than homogeneity. Nevertheless, the power of many of the new regimes was fragile, the local communist parties were extremely small units and they operated, except in a few cases, in countries where anti-Soviet feelings had grown up during the 30s and exploded in 1939-1941, after the punitive reparation imposed on the population and the unfavourable conditions imposed even on allied states, like Poland and Czechoslovakia¹⁰⁸.

After the conflict, the human losses were the most serious: they were estimated to amount to more or less 26-27 million people¹⁰⁹, compared to the 7 million Germans, 500 thousand British and 300 thousand Americans; in addition to the deaths, the country counted many millions of refugees and people removed from home because of the conscription, forced labour, evacuations and deportations. Other important developments of the hostilities had been the modification of the ethnic structure of the population in the various republics in favour of the russification and the increase of the gap between men and women. The population was pretty much left alone in the recovery process. In the urban world the war caused a consolidation of the hierarchy of the beneficiaries of supplies and privileges, with the most important cities, like Moscow and Leningrad, receiving most of the supplies, and the capitals of the republics and the other cities being progressively less supported¹¹⁰.

From July 17 to August 2, 1945 the Potsdam conference was held and in a first phase, the talks seemed to be positive for Stalin, especially in relation to the Polish frontiers. However, the explosion of the first atomic bomb sensibly changed the power relations and the parties did not managed to conclude an accord on Germany. Right after the conclusion of the conference Truman used the bomb to close the war in Japan and Moscow interpreted the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as a message to the USSR. The country, in the eyes of Stalin, needed to employ its resources in a massive rearmament program with the main focus on the development of its own atomic weapon. However, the deterioration of the relations with the Allies had started already after the Yalta conference, and regarded primarily Poland and Turkey. In addition, in November the Red Army prevented the repression of a communist revolt

¹⁰⁷ C. Kennedy-Pipe, "Russia and the World, 1917-1991", London, 1998. R. Menon, "Soviet Power and the Third World", New Haven, 1986

¹⁰⁸ N. M. Naimark, L. Gibianskii, "The Establishment of Communist Regimes in Eastern Europe, 1944-1949", Boulder, Westview Press, 1997

¹⁰⁹ S. J. Linz, 1985, cit.

¹¹⁰ D. Filzter, "The Standard of Living of Soviet Industrial Workers in the Immediate Post-war Period, 1945-1948," in *Europe-Asia Studies*, 6(1999). E. Zubkova, "Russia After the War: Hopes, Illusions, and Disappointments, 1945-1957", Armonk, M. E. Sharpe, 1998

in North Iran, which had been occupied during the war and which the Soviets had promised to leave. In those territories that were occupied by Azerbaijanis and Kurdish a popular republic was proclaimed, forcing England and the U.S to react firmly. At the same time Tito had started to make his moves, willing to create a federal state in the Balkans comprehending Slovenia and Bulgaria and dominated by Belgrade; in 1946 Stalin allowed Tito to annex Albania, but the new dictator also pushed towards Greece, where the civil war was resumed in May.

On the internal front, a new period of primitive accumulation was launched, and the demobilisation started in 1945 was stopped, when the administration decided to concentrate the investments on the heavy industry once again. The reconstruction was pursued also through the employment of semi-servile work on a broader scale throughout the whole country, but in particular in the North and the East and in the territories that remained empty after the war and the deportations. The treatment reserved to the workers varied sharply in function of the relevance of the sector in which they worked in the eyes of the state¹¹¹.

From the point of view of the ideology, the regime tightened the political-ideological grip during the so called *ždanovščina* (from the name of Zhdanov, a close collaborator of Stalin), an attack that involved eminent personalities in the literature, cinema and that part of the intelligentsia that wished for an inclusion in the European cultural community¹¹². The government promoted another round of exaltation of the Russian past and the Orthodox religion, together with the increase of the russification. However, the awareness of the risk that insisting too much on the Russian nationalism would urge the enhancement of the republican nationalisms prevented that the policy be pushed too far. In the meantime, the situation in the rural areas was extremely difficult, and some government campaigns further worsened the conditions of the population; millions of people were starving, dying from epidemics and experiencing the widening of the social gap in relation to the bureaucratic urban classes.

On March 1947 the confrontation with the West entered a new, more tense, phase with the enunciation of the Truman doctrine, that signalled the decision of the U. S. to focus on the confrontation with the Soviet Union. This persuaded Stalin to continue on the road to stabilisation and to entrench in the sphere of influence established at Yalta. The tension increased with the articulation of the Marshall plan, that became a sort of challenge to the Stalin vision of the European future, to an extent that the Kremlin leader was furious when Poland, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia and Hungary presented their requests for participation¹¹³. The Soviet response arrived in September 1947 with the creation of Cominform, a coordination body that tied together Moscow, the parties governing in Eastern Europe and the two main Western communist parties, the French one and the Italian one. One year later, the

¹¹¹ J.S. Berliner, "Soviet Industry from Stalin to Gorbachev", Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1988

¹¹² S. Fitzpatrick, "Culture and Politics Under Stalin: A Reappraisal", in *Slavic Review*, 35, 2(1976)

¹¹³ E. Zubkova, 1998, cit.

communists took control of Czechoslovakia with a coup d'état and soon after, in order to prevent the formation of a new German state, the Soviet authorities started to obstruct the movements in Berlin¹¹⁴. The American decided to respond mobilising the aviation forces, that the Kremlin decided not to stop, also because of the fear inducted by the nuclear monopoly of the U. S¹¹⁵.

Many years of research produced a large mass of information in the origins of the Cold War. Nevertheless, it seems that, exactly because of the incredible quantity of studies, there is not a common understanding on its real causes, on which of the two sides had the largest share of responsibilities, and on the true nature of the calculations and the motivations of the two adversaries. It is possible to argue that, rather than an event with a precise start date, the Cold war has been the result of a gradual evolution, and that the statesmen involved in this process were not only pursuing the fundamental interests of the respective countries, but they were also reacting to particular, most of the times unexpected, situations, with often controversial decisions. The worsening of the conflict between the former allies of the Second World War is considered to have been fuelled by the complete incompatibility of the respective systems, by their opposing desires to expand their own sphere of influence, by the mutual recriminations from the pre-war years and by the common need of a foreign enemy. To the exacerbation of the atmosphere of suspicion and animosity contributed also some specific circumstances, like the nuclear monopoly of the U.S. and their reluctance to allow the Soviet Union to take part in the occupation of Japan. For his part, Stalin attracted the hostilities of the Western leaders, already radically opposing the Soviet communism, with his unconcealed endeavour of sovietisation of Eastern Europe through the Red Army and the local communists¹¹⁶.

An interesting analysis on the nature of Soviet foreign policy is the one provided by Zubok and Pleshakov, who refer to the so called revolutionary-imperial paradigm: it can be considered as the combination of Marxist ideology and traditional Russian messianism founded on the idea of the inevitability of the worldwide expansion of the proletarian revolution and on the role of the USSR as the centre of this revolutionary movement. According to these scholars, not only Lenin, Stalin and Molotov were guided by this principle, but even the younger generation of the Soviet leaders represented by Khrushchev, would inherit this ambivalent worldview¹¹⁷. According to this analysis it is possible to observe how Stalin did not refuse to dismiss, at least for some time, the ideological proselytism in the years 1944-1945, which were characterised by the adoption of a more cooperative stance by both the two superpowers, also thanks to the personal relation between the Soviet leader and the American president Roosevelt. The

¹¹⁴ N. M. Naimark, L. Gibiansky, 1997, cit.

¹¹⁵ V. Mastny, "The Cold War and Soviet Insecurity: The Stalin Years", New York, 1996

¹¹⁶ M. P. Leffler, D. S. Painter, "Origins of the Cold War: An International History", New York, Routledge, 1992

¹¹⁷ V. Zubok, C. Pleshakov, "Inside the Kremlin's Cold War, from Stalin to Khrushchev", Harvard University Press, 1996

Kremlin knew, however, that it had to start a complex process of reconstruction after the war and did not want to irritate excessively the U.S. and Great Britain.

A series of problems arose in different parts of the socialist bloc, especially in Yugoslavia, which was expelled from the Cominform at the end of June because of the excessive autonomy that Tito assumed on himself. Stalin, who believed that he could have easily got rid of Tito, was forced to face the limits of his power even in what he believed to be his internal sphere¹¹⁸. In 1949 other two events let the Cold War enter a new and more dangerous phase: the first one was the explosion of the Soviet atomic bomb, that put an end to the period in which the Kremlin was compelled to pursue a politics of peace, limiting itself to put pressure on the limits of its sphere of influence. The second important event that changed the equilibrium established at Yalta was the proclamation on October 1, 1949 of the People's Republic of China. The victory of Mao appeared as a confirmation of the validity of the politics of Stalin and caused an impression also in the U.S., especially after the Sino-Soviet treaty signed on January 22, 1950. The successes in Asia were counterbalanced by the preoccupation in Eastern Europe, where a series of negative popular reactions were caused by the launch of new collectivisation and industrialisation programs, accompanied by new repressions. The situation was especially tense in Western Ukraine and in the Baltics, where the deportations and the allocation of Slavs provoked the rising of the contempt towards this ethnic group and the hatred towards the communists¹¹⁹.

In the field of the inter-ethnic relations, the Stalin regime left open many controversies; the relative liberalism of the first Bolshevik regime, which was able to build what has been defined as an "affirmative action empire", ended at the beginning of the 1930s¹²⁰. Under the domination of Stalin, the political line in relation to the national minorities had become more and more brutal; mass arrests and executions on the basis of the ethnicity, internal deportations of entire populations and the promotion of "russification" to create a unitary soviet citizenship literally undermined the cultural and professional potential of the country¹²¹. The first signals of instability came when Stalin was still alive, in the episodes in Western Ukraine and the Baltic states cited above. Even if a certain degree of inter-ethnic unity had been actually attained, behind the appearance of friendship among peoples many conflicts were hiding. The "Russian question", developed from the contradictory position of the majority of the inhabitants of the Soviet Union, at the same time pillar of the Soviet empire and one of its main victims, strongly

¹¹⁸ L. Ya. Gibiansky, "Sovetsky soiuz i novaya Iugoslaviya, 1941-1947 gg", Moscow, Nauka, 1987. J. Pirjevec, "Tito, Stalin e l'occidente", Trieste, Estlibris, 1985

¹¹⁹ S. Pons, F. Gori, eds., "The Soviet Union and Europe in the Cold War, 1943-1953", Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1996

¹²⁰ T. Martin, "The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939", Ithaca, London, 2001

¹²¹ T. Snyder, "Terre di Sangue. L'Europa nella Morsa di Hitler e Stalin, Milano, Rizzoli, 2011

favoured instability, to the point that it has been described as one of the elements that led to the dissolution of the USSR¹²².

Meanwhile, the events in the international arena fuelled the suspicion and the insecurities of the Soviet leader, strengthening his willingness to impose the sovietisation of the European communist bloc. Recurring to well-known methods like purges and false accusations, Stalin promoted and directed a campaign against “internal enemies” within the government groups of the socialist countries. This process was accompanied by the consolidation of the internal power of the dictator, so that it would not have been corroded; a new wave of national purges was launched. It is difficult to determine the criteria behind the choice of the themes and the victims. One of them was Andrey Zhdanov, who died in August 1948 and whose offices as Stalin’s substitute in the affairs of the party and chief of the apparatus of the Central committee were assigned to Malenkov. This event drastically changed the balance of power in the restricted circle of the dictator; once it lost its protector Zhdanov, the so-called group of Leningrad, represented primarily by the Gosplan president Nikolai Alekseevich Voznesensky and the secretary of the Central Committee Alexey Alexandrovich Kuznetsov, found itself irremediably weakened to the benefit of the rival group, represented by Beria and Malenkov. These upheavals caused a series of new contentions behind the scenes and the last wave of purges against the highest spheres of the Soviet power that became known as the “Leningrad affair”. The objectives pursued by Stalin in the conduction of this campaign may have been multiple; it is possible that it was part of his intimidatory scheme for the consolidation of his power, but it could also have been part of a broader violent renovation of the staff of the Soviet administration. This second hypothesis seems to be confirmed by the fact that the proofs against the officials from Leningrad were found at the same time when Stalin launched his attack against other old companions, in particular Molotov and Mikoyan¹²³.

Another important internal dynamic that occurred while the relations with the West were worsening regarded the anti-Semite policies promoted by the regime. The nature of the Stalin’s anti-Semitism has been the object of thorough questioning, and one possible explanation regards the political strategy based on calculations both in the internal and the international sphere¹²⁴. Just like every totalitarian regime, also the dictatorship of Stalin needed that the society was in a constant state of mobilisation, an objective that was attained feeding the threat of external enemies and using the national minorities as scapegoats, so that the popular discontent would not have been aimed towards the government. The Jewish became the most immediate target of the social stigma. However, Stalin was not able to exploit the existing anti-Semite feelings of the Soviet population right after the war had ended, since the complex

¹²² G. Hosking, “Rulers and Victims: The Russians in the Soviet Union”, Cambridge, London, 2006

¹²³ B. Tromly, “The Leningrad Affair and Soviet Patronage Politics, 1949-1950”, in *Europe-Asia Studies*, 56, 5(2004)

¹²⁴ B. Pinkus, “The Jews of the Soviet Union: The History of a National Minority”, Cambridge, 1988

international game and the advantages that could still be obtained from the alliance with the West imposed a degree of caution. The situation changed with the increase of the tensions with the western bloc, represented by the United States with their strong Jewish community. An extremely significant historical point of view describes the ideological paradigm formed in the years 1948-1949 as adapting Stalin's campaign against the inferiority complex towards the West to the exploitation of the anti-Semitism; the two instances fused in the campaign against the "cosmopolitans", intended by the Soviet masses as regarding the national Jewish minority and its foreign benefactors¹²⁵.

In the meantime, the situation in the rural areas of the Soviet Union were extremely negative, especially in Central Asia, but also in many Russian regions, and the reforms proposed by Khrushchev after his entrusting to the agricultural affairs were not successful. The other sector where the crisis was particularly sharp was that of the forced labour, and the government in 1951 promoted the adoption of a series of measures aimed at the reduction of the pressure on the workers and the tensions within the camps, like the depenalisation of absenteeism and the promotion of the evolution of forced labour in free work. In most of the cases these policies had the opposite effect than the one they were supposed to achieve, since they caused a relaxation of discipline and a consequent decrease of productivity.

Going back to the foreign policy, at the beginning of 1950 the leader of Korea, Kim Il Sung, attacked with the permission of Stalin the South of the country, but some months later American general MacArthur deployed his troops and attacked Kim forces from behind. The U.S. were able to take advantage of Stalin not invoking his veto power to declare that the intervention was within the scope of the United Nations. Kim asked Stalin for help, and the Soviet leader by his part exhorted Mao to intervene. At the end of October, the Chinese troops defeated the Americans. These events caused the West, but also Moscow, to think that they were witnessing the prelude to a new war and in the U.S. many discussions were held about the nature of the motivations behind Stalin actions; then the opinion according to which the attack on Korea was the preparation to a move towards Europe became the most accredited and the White House began an enormous economic and military effort launching an arms race that Moscow was not able to withstand¹²⁶.

Internally, in those years Stalin was exercising his power in a more and more hateful way and was prey of fears of persecution. This was reflected in the affair of the doctors of 1951, inflated by the outbreak of the obsession of the infiltration of enemy agents after the Korean war and the omen of a new global conflict. The affair involved mainly professionals of Jewish origins, because the Kremlin leader believed that the "agencies of Jewish nationalism" and the "global

¹²⁵ O. V. Chlevnjuk, 2016, cit. Y. Slezkine, "Il Secolo Ebraico", Neri Pozza, Vicenza, 2011

¹²⁶ S. Goncharov, J.W. Lewis, X. Litai, "Uncertain Partners: Stalin, Mao, and the Korean War", Stanford, 1993

Zionism” were the most important instruments of the imperialist forces¹²⁷. Some members of his entourage believed that he was also thinking about new purge in order to prepare the country for the war, and panic started to rise within the party. The panic among the ruling élite, the personal paranoia, and the fear of an imminent war, all of this came to an end with the death of Stalin on March 5, 1953, after a severe cerebral haemorrhage. It seemed that the death of the leader caused a mixture of different emotions across the country and in the rest of the world; while for the élite it corresponded to a liberation, and in a large part of the empire, in the Gulags and the working colonies the joy exploded, abroad the condolence of the popular strata and the intellectuals was sincere and even many opponents paid their tribute to the dead leader. However, the feeling that prevailed was the uncertainty for the future¹²⁸.

With his death, Stalin left the Cold War position of the Soviet Union in bad shape, but even worst was the situation of the Soviet leadership he left behind. The majority of the party leaders had come to power thanks to Stalin, and however hard they tried to act autonomously after his death, they were still influenced by the dead leader in the conduction of the relations with the rest of the world and the Cold War adversaries. In particular, according to some scholars, Stalin’s idiosyncrasies that did not die with him regarded the general sense of xenophobia, to which were related the fear of foreign agents and espionage, and a primitive understanding of the political system and decision-making processes of the West, which compelled the Kremlin to look for the conspiracy of powerful “dark forces” encouraging an arms race and planning a surprise attack to destroy the USSR¹²⁹.

2.5 Reforms, Cold War and New Roads

The year 1953 marked the beginning of a period of changes, characterised by the adoption of reformist policies and the political confrontation among Stalin potential successors, Malenkov, Khrushchev and Beria. In particular, the reform program reflected the need to relax the international tensions, to push the leadership of the satellite countries towards similar reforms, to put an end to the climate of terror within the country, abolishing the power of the political police, reconstituting the supremacy of the party and the state, lifting the pressure on non-Russian nationalities and promoting the improvement of the living standards of the population. At the end of March 1953, Beria, then vice-president of the cabinet, presented an amnesty project of the criminal laws, determining the liberation of more than one million prisoners, while others saw their sentence reduced or even cancelled. Later, he issued a series of memoranda against the policies of russification and denationalisation of Western republics and the annexed

¹²⁷ A. Graziosi, 2011, cit. N. Levin, “The Jews in the Soviet Union since 1917”, New York, 1990

¹²⁸ M. Flores, 1991, cit. A. Nove, “The Stalin Phenomenon”, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1993. J. J. Marie, “Staline”, Paris, Fayard, 2001

¹²⁹ V. Zubok, C. Pleshakov, cit.

territories and asked for the improvement of the political situation in the German Democratic Republic, criticising the rushing of the construction of German socialism.¹³⁰ Those policies however soon started to create problems: the amnesty caused a wave of criminality that caused havoc among the population, and it provoked also the discontent of the prisoners in the lagers that were not included in the process of liberation. In some of these structures great revolts erupted, followed by a violent repression but also by the acceptance of the most important requests of the insurgents, implying that a step further in the direction of the dissolution of the concentration system had been taken. Similar reactions occurred also in Eastern Europe, in Eastern Germany, Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria, contributing to the arrest of Beria on June 26, and to his execution on December¹³¹.

But despite the disappearance of his main promoter, the climate of renovation had already gained momentum: Malenkov proposed the exploitation of the heavy industry in order to increase the level of consumption of the population, the prices paid by the government for the deposits were increased and a series of new dispositions were adopted in order to make the issuing of passports for seasonal work easier. In the meantime, new amnesties further reduced the number of prisoners, abortion was decriminalised and the most tedious dispositions about divorces were abrogated. At that time, a new intelligentsia emerged, constituted by individuals whose thinking was rooted in the pain suffered during the Thirties and in the experience of the war, and who had regained possession of humanitarian values¹³²; in the rural areas the living conditions were improving and the population had more time to spend for themselves; in the urban areas the massive arrival of new cheap labour force significantly contributed to the economic boom of the Fifties. Therefore, this was a period of great opportunities that should have been seized in order to overcome the system built in the Thirties, but this did not happen, primarily because of the lack of nerve and ideas on the part of the administration, but also because the economic boom was believed to be indicative of the good status of the system, an illusion that was shared by the population as well as by the executives¹³³.

After the liquidation of Beria, the reforms in favour of the republics slowed down and in many of the Soviet territories two contradictory phenomena were developing: on the one hand the increased mobility and the prevailing of Russian as the main language added their effects to those of the war, increasing the interpenetration of the Russians and their culture in the other republics, while on the other hand the autonomy conceded to the local élites and the local culture triggered processes and requests heading towards the opposite direction. In this way, local governing groups were gaining power, founding their action on the adoption of the

¹³⁰ A. Antonov-Ovseenko, "Beria", Moscow, 1999. V. F. Nekrasov, "Beria: konets karery", Moscow, 1991

¹³¹ M. Kramer, "The Early Post-Stalin Succession Struggle and Upheavals in East-Central Europe: Internal-External Linkages in Soviet Policy Making," in *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 1-3 (1999)

¹³² B. Kagarlitsky, "The Thinking Reed: Intellectuals and the Soviet State, 1917 to the Present", New York, 1988

¹³³ P. Hanson, "Rise and Fall of the Soviet Economy: An Economic History of the USSR, 1945-1991", London, 2003

mainstream language in the relations with Moscow and their own language within the republics¹³⁴.

In 1955 the confrontation at the top level of the government resumed, when Khrushchev launched an attack on Malenkov exposing the flaws of his policies and his ideas, causing him to be substituted at the guide of the government by Nikolai Alexandrovich Bulganin. Internationally, the main developments regarded the Ginevra summit, the first one that reunited the Big Four after Potsdam, characterised by an overall climate of collaboration in which Eisenhower highlighted for the first time the question of the arms control and after which the USSR politically recognised Federal Germany. The biggest changes however were occurring in the Third World, politically instituted during the 1955 Bandung conference, theatre of the opposition to imperialism, especially in relation to the West and the United States; a period extremely favourable for the Soviet Union was starting in the realm of the international relations, to an extent that the Kremlin decided to adopt a strategy in support to the national bourgeoisies and launched a program of economic aid in the Third World¹³⁵.

Internally, the year 1955 was significant for the party and its leadership. Indeed, after the XX Congress of the Party, Khrushchev reunited all the delegates and read the famous secret report on Stalin, which formally condemned the cult of the personality and denounced the crimes committed by the dead leader. Khrushchev knew that in this way he was challenging the opinion of the party and that he was taking a big risk, but in this way, he was reaching the peak of his career as secretary general and paving the way for the de-stalinisation. However, as Graziosi pointed out, the secret report was based of three false axioms: it read that problems and distortions started after 1934, preventing the radical reformation of Stalin's system, the terror of 1936-1938 was described as involving only the members of the government élite and the party, and the party itself was portrayed as a victim of the dictator, thus hiding the faults of the "old Bolsheviks" and of Stalin's collaborators, including Khrushchev himself¹³⁶.

The report inflicted a heavy blow to the Soviet power and shook the legitimation of the regime, and even if the leaders consequently decided to cancel the plenary session in which the military leadership of Stalin was to be scrutinised, the critiques of the past policies, especially in relation to the agricultural sector, were becoming more and more intense. The impact of the secret report on the population provoked different feelings and reactions in the various social classes and populations of the Union, many people did not understand it, others did not approve the drastic change in the depiction of Stalin, others exploded in manifestations of contempt towards the former secretary general¹³⁷. At the end of June 1956, the Central Committee had

¹³⁴ L. Hajda, M. Beissenger, *"The Nationalities Factor in Soviet Politics and Society"*, Boulder, CO, 1990

¹³⁵ D. I. Dallin, *"Soviet Foreign Policy after Stalin"*, Philadelphia, 1961

¹³⁶ A. Graziosi, 2011, cit. C. Linden, *"Khrushchev and the Soviet Leadership"*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966

¹³⁷ A. Nove, *"Stalinism and After"*, London, Allen & Unwin, 1975

imposed new limits to the critique towards Stalinism, but in the West, the publication of the report had already had a deep impact on the myth of the USSR. However, the socialist countries were those that worried the Kremlin the most, especially Hungary, Yugoslavia, Mao's China and Poland. The latter, after Khrushchev had been accepted as the new head of government, became for some years the freest country of the communist bloc¹³⁸. The country where the situation really precipitated however was Hungary, when in Budapest a massive demonstration in favour of the Polish, with participants destroying symbols of Stalin, took place on October 23, 1956. The Kremlin intervened to sedate the protest and there were victims, but the situation seemed to return to normality rather quickly, until the Soviet troops had left the country. Prime minister Nagy announced that Hungary would have withdrawn from the Warsaw Pact and the Kremlin reacted harshly and quickly: the Soviet army entered Budapest on November 4, engaging in a brutal battle with the insurgents, killing many of them. Nagy was arrested and imprisoned in Romania.

The event had tightened with fear the cohesion of the Soviet bloc, but its consequences were overall disastrous: the unpopularity of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe were evident at this point and the United Nations condemnation of Moscow included the votes of many Asian and African countries¹³⁹. Internally the crisis weakened the position of Khrushchev and conversely strengthened his opposers, guided by Molotov. However, Khrushchev was able to overcome the group of Molotov, the so called "anti-party" group, with the support of a mobilisation organised by the military and the Central Committee, reshaping the balance of power between the latter and the secretary general and putting an end to the conservative tendencies of the political élite. Nevertheless, Khrushchev was hit hard by this and started to isolate himself even from his supporters and to behave quite unpredictably.

Khrushchev view of the international situation had been described as characterised by the tendency to blame the United States for the worsening of the confrontation between the two superpowers; in particular he denounced the American violation of the Potsdam agreements on Germany and the forcing of the Soviet Union out of Japan, contributing to the idea that if treaties are not fortified by force, they have no value¹⁴⁰. Nevertheless, it has been observed that Khrushchev did not share Molotov's view that the confrontation with the West had been preordained and even acknowledged that both parts had made mistakes in the past, assuming a critique stance in relation to the policies of Stalin, Molotov and Beria for having played in America's hands. Much of his involvement in the Cold War has been explained by his desire to overcome Stalin's entangled international legacy, that however continued to haunt him until

¹³⁸ R.F. Miller, F. Feher, "Khrushchev and the Communist World", London, Croom Helm, 1974

¹³⁹ M. Kramer, "The Soviet Union and the 1956 Crises in Hungary and Poland: Reassessments and New Findings," in *Journal of Contemporary History*, 2 (1998). B. Lomax, "Hungary 1956", London, 1976

¹⁴⁰ June 1953 CPSU Central Committee Plenary Meeting, in *Izvestija TsK KPSS*, n.1

the end of his political career, in the form of the fear of losing the strategic periphery of security around the USSR¹⁴¹.

The theoretical basis of Khrushchev departure from Stalin's legacy in 1955-1956 took form in the rejection of the inevitability of global war and of the violent global revolutionary transition from a capitalist to a socialist order. Instead he adopted a sort of interpretation of the doctrine of "peaceful coexistence" between the two opposite social systems, capitalism and socialism, formulated by Lenin. These changes of perspective in the Kremlin leadership can be considered to have marked a shift from the thinking of Stalin and Molotov, who considered the Cold War as a possible prelude to another world war, to a view of the Cold War as a period of transition from the era of imperialist wars to an era of peaceful economic competition between the two systems¹⁴².

The internal tensions and the increasing gap of perspectives that was opening up between the USSR and China were counterbalanced by the launch in orbit on October 4, 1957 of the Sputnik, the first artificial satellite in history. The success was enormous for the image of the country and the message sent to the rest of the world in terms of power was clear, causing a great degree of sensation also in the United States¹⁴³. So, Khrushchev, on the wave of the enthusiasm for the status that the country and his government had suddenly achieved, launched the so-called little leap forward, focusing first of all on agriculture and adopting measures based on his convictions that it was possible to abolish the mandatory deliveries of the plots and to promote the production of milk and meat. In the industrial sector, the investments were once again directed towards the heavy industry and they were financed recurring to the government balance and bank credits, launching an immediate economic boom, but at the same time paving the way for inflation problems and scarcity, in a context in which the technological gap with the U.S. was becoming worse, despite the Sputnik¹⁴⁴.

In 1958, Khrushchev launched in an attempt to stabilise the international situation; in order to send a message to Tito and to the supporters of the national currents in Eastern Europe, he ordered the execution of Nagy in Romania, while he tried to solve the problems with Mao, but the tensions worsened up to the point that the Kremlin decided to take back the promise of giving the atomic bomb to China, thus compromising the relations between the two communist powers¹⁴⁵. In Germany, the secretary general wanted to turn West Berlin from a problem to an instrument for the solution of the German question and issued an ultimatum calling for the

¹⁴¹ V. Zubok, C. Pleshakov, cit.

¹⁴² A. Ulam, "Expansion and Coexistence: Soviet Foreign Policy, 1917-1973", Praeger, New York, 1974. J. G. Ritcher, "Khrushchev Double Bind: International Pressures and Domestic Coalition Politics", John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1994

¹⁴³ P. Dickon, "Sputnik: The Shock of the Century", New York, Walker and Company, 2001

¹⁴⁴ A. Katz, "The Struggle for Economic Reform in the Soviet Union", London, Praeger, 1972

¹⁴⁵ W. E. Griffith, "The Sino-Soviet Rift", Cambridge, MA, The MIT Press, 1964

reaching of an accord on the recognition of the two German states. In this way he was able to obtain a meeting with the American foreign minister that finally allowed him to visit the U.S. When he went back to Moscow a wave of pro-American feelings broke out, which corresponded to a further increase in the tensions with China, which the Kremlin even accused of keeping negative relations with the Americans. But overall the initiatives of Khrushchev in the international arena were positive and reflected his willingness to pursue a relaxation of the tensions in order to have more resources to use in the process of internal transformation¹⁴⁶. However, the difficulties soon re-emerged, especially after Khrushchev attempts to re-approach Beijing and the failure of the Paris summit that was to be held in 1960 between the secretary general and the American president Eisenhower. In addition, in the spring of 1961 Moscow had to face new fractures in his sphere of influence, when Albania decided to join the cause of China, soon followed by Romania, that took advantage of the instability in order to start moving away from the USSR. The summit of Vienna of 1961 saw a Khrushchev determined to put pressure on Kennedy, but the crisis in the German Democratic Republic was cause of shame for the Kremlin, whose aid in the region proved to be insufficient, and it urgently called for a solution. The summit established the division of Germany and the erection of the wall that would have divided the city and Europe for the following thirty years¹⁴⁷. Nevertheless, in the short term the division was useful in re-establishing a degree of stabilisation and in avoiding a war that many feared would have started sooner or later.

In 1962 the situation evolved once again, when Khrushchev decided to preserve his position in international negotiations and to revamp the image of the power of the Soviet Union, and placed short and medium range missiles in Cuba, setting up operation Anadyr. The move was basically the product of three considerations: the first was the presence of American missiles in Turkey, which was formally advanced as the motivation behind the operation, the second was the desire to defend the island, demonstrating the willingness to support the revolutionary movements in the Third World, and the third was the awareness that those missile were intended to serve a strategic purpose, as they would have allowed Moscow to negotiate with Washington on an equal footing. According to Zubok and Pleshakov, what pushed Khrushchev into the arguably most dangerous episode of the Cold War and the potential prelude of a nuclear conflict was not the pragmatic pursuit of the well-being of the Soviet empire, but his revolutionary commitment and his sense of rivalry with the United States. From this perspective it is possible to tie together the Cuban adventure and the Berlin crisis in 1959-1961, since the fear of the Kremlin to lose Cuba can be compared to its fear about the safety of the German Democratic Republic. Once again these two authors emphasise Khrushchev willingness to

¹⁴⁶ A. Graziosi, "L'URSS dal Trionfo al Degrado. Storia dell'Unione Sovietica, 1945-1991", Milano, Il Mulino, 2008

¹⁴⁷ H. Harrison, "Driving the Soviets up the Wall: A Super-Ally, a Superpower, and the Building of the Berlin Wall, 1958-61", in *Cold War History*, 1, 1(2000)

preserve the impression of the communist movement on the march, which was believed to have directed the end of the Cold War in domains favourable to the Soviet Union. It seemed that the loss of Cuba would have irreparably damaged this image, while at the same time it would have entailed the success of those in Washington who promoted the roll-back of communism and denied any legitimacy to the USSR¹⁴⁸.

After some confrontations, Kennedy and Khrushchev were approaching an accord, despite Castro's willingness of a clash, demonstrated by his order to shoot down the American planes flying above the island. The crisis was resolved when the White House declared that the invasion of Cuba would not have been attempted and the Kremlin, in a message characterised by the repudiation of war, announced the withdrawal of Soviet missiles. This solution to the Cuban affair caused the indignation of Castro, that talked about "treason", a judgement that was similar to that shared by the majority of the communist leaderships, and even the Soviets perceived it as a heavy blow to the prestige of the USSR, that had bowed its head to the Americans¹⁴⁹. On the other hand, the episode had positive effects, since it showed that nuclear weapons could not be openly used as a means to obtain political advantages without a war that none of the contenders was willing to fight¹⁵⁰, and opened up dialogue opportunities for the two states, which in August 1963, signed a treaty banning nuclear tests in the atmosphere. Internally, the XXII Congress of the party was the theatre of the elaboration of a program that aimed at the attainment of communism, identified as material well-being, shorter working time, a pension system and so on, resurrecting the propaganda and at the same time advancing the problem of the creation of a culture common to all the nationalities, that needed to be merged in a new community¹⁵¹. On the economic front, Khrushchev was worried about the slow increase in productivity, by the excessive bureaucratisation of the administration and most of all by the lack of goods that forced the government to regretfully impose the rise of the prices of meat, milk and butter. On June 1, 1962 a violent uprising erupted in the city of Novocherkassk that was brutally repressed by the army, thus contributing to the spreading of the discontent among the population, an increasing portion of the administration and the intellectuals¹⁵². The following years the stagnation persisted, and Khrushchev opponents started to work on his removal: those people were organised in two groups, one composed by senior executives, conducted by Brezhnev and supported by regional secretaries, military

¹⁴⁸ V. Zubok, C. Pleshakov, cit.

¹⁴⁹ R. Löwenthal, "World Communism: The Disintegration of a Secular Faith", New York, 1964

¹⁵⁰ W. Raymond Duncan, "The Soviet Union and Cuba", New York, 1985. A. Fursenko, T. Naftali, "One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Kennedy and Castro, 1958-1964", New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997. R. L. Garthoff, "Reflecons on the Cuban Missile Crisis", Washington, DC, Brookings Institution, 1989

¹⁵¹ A. Brumberg, "Russia under Khrushchev: An Anthology from Problems of Communism", New York, Praeger, 1962. C. Linden, "Khrushchev and the Soviet Leadership", Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966

¹⁵² S. H. Baron, "Bloody Saturday in the Soviet Union: Novocherkassk 1962", Stanford, CA, 2001

officials and managers of the military-industrial complex, and one composed by younger executives. These two groups organised an extraordinary assembly, forced Khrushchev to fly back from Egypt, where he was attending the inauguration of the Assam dam, partly financed by the Soviet Union, and moved against him a ferocious attack, pointing out his political mistakes and his personal flaws. Khrushchev, now old and tired, decided not to engage in the fight and the Central Committee sanctioned the nomination of Kosygin as prime minister and elected Brezhnev secretary general.

2.6 Along the Way of the Crisis

The program elaborated by the new administration regarded primarily the reconstruction of the power vertical of the party (Central committee, regional committees, district committees) and of the party control of the economy. Furthermore, the policies aimed at increasing the well-being of the population were multiplied, but they did not address the problems at the core of the system¹⁵³. The willingness to maintain the welfare policies marked a continuity with the previous administration, but many of the measures undertaken by Khrushchev that characterised the little progress of his era were abolished and in some cases substituted by a limited economic liberalisation.

Also the foreign policy was characterised by a degree of continuity with the aims and the contradictions of the precedent years. Its main objectives were: the re-approachement with China, the acknowledgement of the Soviet Union as a global superpower by the U.S., the reduction of the tensions between the East and the West, the construction of mechanisms aimed at regularising the relations between the two blocs and the extension of the Soviet sphere of influence in the Third World. While the desire to improve the relations with the West seemed to work for a while, the attempt to re-approach with China did not meet the approval of Mao.

Internally, the economic problems were addressed in two plenary sessions; the first one focused on agriculture and established the modernisation of the sector through the allocation of enormous financial resources and the introduction of chemical fertilisers and pesticides, causing in few years serious ecological problems in large regions of the country. The second one issued a reform of the industrial sector, but the measure turned out to be contradictory, especially in relation to the revaluation of the economic calculation, that made evident once again the problem of the prices and of the currency as an unreliable means to monitor transactions¹⁵⁴.

Brezhnev was also interested in the redefinition of the legitimization of the regime, and wanted

¹⁵³ N. Fedoryenko, "Soviet Economic Reform: Progress and Problems", Moscow, 1972

¹⁵⁴ J. L. Felker, "Soviet Economic Controversies", Cambridge, MA, 1966

to attain this objective through the reconstruction of the Great Patriotic War: the cult of the war became one of the main components of the official ideology, but it was founded on a false image of the conflict, that did not include the events between 1939 and 1941, the Shoah, the lack of consideration for human life during the military operations and the internal repressions. At the same time, however, this cult proved to be successful because he was based on one truth, the victory had been a success due to the efforts of the population as a whole¹⁵⁵. In the realm of the nationalities, the situation was characterised by contradictory signals, but at first the positive ones prevailed, as it was shown by the complete restoration of the rights for the greater part of the nationalities in 1967, that nevertheless was not fully implemented in Ukraine, where the government considered too much important not to deal with it directly. In addition, the mechanism of the construction of the nationalities was slowed down by phenomena that were pushing in the opposite direction, like the increasing of the Russian minorities within the republics and the progress of the so-called "slow russification", carried on, among other things, through the television and some initiatives related to the elementary education¹⁵⁶.

As far as society is concerned, the material conditions of the population continued to improve, but in some sectors the situation was still dire, as for example in the housing issue, and the limited well-being of the urban areas was extremely unequally distributed, with the people working in the sectors considered secondary and women in general still conducting an extremely poor existence. In addition, in the Sixties the Soviet population in general started to show the symptoms of a progressive degeneration, that could be observed in the increase in crime and alcohol consumption, and in the negative trend of the demographic perspectives, measured in the decline of the average life expectancy of the male population and the fall of the birth rate¹⁵⁷.

At the international level the Chinese hostility continued to represent the main problem for the Kremlin and it pushed the Soviet leaders to move towards the United States, which by their part were also willing to come to terms with Moscow primarily because of the desire to find a solution to the conflict in Vietnam. The beginning of the détente provoked in the East-European élites the feeling that the Soviets and the Americans were making arrangements behind their backs, but main core of the centrifugal forces started with the increase of tourism between west-Europeans and east-Europeans, leading the former to acknowledge bitterly the inferiority of their living conditions¹⁵⁸. The unrest increased also among the intellectuals and anti-Soviet

¹⁵⁵ N. Tumarkin, "The Living and the Dead: The Rise and Fall of the Cult of World War II in Russia", New York, 1994

¹⁵⁶ R. Szporluk, "The Influence of East Europe and the Soviet West on the USSR", New York, 1976

¹⁵⁷ V. Trembl, "Alcohol in the USSR", Duke University Press, 1982. V. Chalidze, "Criminal Russia", New York, 1977. Yu. A. Poliakov, "Naselenie Rossii v XX veke, vol. 2, 1940-1959 gg.", Moscow, 2000-2001

¹⁵⁸ M. J. Dobson; "The Post-Stalin Era: de-Stalinization, daily life, and dissent", in *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 12, 4(2011)

tendencies started to become a serious problem for the Kremlin, as shown in the case of Czechoslovakia; here, the government of Dubček was at first looked at with sympathy by Brezhnev, but soon the situation changed when the lack of trust for the Czech government and the danger for the stability of the Warsaw pact compelled Moscow to look for pro-Soviet forces on which to rely to overcome the situation. Brezhnev, who feared that the situation was getting out of hand, threatening to become a serious danger for the interests of the whole USSR, at first tried to negotiate an accord with Dubček, but then gave his consent to the use of the armed forces. Between August 20 and 21 the Soviet army invaded Prague, in an episode that represented a military success but a political failure: indeed, the Soviet forces were not able to constitute a new Czech government and did not even manage to obtain the majority of the seats in the parliament, while Brezhnev signed an accord with the arrested establishing the withdrawal of the measures that had previously undertaken against Czechoslovakia and the return to power of the leaders of the opposition movement. However, Brezhnev was ready to pay this price, knowing that it would have allowed him to re-affirm his authority and to strengthen the cohesion of the Warsaw pact without affecting the relations with the West¹⁵⁹.

The solution of the Czech question allowed the continuation of the *détente*, and in July 1968 Moscow and Washington had signed a nuclear non-proliferation treaty, and Johnson, still obsessed with the Vietnam war and willing to obtain the Soviet support in order to get out of it, condemned the invasion of Czechoslovakia in really bland terms. By his part, the Kremlin was worried by the tensions with China, with which in March 1969 the first clashes occurred on the frontier between the two nations, near the Ussuri river. The following months, the shared desire of *détente* pushed the USSR and the U.S. to start the negotiations for a treaty on strategic arms control¹⁶⁰. Therefore, it is possible to say that a double thrust originated from outside Europe had been at the base of the acceleration of *détente*, other than from the stabilisation of the situation in Europe and the strengthening of Soviet military power. On the contrary Moscow was well aware of the difficulties in which the Soviet economy as well as its satellite countries were finding themselves¹⁶¹.

During the Seventies the Soviet administration hoped that the import of technology from the West would have favoured the progress of the country, but the real salaries of the population continued to lose ground with respect to those in the Western countries and the problem of the excess of currency held by the Soviet people continued to grow, influencing negatively

¹⁵⁹ M. Kramer, "Crisis in Czechoslovakia, 1968: The Prague Spring and the Soviet Invasion", Harvard University Press. "The Czechoslovak Crisis and the Brezhnev Doctrine", in C. Fink, P. Gassert, D. Junker, "1968: The World Transformed", Cambridge, 1998

¹⁶⁰ A. de Tinguy, "U.S.-Soviet Relations During the *Détente*", New York, 1999

¹⁶¹ A. F. Dobrynin, "In Confidence. Moscow's Ambassador to America's Six Cold War Presidents (1962-1986)", TimesBrook, New York 1995. Z. Brzezinski, "Power and Principle. Memoirs of the National Security Advisor, 1977-1981", Farrar Straus Giroux, New York, 1983

monetary incentives and productivity. Thus, the government felt once again the necessity to resort to periodic “cleanings” of the monetary surplus, but a revolt erupted in Poland after the rising of the prices introduced in December 1970 provoking the irritation of the Kremlin¹⁶². In the meantime, the situation in the rural areas was making very slow progress despite the investments, and after very bad harvests in 1972 and 1973 the administration decided to resort to its reserves to import wheat. In addition, the increase of an excess of demand that continued to remain unsatisfied constituted a strong incentive for the expansion of the private production and the strengthening of a second economy, or illegal economy, together with a further expansion of crime.

Brezhnev and his government however continued to adopt a narrative designed to hide the problems of the country, especially in front of foreign observers, and during the XXIV Congress of the Party the secretary general sanctioned the conservative turn and talked about the concept of “development socialism”, based on solving the unbalances created by the precedent growth and on the progressive harmonisation of the various groups of society and economic sectors in a modern and balanced ensemble. This cult for the present represented one of the aspects of the promise of stability that made Brezhnev so much appreciated among the groups of the little and great Soviet bourgeoisie¹⁶³. This attitude was motive of shock for managers and intellectuals of different orientations but aware of the problems that were plaguing their country. Some members of the intelligentsia formed the first groups of dissidents towards the regime, whose spokesmen were primarily intellectuals and scientists like Sakharov, Alekseeva and Solzhenitsyn; their opinions were worrying the leadership, that feared that their discussions could be heard in the West, thus undermining the image of the regime. For this reason, the Kremlin launched a campaign of repression of all the form of dissent conducted by Yuri Vladimirovich Andropov, who in 1973 was nominated full member of the Political Bureau. The operation concluded with the expulsion of Solzhenitsyn from the country and seemed to confirm the strength and the stability of the system, but on the other hand the damage inflicted to the culture of the country with the repression, emigration or expulsion of its best representatives was significant¹⁶⁴.

In the international sphere, the XXIV Congress adopted a vision in favour of stabilisation and peace, and the debates focused on how to organise a pacific coexistence and on the awareness of the internal problems of the country, that pushed for an improvement of the relations with the West. The willingness to obtain support from Moscow in order to extricate from the Vietnamese question made the United States themselves ready to come to terms with the Kremlin, but Nixon combined the offers of friendship with the use of the Chinese card: the

¹⁶² M. Kramer, “Brežnev e l’Europa orientale,” in *Storica*, 22 (2002)

¹⁶³ A. Graziosi, 2008, cit.

¹⁶⁴ R. Tokes, “Dissent in the USSR: Politics, Ideology, and People”, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975

announcement on July 1971 that the American president would have travelled to Beijing for a visit was a shock for the Soviet leader and it confirmed the transformation of the Cold War in a tripartite game in which the USSR was at a disadvantage¹⁶⁵. The awareness of this inferiority compelled the Soviet leaders to formally invite Nixon to the USSR. The following summit was extremely positive for both parties and concluded with the signing of the first Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT I) that formalised the parity in the field of strategic nuclear weapons establishing mutual limits considered fundamental by Moscow in order to conclude its run-up. In Europe the détente favoured the implementation of Brandt's *Ostpolitik*, and the two German states established mutual diplomatic relations and were admitted to the United Nations. At the same time, the members of the Warsaw pact took advantage of the general climate of relaxation in order to ask for Western loans that would have helped them to improve their technological standards and in few years they contracted a significant debt with Western countries¹⁶⁶. In those years the Kremlin was worried by two things: the new possibilities opened up to dissenters to reach the European public opinion and the re-emergence of national-communism in many Soviet republics. The latter pushed the Soviet administration to remove government officials and party leaders in Romania, Czechoslovakia, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia, accusing them of provincialism and national arrogance.

In January 1973 the signing of the peace treaty between Vietnam and the U.S. opened a year extremely positive for the relations between the Kremlin and the White House, that culminated in June with the visit of Brezhnev in Washington, giving a strong impulse to the Soviet ambitions in the international arena. The Yom-Kippur war, erupted in October 1973 seemed to legitimate this aspiration, especially after the sudden increase in the oil prices. For the Soviet Union, that had become a major oil producer, the benefits were significant, since it could sell part of its production at higher and higher prices, accumulating billion of dollars. In this way, Moscow found itself with an unbelievable quantity of currency that allowed the administration to increase enormously the import of food, capital goods and technology¹⁶⁷. The positive wave for the Soviet Union was confirmed with the signing of the Helsinki accord in 1975, which determined, in addition to the economic and technological cooperation among the parties and the respect for human rights, the inviolability of the borders and for this reason was seen by the Kremlin as finally sanctioning the frontiers established in 1945.

In the Third World, after the crisis of the mid-Sixties, a new Marxist wave gained momentum, entailing a significant expansion of the socialist system. This phenomenon reached its apex in 1974 with the establishment of socialist regimes in Indochina and the former Portuguese

¹⁶⁵ R.S. Ross, "China, the United States, and the Soviet Union: Tripolarity and Policy Making in the Cold War", Armonk, NY, 1993

¹⁶⁶ R. Portes, "East Europe's Debt to the West: Interdependence is a Two-Way Street", in *Foreign Affairs*, 55, 4(1977)

¹⁶⁷ V. L. Israelyan, "Inside the Kremlin During the Yom Kippur War", University Park, PA, 1995

colonies, followed by Ethiopia and Nicaragua. This fuelled Moscow's illusion about the Soviet final victory in the Cold War, and the Kremlin, encouraged by the American crisis and the new financial strength originating from the oil industry, started to adopt more aggressive policies, with no fear that that would have eroded the relations with Washington. As a matter of fact, this interventionist stance within the game of balance between the pacific coexistence and the support for the liberation movement would have led to the crisis of the *détente*¹⁶⁸.

Within the Soviet bloc the continuation of the degradation, the perception of the economic crisis and the Helsinki accord caused the eruption of dissent, especially in Poland and Czechoslovakia; the repression was encouraged by the Kremlin, but the question of the respect for human rights had become source of concern for the Soviet leadership¹⁶⁹. Besides, at the end of the Seventies the health conditions of Brezhnev were rapidly worsening after he suffered two strokes, and his physical deterioration corresponded to a disengagement from the problems of the country. The weakening of the political presence of the centre in the coordination of the administrative apparatus of the country gave rise to a two-fold phenomenon: on the one hand, corruption was increasing, a trend symbolised by the illegal distribution of privileges among the members of the *élite* according to their rank, while on the other hand a feudalisation process developed in the provinces creating a chain of vassalage that went from the district to the capitals. Here most of the work was conducted by energetic men, like Mikhail Gorbachev in Stavropol and Boris Yeltsin in Sverdlovsk, who operated autonomously towards the solution of the local difficulties while only maintaining an ideological conformism in relation to Moscow and the Soviet leadership¹⁷⁰. The same process occurred in the republics, entailing the consolidation of the local *élites*; the members of these *élites* were worried by the russification process promoted by Moscow and in regions like the Baltics and Chechnya the population was already developing a sense of hostility towards this process and the Russian population. While in Ukraine and Belarus the promotion of the Russian language was progressing with no obstacle, in Central Asia and Transcaucasia tendencies leading towards the opposite direction were developing, supported also by the demographic dynamics and the politics in favour of the indigenisation¹⁷¹.

Economically, a financial crisis was expanding in the USSR, because of the monetary expansion, the growth of the balance of payments deficit and the quantity of currency held by the population that the state was not able to reabsorb, being afraid of resorting to an increase of prices. The existence of this mass of money produced several negative effects like the

¹⁶⁸ V. Zubok, C. Pleshakov, cit.

¹⁶⁹ A. Graziosi, 2011, cit.

¹⁷⁰ M. Lewin, "Russia – USSR – Russia: The Drive and Drift of a Superstate", New York, New Press 1995

¹⁷¹ J. Hiden, "The Baltic Nations and Europe: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in the Twentieth Century", London, Longman, 1994. R. G. Suny, "Transcaucasia, Nationalism and Social Change: Essays in the History of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia", Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1996.

weakening of the possibility to use monetary incentives in order to increase productivity, the hindering of the solution of social problems and the increasing of disparities. In addition, the increasing of unsatisfied demand favoured the development of the second economy¹⁷². But besides monetary factors, the bad economic performance of the Soviet Union was determined also by the lower quantity of labour force available, the inability to balance the production of the different sectors, the bad harvests of the mid-Seventies, the quantity of resources absorbed by the military expenditure, the moving towards East of the extraction of natural resources, that caused a costs increase, and a general technological backwardness¹⁷³. The regime decided to react to the agricultural difficulties expanding the tolerance towards the plots, promoting new allocations and trying to implement new reforms aimed at the creation of a big agricultural-industrial complex. In addition, Gorbachev, who in 1978 had become secretary of the Central Committee for agriculture, obtained from the government an increase of the credit and of the deposit prices, but the villages continued to lose inhabitants and the situation did not improve¹⁷⁴.

The situation was precipitating also in the realm of foreign policy, as the Kremlin was worried about president Carter's position in favour of cutting the military arsenals and the appearance of Eurocommunism, an alliance among the Italian, French and Spanish communist parties born in 1977 that criticised Soviet policies in relation to democracy and human rights¹⁷⁵. Furthermore, Moscow recent victories in Afghanistan, where a pro-Soviet regime was established in 1977, and in Ethiopia, with the victory of the Marxist regime, were counterbalanced by the crisis in Iran. Here the Khomeini revolution brutally repressed the Iranian communist party and signalled that the Third World movements were no more following the rules of the previous movements of national liberation and that they were not siding with Moscow any more¹⁷⁶. Soon after, the Kremlin started to discuss about a possible intervention in Afghanistan, where the positive feelings after the 1977 coup d'état were reversed by a Shiite insurrection in the city of Herat in 1979. In a first phase, the Soviet leaders decided to send to the Afghani government all kind help possible, but restrained from recurring to a military operation, until in Autumn 1979, the Political bureau, fearing that an American intervention in Iran would have extended in Afghanistan, reversed its position. The military intervention started in December and the Amin insurrectional regime was crushed. The invasion became the core of the end of détente and Carter responded with extremely harsh sanctions and the increase of military expenditures, weapon supply and training for the Afghani counterrevolutionary

¹⁷² I. Birman, "The Financial Crisis in the USSR," in *Soviet Studies*, 32, 1 (1980)

¹⁷³ J. L. Felker, "Soviet Economic Controversies", Cambridge, MA, 1966

¹⁷⁴ S. Hedlund, "Crisis in Soviet Agriculture", London, 1984

¹⁷⁵ V. V. Aspaturian et al., "Eurocommunism between East and West", Bloomington, University of Indiana Press, 1980

¹⁷⁶ R. Menon, "Soviet Power and the Third World", New Haven, 1986

forces¹⁷⁷.

After a few months of relative calm, in July 1980 the Soviet administration was forced to face the protest of the Polish workers after another price increase. The strikes led to the foundation of the Solidarność movement, guided by the worker Lech Walesa, an event that caused great consternation within the Kremlin. In autumn the preoccupations of Moscow were sharpened by the election of Reagan as president of the U.S., who since the beginning adopted a strong anti-Soviet rhetoric, but on the other hand proved to be quite prudent in its actual policies, since he respected the clauses of the SALT II, even though it had not been ratified, and decided not to come too close to China. Nevertheless, it seemed that the Kremlin failed to acknowledge this and perceived the behaviour of the president as provocative¹⁷⁸. In the meantime, in Poland, Jaruzelski ceded to the Soviet pressure and accepted the role of prime minister becoming the instrument for the repression of the national tendencies; indeed, Moscow knew that the military intervention was not a viable option after Afghanistan and decided to resort to the internal solution. Jaruzelski after some time of hesitation organised a successful military coup d'état, but the name of the organ that took power, the Military Council for National Salvation, showed the end of the communist ideology, and was forced to give way to the national-military rhetoric¹⁷⁹. In addition, other Eastern European states were experiencing a difficult situation, for example Hungary, in order not to declare bankruptcy, asked to be admitted in the International Monetary Fund, and all the countries members of Comecon were progressively distancing themselves from, when not entering in direct conflict with, Moscow. Also in Afghanistan things were not going the right way, since the counter-revolutionary guerrilla was holding on thanks to the international support and the Soviet army was in difficulty. It was in these difficult conditions that Brezhnev left the country when he died on November 10, 1982.

Andropov, former head of the KGB, became the new secretary general and his election gave an injection of energy to the Politburo, despite the limits of the new leader that assumed on himself the control of the defence, the fundamental question of the foreign politics and internal politics and the nomination of the main executives, but at the same time neglected the economy. He faced the internal degradation of the country resorting to the acceleration and the increasing of the efficiency of the system and substituting many executives and party officials. At the same time, a debate on the proper measures to adopt in order to save the Soviet economy started and the discussion led the administration to believe that the crisis was

¹⁷⁷ Russian General Staff, "The Soviet Afghan War", Lawrence, 2002

¹⁷⁸ R. L. Garthoff, "Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan", Washington, DC, The Brookings Institution, 1994

¹⁷⁹ D. S. Mason, "Revolution in East-Central Europe: The Rise and Fall of Communism and the Cold War", Boulder, CO., 1992

aggravated by the diffusion of criminality, alcohol consumption and other anti-social behaviours that were to be necessarily eliminated. For this reason, an extensive repression comprehending the population was started, and the measures undertaken regarded the verification of the identity of the people in the queues to the stores and police raids in places of public entertainment in order to hunt down those who should have been working. In some republics the morality grip turned into a challenge to the local élites and the case of Uzbekistan became an emblematic case, where after the death of Communist Party leader Rashidov, a number of local officials were substituted by officials from other regions, most of which of Slavic origin, causing the indignation of the local population¹⁸⁰.

Internationally, Andropov was struck by the aggressive rhetoric of the American administration, that reached its apex in the speech where the Soviet Union was defined as the “empire of evil”, followed soon after by the presentation of the Strategic Defence Initiative, an unrealizable project that nonetheless was able to lure Moscow into a trap, and increase the uneasiness of the Soviet situation¹⁸¹.

On February 9, 1984 the short term of Andropov as secretary general ended with his death and was followed by the even shorter term of Konstantin Ustinovich Chernenko, that lasted for a little more than one year, since March 10, 1985.

The parenthesis of Chernenko, primarily characterised by a general opposition to the reformist group of the Soviet élite, ended with the election of Gorbachev as secretary general. Soon the new leader started to emphasise the necessity to promote an intensive growth based on science and technology, to broaden democracy and to put an end to the arms race. With Gorbachev the significant and contradictory reform process of the country known under the name of *perestroika* was launched, and in a first phase it presented analogies with the policies of Andropov, since the program was based on the attempt to overcome the backwardness of the country with a leap supported by the acceleration and the changing of the socio-economic structure, by massive technology imports and by an improvement of management attained through an increase of the discipline¹⁸². However, forcing the development through the technical and scientific reconstruction of the mechanic industry implied huge investments on the heavy industry, despite the crisis provoked by the liquidity surplus and the lack of consumption goods. The result was necessarily a sharp increase in the emissions and state deficit that translated in an increase of the foreign debt. In addition, a prohibition policy was launched, but soon the moderate provisions of the official measure transformed in excessive repression practices that discredited the reforms at the eyes of the population.

¹⁸⁰ R. Medvedev, "Andropov and the dissidents: the internal atmosphere under the new Soviet leadership", in *Dissent*, 31, 1(1984).

¹⁸¹ G. Mitrovich, "Undermining the Kremlin: America's Strategy to Subvert the Soviet Bloc", Ithaca, N.Y., 2000

¹⁸² R. Sakwa, "Gorbachev and His Reforms, 1985-1990", New York, 1990

Internationally, the main objective pursued by Gorbachev was the normalisation of the relations with the U.S., that was seen as necessary in order to be able to focus more on the internal reforms. This objective required not only abandoning the methods of the previous politics, which had been discredited by the failures of the Seventies, but also of the ideological foundation of Soviet foreign policy. And if, as some scholars suggest, the Soviet leadership was ready to take this step after a long cultural and ideological maturation, it nevertheless had to show the signs of a real willingness to change to Washington¹⁸³. In this sense, the secretary general was able to obtain a meeting with Reagan which was held in Geneva on November 1985. Here, for the first time in years the two leaders were able to find a common language in relation to peace and the success of the confrontation was reaffirmed by the proposal of the Soviet leader to gradually reduce nuclear weapons, a decision that contributed to the development of positive feelings towards Gorbachev in the West¹⁸⁴.

The international successes were more than compensated by the doubts and the ambiguities that were starting to infect even the most convinced reformists. The sense of disorientation was accelerated by the Chernobyl catastrophe of April 26, 1986, which caused deaths, wounds, mass evacuations, and high political and economic costs, while protests soon converged in the Ukrainian national movements¹⁸⁵. The national question became a preoccupation for Gorbachev when KGB reports referred about tensions accumulated because of the economic crisis and exacerbated by the reduction of the local bureaucracies in the name of efficiency and the morality, causing the opposition of part the national middle classes and élites to the *perestroika*. The fracture emerged in Kazakhstan, when prime minister Kunaev was substituted by the Political Bureau and an uprising of student in Alma-Ata exploded, causing the rise of unrest that marked the entering of the national question in the Soviet crisis. In 1987 the political debates were characterised by the exacerbation of the divisions among the reformist groups, and in this climate of general confusion the reforms approved by Gorbachev continued to be obscure and incoherent, resulting from a compromise among the different reformist currents¹⁸⁶. In the meantime, the discontent was rising, and the national tension involved other non-Russian nationalities: in Latvia the first manifestation in memory of the victims of the deportations of 1941 was held, and thereafter it would have become a recurrence for all the Baltic republics. Other manifestations were held in Moscow, like the one organised by the Tatar community that occupied the Red Square asking for the permission to return to Crimea and the one organised by "Pamijat", a movement declaring to support

¹⁸³ V. Mastny, M. Byrne, "A Cardboard Catstle? An Inside History of the Warsaw Pact, 1955-1991", CEU Press, New York, 2005. R. D. English, "Russia and the Idea of the West", Columbia University Press, 2000

¹⁸⁴ R. Crockatt, "The Fifty Years War: The United States and The Soviet Union in World Politics, 1941-1991", London, 1995

¹⁸⁵ D. R. Marples, "The Social Impact of the Chernobyl Disaster", Edmonton, 1988

¹⁸⁶ A. Åslund, "Gorbachev's Struggle for Economic Reform", Ithaca, NY, 1991

perestroika but expressing nationalist and anti-Semite feelings¹⁸⁷.

From the point of view of politics, in October the confrontation between Gorbachev and Yeltsin rose in tone, when the latter criticised the apparatus for the failures of the reforms and offered his resignation. The secretary general ignored the resignation, but the humiliation suffered by Yeltsin was cooled down by his nomination as vice-head of the state body for constructions. At the end of 1987 the unrest of the republics continued to increase and involved especially the Baltics, Chechnya and Armenia. In the latter in particular the question of the Nagorno-Karabakh became a central issue in the local press, and a group of intellectual had launched a petition for the unification of the region with the Armenian republic; this current provoked the irritation of the Azerbaijanis, that together with the involvement of the local communist parties, provoked the beginning of disorders in Nagorno-Karabakh in February 1988 and the beginning of the spontaneous repatriation of the Azerbaijanis living in Armenia and the Armenians living in Azerbaijan caused a great deal of concern in Moscow. The situation precipitated when in the city of Sumgajt a violent anti-Armenian pogrom erupted and the Soviet administration, refusing to use force to solve the problem, showed the impotence of the centre and deprived Moscow of the credit necessary to influence local processes¹⁸⁸.

Meanwhile, Gorbachev launched an attack to the party apparatus, that he at this point believed was contributing to the ineffectiveness of *perestroika*; in September 1988 the departments of the Central Committee were reduced by more than half, but in this way the absence of the state apparatuses able to perform the functions of control of the economy accelerated the internal disintegration. The cuts of the staff involved also the Political Bureau, where the last representatives of the Brezhnev era were removed, as well as the responsible of the Secretary of the party. Its members stopped to meet periodically, sanctioning the end of the body that had held the country since the Twenties¹⁸⁹. For this reason, many functionaries, hoping to save their functions and their privileges, started to come closer to the nationalist positions, as occurred in the Baltic republics, where the creation of the popular fronts was encouraged. The manifestations against the celebration of the anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact gathered thousand of people, attracting the attention of other national groups and giving rise to what scholar Mark. R. Bessinger has defined an “interactive international tide”, composed by multiple mutually influencing waves from the Caucasus to Ukraine¹⁹⁰. A further development was the “declaration of sovereignty” pronounced by the Estonian Soviet, that proclaimed the right to abrogate Soviet laws, while also in the other Baltic countries the Russian language was

¹⁸⁷ M. Buttino, “In a Collapsing Empire: Underdevelopment, Ethnic Conflicts and Nationalisms in the Soviet Union”, Milano, 1993

¹⁸⁸ E. Melander, “The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict Revisited: Was the War Inevitable?”, in *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 2(2001)

¹⁸⁹ A. Graziosi, 2011, cit

¹⁹⁰ M. R. Beissinger, “Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State”, Cambridge, 2002

deprived of the status of official language and the discrimination against the local Russians intensified.

While internally Gorbachev was submerged by the difficulties, his foreign policy was conversely characterised by remarkable successes, the most important of which was his speech to the United Nations of November 7, 1988. In this occasion the Soviet leader announced a unilateral reduction of the military expenditures and the retirement of military units from the territory of the Warsaw pact countries. In addition, he celebrated the United Nations as an instrument of peace and talked about a new global order identified in a community of states of law that would have subordinated to law also their foreign politics. So, the culmination of Soviet humanism coincided with the exaltation of the myth of the U.N. and the repudiation of the principles of Marxism-Leninism, that aggravated the tensions with countries like Cuba, North Korea and East-Germany¹⁹¹.

At the beginning of 1989 the reforms establishing a representative system on two levels, the Congress of the people's deputies, elected by the population, and the Supreme Soviet, elected by the Congress itself, came into force, and the first elections were established on March. Their results were extremely different from those expected by the party, since Yeltsin triumphed in Moscow, the nationals in Transcaucasia and the radical reformists won in the Baltics, while only in Kazakhstan the regional secretaries of the party were elected. The cadres felt that the party had lost the election, while in Central Asia, in a situation of substantial fidelity to Moscow, the tensions assumed the form of clashes between nationalities, and in the Caucasus, in addition to the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, the main confrontation opposed the Georgian nationalists and the independence claims of the Abkhaz and the Ossetians.

Meanwhile, the Kremlin had to face the rising of unrest in the cities of miners, who were struck by the lack of goods, the bad working conditions and the acknowledgement of the disparity of the living conditions in relation with the West. Those instances caused them to explode in a wave of protest in many mining basins. In the requests advanced by the workers the democratic influences were evident, and Yeltsin even became the standard-bearer of the strikers. At the end of July an accord with the government was reached, but the success of the miners had already triggered the workers activism in the rest of the country¹⁹².

In the following months, the political crisis of the Soviet Union reached its apex with the foundation of the "Ruch", the Ukrainian movement whose stated objective was the independence of the republic, but most important of all with the collapse of the socialist bloc. The crisis opened on September 11, when Budapest announced the opening of its border with Austria, pushing many East-Germans towards Hungary. The leader of democratic Germany

¹⁹¹ M. Kramer, "Realism, Ideology, and the End of the Cold War," *Review of International Studies*, 1 (2001)

¹⁹² M. I. Goldman, "What Went Wrong with Perestroika", New York, 1991

Honecker tried to oppose the course of events, but the country became the theatre of hundreds of manifestations, and when the Political Bureau announced the end of the restrictions to travelling abroad, the crowd launched against the wall. Soon after also the Bulgarian, Czechoslovak and Romanian regimes crumbled down¹⁹³. The Kremlin was forced to face the problem of the unification of Germany, especially after the March 1990 elections where the communist gained only 20% of the votes. The new government was in favour of a reunification conducted on the basis of the Constitution of the Federal republic, and the question was eventually resolved after a personal negotiation between Kohl and Gorbachev, who ceded also because of the German offer of billions of marks in exchange for the Soviet assent¹⁹⁴.

The fragmentation process was advancing also within the Soviet government, when on January 1990 a Democratic platform was born within the party and the Russian Communist Party was created in anticipation of the Russian elections, but the triumph of Yeltsin threw in despair the party, while in Latvia and Ukraine the process of creation of a national political space was accelerated. Gorbachev managed to be elected to the presidency of the USSR by the People's Congress, becoming the symbol of the project of building a new federal state, but on the other hand he had to approve the institution of the presidency of the national republics and to yield to the democrats the abolition of art. 6 of the Constitution, that granted the party privileges, thus precipitating the crisis of the party¹⁹⁵. The results of the second turn of elections saw the triumph of the democrats both in Moscow and in Leningrad, with positive outcomes in all the large cities. The political fragmentation was completed between May and June 1990, when the Russian Parliament was called to elect its president and also in this occasion Yeltsin managed to defeat the candidate of Gorbachev, leading to a period of double power, a Soviet one and a Russian one, with two presidents, two parliamentary assemblies and two governments in the capital of the country.

Soon after, a chain reaction was triggered in the republics, and Georgia, Lithuania and Estonia, that had moved already in March, were followed by Latvia, Uzbekistan, Moldavia, Ukraine, Belarus, while Armenia declared its independence. While the Political Bureau was assuming more and more reactionary positions, the Congress of the Russian Communist Party, founded after the victory of Yeltsin, had become the occasion for a rapprochement between Gorbachev and the democrats of Yeltsin particularly in relation to economic questions, but soon the divisions on the economic program to adopt deepened the fracture between the USSR and Russia, with the latter thinking about adopting its own currency, imposing controls on its

¹⁹³ G. Stokes, "The Walls Came Tumbling Down: The Collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe", New York, 1993.
A. E. Stent, "Russia and Germany Reborn: Unification, the Soviet Collapse and the New Europe", Princeton, 2000

¹⁹⁴ I. T. Berend, "Central and Eastern Europe, 1944-1993. Detour from the Periphery to the Periphery", Cambridge, 1996

¹⁹⁵ A. Ogushi, "The Demise of the Soviet Communist Party", New York, Routledge, 2008

borders and creating its own army¹⁹⁶. In addition, the Russian Parliament adopted a law that subtracted from the USSR the control on the natural resources and aggravated the conflict with the federal state for the tax revenues. On November 20 Yeltsin announced an accord with Ukraine, soon followed by one with Kazakhstan, on the recognition of the respective sovereignties, the inviolability of the existing borders, the protection of the citizens living in the other republic and the economic cooperation¹⁹⁷.

At this point Gorbachev recognised that the power vertical needed to affirm its authority and for this reason on January 7, 1991 Soviet troops entered Vilnius, accompanied by an ultimatum from Gorbachev intimating to the Latvians the respect of Soviet legislation. However, in Moscow Gorbachev denied having ordered anything to the troops, provoking the disgust of the military officials, and his allies. In response, Yeltsin call a meeting with the Baltic presidents, during which a document in which Russia recognised the sovereignty of their states was signed, and between February and March 1991 the majority of the Latvians, Estonians and Lithuanians in a referendum voted in favour of the independence¹⁹⁸.

Conversely, Gorbachev hoped on the positive outcome on another referendum, the one about the opportunity to maintain the federation, that was to be held in March. The referendum, which was boycotted in the Baltic, in Georgia, in Armenia and in Moldavia, centred on the question if it was necessary to preserve the USSR as a “renewed federation of sovereign and equal republics, where the human rights and the liberty of the inhabitants of all the nationalities will be fully guaranteed”¹⁹⁹ had a positive outcome. Gorbachev interpreted the results of the referendum as a mandate not to preserve the Union as it was but to renew it, in order to save it. On this basis he moved towards a rapprochement to Yeltsin, who was favourable to the turn and promoted the signing of the Novo-Ogarevo accord between Gorbachev and nine republican presidents that established future meetings for the preparation of a new treaty. However, Gorbachev and Yeltsin remained divided on the nature of the new Union, since the former wanted to save as much as possible of the existing system, while the latter wanted a Union in which Russia would have been in a power position and with no more ties to the socialist past, and thus the exit from the Soviet context. In the meantime, in Russia Yeltsin won the republican elections, defeating the party, that at the eyes of its own executives was in full despair and passivity, and one month later he was proclaimed president of Russia in the Kremlin²⁰⁰.

In August, while Gorbachev was outside Moscow for a vacation, a group composed by

¹⁹⁶ J. B. Dunlop, “The Rise of Russia and the Fall of the Soviet Empire”, Princeton, 1993

¹⁹⁷ A. Graziosi, 2011, cit.

¹⁹⁸ J. Hiden, “The Baltic Nations and Europe: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in the Twentieth Century”, London, Longman, 1994

¹⁹⁹ https://ria.ru/history_spravki/20110315/354060265.html

²⁰⁰ J. B. Dunlop, cit.

representatives of the military-industrial complex, the Central Committee and the armed and security forces, by high executives of the Soviet Union and members of Gorbachev personal staff, reunited under the State Committee for the State of Emergency (GKČP), organised a coup d'état that, after failing to receive the benediction of Gorbachev, started on August 19, when armed vehicles entered in the main cities of the Baltic region and Moscow woke up with the streets presided by the troops. While on a first phase the coup d'état seemed to gain high recognition, it was poorly organised, and the Russian executives launched an appeal to the Russian citizens that declared the coup illegal. The GKČP did not manage to convince the troops to assault the White House and the Minister of Defence ordered the withdrawal of the soldiers from Moscow, marking the failure of the coup²⁰¹. Once back in Moscow, Gorbachev announced his resignation from secretary general of the CPSU, and a wave of arrest and suicides involved the old hierarchies, starting the crisis of the structures of the central power. Subsequently, the collapse of the structure that held up the Union accelerated the separation process of the Republics that were exercising the constitutional right to secede. The first to announce their detachment were the Baltic republics and Georgia, followed by Ukraine, Belarus, Moldavia, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan and Kirghizstan; on September it was the turn of Tajikistan, Armenia, Turkmenistan, followed on December by Kazakhstan.

Meanwhile the economic situation was precipitating, aggravated by the demographic and social crisis, whose problems were now falling back on the new republics, especially Russia, but in order to deal with them it was necessary to decide what economic and political system to adopt, to reinforce the structures of the Russian state and to solve the question of its borders and consequently clarify the future of those minorities living outside the borders of the republic. The final days of the USSR started in December when after the Ukrainian referendum in favour of the independence, president Kravchuk announced that his country was no more recognising the 1922 accords. On December 8, Yeltsin told Gorbachev that the presidents of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus would have met in Belavezha. Here a document was signed, announcing that the Soviet Union ceased its existence as a subject of international law and geopolitical reality and establishing the creation of the Community of Independent states. On December 10, the Belavezha accord was ratified by the Ukrainian and the Belarussian parliaments and ten days later eleven of the fifteen former Soviet republics signed in Alma-Ata the treaty that gave life to the Community of Independent States. The USSR formally ceased to exist on December 31, 1991²⁰².

The collapse of the Soviet Union can be considered a watershed event in the history of Europe,

²⁰¹ For a direct witness of the event see V. Bonnell, A. Copper, G. Freidin, "Russia at the Barricades: Eyewitness Accounts of the Moscow Coup", M. E. Sharpe, 1994

²⁰² E.W. Walker, "Dissolution: Sovereignty and the Breakup of the Soviet Union", Lanham, 2003. R. Szporluk, "Russia, Ukraine, and the Breakup of the Soviet Union", Stanford, 2000.

and an analysis of its dynamics, causes and consequences can occupy many pages. One of the protagonists of the *perestrojka*, Aleksander Yakovlev, observed that what he defined as the transition “from dictatorship to freedom” did not happen in 1991, but started in the previous years, when the first instances of the market economy started to appear. In this way the process that led to the dissolution of the Soviet system, and continued also after this had happened, can be described as a “reform”, rooted in the Soviet past and then ramified in all the different new states²⁰³. At the same time, it has been observed that in 1991 the Soviet system was already dead since many years and therefore the *perestrojka* was only the futile attempt to reanimate a giant dead body²⁰⁴.

But if the suddenness of the Soviet collapse can be explained by the fact that it was only apparent, since the USSR had long been in a state of coma, the majority of the observers has underlined the incredible nature of its peaceful character, describing it as a sort of “miracle” or even a double miracle, if one takes into account the missed intervention in Eastern Europe in 1989²⁰⁵. It is possible to consider Moscow’s refusal to resort to force as the principal contingent cause of the collapse; Kramer in particular observed how Gorbachev obstinacy to not use it represented a positive change in the typical Soviet methodology for the re-imposition of the desired order, but it was not compatible with his desire to preserve the USSR. This obstinacy, in addition, hid a misunderstanding of the nature of the Soviet system, which had been based on force and on the awareness that, when necessary, it would have been employed with no regrets²⁰⁶.

As far as the economic factors, some observers had already denounced the fragility of the Soviet economic system, strongly influenced by ideology. They knew the limits that the latter imposed on reforms and already in the Seventies and in the early Eighties were extremely pessimistic in relation to the probability of survival of the system²⁰⁷. It is important to observe that it is possible to distinguish the contingent causes of the Soviet collapse from those that dates back in time. A possible enumeration can include the weight of the Soviet past, that became unbearable once the amorality, hypocrisy, and corruption of the people in power, especially under the Brezhnev administration, came to light; the internal conflict of the leadership and those caused by the growth of the various nationalisms, starting from the Russian one; the militarisation of the economy, the crisis of the international position of the USSR and the role of the élite, part of which, despite power and privileges, choose to follow

²⁰³ A. N. Jakovlev, “La Russia, il Vortice della Memoria”, Spirali, Milano, 2000

²⁰⁴ A. Graziosi, cit.

²⁰⁵ S. Kotkin, “A un Passo dall’Apocalisse. Il Collasso Sovietico, 1970-2000”, Viella, Roma, 2010.

²⁰⁶ M. Kramer, “The Collapse of the Soviet Union”, in *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 1(2003). A. B. Ulam, introduction to V. Boldin, “Ten Years that Shook the World” Basic Books, New York, 1994

²⁰⁷ I. Birman, “The Financial Crisis in the USSR”, in *Soviet Studies*, 1(1980). M. I. Goldman, “USSR in Crisis. The Failure of an Economic System”, Norton, New York, 1983. R. Pipes, “Can the Soviet Union Reform?”, in *Foreign Affairs*, vol. LXIII, 1(1984)

the path of the reforms in order to improve a situation that they considered as unbearable²⁰⁸. Pichoya underlined the role of the homogeneity of the Soviet society, caused by the totalitarian nature of the regime, as the cause behind the fact that, when the crisis erupted, almost all the population rose to confront the government²⁰⁹. Others saw in the progressive collapse of the imperial pillar in Eastern Europe and of the internal ideological pillar the reasons of the demise, tied also to the demographic and moral crisis, which has been associated to the phenomena of alcoholism and abortions; to the decline of an economy which could not compete with the West; to the subsequent defeat in the race to well-being, which led a significant part of the inhabitants of the socialist bloc to consider the Western world as a superior system; to the increase of dissatisfaction of the Soviet nationalities, in particular the Russian one; to the disappointment and the illusions of the Soviet élite, forced to adopt reforms by the success of the Chinese ones, the negative trends in the Third World and the awareness of the impossibility to sustain the confrontation with the U.S²¹⁰.

In conclusion, what happened in 1991 was an event that marked the end of an epoch, the culmination of a series of complex processes characterised by mutual entanglements and specific dynamics, which cannot be easily analysed in a couple of pages. The consequences of this event changed a relevant portion of the world map, the global balance of power and ended the life of the largest socio-political entity of the Eurasian continent.

²⁰⁸ Z. Brzezinski, "Il Grande Fallimento. Ascesa e Caduta del Comunismo nel XX Secolo", Longanesi, Milano, 1989. D. M. Kotz, "Revolution from Above. The Demise of the Soviet Union", Routledge, London, 1997. S. L. Solnick, "Stealing the State. Control and Collapse in Soviet Institutions", Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1998. H. Carrère d'Encausse, "Esplosione di un Impero? La Rivolta delle Nazionalità in URSS", Roma, 1980. M. Buttino, "In a Collapsing Empire. Underdevelopment, Ethnic Conflicts and Nationalism in the Soviet Union" Feltrinelli, Milano, 1993

²⁰⁹ R. G. Pichoya, "Sovetskij Soyuz. Istoriya Vlasti, 1945-1991", Rags, Moscow, 1998

²¹⁰ P. Hollander, "Political Will and Personal Belief. The Decline and Fall of Soviet Communism", Yale University Press, New Haven, 1999. A. Jones et al., "Soviet Social Problems", Westview, Boulder, 1991. S. White, "Russia Goes Dry. Alcohol, State and Society", Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996. M. R. Bessinger, "Nationalist Mobilisation and the Collapse of the Soviet State", Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002.

4. Russia Today: the Russian Federation

3.1 After the Soviet Collapse: Crisis, Transition and Reconstruction

The year 1991 formally marked the fragmentation of the Soviet administrative and territorial unity in fifteen different republics: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan. In particular, the Russian state, that corresponds to the territory of the former RSFSR and has been the political, ideological and economic heirs of the USSR²¹¹ maintaining Moscow as its capital, took the name of Russian Federation and started a process of demolition of the Soviet economic structure and of introduction to the market. Already at the end of October 1991, Boris Nikolayevich Yeltsin, a former opponent of Gorbachev who had declared the independence of the Russian Republic from the Soviet System in 1990, once he had become the president of the newly formed Federation, announced an economic program based on the privatisation of the economy and financial stabilisation, that would have been conducted by prime minister Gaydar (in office from 1992 to 1998) and Chubais, who presided the new Committee for privatisation²¹². The Russian administration in the years that immediately followed the Soviet collapse focused almost exclusively on the economic transition, to the point that the creation of new fully democratic political institutions did not constituted a priority, and the first change in this respect regarded the liberalisation of prices in 1992; goods started to circulate once again, but in most of the cases at prices too high for the majority of the population, who felt a heavy material and psychological shock. The Russians experienced a wave of cultural, social and psychological tensions between the part of society that appeared to be ready to take advantage of the extreme changes that were taking place, and those who would have preferred a less rapid transformation process²¹³. The following months the ruble was declared convertible and foreign trade (up to this point a state monopoly) was liberalised, and while the volume of trade with the former Soviet states was collapsing, the one with the countries of the European Union started to grow fast. Other reforms regarded a massive operation of privatisation of buildings and the distribution to every family of vouchers that should have been used to buy equity packages issued by the companies that were being privatised, in order to take part to the privatisation process; however, most of the population did not understand the meaning of such an operation and many vouchers were gathered in the hand of new dealmakers, who exchanged them for cash, or lost value because of the inflation²¹⁴.

²¹¹ T. E. Fakiolas, E. T. Fakiolas, "Domestic Sources of Russia's Resurgence as a Global Great Power", in *Journal of International and Area Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (December 2009)

²¹² R. Ericson, "Economics and the Russian Transition", in *Slavic Review*, 3(1998)

²¹³ T. Gustafson, "Capitalism Russian Style", Cambridge University Press, Cambridge-New York, 1999

²¹⁴ J. Blasi, M. Kroumova, D. Kruse, "Kremlin Capitalism. Privatizing the Russian Economy", Cornell University

The latter was increasing (touching the figure of 839% in 1993)²¹⁵, while the policies of the first post-Soviet governments towards a financial stabilisation implied a heavy erosion of the gold and foreign currency reserves of the state, used in the support for the international course of the ruble. Consequently, in the 1990s the foreign debt of the Russian Federation increased by around 30 million U.S. dollars²¹⁶.

The transition to an economy based on the primacy of demand put stress also on the industrial production, that involved not only the light industry, strained by the end of the redistribution system of the Soviet times and by the imports of better-quality foreign goods, but also the heavy and the military sectors, that used to enjoy a privileged treatment under the Soviet rule. Also the agricultural production decreased sensibly and the level of life of some categories of citizens, like the retirees, women with children, unskilled workers, employees of lower ranks, teachers, scholars and researchers, reached extremely low levels; in addition, the creation of forms of trade union organisations in 1989-1991, especially among the striking miners, did not progress further and Western-type trade unions did not emerge in this phase²¹⁷. Many companies faced the crisis deciding not to fire their employees, according to the custom to maintain the maximum level of employment inherited from the Soviet system, and they were consequently forced to stop the payment of salaries; however, in this way the workers could continue to enjoy part of the services that Soviet companies had provided their employees and were still supported by the government, like kindergartens, factory outlets with discounted prices, strictures for social activities and canteens. An instrument used by the companies in order to avoid the effects of the inflation was the barter of finished goods, semi-finished goods and raw materials, practices that the government tended to tolerate, and a web of informal exchanges involved also individuals and families, with a system of loans and repayments, depending on the respective economic situation²¹⁸. The prices for raw materials and energy were maintained low in order not to further increase the costs of production, but in this way the conditions for large semi-legal speculation were created for those that made a profit on the difference between the internal prices and the world prices; the new fortunes that were built up by this new category of improvised entrepreneurs were used to feed the rampant corruption in the organs of the public administration, accompanied by the appearance and proliferation of criminality on a large-scale, a consequence of misery and the inability of the state to guarantee the public order²¹⁹.

Press, Ithaca, New York, 1997

²¹⁵ Data from <https://it.inflation.eu>

²¹⁶ F. Benvenuti, "Russia Oggi: dalla Caduta dell'Unione Sovietica ai Nostri Giorni", Carrocci editore, 2013

²¹⁷ W. Conor, "Tattered Banners: Labor, Conflict and Corporatism in Post-Communism Russia", Westview Press, Boulder, 1996

²¹⁸ R. Ericson, "Economics and the Russians Transition", in *Slavic Review*, 3(1998)

²¹⁹ J. Hough, "The Logic of Economic Reform in Russia", Brookings Institution, Washington DC, 2001

The Russian traumatic economic and social transformation inevitably reflected on the political situation, were a harsh confrontation involved the members of two representative assemblies that Russia had inherited from the USSR of the reform epoch, the Congress of the People's Deputies on the one hand and the Supreme Soviet on the other; on April 1992 the Congress publicly condemned the economic policies of the Gaydar government and on March 1993 an anti-Yeltsin group tried to trigger an impeachment procedure against the president, but the necessary number of votes was not reached. Yeltsin reacted by calling a referendum on two instances, the popularity of his figure and his economic reform, and the voters (64.5% turnout) confirmed their trust towards the president (59%) even though the positive response to the second question, despite still representing the majority, gained a lesser share of the votes cast (53%, a figure that, if we consider the turnout, represented only one third of the Russian population)²²⁰. The president decided to continue his challenge against the opposition and on June 1993 he created a commission with the task to redact the first Constitution of post-Soviet Russia, that should have been inspired by a presidential political system; the Congress of the People's Deputies was closed by Yeltsin after it had proposed a referendum on a different constitutional text that the assembly itself was to elaborate, and Alexander Vladimirovich Rutskoi, leader of the parliamentary opposition, and Khasbulatov, president of the Supreme Soviet, led a manifestation with insurrectional tones in Moscow. A military unit loyal to Yeltsin sieged the building of the Supreme Soviet, the White House, where a part of the protestors had found shelter, and forced the latter to surrender. After the revolt has been sedated and the opposition had been silenced, on December 12, 1993 the constitutional referendum on the text designed by the presidential commission was held, together with the first political election of post-Soviet Russia²²¹.

The main bodies of the new government structure are the two legislative assemblies, the Chamber of Representatives (Duma) and the Parliamentary Chamber (Federal Council), but the main figure remains the president, whose main tasks are: forming and removing a government, appointing and removing ministers and vice-premiers according to the indications of the prime minister, presiding over the ministry sessions, proposing laws, he is the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, he guides the internal and foreign policy, he can proclaim the state of emergency and presides the Federation Security Council. Moreover, the constitution also refers to an instrument of control and influence on the different branches of the federal administration and on the subjects of the Federation, the Presidential Administration²²².

²²⁰ D. Nohlen & P. Stöver, "Elections in Europe: A Data Handbook", Nomos, 2010

²²¹ F. P. Miller, A. F. Vandome, J. McBrewster, "1993 Russian Constitutional Crisis", Alphascript Publishing, 2009. For a more critic description of Yeltsin role in the events and of the nature of the constitution see J. T. Andrews, "When Majorities Fail: The Russian Parliament, 1990-1993", Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004

²²² J. Henderson, "The Constitution of the Russian Federation. A Contextual Analysis", Hart Publishing, Oxford,

In 1993 the political-territorial components of the Federation were 89: 21 republics, 10 autonomous districts, 49 regions, the cities with federal status (Moscow and St. Petersburg), and the Jewish Autonomous Region. The new Constitution promoted four autonomous regions of the old RSFSR to the status of republic and took note of the existence of the new Republic of Ingushetia, that seceded from Chechnya on June 1993. Unlike the Constitutions of the USSR and the RSFSR, the new one of the Russian Federation does not refer to the right of self-determination of the populations of the republics, thus excluding the right to secede²²³.

In addition, the dispositions in relation to the areas of shared competence between the centre and the subjects of the Federation equally comprehend the republics, the territories, the districts, the regions and the federal cities, thus making difficult, according to some observers, to determine the differences in the degree of autonomy attributed to the categories of federal subjects²²⁴. This can be considered as the willingness of the government to change the principle of the gradual attribution of prerogatives and autonomy to the hierarchy of the federal subjects that had characterised the Soviet system, but at the same time, within the Russian Federation the strength of the local centrifugal thrusts was still significant, forcing the Yeltsin administration to make concessions in favour of the conservation of essential elements of the old system, which emphasised and protected the ethno-cultural diversity. In this way, the 1993 Constitution can be described as reflecting both the new centralistic ambitions of the government of the Federation and the autonomy instances that had spread among the political forces and the different levels of the Soviet federal system in 1990-1993²²⁵.

So, in the years 1994-1996, the central power signed with the regions, territories, districts and republics tens of bilateral treaties intended to establish the autonomy from the centre to the maximum possible degree, thus not only preserving substantial elements of the soviet ethno-federalism, but creating the so-called "segmented federalism", according to which each subject of the Russian federation established a privileged relation with the federal centre, a relation that was different from the one between the centre itself and the other subjects²²⁶. This mixture of autonomism and latent independentism can be considered not a reflection of a preference of the population for the lightest possible form of federalism, but the attempt of the local élites to defend their political positions or their economic instances through the anchoring to the new democratic institutions.

The political consultations of 1993 elected the members of the Duma: according to the constitution, the assembly was composed of 450 deputies, half of which elected through a proportional system based on the party lists, while the other half was elected through a simple

2011

²²³ <http://www.constitution.ru/en/10003000-01.htm> Articles 65-79

²²⁴ J. Henderson, cit. F. Benvenuti, "La Russia dopo l'URSS. Dal 1985 ad Oggi", Carrocci Editore, Roma, 2007

²²⁵ S. Lowell, "Destinazione Incerta. La Russia dal 1989", EDT, Torino, 2008

²²⁶ F. Benvenuti, cit.

majority system. The relative majority of the seats was obtained by the pro-presidential party Choice of Russia (*Выбор России*), while the relative majority of the list votes was won by the Liberal Democratic Party; the Russian Communist Party, that had been legally reconstituted in 1992 under the leadership of Zyuganov, obtained only 11% of the seats. Other forces that managed to obtain parliamentary representation were Yabloko and Women of Russia, characterised by positions of political and moral criticism, if not outright opposition, towards the government of the president; finally, one third of the new deputies were composed by the so-called “independents”, elected in uninominal colleges and not included in any party list, fact that reflected the degree of disaffection of a large part of the electorate towards the new system based on the parties. Finally, a substantial part of the votes was dispersed among a myriad of smaller parties²²⁷. After the facts of October 1993, that closed the most intense period of social and political tensions of the Russian Federation, the new institutional framework that emerged from the double consultation of December marked the beginning of a period of relative stability. In 1994-1995, the government of Chernomyrdin, who succeeded to Gaydar at the guide of the government, started a new privatisation phase, organising the sale by auction of the greatest part of the large industry; the potential foreign buyers were prevented from joining the auctions, and the government, through manifestly underestimated auction bases, managed to favour politically related emerging businessmen²²⁸. Lack of transparency could be observed also in the privatisation operations covered by the loans in exchange for stocks: starting from 1995, the banks lent money to the state under the warranty of the majority equity packages that the latter was holding, then the loans were intentionally not refunded, and the companies became property of the banks. Overall, at the end of the 1990s, the part of the companies generating 70% of the GDP was privatised, but in many cases the state maintained congruous minority equity packages²²⁹.

The relative stability that was reached in 1993 was sensibly compromised by the beginning of the first Chechen war in 1994. In June 1992, under the presidency of Dzhokhar Musayevich Dudayev, Chechnya-Ingushetia declared its independence from the Federation, and one year later the territory inhabited by the Ingush seceded and re-entered again in the Federation as a republic. Soon after Chechnya fell into disorder and civil war, when the fight against Dudayev and his pro-Federation opponents turned into clashes among armed groups. Yeltsin decided to send a federal military unit in order to fight the Chechen leader and the separatist militia. The war was long and bloody, with tens of thousands of deaths and refugees and the destruction of Grozny, the capital of Chechnya; the situation contributed to the crisis of the

²²⁷ D. Nohlen & P. Stöver, cit.

²²⁸ V. Mau, “Russia in an Epoch of Turbulence: Crises and Lessons”, Routledge, New York, 2018. S. Guryev, A. Rachinsky, “The Role of Oligarchs in Russian Capitalism”, in *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 19, 1(2005)

²²⁹ S. Braguinsky, G. Yavlinsky, “Incentives and Institutions: The Transition to a Market Economy in Russia”, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2000

party of the president, whose members divided in between those favourable and those against the war, and in June 1995, after the anti-Russian terroristic attack of the independentist militia in the city of Budyonnovsk, the Duma expressed a formal vote of mistrust towards Yeltsin and his government. Dudayev was killed by a missile attack in 1996, and the new Chechen government signed an association treaty with the Russian government in 1997²³⁰.

The conduction of such a war and the increasing differences in wealth and political representation within the Russian society provoked the beginning of the decline in the popularity of Yeltsin, to an extent that the political elections of December 1995 sanctioned the victory of the left and centre-left opposition; Choice of Russia fell down to 2% of the seats and the spot of main pro-government party was taken by Russia-Our Home (*Наш дом – Россия*), founded by premier Chernomyrdin in April 1995, while almost half of the voters could not be represented in the parliament, since their vote was dispersed among more than thirty little parties that did not manage to reach the 5% of the list votes threshold, nor to advance their candidate in the uninominal colleges. Nevertheless, in January 1996 many government representatives of Choice of Russia were compelled to resign. 1996 was also the year of the presidential election, and the main opponents of the current president were Gennady Andreyevich Zyuganov, leader of the CPRF, and general Alexander Ivanovich Lebed, who after the collapse of the USSR had supported the secession of Transnistria from the republic of Moldova and portrayed himself as a champion of Russian nationalism, moralising statesman and enemy of corruption. After a campaign for the reconstruction of his public image, Yeltsin was able to defeat Zyuganov, who nevertheless reached the maximum in the history of the post-Soviet left wing (40% of the votes), in both the election rounds. The results of the election have been denounced as fraudulent, especially by foreign observers, who base their assumption on the remarkable differences between the results of the first electoral round, in which Yeltsin position appeared to be weaker, and those of the second round. The methodologies denounced regarded the endorsements of biased media coverage, but also outright fraud in the form of stuffed ballot boxes and manipulated official election returns; however, even if a number of instances of fraud were found, no evidence that they had materially influenced the outcome of the election was found, and Yeltsin took the office²³¹. Another controversial aspect related to the 1996 elections is the American meddling in favour of Yeltsin victory, which took the form of the concession of an IMF loan that would have been used by the future president to finance his massive electoral campaign, and promotion of the

²³⁰ "First Chechnya War, 1994-1996", GlobalSecurity.org. J. Hughes, "Chechnya, From Nationalism to Jihad", University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013. For an insight of the Chechen crisis in the context of Russia's democratisation process see T. C. German, "Russia's Chechen War", Taylor and Francis, 2013

²³¹ P. Ordeshook, M. Myagkov, "Russian Election: An Oxymoron of Democracy", Voting Technology Project paper, Caltech-MIT, 2008. E. Depoy, "Boris Yeltsin and the 1996 Russian Presidential Election", in *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 26, 4(1996)

activity in Russia of a number of American consultants, who would have worked in an electoral task force²³². Such intricacies seriously challenged the democratic value of the first presidential elections of the Russian Federation, marking the first step along the tortuous path of the Russian democracy²³³.

On March 1998, Yeltsin suddenly decided to remove Chernomyrdin from the office of prime minister and to substitute him with the young and inexperienced economist Sergey Vladilenovich Kirienko. The new head of the government reacted to the international speculation that hit the ruble caused by the recent Asian financial crisis of 1997 quite inappropriately and dried out the reserves of the country in an attempt to sustain the international course of the currency. The fragile and still institutionally underdeveloped Russian bank system collapsed, the ruble was further devalued, Russia was forced to renegotiate the repayment of his debt to foreign lenders and the consumers were forced to endure other constraints. Kirienko had to resign, and Yeltsin accepted as his successor the candidate proposed by the majority of the Duma, Primakov. The new premier tried to obtain a greater degree of autonomy from the president and internationally he risked the isolation from the West after the crisis in Kosovo in March 1999. These events marked the moment of greatest socio-economic difficulty of the new Russian Federation, but on the other hand it has been observed how the crisis served to re-launch the economy of the country, which would have continued to show significant figures of growth until 2008²³⁴.

In order to address the overwhelming pressures of the economic difficulties, Yeltsin decided to remove Primakov and, after the office had been occupied by Stepashin for a few months, in August was nominated prime minister Vladimir Putin, head of the FSB (Russian heirs of KGB) and secretary of the Security council from 1998. Former official of the KGB until 1991, in the 1980s he had worked for the secret services in the GDR and during the last months of the *perestrojka* he had been a member of the Leningrad (S. Petersburg) administration, where he developed strong ties with the mayor of the city Anatoly Aleksandrovich Sobchak, and he even enjoyed the esteem of the still influential Primakov²³⁵.

3.2 The New Presidency, War and Authoritarianism

A few days after the appointment of Putin at the head of the government the question of Chechnya went back to the centre of the Russian political scene. After the settlement of new

²³² N. Agrawal, "The U.S. is no Stranger to Interfering in the Elections of Other Countries", in *Los Angeles Times*, December 21, 2016. O. Jones, "Americans can Spot Election Meddling Because They Have Been Doing it for Years", in *The Guardian*, January 5, 2017

²³³ P. Ordeshook, M. Myagkov, cit. M. S. Fish, "Democracy Derailed in Russia: The Failure of Open Politics", Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005

²³⁴ L. Gudkov, V. Zaslavski, , "La Russia da Gorbachev a Putin", Il Mulino, Bologna, 2010

²³⁵ <http://eng.putin.kremlin.ru/bio>

local authorities, for the most part expression of the ideas of the anti-Russian militia during the 1994-1996 conflict, the public order in the small republic of the Caucasus started to degenerate once again. In September 1999 a series of terroristic attacks in Moscow caused the death of around three hundred people and the Russian government reacted sending special units of the army and the security forces in Chechen territory to resume the fight against the guerrilla movement and reaffirm the sovereignty of the Russian Federation on those lands. Abroad, especially in the European Union, the war caused manifestation of condemnation not only of the tragic terroristic attack of the militia, but also of the hasty and indiscriminate methods with which the Russian government and army pursued their objectives²³⁶. Conversely, the Russian population showed a widespread consensus over the objectives of the government, that was stating that its initiatives were aimed at the attainment in a cleaner and more effective way than in the past of the restoration of the internal and international prestige of the state²³⁷; in this way a Russian nationalism, of a traditional nature, was beginning to rise at the side of the more liberal nationalism that characterised the first phase of the Yeltsin government of the new Russia.

On December 1999, the political elections saw the appearance of three new political forces: Unity, established in autumn in support of premier Putin and his energetic answer to the terroristic attacks, and presided by Gryzlov, future Interior Minister in 2000-2001; Fatherland-All Russia, guided by Primakov and the major of Moscow Luzhkov, expert professional politicians with an attractive profile, formed within the Soviet political class but at the time free from ideological biases; Union of Right Forces, comprehending some of the most significant personalities of Russian liberalism, like Gaydar, Chubais, Kirienko and Nemzov. This voting saw the increase of the percentage of the candidates that presented themselves to the electorate as independents, who occupied 23% of the seats, while the parties of the former premier Chernomyrdin and Zhirinovskiy suffered a heavy defeat. At the end of December 1999, after Yeltsin had retired from the office of president, as required by the Constitution, Putin temporarily became president of the Russian Federation until the following presidential election that were anticipated at March 2000, when he obtained the full mandate with almost 53% of the votes²³⁸.

Under the first government of the new president, guided by Mikhail Mikhailovich Kasyanov, a politician with a Yeltsin-like orientation, the establishment of the economic institutions characteristic of a developed market society was completed; a law on insolvency and bankruptcy had already been passed in 1998, followed by measures guaranteeing compliance to contracts, measures for the resolution of commercial disputes and the repayment of bank

²³⁶ European Commission, Press release, "Declaration by the European Union on Chechnya", on europa.eu

²³⁷ G. Bensi, "La Cecenia e la Polveriera del Caucaso", Rovereto, Nicolodi, 2005

²³⁸ D. Nohlen & P. Stöver, cit.

loans, the introduction of the corporate governance in joint-stock companies, antitrust laws and the regulation of the bank system and of the securities and land market. In addition, a Labour Code and an Agriculture Code were promulgated in 2001 and 2002 respectively, while new steps towards the reduction of the bureaucratic procedures for the concession of licences and the registration of new companies were undertaken. However, the definitive establishment of the institution of private property of the land continued to be obstructed in the peripheries by a municipal legislation full of constraints and requests for guarantees; in the agricultural, field the tendency of the producers to remain united in large factories, cooperatives or large private companies, on the model of the Soviet kolkhoz and the sovkhoz, was still predominant²³⁹.

The introduction of these measures corresponded to the acceleration of the negotiations for the access of the Russian Federation to the WTO, and the process of homologation of the economic and social relations of the country to those of Western capitalism was taken a step further when, starting from 2005 a broad reform was launched aiming at the re-evaluation of the prices for the public and social services, which under the Soviet rule and the Yeltsin government were issued at extremely low figures.

The economic performance started to benefit from the financial and monetary consequences that followed the crisis of 1998; the industry of consumption goods emerged from the depression and successfully started its way towards the substitution of the imports with goods of national production, while at the same time the exports were increasing, even though they consisted for almost half of the total in oil and marsh gas. Thank to those circumstances, the balance of payments went positive for the first time in financial year 2000-2001. The positive developments extended to the increase in industrial production and in the GDP, the decrease of inflation, the increase of foreign direct investments (primarily from Germany Britain, France and the United States), and the decrease of the number of people that, during the first phase of the transition, saw their level of life falling under the poverty threshold²⁴⁰.

The years of the first government of Putin were also characterised by a dynamic policy of re-organisation of the public administration, intended to reinforce the centre and build a strong state; in October 1999 some of the bilateral treaties that the federal units managed to obtain from the central administration in the previous years were abolished, a process that continued for the following years. In May 2000, right after the settlement of Putin, the federal subjects were re-organised and merged in seven federal districts, each of them ruled by a supervisor nominated by the president himself, and the presidential representatives within the units of the Federation that had been instituted by Yeltsin were abolished. The federal supervisors

²³⁹ A. Åslund, "Russia's Capitalism Devolution", Peterson Institute for International Economics, Washington DC, 2007. Z. Lerman, D. Sedik, "Russian Agriculture and Transition", in "Oxford Handbook of Russian Economy", Oxford University Press, 2013

²⁴⁰ L. Gudkov, V. Zaslavsky, cit. F. Benaroya, "L'Economia della Russia", Il Mulino, Bologna, 2007

presided over the activity of the inspectors, one for each region, territory, circumscription and republic included in each new district, whose task was to control the activity of the local governors and of the local legislative assemblies; furthermore, they were in charge of the supervision of the fight against crime and corruption, as well as of the acts related to the internal security and the international relations of the subjects of the Federation. Finally, the supervisors of the districts could enjoy the collaboration of the regional branches of the Interior Ministry, the Attorney, the Justice and the Treasury, and many federal departments created a structure at the level of the districts. In 2002 a federal law establishing the homogenisation of the electoral systems of the federal subjects was introduced, entailing the adoption of the mixed system that characterised the election of the members of the Duma²⁴¹.

A couple of years earlier a new parliamentary law for the reform of the composition of the Federal Council came into force; since that moment, the second Chamber of the parliament would not have been presided by the governors and speakers of the regional parliaments any more, but by their representatives, appointed respectively by the first two figures; in the process of selection of these representatives, the Presidential Administration was beginning to have an important role, since it would have been able to recommend a large number of politicians from Moscow and members of the big corporations affiliated to the state²⁴². However, a provision of the measure established the possibility that those representatives could be revoked by those who appointed them, in such a way that the governors and the speakers of the legislative assemblies seemed to maintain their influence on the Council. Other measures regarded the creation of a new State Council, where the governors could preside by law, and the devolution of a large part of the income tax to the subjects of the Federation.

In June 2000, the General Power of Attorney launched a massive offensive aimed at the revision of the constitutions and the statutes of the of the federal units and the legislation that since then had been promoted by the respective legislative assemblies; more than half of these document was found to be at odds with the Federal Constitution as well as a large part of the local legislation was declared to be in contrast with the federal laws, and the local assemblies of two republics of the Caucasus, Adygea and Ingushetia, were even suspended. Also the fiscal legislation became a battleground for the centre and the peripheries; the difference in the distribution of the tax revenues between the Treasury and the different federal units continued to constitute one of the main characteristic of the “segmented federalism” system that had been established under the Yeltsin presidency. In order to change this situation, in 2001 Putin proclaimed a fiscal law encouraging the payment of the revenue tax and leaving in

²⁴¹ C. Ross, “Federalism and Inter-Governmental Relations in Russia”, in *Journal of Communist Studies and Transitional Politics*, 26, 2(2010). S. White, R. Sakwa, H. E. Hale, “Development in Russian Politics, vol. 8”, Palgrave MacMillan, Basingstoke, 2014

²⁴² A. C. Lynch, “How Russia Is Not Ruled: Reflections on Russian Political Development”, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005

the hands of the subjects of the Federation less than half of the revenue, while the value added tax would have entirely gone to the centre. In addition, a substantial portion of the revenue tax that remained in the hands of the federal units had to be destined to the municipalities²⁴³.

In this way the number of the federal subjects was reduced from 89 to 83, and Moscow justified these initiatives referring to the exigency to better coordinate the efforts towards the economic and civil development of these territories that were more impoverished and less populated, while according to other perspectives the country was experiencing the tendency to reduce the number of the federal units as part of Putin centralistic course²⁴⁴.

Another element of the first years of Putin presidency is the activity of the Attorney General's Office of the Federation that brought up many criminal proceedings for economic malversations against the oligarchs, accused primarily of tax fraud and peculation; in particular, the focus was primarily on those businessmen that during the previous years had reached great power positions in the system of the television information and in the press, and thanks to their influence started to amplify the criticism of the parliamentary opposition towards the government and the policy of the president. One of the main consequences of the anti-oligarchs campaign had been the take-over by the state of the control on the most important television channels.

The problem of Chechnya came back to the headlines when in October 2002 a Chechen command that included many women held hostage for several hours more than 900 spectators inside the Dubrovka theatre in Moscow, asking for the retirement of the federal armed forces from the territory of the republic; consequently, the president ordered a risky rescue operation that caused the death not only of the terrorists, but also of at least one hundred and thirty hostages. The security forces attacked blowing nerve gas inside the theatre, but the assistance to the intoxicated hostages arrived too late. This dramatic episode was however the last backlash of the agonising separatist movement, while in Chechnya the large-scale fighting came to an end and the federal authorities proclaimed the beginning of the normalisation of the situation in the republic; by June, the direction of the temporary federal administration was assigned to Akhmad Abdulkhamidovich Kadyrov and in March 2003 a republican constitution was approved with a referendum. Finally, in October Kadyrov was elected president with a popular election and constituted a government. After the end of the conflict and the stabilisation of the situation, tens of thousands of Chechens that had been refugees in camps located principally in Ingushetia were eager to go back home, but the conduction of the controls by the federal forces on the borders with Chechnya raise the criticism of the Russian NGO named

²⁴³ S. White, R. Sakwa, H. E. Hale, cit.

²⁴⁴ G. Breslauer, "Regimes of Political Consolidation: the Putin Regime in Soviet and Post-Soviet Perspective", in A. Pravda, "Leading Russia: Putin in Perspective: Essays in Honour of Archie Brown", Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005. M. McFaul, N. Petrov, A. Ryabov, "Between Dictatorship and Democracy. Russian Post-communist Political Reform", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Washington DC, 2004

Helsinki Group and the European Council, which referred to hundreds of people disappeared without leaving a trace after having been filtered through roundups and checkpoints²⁴⁵. During the following months, the Federation continued to be the victim of many terroristic attacks, like the two explosion that involved the subway of Moscow in 2004; those attacks had the effect of strengthening the support of many Russians towards the President and his government, and they gave to the federal administration the possibility to show both concern and the determination to build a solid system of controls and more adequate security conditions on the internal frontiers of the country. In May, Chechen president Akhmad Kadyrov was killed and in September an armed group occupied a school with hundreds of children and teachers in the city of Beslan, in North Ossetia; three hundred and thirty young hostages perished in a terrible explosion provoked by the terrorists, that the confused and unprepared local security forces were not able to stop. The objectives of the terroristic attack did not concern exclusively Chechnya, since part of the group of terrorists was of Ingush ethnicity; in 1944 a district of Ingushetia had been annexed to the adjoining Autonomous Republic of North Ossetia. After the dissolution of the USSR and the secession of Ingushetia from Chechnya, a political movement was formed in favour of the resettlement of the Ingush population in the district and the restitution of the latter to Ingushetia; this aspect seemed to have been related to the events of Beslan²⁴⁶.

In March 2005, the leader of the Chechen guerrilla Maskhadov was killed, but his place did not remain empty since it was soon taken by Abdul-Khalim Sadulayev; in November the political election were held in Chechnya and the party that obtained the majority of the votes was the one with the same name and many political affinities to the Russian United Russia and it was presided by Ramzan Kadyrov, son of the former president killed by the separatist militia. These political developments came together with a significant reduction of military fights and violence, while within the group of the anti-Federation fighters signs of contrast were appearing between the positions that took up the heritage of Maskhadov and those of the group of the guerrilla suspected of connections with the international Islamic terrorism; however, the killing of the clandestine president Sadulayev by the federal forces in June 2006 caused the extreme political weakening of the radical wing of the fundamentalist guerrilla and of his military capability. The Russian government offered the amnesty to the survived militia, in exchange for the end of the hostilities; at the same time a large number of former anti-federal fighters was appointed in the Chechen administration and in the ranks of the Chechen security forces, and in February 2007 Kadyrov was nominated by Putin president of the Chechen republic²⁴⁷.

²⁴⁵ "Guidelines on the Treatment of Chechen IDPs, Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Europe", European Council on Refugees and Exiles, June 2005

²⁴⁶ "What happened in Beslan?", BBC News, 10 September 2004. S. Greene, "Open Wound: Chechnya 1994-2003", Trolley, 2003. F. Benvenuti, cit.

²⁴⁷ T. Wood, "Chechnya: The Case for Independence", Verso, 2007

In the condition of normalisation and stability of the little state, accompanied by the political monopoly enjoyed by the new president and the local branch of United Russia, the process of local economic reconstruction slowly started to move its first steps.

Internally, the campaign against the oligarchs had continued in the meantime, and in October 2003 Mikhail Khodorkovsky, owner of the oil giant Yukos and a political opponent of the president was arrested for tax evasion; in this way the campaign against the oligarchs assumed a more properly political connotation, since Yukos had engaged in the funding of Yabloko, a party of the opposition and the businessman was sentenced to a long stay in prison while his company was divided and partially reacquired by the state oil company, Rosneft²⁴⁸. The process proved to be politically cautious and selective, since the magistrates seemed not to consider the cases of other great fortunes possessed by businessmen that appeared to be more supportive of the government; the magistrates also avoided to confront with the problem of the compatibility with the antitrust legislation of the big monopolies in which the state had a decisive financial role: the monopoly on electricity, directed by Chubais, and Gazprom. All that casted a shadow on the Attorney and the Judiciary system of the country that had been judged too much complacent relatively to the political orientations of the president²⁴⁹. In addition, the attention of the international community was attracted also by the cases of two Russian journalists, Andrey Babitsky and Aleksander Nikitin; the first was arrested and kept in prison for several months with the accusation of espionage because of his reports on the second Chechen war, while the second suffered a similar fate after he had spread news on the pollution produced by the erosion of the hulls of the disarmed military ships and submarines of the Baltic fleet²⁵⁰. However, the Russian electorate did not show too much criticism in relation to these cases, to the arrest of Khodorkovsky and even to the question on the dubious legitimacy of the means used by the federal administration in order to restore order in Chechnya²⁵¹.

In 2003 the authority of the president of the Federation had by that time strengthened considerably within the parliament and the country and Putin could think about getting rid of some of the personalities that belonged to the old establishment of the Yeltsin era; so he started a process of renovation and integration of the political class that led to the appointment of new political cadres, most of which were former officials of the FSB, the Interior and the Defence, the so called *siloviki*, and former managers of state companies, for the most part

²⁴⁸ "Khordokovskiygate", in *Espresso*, 14(78), November 2003. "Yukos Probe Spills Over to Yabloko", in *The Moscow Times*, October 24, 2003

²⁴⁹ R. Sakwa, "Putin: Russia's Choice", Routledge, London-New York, 2008. A. Roxburgh, "The Strongman: Vladimir Putin and the Struggle for Russia", I.B. Tauris, London-New York, 2011

²⁵⁰ T.Karon, "Russia Declares War on the Media", *Time*, Feb 9, 2000. M. R. Gordon, "Detained Reporter in Swap", *The New York Times*, 2000. "Old Habits Die Hard: Aleksandr Nikitin, the European Court of Human Rights, and Criminal Procedure in the Russian Federation", in *B.C. Int'l & Comp. L. Rev.* 25 (1): 190, 2002.

²⁵¹ J. Wilhelmsen, "Russia's Securitization of Chechnya. How War Became Acceptable", Routledge, 2016

coming from S. Petersburg, the city of the president²⁵².

On December 2003, the political elections were held and the party that declared to take inspiration for their program directly from the initiatives and the declarations of the president (Unity) presented itself under the name of United Russia, that was assumed at the moment when the Primakov and Luzhkov party (Fatherland-All Russia) was incorporated in it. The elections were an incredible success for the party, it obtained 37% of the votes and almost half of the seats, after a decade in which the pro-government and pro-president parties found it hard to reach 15% of the suffrages; in addition, many deputies that had been voted as independents soon joined its parliamentary group (which in this way reached the absolute majority) to the level that their number reached its historical minimum²⁵³. On the other hand, the Communist Party suffered a heavy defeat, since most of its voters during the previous electoral competitions preferred to give their preference to those parties that had recurred to a more frank and exclusive nationalist appeal, enthusiastically supporting the government.

In March 2004 also the presidential elections were held and Putin established its supremacy at the first turn, but this time with an impressive majority of more than 71% of the votes; the United Russia party started to attract decisive groups of the state bureaucracy and the regional notability gathered around the governors, up to the point that in 2006 it detained the relative or even the absolute majority in the legislative assemblies of almost all the federal subjects. They were forces able to direct the electorate through the use of administrative and economic resources, such as the influence on the local media, the possibility of entering in the government apparatus and practices of clientelism; furthermore, belonging to the party started to become an essential precondition for those who aimed at making a career and these characteristics could not fail to constitute some similarities between United Russia and the old Communist Party of the Soviet Union²⁵⁴. The consensus the party obtained from the electorate did not come from its political program or from its ideology, but rather from its strong position among the cadres and in the administrative organs and from the personal charisma of Putin. In 2004, after the terroristic attack at the Beslan school, an important acceleration in the centralistic political course among the establishment occurred; in December 2004 and in May 2005 the Duma approved two important legislative acts proposed by the president. The first established a drastic change in the electoral system that became in full proportional, so that not only half of the members of the Duma, but all of them would have been elected through the list vote; in this way the electoral competition would have been opened for those political groups that demonstrated to correspond to a new official definition of "political party", and the

²⁵² M. McFaul, N. Petrov, A. Ryabov, cit.

²⁵³ D. Nohlen & P. Stöver, cit.

²⁵⁴ M. Laurelle, "In the Name of the Nation: Nationalism and Politics in Contemporary Russia", Springer, 2009. S. P. Roberts, "Putin's United Russia Party", Routledge, Abingdon-New York, 2012

requisites were far more difficult to meet than before. In addition, the threshold for the admission to the Duma of the party lists was changed from 5 to 7% of the votes and the interdiction for the parties to unite in electoral blocs was established; the increase of the representation threshold risked becoming a cleaver for the presence in the Duma of little but important opposition parties, and to avoid the possibility of its own disappearance Yabloko, the Union of Right Forces and other little political groups started a long negotiation for the unification that however ended up only with a series of reciprocal recriminations²⁵⁵.

The second legislative act regarded in an equally substantial way the election procedure of the governors; at the end of their office, the responsible of the federal district in which the federal units were included would have sent to the president a list of candidates, from which the latter would have made his choice. The local legislative assembly would have been called to express a vote on the name of the chosen candidate, and it could eventually reject him: but if it would have expressed a negative vote for two successive nominations by the president, the latter could dismiss the assembly. Finally, the new law reinforced the provisions of a 2001 regulation, establishing that the president could have removed the governors that had “lost his trust”²⁵⁶. In addition, in 2004-2005 the president managed to obtain the adoption by the Duma of a law conferring extraordinary powers to the FSB in those areas recognised as seriously threatened of terroristic attack, and another one authorising counter-terrorism military operations even outside the territory of the Federation.

In January 2006, thanks to the initiative of the president, the Duma approved a law providing the registration of the branches of foreign NGOs operating in the Federation as Russian organisations to all juridical effects and establishing particular limits and controls on their activities and their finances; the new law was perceived in the West as seriously limiting freedom and human rights protection²⁵⁷. In October of the same year the attention of the international community was once again attracted by Russia after the murder in Moscow of the journalist Anna Politkovskaya, who had firmly denounced the atrocities committed by the federal forces in Chechnya; the following investigations led to the arrest only of the material executors of the crime, but the names of the instigators remained unknown²⁵⁸.

Despite this obscure episodes, according to the analysis by Francesco Benvenuti, Putin enjoyed an incredible degree of appreciation from the Russian electorate, in part due to the

²⁵⁵ V. Gelman, “Authoritarian Russia: Analyzing Post-Soviet Regime Change”, University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, 2015

²⁵⁶ V. Sheinis, “The Devolution of the Electoral System in Russia”, in *Russian Politics and Law*, vol.52, 2(2014)

²⁵⁷ A. Kamhi, “The Russian NGO Law: Potential Conflicts with International, National and Foreign Legislation”, in *The International Journal for Not-for-Profit Law*, 1(9) December 2006. “Challenge to Civil Society: Russia’s Amended Law on Non-commercial Organisations”, U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom report, March 2007

²⁵⁸ “A Suspicious Death in Russia”, in *The Economist*, October 8, 2006. “Murder in Moscow. The Shooting of Anna Politkovskaya”, in *The Independent*, October 8, 2006

traditional tendency of many citizens to not be interested in the political life of the country and to confer a substantial delegation of power to energetic leaders, able to show some results in their operation of reinforcement of the internal order, the international prestige and the economy; in addition the perception that as much politically capable alternative personalities in the political scene were not present seemed to have contributed to the success of the president, together with the appreciation of his political line, associated with the idea of stability and of the growth of well-being²⁵⁹. In those years the country continued to enjoy the revenues coming from the export of marsh gas through the infrastructures crossing the territories of Belarus and Ukraine, the Baltic sea and the Black sea²⁶⁰. Thanks to the improvement of the fiscal regime the pensions of the workers, the salaries of the employees in the public sector, members of the military and police agents included, were increased; the promotion of procreation, the construction of accommodations and the support for the underdeveloped areas were strengthened; the minimum salaries and scholarships were raised; unemployment reached the lowest level in years and poverty decreased²⁶¹. Finally, the agricultural production received a greater degree of attention by the government than in the Yeltsin years, and the state issued several measures of support for the agriculture (fiscal, credit and rate support), promoting the sharp increase in production.

The political consultations of December 2007 saw the completion of the simplification of the parliamentary composition started during the previous elections thanks to the introduction of the full proportional system and the 7% threshold; the Duma, dominated by United Russia, comprehended only three other parties, the Communist party, Zhirinovskiy liberal democratic party and the new Fair Russia (or Just Russia). The latter seemed to be part of a bipartite project, since it should have represented a middle-left version of the political current of Putin, while United Russia was meant to represent its middle-right version; however this eventuality did not materialise, both for the modest electoral success of the new party and for the feelings of true oppositions that some of its members would have expressed in the future²⁶².

On another note, the establishment feared that the new electoral law that openly favoured United Russia would have caused the departure of a portion of the electorate and a strong abstentionism was perceived as decreasing the legitimacy of the suffrage to the eyes of the Russians and the rest of the world; for this reason the president was appointed leader of United Russia, even if other measures had been previously undertaken in order to guarantee the success of the elections, such as the abolition of the *quorum* of those entitled to the right of

²⁵⁹ F. Benvenuti, cit.

²⁶⁰ N. Sabitova, C. Shavaleyeva, "Oil and Gas Revenues of the Russian Federation: Trends and Prospects", 22nd International Economic Conference – IECS, 2015

²⁶¹ "Russia's Booming Economy", in *The Economist*, June 18, 2007. M. Alekseev, S. Weber, "The Oxford Handbook of the Russian Economy", Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013

²⁶² S. White, R. Sakwa, cit.

vote for the validity of the elections, and the elimination from the voting paper of the possibility to vote against all the parties enlisted. The turnout ended up being the highest at the political elections from the times of the *perestrojka*, amounting to 64%²⁶³.

During 2007, Putin repeatedly excluded the possibility of presenting himself at the 2008 presidential election for a third mandate, an eventuality that would have required an amendment of the Constitution, and after the triumph of United Russia he and his party proposed Medvedev as a candidate to the presidential vote. The latter by his part made sure that Putin would have been available for the office of premier in case of victory²⁶⁴. At the first turn of the 2008 election, 70% of the votes consecrated Medvedev to the presidency of the Federation, a percentage close to the one that sanctioned Putin's victory in 2004.

3.3 Alternate Presidency, New and Old Policies

After his election, the new president appointed Putin to the office of prime minister while at the same time the latter was proclaimed president of United Russia (even though, formally he was not member of the party); in this way, the period of the duumvirate started, characterised by the continuity, stability and cooperation between the two highest offices of the state, especially considering that other than some vague liberal instances, Medvedev did not seem to have a strong political personality independent from Putin²⁶⁵.

In 2009-2010 the new president promoted within the Duma an amendment aimed at softening the legislation on the NGOs, refused to sign a draft law establishing the shutdown of a newspaper for the publication of false and slanderous news without recurring to a tribunal, disposed that the local party of the majority would have indicated to the president the candidates to the office of governor (even though the local party of majority in most of the cases was exactly United Russia), supported an amendment of the electoral law, so that the parties reaching 5% of the votes would have had a minimum degree of representation in the parliament, and lightened the requirements for the registration of the parties. In addition, he led to approval a law changing the traditional denomination of the Russian internal security forces from militia (of Soviet ascendancy) to police, and tried to inspire in them a greater sense of responsibility in relation to the community they served and greater discipline towards their superiors; agents and officials went through an exam in order to stay in service and tens of high officials were removed from their offices, as well as many military officials, suspected of corruption²⁶⁶.

²⁶³ D. Nohlen & P. Stöver, cit.

²⁶⁴ S. White, R. Sakwa, H. E. Hale, "Development in Russian Politics", Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2009

²⁶⁵ H. E. Hale, T. J. Colton, "Russians and the Putin-Medvedev Tandemocracy", The National Council for Eurasian and East European Research, University of Washington, 2009

²⁶⁶ P. Dutkiewitz, D. Trenin, "Russia. The Challenge of Transformation", New York University Press, New York, 2011

At the beginning of 2011 the president presented to the Duma an amendment of the Penal Code that excluded the immediate arrest of businessmen investigated for economic frauds and mitigated the penalties associated at minor crimes. In order to fight the corruption among the members of the bureaucracy, the Duma issued a tightening of the penalties for this crime and introduced the obligation for all the state officers to open to the public their tax declarations. Finally, another law promoter by Medvedev established the incompatibility between being in charge of an office within the federal government and working in the management of the companies with prevalent state participation²⁶⁷.

In September 2009, Medvedev published an article entitled “Go, Russia!” calling for the economic modernisation of the country that, according to the president would have entailed crucial political and institutional requirements; in addition, he distanced himself from Putin’s anti-West positions of 2005-2007, stating that it was important for the states of the world to better know each other and elaborate common behaviour standards. However, he did not push himself to the level of questioning Putin’s law on the presidential designation of the governors²⁶⁸. Few days before the publication of his article, Medvedev, visiting the United States, declared that he did not exclude his participation to the presidential elections of 2012, thus making his “Go, Russia!” appear as a programmatic manifesto; Putin quickly commented that the two leaders would have decided by mutual agreement which of the two would have applied, excluding that one could have competed against the other²⁶⁹.

In June 2011, during an important international meeting on the economy held in S. Petersburg, the president gave an explicit speech on the political economy necessary for Russia; he invoked the end of “state capitalism” and the selling of the shares held by the Russian Treasury at many national companies, and described the massive policy of re-entry of the state in the economy (that had been pursued by Putin) as valuable but outdated²⁷⁰. Immediately after this meeting, the president declared to the *Financial Times* that he was willing to restore the 5% electoral threshold, that would have been then approved by the Duma²⁷¹; once again these words appeared as a pre-electoral liberal program, but Medvedev, even if he confirmed his inclination to re-present himself as a candidate for the next presidential election, excluded that he would have competed with Putin for the office.

Such initiatives and pronouncements corresponded to a new tendency in the internal politics; the president promoted a series of trusted officials in the Presidential Administration and in the

²⁶⁷ “Amendments to Criminal Penitentiary Code of The Russian Federation”, <http://en.kremlin.ru>, February 10, 2011. “Amendments to Bolster Anti-Corruption Legislation”, <http://en.kremlin.ru>, May 4, 2011

²⁶⁸ <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/5413>

²⁶⁹ “Russia’s Medvedev Says He Could Run Again in 2012”, in *Reuters*, September 25, 2009

²⁷⁰ “Dimitri Medvedev Spoke at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum”, <http://en.kremlin.ru>, June 17, 2011

²⁷¹ “Interview by Dimitri Medvedev to Financial Times”, <http://en.kremlin.ru>, June 20, 2011

government apparatus, and he made broad use of his prerogative to dismiss and nominate the governors of the subjects of the Federation. However, these cyclical operations of dismissal and nomination of the government staff can be described as part of the Putin system, and in this way Medvedev could defer the moment when a great number of governors, who remained in charge for five years, should have been re-elected by popular suffrage. A different logic, however, was behind some of these dismissals; in March 2010 the president arranged the substitution of the restless governor of Tatarstan, Mintimer Saymiev, one of the most strenuous lobbyists of the “segmented federalism” of the 90s, but the republic continued to enjoy a privileged status of autonomy. At the end of September Medvedev asked for the resignation of Luzhkov (major of Moscow for eighteen years) at the end of a long denunciation campaign of alleged embezzlements; the president could push for the removal of Luzhkov on the base of a law establishing the presidential designation of the local governors, since the Constitution includes Moscow (and S. Petersburg) among the subjects of the Federation²⁷². The new Mayor-governor was Sobyenin, already at the head of the Presidential Administration and, afterwards, one of Putin vice-premiers, who soon started an operation against corruption and promoted a wide plan for the urban reorganisation of the city.

At the political election of December 4, 2011, United Russia suffered a heavy defeat; its votes went from 64% to 49% and its seats from 70% to 53%²⁷³. This decrease was the manifestation of a significant disaffection among the electorate towards the party of power, and some of those who supported it in the previous elections voted for other groups, while others did not even express their vote. This outcome was the product of a series of circumstances; the most important of these was that on September 24, during the Congress of United Russia, Medvedev had declared that he would not have showed up as a candidate at the presidential election in favour of Putin, who, by his part, designated Medvedev as the new president of the party and as his prime minister in case of success²⁷⁴. This “castling” move triggered the immediate reaction of the minister of Finances, Aleksey Kudrin, but most importantly it angered part of Putin’s electorate, that up to that point had saw in Medvedev a more liberal alternative to the figure of his mentor, but still within the Putin’s system; this effect was inevitably enhanced by the considerations about the consequences of the two amendments to the Constitution promoted in November 2008 in the Duma by the president, extending the mandate of the parliament to five years and that of the president to six years. The credibility of Medvedev suffered a hard blow and the power legitimacy started to falter²⁷⁵.

Other reasons for the decline in popularity of United Russia regarded the large fires that

²⁷² J. Henderson, cit. F. Benvenuti, cit.

²⁷³ D. Nohlen & P. Stöver, cit

²⁷⁴ “Presidential Election Russia, an Unsurprising Election”, in *The European Election Monitor*, February 6, 2012

²⁷⁵ E. Ivanov, “The Kremlin Castling”, in *Russia Beyond*, September 26, 2011. R. Sakwa, “Putin Redux: Power and Contradiction in Contemporary Russia”, Rutledge, London-New York, 2014

devastated some regions of Central Russia in the summer of 2010, when the local authorities proved to be unable to face the emergencies and the population organised autonomously to extinguish the fires; a long series of lethal accidents that involved the air and river transport and some military deposits; the substitution without any explicit motivation of more than half of the governors by the president in the previous two years. In addition, the terroristic and guerrilla activity in Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan was still a problem, and at the end of March 2010 a Dagestani group caused forty victims in two explosive attacks at the subway of the capital, while in January 2011 another terroristic group of the same ethnic origin caused another explosion in the airport of Domodedovo²⁷⁶. The climate of tension led to the stabbing of a Russian football supporter during a match between a Moscow team and a Caucasian team, and the episode caused the manifestations in the street of Moscow of many people denouncing the ethnic prejudice and asking for retaliation.

After the election of December the positions of the establishment continued to get worse and United Russia was hit by a real scandal: in the web appeared many amateur videos documenting episodes of fraud in favour of the party, and a vast opinion movement was created, asking for the repetition of the elections, the end of the tandemocracy and the liberations of the people that had been arrested during the recent protest in the streets. In December thousands of people manifested in the capital calling for “clean elections”, with the participation of representatives of both the extra-parliamentary and the parliamentary oppositions, but the figure that gained the most visibility in this occasion was Alexei Navalny, who for many months had been conducting in his blog a campaign against the party, exhorting the electorate not to vote for its candidates²⁷⁷.

The tandemocracy decided to adopt a stance of apparent opening to the instances of the protest, and the president engaged in the promotion of a radical revision of the severe electoral legislation of 2002-2005, entailing a drastic reduction of the number of registered people necessary to present a party to the parliamentary election and re-instituting the direct election of the governors. In relation to the presidential elections, Medvedev determined a substantial reduction of the number of signatures requested for the presentation of the nominations.

The so-called “extra-systemic” politicians, in other words the representative of those parties which did not have parliamentary representation, who participated in the street protests of December 2011, accepted to meet the president so that they could express their opinions and they were invited to participate to the Duma sessions; those representatives expressed their dissatisfaction with Medvedev’s proposals, in particular, arguing that the abolition of the

²⁷⁶ “Moscow Attack. A Test for Putin and His Record Against Terror”, in *The New York Times*, March 29, 2010. “Domodedovo Airport Hit by Deadly Bombing”, in *The Guardian*, Jan 24, 2011

²⁷⁷ M. Elder, “Russians Come Out in Force to Protest Against Alleged Electoral Fraud”, in *The Guardian*, Dec 10, 2011. G. Gill, “Russia and the Vulnerability of Electoral Authoritarianism?”, in *Slavic Review*, 2(75) 2016

obstacles for the registration of the new parties should have come with the abrogation of the norm that prevented the formation of electoral blocs and with the restoration of the uninominal districts. In addition, the new figures of the opposition criticised the suggestion of restoring the direct election of the governors leaving, at the same time, to the president the privilege of select the candidates in advance²⁷⁸.

By his part, Putin tried to interpret the feelings of the streets and to integrate them in his own electoral platform, with an eye to the presidential election of March 2012, dismissing the causes that had originated the protests and taking the initiative to develop his discourse faster than the difficult articulation process of the new movement of protest. In this way he was able to re-shape his public image, without renouncing to a substantial continuity with his previous politics²⁷⁹. The days that followed one of the main manifestations of protest in December 2010, a cautious redistribution of the high institutional offices took place; Boris Gryzlov, responsible for the parliamentary section of United Russia, and since 2003 president of the Duma, left this position and was substituted by Sergey Narishkin. Sergey Ivanov, anti-West personality of Russian foreign politics and former vice-premier to the ministry of Defence, was appointed chief of the Presidential Administration. The office left by Ivanov was occupied by Dimitry Rogozin, up to that moment the Russian representative within the NATO and another anti-West politician. Vladislav Surkov, until then grey eminence of Putin's political system, was moved from the position of vice-head of the Presidential Administration to the apparently meaningless office of vice-premier to development and innovation, and Vyacheslav Volodin, already at the head of the government apparatus, was appointed to his office²⁸⁰.

From January to March 2012, while still refusing to participate to public and television debates, Putin manifested an inedited activism of movement and speech, visiting the federal subjects, the workers councils, professional associations and with the publication of many articles. In addition, he started to affirm that he was willing to politically cooperate with whosoever and expressed appreciation for the broadening of the number of candidates to the new electoral challenge and the strengthening of their political message²⁸¹. Pointing out the success of his economic policies, he called out those social groups that had expressed their dissatisfaction in the streets, so that they contributed more to the politics and the life of the state; he manifested his appreciation for the strengthening of the pluralism of the parties, his deprecation of corruption and his willingness to sustain a strong judicial system; he affirmed that the state was lagging behind in the maturation of civil society, confirming to be planning the elaboration of new electoral laws and insisting on democratisation, especially within the local governance.

²⁷⁸ "Russia to Ease Law on Forming Political Parties", in *The New York Times*, March 23, 2012

²⁷⁹ F. Benvenuti, cit. Sakwa, 2014, cit.

²⁸⁰ S. White, R. Sakwa, H. E. Hale, cit. 2014

²⁸¹ <https://iz.ru/news/511884>. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1866753>

In this way, Putin skilfully tried to give value to the idea that the movement of protest should have been perceived as proof of the foresight of his previous political work and that he himself was the one that could have interpreted its aspirations towards change. Finally, candidate Putin addressed also the different religious confessions existing within the Federation, promising an enhanced visibility of religious instances in the schools and in the media, and the financial support of the state for the churches that engaged in the reconstruction of the institution of the family and of the moral values during the difficult years of the reconstruction of the country²⁸².

On March 4, Putin was elected with 64% of the votes. It was a great personal achievement for the president, since his party, in December 2011 had obtained only 49%, even if his votes were a little lower to those of 2004. However, the success of Putin was in a way debunked, if one takes a look to the votes he received in Moscow and S. Petersburg, were the percentage was inferior to the national average (47% and 59% respectively)²⁸³; the electoral turnout amounted to 65%, 5% less than the two previous presidential elections, a number that shows how part of traditional Putin's electorate confirmed his disaffections to the vote and was not persuaded by the messages of his campaign. As far as the extra-systemic opposition is concerned, it seems possible that many of those that had shared the motives of the protests in the streets had given their vote to Prokhorov, an independent candidate, or decided not to go to the polls. However, Prokhorov was not an intransigent radical and expressed himself as willing to constitute a "constructive" opposition.

Before leaving the office of president, Medvedev undertook two important legislative acts: the first established that, in order to be registered, a national political party should have had at least only five hundred members, provided that at the constitutive congress at least two delegates for half of the federal subjects were present. At the beginning of May, Medvedev also signed a Duma legislation re-establishing that the governors would be directly elected by the local electorate. The drastic liberalisation of the official registration of new parties could have weakened the position of the parliamentary parties, because giving the possibility to compete to a large number of new units could have contributed to reduce the number of votes for each one of them. As far as the governors were concerned, since each mayor and city councillor could have signed in favour of only one candidate, the candidate of the strongest party in the federal subjects (still United Russia) would have obtained the necessary number of signatures far more easily, while at the same time reducing the number of those available to the candidates of smaller and new parties²⁸⁴.

²⁸² "Статья Путина - «КП»: Строительство справедливости. Социальная политика для России", in *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, February 12, 2012, <https://www.kp.ru/daily/25833/2807793/>

²⁸³ "Regional results". Central Election Commission of the Russian Federation

²⁸⁴ S. P. Roberts, cit. J. I. Black, "The presidency of Dimitry Medvedev. The next Step Forward or Merely a Timeout?", Routledge, London and New York, 2015

On May 6, the extra-systemic opposition gathered in Moscow some thousands of people, and, for the first time, violent clashes between the protestors and the police occurred, and ended with many people arrested. The episode constituted the occasion for the adoption of a series of legislative acts proposed by United Russia, one of which establishing an increase of the fines for the organisers of street manifestations that would have ended up in violence, and another, approved in July, imposing the official denomination of “foreign agent” to the NGOs obtaining financial support from abroad and establishing the prohibition for them to conduct political activity²⁸⁵. In September, the Foreign minister closed the circle shutting down the USAID office in Moscow. At the end of 2012, the judiciary processed for the organisation of mass disorders the individuals arrested after the accidents of May 6, and at the same time a deputy of A Just Russia, Gennady Gudkov, sympathising with the street opposition, was expelled from the Duma because of the incompatibility of his economic activity with the office. In addition, an investigation for economic crimes that involved Navalny was started. In July 2012, another law supported by United Russia was approved, establishing huge fines and even many years of detention for the crime of slander, and in October the Chambers approved a law against treachery, espionage and in favour of the defence of state secret and state security, entailing many years of prison for those crimes. Always in September, a new manifestation with thousands of people was organised in the streets of Moscow by the new opposition, but the province continued to maintain a passive stance, thus making clear that the movement was not growing. Another proof of this stagnation emerged at the local elections that occurred the following months in some regions of the Federation, where the supremacy of United Russia and its candidates to before December 2011 levels was confirmed.

Despite all that, the rating of the president and the premier at the level of the public opinion was decreasing, and Medvedev in particular was the one losing in popularity²⁸⁶. So, at the beginning of his third presidency, Putin and the Russian power were focused on an operation aimed at revamping their public image. It was an attempt to look for a sort of ideal proportionality among liberal measures (electoral law for the governors, party laws, anti-corruption measures), intimidating measures (ONG, slander, state security, selective initiatives of the judiciary) and repressive ones (street manifestations, hooligans)²⁸⁷. In any case, this behaviour met the recognition of the international community; in May 2012, Amnesty International was induced to judge the respect of human rights picture in the Russian Federation as “mixed” and in October the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

²⁸⁵ G. Bryanski, “Russia's Putin signs anti-protest law before rally”, in *Reuters*, June 8, 2012. S. Rainford, “Protesting in Putin's Russia”, in *BBC News*, August 25, 2016

²⁸⁶ “Putin's Approval Rating Hits 2005 Low”, in *Moscow Times*, March 5, 2011. “Putin's Approval Rating Falls to Lowest Since 2005”, in *Reuters*, March 24, 2011

²⁸⁷ S. K. Wegren, “Putin's Russia: Past Imperfect, Future Uncertain”, Rowman and Littlefield, 2016

(PACE) showed its complacency for the new Russian electoral laws²⁸⁸. In December the president declared to agree with those that wanted to restore the mixed electoral system of 1993-2005 and to authorize once again the formation of electoral blocs of the parties. In March 2013 he presented a law establishing those principles, except for the legitimacy of the electoral blocs, together with the lowering of the accession threshold to 5%. The same month, the Duma decided that the legislative assemblies of the federal subjects could have chosen to adopt the election of their governors through universal suffrage or through the procedure introduced in 2004, with the note that, if this was the case, all the regional parties should have submitted the candidates to the president of the Federation.

In conclusion, the political and economic order of the Russian Federation has known a specific evolution trajectory, from the slow and contradictory economic liberalisation and political democratisation of the first years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, to the restoration of a centralised vertical power with the arrival of Putin at the presidency. Indeed, as some observers noted, the hopes for a rapid democratic transformation of post-Soviet Russia and its integration in the West appeared to be unfounded, as the war in the Caucasus, the political scandals and the corruption, the deluding results of the reforms and the centralisation of the prerogatives of the government have all been observed with extreme criticism, to the level that some may think that the country is structurally unable to develop democracy²⁸⁹. However, an unambiguous picture of the political and economic system of the Russian Federation appear to be beyond the possibilities of many analyses, certainly of this work. On the one hand, it is impossible not to observe that Russia today constitutes one of the main economic forces in the international arena in the energy sector, a fact that has always prevented many Western countries to adopt a straightforward anti-Russian stance, while on the other the continuous dismissal of reforms aimed at the creation of “true” democratic institutions still represents one of the main core elements of the criticism towards Putin’s administration, which is described as “centralised” by the more tolerant observers, and as “authoritarian” by the most intransigent ones, some of whom even described the figure of the president as a XXI century tsar²⁹⁰. This puzzling picture is very relevant also today, especially after the re-election of Putin to the presidency of the Federation in March 2018 (with almost 77% of the votes, even if the percentage has been denounced to be the result of an electoral fraud, for the umpteenth time in the history of Russian elections).

²⁸⁸ Amnesty International, “Amnesty International Annual Report 2012 - Russian Federation”, 24 May 2012, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/4fbc391569.html>

²⁸⁹ L. Gudkov, V. Zaslavsky, cit.

²⁹⁰ F. Benvenuti, cit. R. Sakwa, cit. E. Bacon, cit. S. L. Myers, “The New Tsar. The Rise and Reign of Vladimir Putin”, Simon and Schuster, London, 2015. C. Dicker, “Vladimir Putin Biography: The Rise of the New Tsar, How Putin Will Rule the World and the Russian Empire?”, Smashwords, 2017

3.4 The Post-Soviet Space: A Field of Tensions

The Community of Independent States (CIS), born in December 1991 with the Alma-Ata treaty, associates the former Soviet republics minus the Baltic states, Georgia (which abandoned the community after the 2008 war) and Ukraine (which officially left in 2018, after the Crimean crisis). Right after the dissolution of the USSR, the Russian Federation did not attempt to constitute an association with a less opaque definition and a more concrete description of its prerogatives, that in its territorial extension would have had some significant resemblance with the Soviet Union. The main obstacles were found in the new sensitivity to the recently acquired independence by the part of its new neighbours, but also in the fear of the first post-Soviet Russian government that re-establishing close economic ties with the former federal republics would have interfered with the process of transformation of the economy that it had started, and in the care of avoiding to appear at the eyes of the western countries as trying to re-establish some version of the disappeared Union²⁹¹. The new states were for the most part less economically developed than the Federation, and, except for the Baltic republics, they did not demonstrate to be extremely eager to adopt policies intended to push for a fast conversion to the market and private property, and also the process of democratisation appeared to be quite slow²⁹². So, it was established, and through the years consolidated, a tendency to develop bilateral relations, most of which not very demanding from the political and the economic point of view; all the newly independent states, Russia included, started to look for new commercial partners outside the old “socialist bloc”, orientating towards western countries and in particular the states of the European Union.

One of the most significant features of the CIS is the treaty on military security signed in Tashkent in May 1992, regulating the defence of the frontiers of each state of the Community and the external one dividing it from neighbouring states. In June 2003 the treaty transformed in the Collective Security Treaty Organisation and, other than Russia, it comprehended only Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kirgizstan and Tajikistan. Another international forum to mention is the Shanghai Group, or Security and Cooperation Organisation (SCO), born in 1996 and uniting some countries of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kirgizstan, Tajikistan) with the Russian Federation and the Chinese People’s Republic (Uzbekistan would have joined in 2001, while India, Iran, Mongolia and Pakistan would have sent observers to the meetings). In 1996 also an accord on the economic integration between Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan was signed, establishing a customs union and a political understanding among the members. Three years later Kirghizstan and Tajikistan joined the group, while Uzbekistan voluntarily abandoned it in 2008. Since 2000 the group is known as the Eurasian Economic

²⁹¹ F. Benvenuti, cit. A. Felkay, “Yeltsin Russia and the West”, Praeger, London, 1992

²⁹² J. S. Dryzek, L. Holmes, “Post-Communist Democratisation: Political Discourse Across Thirteen Countries”, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002

Community. Finally, in 2011 a customs union and a system of free exchange between Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan started to be fully operative, and in February 2012 Putin expressed his positivity about its role as the main vector for the integration of as many post-Soviet states as possible, following the example of the European Union²⁹³. The Customs Union offered an enticing prospect also for other different countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus, that however, despite their eagerness to have access to a broad market, were reluctant to break down their protectionist barriers.

Going more deeply in the description of the situation in the post-Soviet states after the obtaining of the independence, in Georgia at the moment of the dissolution of the USSR, the former autonomous soviet republic of Abkhazia declared its independence. Subsequently, a short but extremely violent civil war occurred, and it entailed the expulsion of tens of thousands of ethnic Georgians from the region. A military base of the Russian army was established in the territory of the secessionist region in 1994 to guarantee peace. In 1992 another Russian military base had been dislocated in the former Georgian Autonomous Region of south Ossetia, where the conflict had originated from the eagerness of the population to reconnect with the neighbouring North Ossetia, part of the Russian Federation. In addition, two other Russian military bases were left in the territory of Georgia after 1993 and the OECD formally requested to remove them by 2002. However, the Russians were reluctant to take this step and in the summer of 2005 they managed to obtain with an accord concluded directly with the Georgian government an extension of the deadline to 2008²⁹⁴. The interest of the Federation for a Russian military presence in Georgia strengthened after the renovations of the hostilities in Chechnya at the end 1999, and the Kremlin lamented that Chechen guerrillas were trying to flee in Georgia crossing the common frontier between the two countries, pointing to the lack of zeal from the Georgian border officers in blocking them. The tensions between Georgia and Russia were related also to the presence of the Chechen guerrilla also in Abkhazia, supporting the Georgian cause, but until the Federal armed forces and the local authorities they supported had not taken control of Chechnya, Moscow did not push too far in promoting the separatist instances of Abkhaz and Ossetians. The summer of 2002 saw the tensions between the two countries reaching its apex, but the Kremlin and the government of Tbilisi managed to find a meeting point and in April signed a security agreement²⁹⁵.

In Tajikistan, from 1992 to 1997 a civil war erupted among different ethnic and political clans and the conflict was sedated thanks to a conjoined military operation comprehending troops

²⁹³ D. Lane, V. Samokhvalov, "The Eurasian Project and Europe: Regional Discontinuities and Geopolitics", Palgrave Macmillan 2015. N. K. Gvosdev, C. Marsh, "Russian Foreign Policy: Interests, Vectors and Sectors", CQpress, 2015

²⁹⁴ D. Lynch, "Russian Peacekeeping Strategies in the CIS: The Cases of Moldova, Georgia and Tajikistan: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000

²⁹⁵ H. Peimani, "Conflict and Security in Central Asia and the Caucasus", ABC-CLIO, 2009

from Kazakhstan, Kirgizstan, Uzbekistan and Russia, under the auspices of the U.N. and the OECD. Once the hostilities had ended, a Russian military base was maintained in the territory of the country, and the Russian troops contributed to the reinforcement of the control on the Afghanistan frontier, that for many years had been repeatedly crossed by Taliban guerrilla supporting the group of the local radical Muslims. The military role of the Russian Federation in Tajikistan has been appreciated from the international community, especially after 9/11 and the military intervention of the U.S. and NATO in Afghanistan, and in 2002 a second Russian military base was established in the country, while at the same time, the possibility of an American base did not concretise²⁹⁶. Despite not being a rich country, during the first years after the end of the civil war, Tajikistan had been able to constitute one of the best examples of economic liberalisation and democratisation not only within the CIS, but also in comparison with the other former communist countries of Eastern Europe, yet not free from problems and contradictions²⁹⁷.

After the dissolution of the USSR, the state of Moldova continued to host a strong Russian and Ukrainian minority, that however constituted the majority of the population in the region of Transnistria. Soon, the inhabitants of the regions declared their secession from Moldova and their willingness to become part of the Russian Federation. After 1992 a diplomatic situation of stalemate was created in Moldova, since Transnistria enjoys a *de facto* condition of independence, but it is not formally recognised by any states, not even Russia, which nevertheless guarantee its separate existence diplomatically, financially and militarily²⁹⁸. With the accession of Romania to NATO in 2004 and to the European Union in 2007, the relations between the Russian federation and Moldova saw different episodes of tensions, due to the fact that part of Moldovans wanted to follow the example of their neighbours. In March 2006, with the support of the European Union, Moldova and Ukraine suspended their commercial relations with Transnistria, which had become the corridor for smugglers, because of its abnormal international status, and Russia reacted increasing the customs duties to both of the countries. In addition, the OECD proposed that the Russian troops in Transnistria were substituted by an international unit with peacekeeping functions, but, because of the opposition of Russia and the locals, the proposals did not concretise²⁹⁹.

Theatre of great tensions had been the Nagorno-Karabakh region, object of a bloody contention between Armenia and Azerbaijan from 1988 to 1994. In this case, the Russian inference has been limited to coordination attempts, undertaken with the United States and

²⁹⁶ L. Jonson, "Vladimir Putin and Central Asia. The Shaping of Russian Foreign Policy", I. B. Tauris, London, 2004

²⁹⁷ J. Heathershaw, "Post-Conflict Tajikistan. The Politics of Peacebuilding and the Emergence of Legitimate Order", Routledge, London-New York, 2009

²⁹⁸ J. Hughes, G. Sasse, "Ethnicity and Territory in the Former Soviet Union: Regions in Conflict", Routledge, London and New York, 2014

²⁹⁹ L. Jonson, cit.

France, the Minsk Group of the OECD, aimed at the mediation of the difficult relations between the two Transcaucasian countries. In the meantime, several districts of Nagorno, linked to Armenia through the Laçin corridor, located in Azerbaijani territory, continue to live in condition of *de facto* independence from Azerbaijan, but the international community had not shown the willingness to support a possible inclusion of the whole region within Armenia. A similar stance could have been observed also in the case of ex-Yugoslavia, where, after the end of the civil war in 1995, Europe and the U. S. firmly opposed the possibility of a partition of Bosnia-Herzegovina among the Croats, the Serbs and the Muslims, as well as the inclusion of Kosovo (then part of the Republic of Serbia) in Albania. Still, in the autumn of 2006, two popular referendums were announced by the secessionist governments of Transnistria and South Ossetia, asking for the secession from Moldova and Georgia respectively. These votes were formally recognised by the Duma of the Russian Federation, but not by the rest of the international community, thus contributing to the preoccupation with which the West looked at Russian politics the region³⁰⁰.

The former Soviet country with which the bilateral relations of the Russian Federation initially progressed significantly is Belarus. After the election to the office of president of Aleksandr Lukashenko in 1994 a popular referendum expressed the willingness to strengthen the ties with Russian, but also to proclaim the Russian official language of the republic, together with Belarussian, and to adopt the flag of the Federation. In April 1997 Belarus and the Russian Federation decided to unite in a "Union" and at the end of 1999 declared the willingness to move towards the constitution of a unitary state, composed by two sovereign political entities. Indeed, Yeltsin's Russia, despite a degree of disdain for the conservatism of Lukashenko's regime, found in Belarus a shield against the expansion of NATO towards East and the corridor for the transportation of marsh gas from Siberia to Central Europe³⁰¹. Nevertheless, in autumn 2005 the American Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice defined Belarus as the "Europe's last dictatorship", and at the beginning of the following years even Putin distanced himself from the regime of Lukashenko³⁰².

Another post-Soviet state that became a close partner of the Russian Federation is Kazakhstan. More than 30% of the population in 1999 was composed by Slavic immigrants (Russians Ukrainian, Belarussians) and their descendants, concentrated in the industrialised provinces in the North³⁰³. In 2006, Nazarbaev, who in 2005 had been elected president of the

³⁰⁰ R. H. Donaldson, "The Foreign policy of Russia: Changing System, Enduring Interests", Sharpe, New York 2009. A. W. M. Gerrits, "Russian Patronage over Abkhazia and South Ossetia: Implications for Conflict Resolution", in *East European Politics*, 32, 2016. A. Muntenau, I. Muntenau, "Transnistria: A Paradise for Vested Interests", in *SEER: Journal for Labour and Social Affairs in Eastern Europe*, 10(4), 2007

³⁰¹ C. Rontoyanni, "Building the Wider Europe: Ambitions and Constraints in Russia's Policies Towards Belarus and Ukraine (Glasgow Papers)", University of Glasgow, 2000

³⁰² For the quotation of Rice, see <http://edition.cnn.com/2005/WORLD/europe/04/20/rice.belarus/>

³⁰³ "Ethnodemographic situation in Kazakhstan", in <http://www.ide.go.jp/English/> (archived)

country for the second mandate with an outstanding majority of the votes, declared that he was willing to promote an acceleration of the process of complete economic liberalisation and democratisation of the institutions of the country. However, shortly before the 2012 elections, in an industrial centre of the country, extremely violent clashes between oil workers and the police occurred, making visible a degree of hardship and unrest among the population, under the surface of an apparent political stability³⁰⁴.

In the 2000s the relations of the Russian Federation and its neighbours has been extremely complex and characterised by instances of economic, military and political cooperation, contrasted by moment of extreme tensions that had attracted the attention of the whole international community in the post-Soviet area.

In November 2003 the Georgian president Shevardnadze was forcefully but peacefully substituted by Saakashvili, a far more nationalist and pro-West figure, that had guided a mass movement denouncing evident electoral frauds during the recent political elections. In 2004, at the presidential elections Saakashvili himself obtained an outstanding 96% of the votes. The moment became known as the “Rose revolution”. This name can be considered as referring to the fact that, after the fall of communism and the establishment of controversial political regimes in many countries of the post-Soviet space, the march towards democracy would have started along the right path, connecting to the European anti-dictatorship tradition of the “Carnation revolution” in Portugal (1974), and the “Velvet revolution” in Czechoslovakia (1989)³⁰⁵.

In November 2004, the results of the Ukrainian presidential elections were contested by hundreds of thousands of people that, after having occupied Maidan square in Kyiv for weeks, obtained their annulment; this civil mobilisation became known as the “Orange revolution”, from the colour chosen by the protesters for their flags and banners. The president that had been first elected, Yanukovich, enjoyed the support of the Russian government and of the numerous Russian people living in Ukraine, but at the eyes of part of the Ukrainian public opinion he represented the obscure bloc of bureaucratic and economic interests of the former Soviet nomenklatura and the new oligarchs. The repetition of the election saw the victory of Yushchenko, who had obtained the second most votes in the previous turn and in 2005, and the new president with an unscrupulous move resigned the government that he created himself, when he assumed that elements of corruption were clearly visible. Its premier was the entrepreneur Yuliya Timoshenko, an anti-Russian nationalist and herald of the Orange revolution. The political situation of the country worsened in January 2006, when the Russian

³⁰⁴ “Clashes Between Police and Sacked Oil Workers in Kazakhstan Leave 10 Dead”, in *The Guardian*, December 16, 2011. “10 Die as Workers Clash with Police in Kazakhstan”, in *The Independent*, December 17, 2011

³⁰⁵ V. J. Bunce, S. L. Wolchik, “International Diffusion and Post-communist Electoral Revolutions”, in *Communist and Post-communist Studies*, 3(39), 2006

government declared to be forced to decrease the marsh gas supply to Ukraine and Europe, in order to guarantee the internal consumption and that henceforward Ukraine would have paid the Russian gas at the global price and not at a lowered price any more³⁰⁶. It was a measure complying with the liberal norms that had to be respected if Russia wanted to join the WTO, but many Ukrainians and foreign observers perceived it as a form of pressure on the country, so that it would have changed its political orientation towards the West, which had been enhancing after the Orange revolution³⁰⁷. Yushchenko negotiated a compromise according to which at least part of the gas needed by Ukraine would have been provided at increased but still favourable prices from a union comprehending Russia and other states of Central Asia. In 2006, Putin also made known that, starting from the following year also Belarus would have had to pay the Russian gas at international prices. Such a move was made possible thanks to a simultaneous accord concluded with Germany for the realisation of the North Stream pipeline on the bottom of the Baltic sea. The new pipeline, that became operative at the end of 2011, could have guarded the Russian Federation from a possible redraft, issued by Belarus, of the flows of Russian gas to Europe through the lines that cross its territory, thanks to the infrastructure coordinated by the national company Beltransgaz. Starting from 2008 the economic relations between Russia and Belarus became extremely fluctuating; Gazprom managed to obtain an increase in the prices for the supply of gas to the latter and the equal participation of the former in the equity holdings of Beltrangaz, triggering the reaction of Lukashenko, who opened to the negotiations with the European Union for the access, in a balance game between Europe and the Federation. The year 2009 saw many commercial wars between Moscow and Minsk, among which the one that followed a Russian embargo on milk imported from Belarus. In 2010 Lukashenko and Medvedev exchanged harsh invectives, despite the advancement of the integration of Belarus in the new Customs Union with Russia and Kazakhstan. However, the repression of the political opposition in December 2010 during the presidential elections that once again saw the triumph of Lukashenko attracted the criticism of Europe, which started to impose sanctions to the members of his administration³⁰⁸. The tensions between Moscow and Minsk decreased accordingly, to the point that in November 2011 Gazprom managed to obtain the full ownership of Beltransgaz, in exchange for a substantial reduction of the price of the gas supplied to Belarus.

Another post-Soviet state characterised by a complex political situation that can be compared

³⁰⁶ A. Monaghan, L. Montanaro-Jankovski, "EU-Russia energy relations: The Need for Active Engagement", EPC Issue Paper No.45, March 2006

³⁰⁷ T. Parfitt, "Russia turns off supplies to Ukraine in payment row, and EU feels the chill", in *The Guardian*, January 2, 2006. A. E. Kramer, "Russia Cuts Off Gas to Ukraine in Cost Dispute", in *The New York Times*, January 2, 2006

³⁰⁷ E. Vizgunova, "The Belarus Dilemma", European Institute for Security Studies", October 2015

³⁰⁸ D. Shlapentokh, "The Role of Small States in the Post-Cold War Era: The Case of Belarus", Strategic Studies Institute, 2013

to the coloured revolutions is Moldova. Here, after the elections at the beginning of 2005, the Moldovan communist party, which the filo-Russian president Vladimir Voronin belonged to, suffered a sensible reduction of the number of seats, but by distancing energetically from the political orientations of the Russia Federation, Voronin was able to obtain the re-election at the presidential vote the following April. According to Benvenuti, this was an indirect confirmation of the political and ideal orientation of the coloured revolution: the desire of large masses of people to give the rest of the population and the world a perceivable sign of their pro-West feelings, their political and institutional system and their opportunities of well-being. Such a way of feeling continued to be characterised by a consolidated anti-Russian stereotype, that described the federation as the heirs of the tsarist expansionism and the Soviet neo-imperialism³⁰⁹. The political elections of July 2009 were preceded by large pro-European and pro-Romanian manifestations, and the party of Voronin was forced to give up the absolute majority in the parliament to a coalition of parties that supported the reabsorption of the country within Romania. Nevertheless, the winner of the elections did not have the qualified majority necessary to the election of the president and after Voronin the office was taken by the liberal Ghimpu and then the democratic Lupu, until in March 2012 the pro-European Timofti was elected. The Moldovan population was therefore divided on the nature of their nation and their state: on the one hand the communists and Voronin tried to develop a concept of citizenship based on civic terms and not ethno-linguistic terms. On the other hand, there is a part of the population and other political forces that tended to see a prospect of survival and economic prosperity most of all in a rapid inclusion of their country in the European Union, even if this possibility still has not concretised³¹⁰. In 2010-2011 the EU entered in the group of the mediator countries in the conflict between Moldova and Transnistria, casting a shadow on the traditional role of Russia, which, by its part, welcomed the initiative with a degree of relief, since the situation in the region constituted a failure of the Russian administration in proposing a solution. On the other hand, it has been observed that the Russian Federation continue to fear for its influence in Moldova and for the possible approaching of the country to NATO³¹¹. In December 2011 was elected president of Transnistria Yevgeny Shevchuk, who gained the upper hand on the candidate supported by Moscow and on the champion of the independence of the region. However, Shevchuk took the care to reassure Moscow presenting as his premier a former manager of Gazprom. Indeed, Transnistria has been heavily indebted with the company and Gazprom could have continued to overlook the delay in the payment of its obligations, provided

³⁰⁹ Benvenuti, cit.

³¹⁰ R. Fawn, "Ideology and National Identity in Post-communist Foreign Policy", Franck Class, London, 2004
S. D. Roper, "Post-Soviet Moldova's National Identity and Foreign Policy", in *Europe's Last Frontier? Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine between Russia and the European Union*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2008

³¹¹ R. H. Donaldson, cit.

that the region continued to keep a pro-Russian international orientation³¹².

In March 2005, it was the turn of Kirghizstan to experience a “Tulip Revolution”, even though it was essentially different from the other, pacific, colour revolutions, since serious episodes of violence against people and objects occurred. It was a peasant uprising against the capital of the country, considered as a centre of corruption and privileges for the urban population, to the disadvantage of the agricultural economy³¹³. Askar Akayev, president of Kirghizstan since 1990, was forced to flee abroad and to resign, after several accusations of corruption and clientelism. In July and August, Kurmanbek Bakiev was elected president and Felix Kulov became prime minister. The meaning and the outcome of the uprising of March seem to remain difficult to understand. Right after his election, president Bakiev claimed an increase of the rent paid by the United States to maintain an air base in its territory, causing harsh declarations by the American Secretary of State, Rice. Still, in July, the bilateral negotiations ended with an increase of the rent paid for the military base. In April 2010, another uprising removed Bakiev from the office and in July other violence and bloody fights occurred in the city and in the province of Osh, directed primarily against the large Uzbek minority living in this area, shedding light on a truculent Kirghiz ethno-nationalism³¹⁴.

The colour revolutions had a significant political backlash on the internal politics of the Russian Federation, contributing to give credit to the opinion according to which the country would have followed a worrying authoritarian drift³¹⁵. Putin believed that the role of Western NGOs in the organisation of the mass movements that had led to the substitution of Shevardnadze in Georgia and the repetition of the election in Ukraine had been fundamental, and the Russian government expressed the preoccupation that the NGOs could become instruments of the external politics of foreign countries, which could have tried to influence illegitimately the politics of the Federation. The narrative about the encirclement by the West began to be spread and the harsh Russian legislation regarding the NGOs can be considered to have been based also on this kind of considerations.

3.5 The “Near Abroad”: Georgia and Ukraine

After the “Rose revolution”, the relations between Georgia and the Russian Federation progressively worsened, as shown by the fact that in 2006 the Russians removed their military bases in the country, where at the same time an American one was established. The tension reached its apex when, after the meeting of the Russian Council and NATO in Bucharest, in

³¹² “The European Union’s Eastern Neighbours after the Orange Revolution”, Latvian Institute of International Affairs, 2006

³¹³ S. Cummings, M. Ryabkov, “Situating the Tulip Revolution”, in *Central Asian Survey*, 27, 3-4(2008)

³¹⁴ S. N. Cummings, “Domestic and International Perspectives on Kirghizstan’s Tulip Revolution”, Routledge, New York, 2010

³¹⁵ L. Gudkov, V. Zaslavski, cit. E. Bacon, cit.

April 2008, when the representatives of the Atlantic Alliance announced the beginning of the admission procedure for Georgia and Ukraine. The move was considered by Moscow an attempt to dismiss the Russian inference on that part of the world that had traditionally been part of the sphere of influence of the Federation, inhabited by populations with historical, cultural, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds kindred to the Russian one, the so called “near abroad”, in an attempt to sabotage the role of Russia as the traditional and legitimate leader in this space and as a superpower counterbalancing the role of the United States³¹⁶. Consequently, Moscow decided to reinforce its military presence in the Abkhazia region, while many American and European representatives visited both Georgia and Abkhazia, preaching caution and guaranteeing the support of the respective governments. Nevertheless, Saakashvili took a step that some observer considered a grave mistake, and in the night between the August 7 and 8, 2008, ordered Georgian peace-keeping troops, stationing at the border between Georgia and South Ossetia, to attack the contingents of Russian soldiers, while Tskhinvali, the capital of the region, was attacked with rockets³¹⁷.

The beginning of the Georgian-Russian war has triggered a debate on who is to consider responsible for the beginning of the hostilities: on the one hand there are those that seem to support the justification given by Saakashvili, who declared that his attack to South Ossetia came after, and in response to, a Russian military invasion through the Roki tunnel, aimed at taking the capital of the separatist region, in order to prevent a possible move of the Georgian government³¹⁸. On the other hand, it seems clear today that Saakashvili references to the Roki tunnel came only after it had been ascertained that Russian troops were crossing it, but this happened only three days after the attack. In addition, the report from the EU Fact Finding Commission, addressed by the Georgian government, which denounced that the build-up of Russian Forces began in early July 2008, declared that it was “not in a position to consider as sufficiently substantiated the Georgian claims concerning a large-scale Russian military incursion into South Ossetia before 8 August 2008”, and that “There was no ongoing armed attack by Russia before the start of the Georgian operation”³¹⁹. So, the argument according to which the Russian government is to consider the responsible of the beginning of the war needs to be considered carefully, since even American senior officials do not seem to share this point of view³²⁰.

The Russian response, after a first moment of surprise, was determined and effective, and the army of the Federation arrived close to Tbilisi, while the aviation targeted the Georgian main

³¹⁶ G. Toal, cit. A. Blomfield, J. Kirkup, “Stay Away, Vladimir Putin Tells NATO”, in *The Telegraph*, April 5, 2008.

³¹⁷ P. Conradi, “Who lost Russia? How the World Entered a new Cold War”, Oneword Publications, 2017

³¹⁸ S. E. Cornell, F. Starr, “The Guns of August 2008. Russia’s War in Georgia”, M.E. Sharpe, London-New York, 2009. M. H. Van Herpen, “Putin’s Wars. The Rise of Russia’s New Imperialism”, Rowman & Littlefield, 2015

³¹⁹ Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia, “Report, Volume 1”, 2009

³²⁰ C. Rice, “No Higher Honour: A Memoir of my Years in Washington”, Crown, New York, 2011

military deposits and the ships of the Sebastopol federal fleet occupied the Georgian port of Poti. On August 13, the French president Sarkozy negotiated the cease-fire with Medvedev, entailing the coming back in their previous positions of the Russian troops and the beginning of a conference in Geneva between all the parties involved in the conflict. However, the Kremlin was able to maintain its troops in the secessionist regions of the country, violating the Sarkozy-Medvedev accord, thanks to the international ascription to Saakashvili of the responsibility for the beginning of the war. In this way the formal recognition of the two new Transcaucasian states, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, was possible, even if only Mongolia and Venezuela did so. In particular, it is important to note that not even Belarus and Kazakhstan recognised their sovereignty, imitated by all the post-Soviet states. After the developments that followed the end of the war, Tbilisi interrupted the diplomatic relations with Moscow and left the CIS³²¹. At the political election of September 2012, the party of president Saakashvili was defeated by the party of Ivanishvili, who, once had become premier, continued a political course aimed at the inclusion of his country in NATO and the European Union, but at the same time tried to normalise the relations with the Russian Federation. In December 2012 a round of negotiations with Russia for the resolution of the consequences of the August 2008 war was started, and the new parliament amended the constitution, making Georgia a parliamentary republic. Even more significant in the field of the ties between the Russian Federation and the post-Soviet states are the relations with Ukraine, whose weight in the international politics has recently reached incredible levels. Two years after the Orange Revolution, the political election of March 2006 did not give a straightforward result, since neither of the two principal parties, one guided by Yanukovich and the other by Timoshenko, obtained the votes necessary to constitute a solid parliamentarian majority and in June 2006 the country still did not have a government. In summer, president Yushchenko conferred the task to form a new government to Yanukovich, but at the political election that had been anticipated to September 2007 the party of Timoshenko won, and the Rada voted for the establishment of a new government led by Timoshenko herself. Then, the political situation of the country failed to stabilise and had been characterised by a clash between the prime minister, who proposed a series of constitutional amendment aimed at diminishing the prerogatives of the president while increasing hers, and the president himself³²². In the meantime, the relations between Ukraine and Russia became tenser when the president talked against the renewal of the twenty-years rent paid by Russia for the base in Sebastopol and because of the attempts of the European Union to find an accord with the Ukrainian government that would have liberalised the transit of marsh gas in the territory of the Ukraine.

³²¹ R. D. Asmus, "A Little War That Shook the World: Georgia, Russia and the Future of the West", Palgrave MacMillan, New York, 2010

³²² A. N. Lushnycky, M. Ryabchuk, "Ukraine on its Meandering Path Between East and West", Peter Lang, 2009

After the presidential election of 2011, the defeat of both Timoshenko and Yushchenko and the victory of Yanukovych seemed in a first moment to open a new phase in the relations with the Russian Federation, when the new premier Azarov signed with Putin the renewal of the Russian rent for the Sebastopol base. But exactly under the new president, who was believed to be a pro-Russian figure, the foreign politics of the country became winding and unwelcomed in Moscow, also in relation to the Ukrainian role as a transit country for energy supplies. Consequently, in Moscow it was believed that Yanukovych was pursuing a two-tracks tactic: on the one hand, use the EU to as a way to put pressure on Moscow in order to obtain economic and energetic concessions, while on the other hand use the relations with Moscow to obtain more favourable conditions for the creation of a free trade area with the EU and for a more rapid accession to it³²³. The finalisation of the negotiations on the Ukrainian Association Agreement to the EU can be considered to have contributed to the attempts by the Kremlin to reanimate the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) as a competitor to the European Union; it is possible to consider the move as an initiative conceived in a zero-sum game framework, that would have pushed the neighbouring states to choose between one of the two economic unions³²⁴. The “multivectoral” approach of Yanukovych led Russia to increase the pressure on Ukraine by imposing new restrictions on the imports in August of 2013. Eventually, the Ukrainian president backed out from the Association Agreement and the free trade agreement with the EU that was to be signed in November 2013, while at the same time he accepted the financing of Russian loans and the decrease of the prices for the supply of gas, thus making, at the eyes of some observers, the geopolitical choice to reject Europe and join the Russian-dominated Eurasia³²⁵.

What occurred afterwards created a series of contingencies that are at the base of a major geopolitical crisis that to this date has still not been solved. The protests occurred after the trade deal with the Russian Federation gained a broader meaning because of the geopolitical rhetoric that constituted the frame to the choice of the Ukrainian president. In this way what could have been a simple economic choice became part of a “civilizational choice” between the East and the West, the legitimacy of which was questioned by the multitude of people who occupied the streets of Kyiv waving European flags. The Euromaidan protest has been observed to have constituted a challenge not only to the legitimacy of the political, economic and institutional system of the Ukrainian state, but also a condemnation of Yanukovych’s rejection of the EU Association Agreement as a symbol of the drift of the country towards

³²³ B. Tarasyuk, “Ukraine, Europe and the Yanukovych Game”, in *Open Democracy*, January 4, 2012

³²⁴ I. Chifu, S. Tutuianu, “Torn Between East and West. Europe’s Border State”, Routledge, London-New York, 2017

³²⁵ M. H. Van Herpen, cit. A. Cohen, “Why the U.S. Should Support Ukraine’s Association and Free Trade Agreements with Europe”, The Heritage Foundation, 2013

higher and higher level of authoritarianism and kleptocracy³²⁶. The manifestation saw many episodes of physical violence by police units against the protestors, and activist leaders away from the protest suffered various forms of intimidation. While the majority of the protestors was non-violent, a part of them fought back against the state authorities and the situation radically deteriorated when on February 20, 2014 a group of snipers fired shots against the crowd, killing almost one hundred people³²⁷. The Euromaidan culminated with the overthrow of the Ukrainian government and the democratically elected president was forced to flee from the country. The new government was soon recognised by Western countries, but violence had at this point become the main channel for the expression of the feelings of peaceful political struggle that had characterised the first phases of the manifestation, and the Ukrainians quickly radicalised their positions³²⁸. The next move of the Kremlin was the beginning of a stealthy invasion of Crimea, the Ukrainian peninsula inhabited for the most part by ethnic Russians. The operation became visible only some days later, when unmarked armed men, later known as the “little green men”, seized and occupied many strategic facilities of the region. The administration of the Russian Federation was able to ride the pro-Russian feelings that had surged in the population of Crimea and the rest of Eastern Ukraine after the Euromaidan protests and the overthrow of Yanukovich, a fact that the Kremlin always portrayed as an unconstitutional and anti-democratic act. After the Russian unmarked troops had captured the most important centres of the Crimean institutional system, a new pro-Russian government led by Aksyonov was created, the independence of the peninsula was declared on March 16, 2014 after a popular referendum on the status of the region, and its annexation to the Russian Federation on March 18, 2014³²⁹.

Internationally, the event attracted the strong condemnation of Ukraine and many world leaders as a violation of international law and the agreements that had been signed by Russia safeguarding the territorial integrity of Ukraine. However, the latter saw the internal insurgence of pro-Russian protests in the Donbass region, specifically in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, that began after the Euromaidan protests and the 2014 revolution. The demonstrations soon turned in a proper armed conflict between separatist forces of the self-declared Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics, backed by Russian paramilitary forces, and the Ukrainian government³³⁰. The dynamics that led to the beginning of the war in Eastern Ukraine constitute a challenge for scholars, since the conflict, which is still ongoing, has gone through multiple phases that are difficult to determine, in part because of the information war surrounding the coverage of the conflict. Great attention has been given to the question of causality and blame,

³²⁶ T. Kuzio, “Ukraine: Democratisation, Corruption and the New Russian Imperialism”, Praeger, S. Barbara, 2015

³²⁷ “Ukraine Crisis: Deadly Snipers Extinguish Live’s of Kiev’s Protesters”, in *The Telegraph*, February 20, 2014.

³²⁸ S. Kudelia, “The Donbass Rift”, in *Russian Politics and Law*, 1(54), 2016

³²⁹ G. Toal, cit.

³³⁰ S. Yekelchyk, “The conflict in Ukraine: what Everyone Need to Know”, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2015

and if many critics of the Kremlin tend to see the inference of the “Moscow hand”, critics of the Ukrainian government are more prone to analyse the conflict as a civil war; also scholars, who are generally more aware of the complexities, tend to be caught in the trap of the binary framework of “domestic sources” against “outside inferences”³³¹.

Another interesting element to be considered in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict regards the construction of a specific narrative by the Kremlin, encapsulating the annexation of Crimea within a broader perception of the historical boundaries of the Russian civilisation and its role in the history of the world. This narrative revolves around the concept of *Novorossiya*, a term that dates back to the XVIII century and refers to the administration of the Russian provinces near the Black sea. The geographical connotations of the term can be considered as having become a geopolitical revisionist imaginary already in 1990, when Ukraine proclaimed its independence, sovereignty and integrity, triggering the reaction of those groups that were a majority of the population at the federal level, but constituted a minority at the level of the separate republics. In fact, in 1990 a group of intellectuals in Odessa sought to revive the idea of *Novorossiya*, even declaring the formation of the Democratic Union of *Novorossiya*.

Russian state officials became interested in the concept as a reserve card in their relations with Ukraine when the question of the accession of the latter to NATO started to become a problem in the perception of the integrity of the Russian sphere of influence by the Kremlin. This fear translated in the belief that separatist tensions could become a Russian lever in Ukraine, to the point that, after Ukrainian bid for NATO membership in 2008, some figures within the Kremlin considered the idea of creating a sort of buffer-zone, a state comprehending Crimea that would have seceded from Ukraine and joined Transnistria to form a new state which would have been called *Novorossiya*³³². Yanukovich triumph at the presidential election in 2010 is seen as a moment that removed the eventuality of Kremlin support for regional divisions within Ukraine, but it did not last for long, until the crisis of 2014, when the *Novorossiya* narrative was once again adopted by Putin, marking the shift, according to some observers, of the international orientations of the Russian Federation from great power politics to revisionist imperial politics³³³.

Those developments marked one of the many controversial aspects that had characterised the foreign policy of the Russian Federation since its formation; after the fall of the Soviet Union

³³¹ S. Kudelia, cit. A. Wilson, “Explaining Civil Conflict Perhaps, But Not Civil War”, in *Europe-Asia Studies*, 68, 2016. I. Katchanovski, “The Separatist Conflict in Donbass: A Violent Breakup of Ukraine?”, in *European Policies and Society*, 2016

³³² D. Trenin, “Post-Imperium: A Eurasian Story”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington DC, 2011

³³³ H. Adomeit, cit. G. Toal, cit. Address by the President of the Russian Federation to State Duma deputies, Federation Council members, heads of Russian regions and civil society representatives in the Kremlin, March 18, 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>

indeed, the new state had to face the question of creating almost from zero its own position in the new international order and had to assume an extremely debunked capability of international influence. Since then, the relations of the Federation with the rest of the world have been extremely evolving and unpredictably related to the internal dynamics of the country. While Yeltsin's Russia needed to recover from the crisis and opened up economically and culturally to the West, Putin' Russia assumed a more pragmatic role, pursuing specific economic interests and, in an almost exasperated way, it fought, both literally and metaphorically, to re-establish itself as one of the great powers in the multipolar international system. Under Putin's presidency, the relations with the West had been extremely discontinuous, especially depending on the relative divergent interests in the post-Soviet states and in the Middle East. The recent historical moments that marked the lowest points in the Russia-West relations can be pretty much unanimously individuated in the Georgian war of 2008 and the Ukrainian war of 2014, which closed the "reset" climate of the previous years. These two issues and the development of Russian foreign policies has always spurred a myriad of analyses, studies, debates, critics and descriptions, making the task of creating a picture broad enough to frame the extremely articulated and compound motivations behind the politics of the Russian Federation, and determining precisely what direction they would take in the future, a seemingly out of reach task.

5. Putin's Words: A Multiple Perspective Analysis

In this chapter the focus will once again be on the declaration made by Putin during the speech to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation on 25 April 2005, in which he said that the “collapse of the Soviet Union was a major geopolitical disaster of the XX century” (official translation by the Kremlin)³³⁴. As already noted at the beginning of this work, these words had great resonance and constituted the basis for an extremely broad series of reflections on Russia, its population, and both the internal as well as the foreign politics of Putin's government. This chapter will attempt a comparative analysis of a selection of these reflections, taken from newspapers, radio broadcasts, public opinion journals and foreign journals, that can be related in different ways to the words of the Russian president.

The 2005 address to the Federal Assembly was a long speech touching many different subjects related to the qualities of the institutions and values of the Russian Federation in relation to the standards of contemporary world as well as the necessary political, economic and social reforms that needed to be pursued by the government. It is possible to say that the words by Putin constituted both an ideological framework and a political program.

The first section of the speech revolved around the claims about the democratic nature of the political and institutional developments of the Russian state. The president referred to the debates about the Russian people not being used to freedom and needing constant supervision from the central power, and he wanted to demonstrate the groundlessness of such claims by analysing the recent history of the country. It is at this point that he talked about the collapse of the Soviet Union as a major geopolitical disaster of the century, linking the claim to various instances: the first was the drama experienced by the ethnic Russians that suddenly found themselves living in foreign territory, the second regarded the loss of traditional values and the careless reformation of many institutions, and the third regarded the problematic developments that occurred in the following years, like terroristic activity, control of media and communications by a small group of oligarchs, and the sharp economic and financial downturn. The Russian president then launched in a celebration of the progress that his country has achieved in the construction of a viable Russian democracy that, on the one hand, preserved the background of Russian identity and, on the other hand, maintained what the president perceived to be the common cultural framework that tied together the Russian state with the European culture. It is possible at this point to observe how Putin's rhetoric unfolded on a double standard: on the one hand he underlined the exceptionality of the history of his country describing what happened in 1991, which constituted a watershed event for millions of people, with a purposely strong language, while on the other he inserted the Russian institutional and cultural development within the common European course towards the establishment of similar

³³⁴ <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931>

legal systems.

The second and largest part of the speech was constituted by a programmatic enumeration of the tasks and the activities that his administration was planning to address, organising them along three main lines: the development of the state, the development of the legal political and judicial system, and the development of the individual and civil society. As far as the first point is concerned, the main objectives regarded the fight against the excessive bureaucracy and the business-like mentality of the administration, both at the federal and local level, that led to the spread of corruption and self-aggrandisement to the detriment of the citizens. Other important aspects regarded the liberalisation of the private enterprise, the consolidation of civil law relations, the simplification of the procedures for the legalisation of real estates, the promotion of the reinvestment of private capital in the internal economy, the revision of the activity of the tax and custom agencies and the promotion of stability and long-term development for business.

As far as the second point is concerned, the president underlined the importance of the development of the most significant instances of democracy, underlining the fact that Russia had chosen democracy through the will of its own people. On the other hand, Putin did not miss to emphasise the fact that his country was heading towards its own way along the development of the fundamental democratic norms, due to its historic, geopolitical and other peculiarities. It is not difficult here to miss a veiled attack towards the critics of the political system of the Russian Federation, which according to some observes, did not meet the necessary standards of democracy and respect of individual freedoms and human rights.

Other aspects that constituted the focus of the speech regarded the fight against terrorism and the necessity to protect the borders of the Russian Federation from the activities of criminal organisations (in 2004 Russia had experienced two dramatic terroristic attacks, one at the metro of Moscow and the other at a school in Beslan, whose effects were still fresh in the minds of the Russians), the willingness to strengthen the economic and cultural channels of exchange between Russia and the former Soviet republics, the calling for the respect of the human rights of the Russian minorities living outside the Federation, the promotion of freedom of speech in the media, the creation for objective information channels and the support for equal opportunities for all the political parties. Finally, the president focused on some social problems that needed to be addressed promptly and quickly, problems that regarded primarily the demographic crisis, the phenomenon of alcohol and drug addiction, the low wages of some categories of workers, especially in the public sector, and the fight against corruption in the name of morality and decency.

If we take a look at the speech in its entirety, it is possible to describe it as a programmatic manifesto of Putin's administration after his election to the second mandate as president of the Russian Federation. Indeed, the largest part of the speech enumerated a series of issues,

areas and sectors in which the government needed to adopt a series of policies aimed at the development of Russian society and economic activity, and at the strengthening of security, international cooperation and democratic institutions. Naturally, it is not likely that the president opened his speech referring to the Soviet collapse as a major tragedy of the century by chance, especially since the recurrence of the Victory Day (May 9), celebrating the sixtieth anniversary of the victory of the Soviet Union against Nazi Germany, was approaching. Indeed, the Soviet triumph in the Great Patriotic War constitutes even today one of the most important ideological points of reference for the population, a fundamental component of the collective imaginary and has been employed by the Soviet administration as an essential prerogative for the preservation of the legitimacy of the regime. In conclusion, the address to the Federal Assembly pronounced by Putin on April 25, 2005 does not appear as an apology of the Soviet Union pervaded by an aching sense of nostalgia for those times, but at the same time it is not surprising that the rhetorical devices used by Putin, not free from conceptual contradictions, can appear startling at the eyes of the western observer. Certainly, they had an impact on the perceptions of the Russian population, especially in relation to the rhetoric about the resurgence of the Russian Federation to the status of “great power”.

Clearly, the West and Putin's opposers in general took the declaration about the Soviet collapse as a synthesis, or an omen, of the most controversial practices, policies and activities of the Russian government in the subsequent years, demonstrating how the rhetoric constitutes a fundamental element in international politics and international relations.

The Russian president returned on the concept with extremely similar tones in another, most recent, occasion. The American film director and producer Oliver Stone collected a series of interviews with Putin that he conducted himself from July 2015 until February 2017 and realized the documentary “The Putin Interviews”, aired for the first time by the American channel *Showcase* in June 2017. Sitting one in front of each other in a large, circular room of the Kremlin, the two men were talking about the career of Putin before he had taken the office of president of the Russian Federation, and of the difficult years in which the country found itself after the Soviet collapse. Putin affirmed to perfectly remember those years as characterised by the destruction of the system of social protection, by the paralysis of entire sectors of the economy, by the collapse of the sanitary system, by the havoc of the army and by the conditions of extreme poverty that regarded millions of Russians. He then got to the main point: “I have often heard critics related to the fact that I regret the collapse of the Soviet Union. First of all, the main question regards the fact that after the fall of the USSR 25 million of Russian people in the time of just a night found themselves abroad, and this thing really constitutes one of the major catastrophes of the XX centuries. People used to live in a large, unified country, they had relatives, their home, and obviously everybody enjoyed the same rights, and suddenly

they found themselves living in a foreign country”³³⁵. First of all, it is possible to observe the similarities between these phrases and the one used for the address to the Federal Assembly in 2005; indeed, the Russian president tied the definition of the Soviet collapse as a major catastrophe of the century mainly to the question of the “Russian diaspora”, of those Russian citizens of the Soviet Union that after 1991 found themselves living in a foreign country, just like he did in 2005. Therefore, the question of the dispersed compatriots appeared to be still extremely important to Putin, even if more than ten years had passed. This aspect that has been confirmed by the adoption in 2007 of a program aimed at favouring the repatriation of the Russians living abroad, granting them citizenship, providing a job and paying for the moving with governmental funds (according to the Russian journal *Ria Novosti*, in 2015 alone the program had brought to Russia more than 180 thousand people)³³⁶. The use of the term “geopolitical catastrophe” when talking about the Soviet collapse, both in the 2005 speech and in the documentary by Stone, appears therefore to be linked to specific instances, and even though it is difficult to imagine that Putin would not be aware of the influence that those words could have had, and still can have, on the Russian population and foreign observers, isolating those words from their context and using them to denounce the most controversial aspects of the government of Vladimir Putin has constituted a common practice for Western scholars, journalists and politicians. However, it does not seem realistic to deny that in several occasions the Russian president gave them the pretext to do so.

4.1 An External Perspective

The first important question in relation to Putin’s declaration that has been raised some years ago and that is worth analysing here is related to a linguistic dispute. In fact, in July 2014, American foreign policy expert Patrick Armstrong challenged the translation of the infamous phrase pronounced by Putin that has been employed by the Western media as well as scholars, according to which he said that “the collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest” or “the biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the century”³³⁷. Instead he supported the official, and less impactful, translation offered by the Russian presidential website, which reads that the Soviet breakdown was a “major geopolitical disaster of the century” and took on an essay by the Swedish economist and senior fellow at the Atlantic Council Anders Åslund as a particular case of use of such an improper translation³³⁸. According to this perspective, the Soviet

³³⁵ The full documentary can be easily found on Youtube, divided in segments, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QvIKSbYkTXI>

³³⁶ “Распад СССР: «крупнейшая геополитическая катастрофа XX века»”, in *ria.ru*, August 19, 2016

³³⁷ S. Frizell, “Ukraine PM: Putin wants to Rebuild the Soviet Union”, in *Time*, April 19, 2014. K. Henderson, “Putin Long to Be Back in the USSR”, in *guardianlv.com*, March 28, 2014

³³⁸ The article is: A. Åslund, “The Post-Soviet Space: An Obituary”, published in A. Åslund, S. Guriev, A. Kuchins, “Russia After the Global Economic Crisis”, Peterson Institute for International Economics, Washington DC, 2010

collapse had been ascribed by Putin among one of the many disasters that had characterised the XX century, constituting “a major one”, but not the greatest, not the most important, not the largest or anything³³⁹.

On the other hand, Åslund retorted confirming the validity of his translation and affirming that a serious scholar should not let himself be deceived by the too common softening translations of the sentence and make his own translation³⁴⁰; this challenge pushed Armstrong to take out a Russian grammar book, on the page describing the meaning of the adjectival form *крупнейший*, the one that had been used by Putin. The book said that the suffix *-ейший* in the Russian language indicated that “an object possesses some quality in an extraordinary degree, without comparing it to other objects”, and that therefore, a proper translation would have sounded like “one of the biggest”³⁴¹. If on the one hand the little differences that can appear in the various versions of the translation of the sentence do not change the substance of what Putin said, on the other hand, the contention shed light on the impact it had on foreign observers, especially those who related it to the politics of the Kremlin in the post-Soviet space, and how in fact the choice to give an absolute meaning to the adjective used by Putin can be considered to serve specific purposes.

Indeed, as noted by Armstrong, a number of newspapers and observers have considered the words of Putin in 2005 as an omen to what would have happened in Georgia in 2008 and in Ukraine in 2014. For example, an article appeared in *The Telegraph* on September 5, 2008, described how the annexation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia by the Russian Federation had been perceived by American senior officials as the first step of a new phase of Russian territorial expansionism, the prelude to “Russia’s quest to establish a new era of imperial glory”. Similarly, what Putin said in 2005 has been believed to suggest that “Russia, buoyed by its vast oil wealth, is intent on re-establishing the old Cold War boundaries in central Europe”³⁴². A March 2014 article published in *The New York Times* opened with an assertion implying that the words pronounced by the Russian president in 2005 were the expression of the fact that “Putin’s obsession is the restoration of Russia’s pride through the restoration of its imperium”³⁴³. It is important not to underestimate the fact that many American newspapers deliberately chose to use the “improper” translation of the adjective, certainly knowing that such a choice would have slightly changed the meaning and the tone of the declaration at the eyes of their readers.

Even more significant is the fact that the same linguistic interpretation has been adopted also

³³⁹ P. Armstrong, “Deadly Quotations”, in russiaotherpointsofview.typepad.com, June 30, 2014

³⁴⁰ See <http://russialist.org/re-putin-soviet-geopolitical-disaster-re-2014-166-johnsons-russia-listpatrick-armstrong/>

³⁴¹ See <http://russialist.org/re-putin-soviet-geopolitical-disaster-deadly-quotations-part-2/>

³⁴² C. Coughlin, “Putin wants a new Russian Empire”, in *The Telegraph*, September 5, 2008

³⁴³ R. Cohen, “Putin’s Crimean Crime”, in *The New York Times*, March 3, 2014

by the former U.N. ambassador for the United States John Bolton. Appearing as a commentator for the Fox News television channel on the newscast edition of March 3, 2014 he too adopted a specific point of view when he stated that the development of the crisis in Ukraine did not appear surprising, since it was part of Putin's strategy to re-establish Russian hegemony within the space of the Soviet Union. The Russian president "gave us notice of his tragedy", said Bolton, "seven or eight years ago when he said, in what now one of the most frequently repeated quotes from his leadership in Russia, when he said that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical tragedy of the XX century"³⁴⁴. The language adopted by Bolton does not seem surprising if we consider his ideological background, characterised by an aggressive neo-conservatism and the firm commitment to the discourse on the fundamental role of the United States in the international arena³⁴⁵. Bolton made clear his perspective on the Russian Federation in several occasions, other than the one already noted, for example criticising the Obama administration for playing in Putin's hands after the Russian Federation granted asylum to Edward Snowden in 2013. The firmness of his convictions earned him the reputation of "ideologue of a new Cold War" and "convinced opponents of Russia"³⁴⁶. The office occupied by Bolton as National Security Advisor for the United States in the current Trump administration is an element that needs to be taken into consideration when analysing the choice to refer to an improper translation of Putin's words in the condemnation of the foreign policies of the Russian Federation.

According to the German political scientist and Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Security Policy at the University of Kiel Hannes Adomeit, it is "well-nigh incontrovertible" that the Soviet Union constitutes Putin's conceptual point of reference, and that it is possible to observe it in both the statements and the policies of the Russian president. All of this could be related to both Soviet geographical extent and its superpower status on a par with the United States. Adomeit inserted Putin's 2005 statement within the context of a wider Russian rhetoric that implies the intimate ties of the Russian Federation with the USSR and cited as a comparable example what he said in 2011 when he answered the rhetorical question "what was the Soviet Union?" stating that "it was Russia, only under a different name"³⁴⁷. The German scholar did not fall in the temptation to call for the Kremlin desire to restore the Soviet Union in its legal and constitutional form but underlined how this nostalgia for the Soviet times can be considered to have as practical consequences the attempts to restore Russian control over the internal political and economic policies as well as foreign orientation of the post-Soviet

³⁴⁴ See K. Sanders, "Did Vladimir Putin Call the Breakup of the USSR the Greatest Geopolitical Tragedy of the Twentieth Century?", in www.politifact.com, March 6, 2014

³⁴⁵ BBC News, Americas, Profile: John Bolton at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4327185.stm>

³⁴⁶ "Russians Fear Bolton May Doom Iran Deal, Stoke Arms Race", in www.al-monitor.com, March 23, 2018

³⁴⁷ H. Adomeit, "Putin's Greater Russia: Misunderstanding or Mission?", in www.raamoprusland.nl, February 27, 2017

states. The framework of these objectives of the Putin administration was constituted by Kremlin's claim for possessing and having to safeguard a "sphere of influence" and the assertion of "special interests" on the territory of the former USSR.

Another aspect of those claims about a Russian sphere of influence has been related to the NATO question. Indeed, the relations between the Russian Federation and the Atlantic organisation have been fluctuating over the years and even if in 2002 a Russia-NATO Council was established (Russia was the only country in the world to enjoy such a position), the Kremlin have always displayed a high degree of criticism for the expansion of NATO towards East even at the time of the Yeltsin administration. In particular, the strong opposition showed by the Kremlin when in April 2008 NATO announced its membership plan for Georgia and Ukraine has been seen by observers, together with the coloured revolutions of 2003-2004, as one the motives behind the Russian initiatives in South Ossetia and Abkhazia and later in Crimea³⁴⁸. It is important to recognise that the question of NATO enlargement did encounter a degree of criticism also among western observers. For example, already in 1998, the famous American historian John Lewis Gaddis made himself the herald of the opinion of a group of colleagues, according to which NATO expansion was "ill-conceived, ill-timed, and above all ill-suited for the realities of the post-Cold War world"³⁴⁹. The possibility that NATO expansion would have antagonised Russia and exacerbated the distrust towards the West, thus strengthening anti-Western elements in the political system of the Russian Federation, was already described here as a concrete possibility. According to Andrew Kydd, trust and mistrust are at the basis of what he called the "NATO enlargement dilemma", the two antagonistic thrusts derived from the enlargement tendency, whose goal was to foster trust into the new members, but that one the other hand had the side effect to lessen trust with Russia³⁵⁰. In particular, this analysis referred to the fact that the relationship between the criteria of admission in the organisation and the rules governing its expansion needed to be assessed carefully, since extending NATO membership to certain countries, especially former Soviet republics, could have been highly provocative for the Russian Federation. Therefore, the North Atlantic Council should have been inclined towards the adoption of restrictive criteria of admission and the principle of conditional expansion that would have reassured the Russian government against the perceived threat of encirclement, thus eliminating the dilemma altogether.

But if the relations between NATO and the Russian Federation on the one hand have caused the concern of some observers about the too aggressive expansionist policy it had undertaken

³⁴⁸ R. Kagan, "Putin Makes His move", *Washington Post*, August 11, 2008. R. Allison, "Russia Resurgent? Moscow's Campaign to 'Coerce Georgia to Peace'", in *International Affairs*, 84, 6(2008). H. Adomeit, cit. D. Trenin, cit.

³⁴⁹ J. L. Gaddis, "History, Grand Strategy and NATO Enlargement", in *Survival*, 40, (1)1998

³⁵⁰ A. Kydd, "Trust Building, Trust Breaking: The Dilemma of NATO Enlargement", in *International Organization*, 55, 4(2001)

since the fall of the USSR, on the other hand Putin's rhetoric about the Soviet collapse and the event in Georgia and Ukraine called also for a change in the stance of the organisation within the context of military security for its members. An example of this different perspective can be found in a 2015 essay by Matthew Kroenig, who argued in favour of the adoption of new security policies by NATO for the protection of its Eastern members against the aggressive influence of the Russian Federation³⁵¹. In particular, Kroenig described how NATO, once the Cold War tensions had come to an end, had been adopting more relaxed security policies for its members and assuming the role of guarantor of stability and promoter of democracy, rule of law, non-proliferation and disarmament. However, the Kremlin's aim to establish a greater degree of control over territories that were once part of the Soviet Union, which, according to the scholar, should have been considered as a concrete possibility after the 2005 declaration, called for a change in the strategy of the Atlantic alliance, whose policies were considered to have left open a opportunity for Russia to take advantage of the "slackened posture" of the organisation.

Particular attention should be focused on Russian nuclear brinkmanship, considered as an integral part of Moscow's initiative in Crimea, and the possibility that a similar intervention to that in Ukraine would occur should not be excluded, especially in those former republics of the Soviet Union where Russia could intervene advancing the reasons of the Russian minorities. For this reason, given the alleged nuclear component in the strategy of the Kremlin, Kroenig did not see how NATO could address it without some upgrade of nuclear capabilities and options. The scholar did not miss to underline the fact that an open military confrontation with Russia should be avoided at all costs, but on the other hand he insisted rather strongly on the fact that NATO should close those gaps left open at the end of the Cold War, being able to deter and defeat local hybrid aggression against NATO members and to deter, and if necessary defeat, any Russian attempts to escalate its way out of a conflict through the early use of nuclear weapons. Maybe the most striking line of the article is the one that says that "NATO must make abundantly clear in its declaratory policy that it stands willing and able to use nuclear weapons in response to Russian aggression against NATO members".

It does not seem too big an exaggeration to say that, in this particular case, the phrase "The collapse of the Soviet Union was the biggest geopolitical tragedy of the century" has been inserted in an analysis of the dynamics of power between the West and Russia characterised by tones that resembles pretty closely those typical of the Cold War period, when it was common to hear about "nuclear retaliation" or "military build-up". It is possible to perceive it even before starting the reading of these pages, by just looking at the title of the essay that calls NATO to get "ready for a new Cold War".

³⁵¹ M. Kroenig, "Facing Reality: Getting NATO ready for a New Cold War", in *Survival*, 57, 1(2015)

It is possible to consider the use of such a strong language by Putin in 2005 as a means to strike the most sensitive chords in the minds and in the hearts of the Russian citizens so as to guarantee government stability. Derek Hutcheson and Bo Petersson described how contemporary Russia is in the paradoxical situation in which president Putin seems to enjoy a consistently high approval ratings, while trust in the institutions of the state is consistently low³⁵². Their analysis focuses on the demonstration that Putin popularity rests primarily on three pillars: the maintenance of economic growth, the creation of domestic order, and (the point of major interest for us) the use of myth to portray the president as a bulwark against chaos and foreign threats, promoting the reinforcement of Russia’s unchallenged status as a great power.

In the first place, the proponents of this analysis underlined the fact that the data of the surveys they conducted led them to delineate the situation of the administration of contemporary Russia as characterised by a lack of long-term legitimacy and a high degree of short-term popularity. A similar description had already been drawn by Sakwa when he talked about Russia as a “dual” state, where a legal and normative constitutional order is operating within a “para-constitutional” administrative regime, held together by the personal popularity of the president³⁵³.

Table 4: Trust and Distrust in State Institutions. The questions were ‘To what extent do you trust each of the following institutions to look after your interests?’ (2000) and ‘To what extent do you trust each of the following institutions?’ (2004–2014). Figures in the table are the cumulative percentages of respondents expressing ‘trust’ and ‘distrust’ in the institutions listed. *Sources:* Calculated from 2000 NRB8 survey, c12; 2004, 2008 and 2012 Russian Research Surveys, B14; 2014 Russian Research Survey, B18.

	<i>Trust</i>					<i>Distrust</i>				
	2000	2004	2008	2012	2014	2000	2004	2008	2012	2014
Church	–	51	58	56	51	–	31	24	28	28
Army	52	44	49	47	48	30	33	30	33	32
President	23	65	68	44	45	62	18	19	33	34
State TV	–	33	39	37	34	–	41	39	38	42
Police	16	14	20	23	28	66	71	61	55	49
Government	–	24	39	32	26	–	54	39	42	50
Regional government	–	18	25	22	25	–	64	57	54	54
Courts	17	20	34	32	25	64	60	46	49	49
Trade unions	22	21	29	30	24	61	63	52	49	56
Private enterprise	16	24	25	29	23	65	54	53	46	51
Parties	9	10	16	19	18	76	75	65	62	64
Parliament	13	10	21	21	17	70	74	60	59	64

³⁵² D. S. Hutcheson, B. Petersson, “Shortcut to Legitimacy: Popularity in Putin’s Russia”, in *Europe-Asia Studies*, 68, 7(2016)

³⁵³ R. Sakwa, “The Crisis of Russian Democracy: The Dual State, Factionalism and the Medvedev Succession”, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2011

Hutcheson and Petersson underlined the fact that the Putin has been able to put himself under the light of the bulwark against instability and threat, and to make this instance one of the foundations of the stability of his regime, which needed to compensate for the falling of legitimacy due to the poor economic performance. This aspect took form in the political strategy of finding outliers, blaming them for the majority if not all the ills of the country and to build a sense of togetherness based on the need to fight these alleged malignant forces.

Closely tied to the perception of a threat is the extent to which Russia is able to stand up against such a danger.

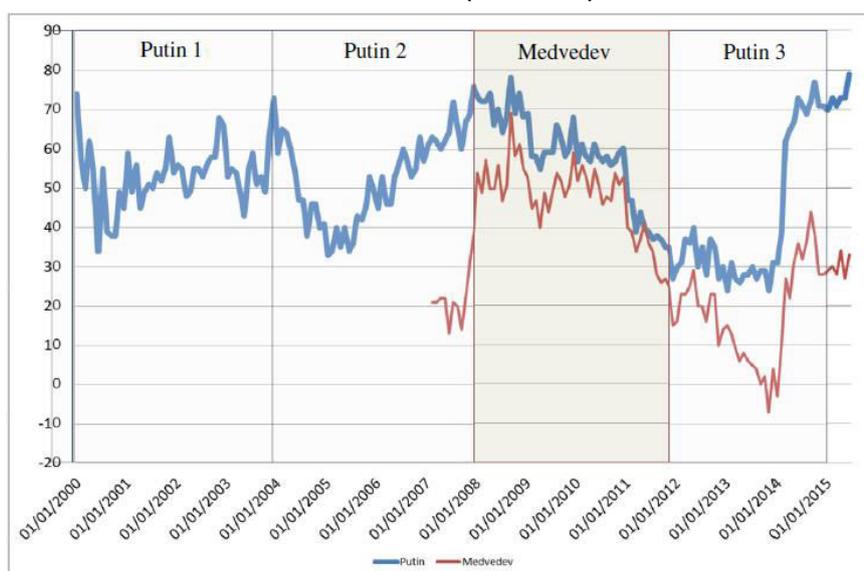
In this sense, describing the collapse of the Soviet Union as the greatest catastrophe of the century has been described as an example of Putin’s rhetoric aimed at the creation and sustainment of the myth of great power Russia. According to Hutcheson and Petersson, the fall in popularity of the president after the Putin-Medvedev swap in 2012 was a great danger for the stability of the Russian government, since the presidential mandate was founded almost exclusively on Putin’s personal popularity. The 2014 events in Ukraine have been considered as, in addition to all the geopolitical, ethnic and economic considerations that could be aroused, a means of internal mobilisation aimed at restoring the legitimacy of the administration. Indeed, data showed a high degree of popular support for the adoption of a more assertive stance in the post-Soviet space and for the annexation of Crimea in the Russian Federation, followed by a restoration of the degree of popularity of the figure of the president himself³⁵⁴.

Table 5: Question: Do you believe that the Russian acted correctly by incorporating Crimea n its territory immediately after the referendum? Data are expressed in percentage points. Sources: Levada Centre (2014, N=1600)

Yes, it had to be done quickly	65
Probably yes, but it had to be done without rushing after discussing the issue with Ukrainian leaders and considering the consequences	16
Probably no, it was immediately clear that the risks associated with this decision were too high	11
Definitely no, on principle this should not have been done	2
It is difficult to say	7

³⁵⁴ For the data in table 5 see www.levada.ru/en/2014/12/23/russian-politics-towards-crimea/. For the data in figure 4 see www.levada.ru/indeksy,

Figure 4: Net approval levels of Putin and Medvedev. Data expressed in percentage points. Source: Levada Centre (2000-2014)



Putin’s 2005 declaration has appeared several times in also in the Russian press. In particular, the independent newspaper *The Moscow Times*, founded in 1992 and publishing English-written articles addressed mainly to foreigners and people interested in international affairs, has regularly released articles quoting the notorious phrase, which has been inserted in various contexts and has been related to different topics on Russian society and politics.

For example, professor of philosophy at the Moscow State Institute of International Affairs Andrei Zubov, in 2010 expressed his dissent towards the decision of the Yeltsin administration to declare the Russian Republic of the Soviet Union as the legal continuation of the USSR few days before the formal end of the Soviet system. According to the author, in that occasion Russia could have chosen a different path for its future, by declaring that the new Russia would have been the legal successor of pre-Soviet Russia, in this way opening greater possibilities for the de-communization of the country and for a less contradictory establishment of a legal system based on the respect for individual rights. Instead, Zubov argues, Russia continued to constitute a “Soviet country”, a fact confirmed by the 2005 words by Putin and by the traditional soviet monumental iconography, materialised in the numerous statues of Lenin still exposed throughout the country³⁵⁵.

In 2012 the newspaper published an article by senior fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economic Anders Åslund, that we have already encountered, about the perceived ineffectiveness of the economic initiatives pursued by Russia in the post-Soviet space. Here, as he had already done in other occasions, the author argued that the 2005 declaration was used by the president to present itself as a neo-imperialist, even if Russia

³⁵⁵ A. Zubov, “It Is Time to Declare the Soviet Union Illegal”, in *The Moscow Times*, July 27, 2010

constitutes a post-imperialist entity³⁵⁶. Åslund then describes how the ties between Russia and the former Soviet republics can be considered to be quite contradictory. Indeed, he argues, the Russian Federation was able to maintain a closer economic and political collaboration with some these countries, like Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, embodied, for example, by the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, while on the other hand countries like Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and Azerbaijan desire independence and have been leaning towards the West and the European Union for several years. The article concludes warning that pursuing aggressive, neo-imperial, policies in relation to the former Soviet Republics, Russia would risk complete isolation even from its closest partners³⁵⁷.

Finally, another example of quotation of the Putin sentence is provided by an article published extremely recently, in the summer of 2018, about the revisionist view adopted by the Kremlin relatively to the August attempted putsch and the Soviet collapse. Here the author, a *Bloomberg Opinion* columnist, argues that the nostalgia for the USSR and Russia's imperial past constitutes by now part of the official ideology of the Kremlin, as demonstrated by the 2005 declaration. It is argued that from these ideological instances stemmed out the recent revisionist trend of the dynamics of the events during the August 1991 putsch, in which the nerve demonstrated by Yeltsin is thoroughly questioned by those convinced of the fact that the former president of the Russian Federation wanted to find shelter in the American embassy. According to this perspective, that the author firmly rejects and ascribes to figures close to Putin, what happened in August 1991 was in part consequences of plots by foreign agents³⁵⁸. In conclusion, it is possible to note that in the majority of the articles reporting the declaration made by Putin in 2005 published by this newspaper the words of the Russian president are inserted in a series of critiques to various aspects of contemporary Russia, in the context of the ideology and foreign politics. The tone of the articles resembles closely the one used by most of western newspapers when dealing with the same topics, a fact that is due also to the fact that The Moscow Times publishes the works of many western journalists and experts. In this way, the description of the Soviet collapse as "a major catastrophe of the century" really constitutes a fitting element for those observers expressing their concern, fear or disdain for the position of the Russian Federation in the international arena, the quality of its democratic institutions and the ideological background of the government of Putin, who is bound to guide and represent the country for several years to come.

³⁵⁶ D. Trenin, "Russia's Post-Imperial Conditions", in *carnegie.ru*, October 18, 2011

³⁵⁷ A. Åslund, "Putin's Eurasian Illusion Will Lead to Isolation", in *The Moscow Times*, June 21, 2012

³⁵⁸ L. Bershidsky, "Soviet Union's Collapse Gets Revisionist View", in *The Moscow Times*, August 22, 2018

4.2 An Internal Perspective

During the transmission of the program “A way out” (“*Ищем выход*”) on the Russian radio channel *Эхо Москвы* on May 16, 2005, the host asked his guests if they agreed with Putin’s statement describing the Soviet collapse as a great catastrophe³⁵⁹. All of them agreed. The question was followed by a debate on the implications of the Soviet collapse for the Russian Federation, the role of the country in the international arena, the perceptions of the population, the question of the detachment from the instances of national cohesion, the socio-economic problems of Russian society, the political rhetoric and the lack of initiative of the governmental administration in relation to the legitimate interests of the country in its traditional sphere of influence.

One of the guests, Dmitry Rogozin, then vice-premier of the government of the Russian Federation and president of the Military-industrial Commission, referred to the fact that, other than the great number of conflicts that had erupted in the post-Soviet space after 1991, the Soviet collapse generated a great vacuum that had been filled by different disrupting forces, the most dangerous of which was considered to be the “American imperialism”, which however was not further described. A similar point of view was shared by another guest of the transmission, Geydar Dzhemal, president of the Russian Islamic Committee, who asserted that this collapse was part of a process that was still going on, a process that was primarily conducted against the Russian Federation by external agents that wanted the complete the dismantling of the Russian political subjectivity. Once again the main incarnation of these obscure external forces, the main guide of these foreign agents, the greatest geopolitical enemy of Russia was detected in the United States: in fact, they needed to finish what had started in 1991, to “kill the beast while it was still weakened by its wounds”, establishing a number of anti-Russian regimes in the post-Soviet space, that would have allowed them to take the conflict to its final phase. It appears evident how both Rogozin and Dzhemal adopted a strong anti-American language, which has been incorporated in a broader rhetoric about the activity of foreign agents planning to lead the Russian state to its final disintegration. It is possible to argue that this kind of language reminds closely the typical Soviet propaganda on the necessity to protect the state, the institutions and society from external disruptive forces responsible for the internal socio-economic problems of the country, even though these problems were principally related to controversial policies aimed at strengthening the central power to the detriment of the citizens. For example, it is easy to draw a tie between these instances and the campaigns against the “cosmopolitans” that characterised the last years of the Stalin regime and the anti-imperialist discourse that constituted one of the dialectical instances of the Cold war period.

³⁵⁹ The full transcription of the broadcast can be seen at: <https://echo.msk.ru/programs/exit/36441/>

Another important element that has been underlined during the broadcast is related to the lack of commitment on the part of the Russian administration as one of the main causes of the potential collapse of the Russian Federation. Indeed, according to Rogozin, the danger of a collapse of the Russian country did not come from American schemes, but from the weakness, the insensibility and the irresponsibility of the Russian administration, which was receding, creating a gap that the Americans, but it could have been basically everyone, even “the Martians”, were ready to fill. Therefore, the élites, (and not the president) considered also those responsible for the collapse of the USSR, were denounced to be the potential cause at the base of the eventual collapse of the Russian Federation. The reasoning was the following: if the authorities would not address the problems of contemporary Russian society, the gap between poor and rich people, the bias of the Russian judiciary, the freedom of speech and so on, the citizens would eventually detach themselves from the state and from the Russian national subjectivity as a whole, thus making the Federation more vulnerable to the disruptive forces represented by local autocrats, separatist nationals, international terrorist groups and, at last, strong foreign states, as the United States.

In this sense, the collapse of the Soviet Union was considered not to have been a predetermined event, but to have been provoked by the treason of the Soviet élite, those who once fiercely spoke about Marxism, Leninism, the only right path, and then surrendered large portion of the country to the neighbours, whose managed to exploit the events to escape the punishment that history would have imposed to them. Thus, the celebration of the recurrence of the adoption of the Declaration of National Sovereignty of the Russian Federation was described as a bitter mockery. Yeltsin’s appeasement during the signing of the Belavezha treaty was said to have been one of the factors at the base of such a tragic territorial mutilation, and Rogozin affirmed that if in that occasion a more firm stance would have been adopted, for example in relation to Crimea, a different course would have been followed also in the territorial discussions with, for example, Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan and the rest of the Caucasus. Therefore, the Soviet collapse has been inserted within a process that was considered to be still going on in the XXI century, a process that reached its apex in 1991 and whose share of responsibility had been ascribed to Yeltsin and his administration. In the same way the contemporary Russian administration has been denounced as unable to reverse this process, thus constituting in turn one of the main obstacles to the resurgence of the Russian Federation to its traditional role of arbiter of the equilibrium in the Eurasian continent. In this particular occasion, the discourse about the importance of the stability factor reached catastrophic tones, when the president of the Islamic Committee Dzhemal launched in a bombastic enumeration of the tragic effects that the envisaged Russian collapse could have entailed for the rest of the world: first, he said, the supply of oil and gas to Europe, and in particular Germany, would have been shattered. This would have caused the collapse of the German economy, the rise to

power of the extremist nationalists and the breakdown of Europe, with the crisis of the relations between Berlin and Paris (the parallelism with the National Socialism of the 1930s is hard to miss). The U.S. at this point could have exploited the vacuum left by Moscow to establish themselves as the arbiter of the equilibrium in the old continent, that nevertheless would have gone through a deep crisis that would have involved China, India and Pakistan, thus constituting the scenario of a possible third global conflict. While the discourse by Dzhemal can be considered excessively unrealistic and maybe dictated by a willingness to hit the conscience of the listeners, it is nonetheless significant if we consider it as a reflection on the role that the Russian Federation is thought to have in maintaining a sort of balance of forces between East and West in the contemporary world, which seems to be heading more and more towards complexity and multipolarity³⁶⁰.

This perspective about the inadequacy of the Russian élite in relation to the what should be the international status of Russia was embraced also by the third guest, Aleksandr Kazakov, then president of the Federal Committee for the Affairs of the Federation and the Regional Politics. Kazakov, while on the one hand emphasised the complex and inter-related factors that led to the events of 1991, on the other referred to the agreement between the centre and Chechnya and the 1994 treaty between with Tatarstan as a withdrawal of the centre from its prerogatives. Similarly, the refusal to openly support the right of the Russian citizens in South Ossetia to live within the Russian Federation, was described as undermining the Russian status as the logical heir of the Soviet Union. A fiercer stance in relation to the Russian legitimate national and territorial demands was believed to have eventually forced the rest of the world to come to terms with the Russian government, thus contributing to the reinforcement of Russian statehood, especially in the Caucasus.

Not surprisingly, the post-Soviet space was one of the main subjects related to these instances, and the aspects that continued to be emphasised related to the fact that the Russian Federation was losing its grip on those territories that would have prevented the worsening of this process of disintegration, that had started with the Soviet collapse. On the one hand Rogozin affirmed that the rise of Yushenko, the Maidan, the Orange Revolution and the other coloured revolutions in general had been possible only because Russia had not been able to influence the course of the events in these territories, calling for a change in the course of the politics of the Russian administration. Kazakov by his part expressed his refusal to consider the widely used term “post-Soviet space” as a correct one, underlining that the right way in which Russia should have addressed its external problems required the adoption of an ad hoc

³⁶⁰ D. Murray, D. Brown, “Power Relations in the XXI Century: Mapping a Multipolar World?”, Routledge, New York, 2017. A. Makarychev, “Russia and the EU in a Multipolar World. Discourses, Identities, Norms”, Ibidem Press, 2014. S. Amin, “Beyond U.S. Hegemony? Assessing the Prospects of a Multipolar World”, Zed Books, London 2006.

stance for each one of the countries taken one by one, articulating in a more appropriate way the politics and the political discourse, since the type of relations conducted with the Baltic States, which are developed democracies, “would be completely unacceptable if applied to Turkmenistan or Uzbekistan, characterised by a dictatorship regime”. Even though the two perspectives appear to be quite different in tone, they both emphasised the importance of the role that Russia must play in the relations with the post-Soviet states, the “near abroad” as an essential aspect of the survival of the Federation. In this way, the coloured revolutions, the political, ideological and nationalistic opposition of the Baltic states, the conflicts in the Middle-East, the question of the national Russians dispersed in the territories of the former Soviet republics, all of this constitutes a complex set of issues that were to be addressed in this struggle for survival in which Russia found itself. This tendency to represent the Russian state as surrounded by enemy states within a world characterised by hostile forces can once again be compared to the Soviet narrative that similarly referred to the necessity to protect the interests of the Union through an expansion of its prerogatives in its spheres of influence; it is possible to consider this aspect as one of the many threads constituting the ideological hank that the Russian Federation inherited from its Soviet predecessor. It is not a case, therefore, that both the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation have been described as “revisionist” entities³⁶¹.

The last element of our analysis on the perspectives about the Soviet collapse from the point of view of three representatives of different institutions and interests of contemporary Russia regards the degree of commitment of the population to the historical, cultural, ideological and political instances described above. The host of the broadcast revealed the results of a poll conducted live among the listeners, who were asked if they agreed with the fact that the Soviet collapse had tragic consequences. To the surprise of everyone in the room, the results showed that 50% of the respondents agreed and 50% disagreed, while the guests had forecasted an 80% rate of approval. While to some observers 50% could not represent by any means a low degree of support for such a controversial instance, the guests of the broadcast seemed to show dissatisfaction and even contempt for the result, and the most supported explanation referred to the sense of indifference towards the international political status of the Russian state that appeared and permeated the citizens. In this respect Rogozin even recognised the possibility that the revolutionary movements of the former Soviet republics had a positive effect, that of awakening the national consciousness of the local populations, consciousness that was instead still missing in the Russian society, characterised by a stagnation of the political life. This suffocation of the political engagement was said to be a consequence of the fact that the most valuable strata of the population perceived to not have any viable channel

³⁶¹ A. Graziosi, 2011, cit. F. Benvenuti, cit.

of expression, any way out of their situation of apathy.

On the one hand, this sense of general disengagement can be interpreted as a contingency of the historical phase that the country was living at the time, a phase in which the Russian society and the life of the individuals was dominated by a set of priorities oriented more towards the stability and ease of the everyday life, a fixed income derived from a secured job. Kazakov in particular denounced the fact that the people were tired of all the “great power” rhetoric and only wanted to live in a civilised society, even if it would have meant living in a smaller, less influential country. He then continued ironically asking where resided the greatness of Russia in the XXI century, the country that in the past was the world largest territorial unit, won WWII, first launched a satellite in the space, but now was characterised by the worrisome spread of AIDS and by the conditions of poverty in which half of its population was living. These factors, according to Kazakov, were at the basis of such a surprising response to the question on the catastrophic consequences of the Soviet collapse.

On the other hand, it is possible to argue that such a political and ideological disengagement created a vacuum that proved to be a fertile terrain, as will be demonstrated below, for exactly this kind of “great power” rhetoric advanced by Putin and his supporters, Rogozin included. The latter indeed insisted on the fact that the destiny of the Russian civilisation was not that of giving up its right to resurge to its legitimate status, just because the people wanted to drink their tea in peace. While he recognised that it would have been a mistake not to talk about the socioeconomic problems that were afflicting society, on the other hand he was convinced that the country needed “big ideas”, ideas that would have awakened the national spirit of a nation that was destined to struggle against the charm of the bourgeoisie. He then evoked, perfectly in line with the typical instances chanted by the champions of great Russia, all the historical precedents in which the Russian population had elevated itself against the sufferings that history forced it to endure, the revolution, the civil war, the painful industrialisation process, the Great Patriotic War, the reconstruction, the Cold War, and so on, asking himself why today the Russians had lost this distinctive inner strength.

In conclusion, what emerged from this debate, broadcasted on a Russian radio channel not even a month after Putin had given his speech to the nation, is a bitter sense of frustration coming from perceived abuses that the Russian state was experiencing in the post-Soviet space (we will use the term, despite what Kazakov said), a rhetoric of a lost great power that the national intelligentsia is not able to take back, preferring instead to “clean the shoes” of those great powers that only want to isolate and destroy the country once dominating the Eurasian continent. It is significant to underline the fact that the adoption of this language has been a common feature of representatives of different political currents, different specific economic and social interests and both supporters (like Rogozin) and opponents (like Dzhemal and Kazakov) of Putin’s administration. If we consider all of this, it is possible to affirm that the

perception of the Soviet collapse as a tragedy, the nostalgia for the Soviet times, the perceived external dangers to the integrity of the Russian Federation and the struggle for finding a place in the contemporary world constitute a widespread ideological burden that connects various elements of the contemporary Russian society.

While such a vibrant expression of these feelings can be considered to be a consequence of the definition of the Soviet collapse as a catastrophe, similar concepts had been expressed several years before 2005. I am referring to a couple of interviews released by the Italian geopolitical journal *Limes* in 1998 which involved Anatoly Ivanovich Lukyanov, deputy of the Russian Communist Party and former president of the Federal Committee for the legislation and judicial reforms, and the better-known Gennady Andreevich Zyuganov, secretary general of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation.

In particular, Lukyanov referred to a general sense of nostalgia for the USSR and personal anger for how it has come to an end, and even though the main reasons he attached to these feelings for the Soviet past related primarily to the difficult economic situation of the Russian population (the year 1998 was characterised by a heavy financial crisis of the Russian Federation³⁶²), he too talked about the role played in the Soviet collapse by external actors, that wanted to finish what they had started by destroying the Russian Federation, dividing it in a multitude of smaller countries that could be manipulated more easily.

The communist deputy, in the following phases of the interview took some time to remind the reader about the nature of the process that led to the creation of the USSR, underlining the fact that, with the adoption of the Soviet Constitution in 1924, the republics that united to form the new political entity were not forced by any kind of compulsion, since the Soviet Union could have been formed only “on the basis of freedom”, (apparently the blood of the victims of the Bolshevik Revolution and the long civil war that followed did not seem worth mentioning).

The future of the Russian Federation and the countries of the post-Soviet space, Lukyanov said, was that of going back to another form of union, something more valuable than the CSI, a new Soviet Union, which would have been different from the previous one, of course, but which would have been inevitable. The form it could have taken, a federal state, a confederation, or an association of sovereign states, was not important; the important thing was that it would have once again reunited those people linked by an authentic, millennial connection, a unity of values and culture, a common vision of life that put the state and the collectivity, and not the individual, at the first place³⁶³.

Similar tones were used also by Zyuganov, when he said that the collapse of the USSR led to the rise of dangerous situations, that the United States, described as the only superpower

³⁶² Cit., *infra*

³⁶³ For the full interview, see: M. De Bonis, “Confessioni di un Nostalgico”, in “La Russia a Pezzi”, *Limes*, 4(1998)

still sound in the international arena, were not able to control, thus contributing to the unpredictability of the future of the world. Another aspect that the two politicians shared regarded not only the possibility, but even the necessity to reconstruct the Soviet Union; Zyuganov went as far as saying that Russia, nor Ukraine or Belarus, could not survive by their own. What was necessary, according to the Communist leader, was first of all to get rid of Yeltsin, and secondly to take the time necessary for the reconstruction of the “pacific and democratic ties” among the former Soviet republics.

Subsequently, when he was asked if Russia was still a great power, he launched in a decantation of the messianic role of the country as the kingpin of the equilibrium between Europe and Asia, the axis of the balance between two worlds, without which, a “a geopolitical catastrophe will certainly occur” (interesting choice of words). This discourse, filled with tones of predeterminism and revanchism, continued with another attack to the Yeltsin administration as the harbinger of the loss of prestige and unity, and stressed also the loss of the Russian collective spirit and the rise of individualism (in the interview at *Эхо Москвы* that has been described above, the term used was “indifference, but the meaning can be considered to be more or less the same). A central aspect that emerged from this interview regarded the fact that one of the major mistakes of the Soviet collapse was the destruction of the CPSU; in this respect, the perspective of Zyuganov is unsurprisingly distant from the rhetoric of the Russian administration of the XXI century. However, if we let aside this point, since it is not strange for a political exponent to defend the validity of the political doctrine they are embodying and representing, it is impossible not to perceive the similarities with the more recent claims about the dangers deriving from the collapse of the USSR (apart from the change of perspective in relation to the inevitability, and subsequently even the possibility, to restore the Union), especially those claims about the threat of a collapse of the Russian state³⁶⁴.

4.3 The Public Opinion

Once we analysed the question of the Soviet collapse from the perspective of a number of Russian politicians and officials, what is possible to say about the Russian citizens? What do they feel about the USSR? Have the 2005 words by Putin had any influence on their perceptions? Or are they a crystallisation of a constant perception of the population?

The Irish scholar Neil Munro in an article published in 2006 in the journals *Post-Soviet Affairs* and *Вестник Общественного Мнения* launched in a theoretical analysis of the multidimensional structure of the nostalgia for the Soviet times in the Russian population, analysis that can be relevant in this context since it provides a series of data on the phenomenon. Observing the data of a public opinion survey conducted on the Russian

³⁶⁴ For the full interview see: M. De Bonis, “Così Rifaremo l’URSS”, in “La Russia a Pezzi”, *Limes*, 4(1998)

population by the New Russian Barometer group in 2005, it was possible to say that in this year 70% of the Russians held a positive evaluation of the Soviet regime, while 17% had a negative assessment and 11% were neutral³⁶⁵. It is worth noting that the model used in this measurement had been based on an assessment scale that ranged from -100 (worst) to +100 (best), and the variation of 49 points among the positive responses can be considered as a sign of the difference in degree and kind of the assessment of the past by the Russian population (Figure 1).

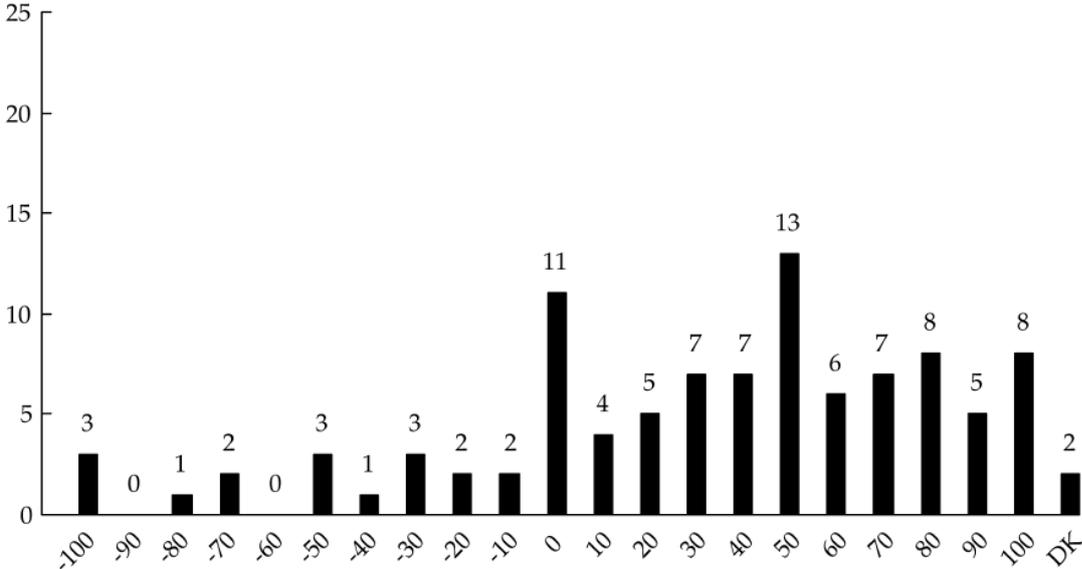


Figure 1: Question: “Here is a scale for ranking how our system of government works. The top, plus 100, is the best; the bottom, minus 100, is the worst. Where on this scale would you put the former Communist regime?”

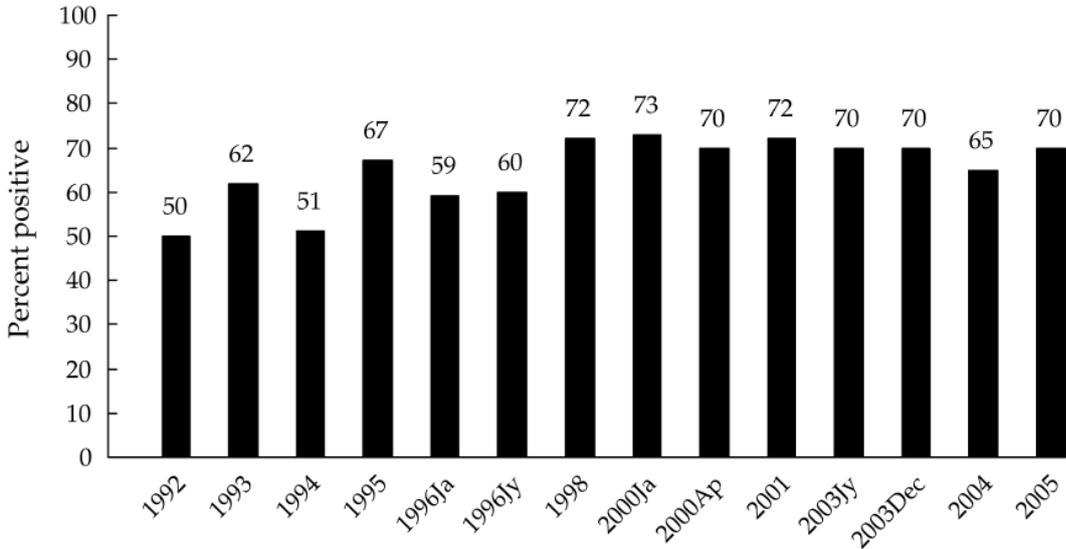


Figure 2: Question: “Here is a scale for ranking how our system of government works. The top, plus 100, is the best; the bottom, minus 100, the worst. Where on this scale would you put the former Communist regime?”

³⁶⁵ New Russia Barometer XIV, fieldwork, January 3–23, 2005

In addition, it has been observed that this trend in nostalgia, that had already started from a high base, had steadily increased from 1992 to 2000, when Putin came to power, when it stabilised on a level of two thirds of the respondents (Figure 2)³⁶⁶.

Munro's analysis is interesting also because it draws a line between the Soviet nostalgia on the one hand and the feelings about the desirability and the feasibility of a reconstruction of the Soviet regime: indeed, the New Russian Barometer 2005 survey showed that 58% percent of respondent opposed a returned to Communism, and 41%, a lower, but still a significant figure, supported it, whereas only 16% of respondents believed that the likelihood of a future restoration of Communism was a possible or likely turn of events, and 83% believed it not to be likely or possible at all³⁶⁷. How it is possible to explain this difference? In order to answer this question, Munro elaborated a list of hypotheses in order to theorise the wider relationships in which nostalgia, reaction and expectation are embedded. One of these hypotheses considered the social and structural differences of the population: the New Russian Barometer 2005 surveys shows that older people, for example those who have fought in the Great Patriotic War, or those who came to adulthood under Stalin or the post-war years tend to be more nostalgic of the *glasnost* and post-*glasnost* generations³⁶⁸. A second hypothesis regarded the dissatisfaction with the (in 2005) current regime in delivering political goods and economic stability: in this respect the main problems that can be considered to affect Russians perceptions of the past are related to the degree of corruption of the government officials (in 2005, only 9% of respondents believed that in Russia there was little or no corruption) and the household economic grievances, in the circumstances of still incomplete transformation of the economy (in 2005, 49% of respondents said that the economic situation of their household was better before the economic transformation, while only 28% said the contrary and 23% that it was more or less the same).

According to Munro, the implications of the Soviet legacy in Russian political behaviour can be framed within a "persistence scenario", in which evaluation of the past predict present preferences and inform future expectations, but when a discrepancy between three instances arises, another phenomenon takes over, the decay. This dynamic is used by Munro to explain the fate of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, which is experiencing a serious lack of political preferences since 1991³⁶⁹. As communism has decayed, then, an ideological vacuum has taken its place. This vacuum by its part can be considered as a fertile ground for

³⁶⁶ New Russia Barometer surveys I–XIV (1992–2005)

³⁶⁷ R. Rose, "New Russia Barometer XIV: Evidence of Dissatisfaction," *Studies in Public Policy No. 402*, Centre for the Study of Public Policy, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, 2005.

³⁶⁸ R. Rose, cit.

³⁶⁹ N. Munro, "Russia's Persistent Communist Legacy: Nostalgia, Reaction, and Reactionary Expectations", in *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 22, 4(2006), and in *Вестник Общественного Мнения*, 86, 6(2006)

the rhetoric of Putin's government which is based on a consistent syncretism, the mixing and matching of different points of view. This can be observed in the same 2005 address of the president to the Federal Assembly, when on the one hand, as we know pretty well at this moment, he told that "the collapse of the Soviet Union was a major geopolitical catastrophe of the XX Century", while on the other he claimed that Russia had long been part of the European civilisation and that "For three centuries, we—together with the other European nations—passed hand in hand through reforms of Enlightenment, the difficulties of emerging parliamentarism, municipal and judiciary branches, and the establishment of similar legal systems"³⁷⁰. The convergence of such different tones in the rhetoric and symbolism of Putin is described by Munro as reflecting the multidirectional interest of the Russian Federation in the XXI century, among which there is the restoration of Russia "great power" status, pursued also including the exaltation of nostalgic and reactionary feelings, disregarding the impact on the image of the Federation in the West³⁷¹.

The importance of age as a social factor in the persistence of the sense of nostalgia for the Soviet system in the Russian population does not exclude the fact that the younger generations would not relate with what Putin said in 2005. Indeed, the analysis of Natalya Zorkaya does provide us another, different, insight on how the young Russians perceived the Soviet past. Referring to the data of a 2005 survey conducted by the analytical Levada Centre on the Russian youth, the absolute majority (78%) of the respondents "completely" or "rather" agreed with the fact that the collapse of the USSR was a major geopolitical catastrophe of the XX century, thus in a way underlining a tendency that needs to be observed, especially if we relate it to the observations made by Munro on the fact that the older the Russian citizen, the more likely he or she is to hold feelings of nostalgia for the Soviet past³⁷².

As Zorkaya says, the younger generations, during the first years of the new Russian political life, were considered by the liberal and democratic Russian parties as the most permeable to the Western ideas and the principles of democracy, such as human rights protection, private property, freedom of speech, and son on, which were at the base of the modernisation of the Russian society and economy. Consequently, it could have been logical to think that, with the natural generational change, a constitutional consolidation of such ideas would have occurred, together with the suppression of the previous complex of Soviet ideas. However, in the mid-1990s a series of works by the Levada Centre demonstrated that attributing to the young generations the role of promoters of the modernisation and carriers of the new liberal and democratic values was "confusing a dream for reality", since the pro-West orientations had

³⁷⁰ <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931>

³⁷¹ N. Munro, cit.

³⁷² N. Zorkaya, "Ностальгия по прошлому, или какие уроки могла усвоить и усвоила молодежь", in *Вестник Общественного Мнения*, 89, 3(2007)

mainly a verbal, (that is they constituted only an indicator of belonging to a specific social group), and transitory character³⁷³.

In this way, according to this perspective, the young individuals became more and more part of the structure of those mass representations that constituted the array of ideas, stereotypes and concepts typical of the "Soviet man"³⁷⁴. One of the main instances that can be inserted within this array is the era of Stalin. In 2005, the relationship of the young generations with this long and important historical phase appeared to be quite contradictory; on the one hand the Stalin regime needed to be condemned, but on the other hand it was necessary to question the common assessments in this respect and even not think that it had been so negative. In this sense, according to the data coming from a national survey on the young people of the Russian Federation conducted by Theodore Gerbert and Sarah Mendelson, the large majority of the respondents (70%) thought that "Stalin was the direct responsible for the detention of people in gulags, for the tortures and killing of millions of innocent people", but only 43% of them agreed to the statement that "Stalin was a tyrant, who deserves nothing except blame", whereas 48% disagreed. The point of view that "Stalin made some mistakes, but his merits are far greater than his flaws", which had been gaining more and more popularity, was shared by the 55% of the respondents³⁷⁵.

Stalin's main achievement had been the victory in the Great Patriotic War, which reveals a sort of indulgence towards all the crimes that the dictators committed in several occasions; Zorkaya argued that it seemed like the magnitude of these crimes and the meaning of the victory itself entailed the prohibition to comprehend and analyse critically not only the figure of the dictator, but Stalin' epoch in general³⁷⁶. It is possible to relate that to the results of a 2006 survey on the "most eminent personalities of all people and of all times" among the young Russians, who placed the Soviet dictator at the third place, behind only Pushkin and tsar Peter I³⁷⁷.

Such a perception, or missed perception, of what can be considered the most complex and the most controversial epoch of the Russian past, such a missed problematisation, examination, comprehension of the totality of the problematics inherited from the Soviet epoch can be related to the fact that for the young generations the main sources of knowledge of those times is neither school, nor parents, but the mass-media.

³⁷³ For example, see: Y. Levada, "Три 'поколения перестройки'", in *Мониторинг Общественного Мнения*, 3(1995). В. Dubin, "Поколение: Социологические границы понятия", in *Мониторинг Общественного Мнения*, 2(2002). N. Zorkaya, "Молодежь: Типы адаптации, оценка перемен, установки на социальное достижение", in *Мониторинг Общественного Мнения*, 2(2001)

³⁷⁴ N. Zorkaya, cit.

³⁷⁵ T. Gerbert, S. Mendelson, "Failing the Stalin Test: Russians and their Dictator", in *Foreign Affairs*, 85, 1(2006)

³⁷⁶ N. Zorkaya, cit.

³⁷⁷ www.levada.ru/

Table 1: Evaluate how much did you learn about the period of Stalin’s government from... (percentage points of respondents)³⁷⁸

Sources of Knowledge	Response Options		
	Much	Not Much	None
School, teachers, professors	26	62	12
Books	21	55	24
TV Programs and films	40	50	10
Declarations of Russian Executives	6	38	56
Parents	12	44	43
Grandparents	18	38	43

Table 2: Evaluate how much did you learn about mass arrests and the gulags of the Soviet period from... (percentage points of respondents)

Sources of Knowledge	Response Options		
	Much	Not Much	None
School, teachers, professors	20	59	22
Books	22	50	28
TV Programs and films	38	48	14
Declarations of Russian Executives	6	37	57
Parents	9	38	52
Grandparents	14	35	51

It has been observed that this “deproblematization” of the Soviet times for the younger generations came also from a lack of depth in the familiar memory, since discussions about those times with parents and grandparents were happening more and more rarely. In this way, Zorkaya notes, the crucial phase of the life of the country had been experienced by the young Russians exclusively through the old ensemble of ideas, complexes, values and fears with the prevalence of passive modes of survival and adaptations, based not on a thorough comprehension of the past, but on its banal stylisation³⁷⁹.

The picture of Soviet nostalgia can be extended more by including a number of analyses comparing data that regards not only Russia, but also other former Soviet republics, in particular Belarus and Ukraine, whose leaders in 1991 took part in the signing of the Belavezha accord and had a fundamental role in the creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States. Steven White, in one of his many studies on the dynamics of the perceptions in the post-Soviet states, noted that the March 1991 referendum on the continuation of the USSR as a “renewed federation of equal sovereign republics in which the human rights and freedoms of

³⁷⁸ These and the following data refer the 2005 surveys of Mendelson and Gerber

³⁷⁹ N. Zorkaya, cit.

people of every nationality [would] be fully guaranteed”, attracted the consensus of 71% of Russians, 70% of Ukrainians, and 83% of Belarusians. However, the degree of support for the principles of a union of some kind have continued to be high; in a 2008 Russian survey, 57% of the respondent largely or entirely agreed that the demise of the Soviet Union was a “disaster”, and 64% thought that the former Soviet Republics that had formed the CIS should reunite in a single state or at least cooperate more closely³⁸⁰. These data on the feelings of the necessity to (re)form a unitary political entity can be compared to another survey reported by Boris Dubin and conducted by the Levada Analytical Centre between 2002 and 2004, which shows a particular trend in the perceptions of the Russian population in relation to the common Slavic umbrella under which the Russian Ukrainian and Belarusian populations should be comprehended. Indeed, to the question “do you consider the Russians, the Ukrainians and the Belarusians as different nations or as three branches of the same nation?”, the absolute majority of the respondents (76% in 2002 and 79% in 2004) supported the “same nation” alternative (Figure 3)³⁸¹. Still, as noted by White, Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians certainly have complex and differentiated views of the political economic and social system that was formally ended in 1991. Citizens of the three countries were asked in a series of national surveys about the “best” and the “worst” features of the communist regimes: the most positive of these features for the respondents in all the three former Soviet republics were guaranteed employment, the degree of stability among the various nationalities, economic stability (particularly relevant in Ukraine) and the way the regime had maintained a measure of social equality and public order.

Table 3: Nostalgics by social characteristic (proportion in each country in respect of each characteristic who agree or disagree with the proposition that ‘It is a great misfortune that the Soviet Union no longer exists’). Surveys: Russia, 2008; Ukraine, 2007; Belarus, 2006, rounded percentages, N=2000, 1200 and 1000 respectively

	All	M	F	<30	>60	1 + 2 ed	3 ed	Low SoL	High SoL
Russia									
Agree	57	55	58	34	77	59	50	71	46
Disagree	32	36	30	50	15	31	41	22	41
Ukraine									
Agree	48	49	48	22	64	57	37	58	28
Disagree	40	42	39	59	27	31	53	31	66
Belarus									
Agree	39	40	39	22	57	40	37	51	32
Disagree	49	51	48	64	32	45	56	36	59

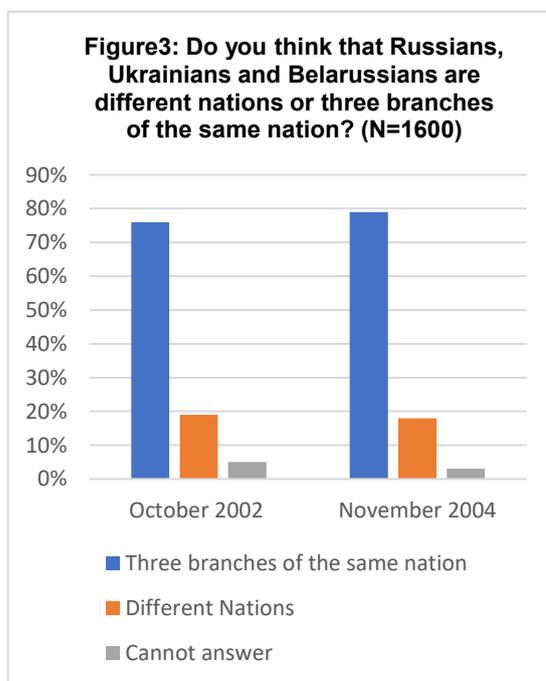
³⁸⁰ S. White, “Soviet Nostalgia and Russian Politics”, in *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 1(2010)

³⁸¹ B. Dubin, “Россия и соседи: проблемы взаимопонимания”, in *Вестник Общественного Мнения*, 75, 1(2005)

At the same time, there was a significant level of agreement also in relation to those features of the old regime that were considered negative: economic stagnation, excessive bureaucracy and violation of human rights, even though the latter, as White does not fail to note, came only in third place, and in Ukraine constituted as bad a shortcoming as economic stagnation³⁸².

Other data show that people in Ukraine, Belarus, but also in Russia, recognised that they enjoyed more freedom to express their religious beliefs and more freedom to decide whether or not to join a particular organisation in the post-Soviet regime than in the past, but the relationship between citizens and the government did not appear to have changed as much positively. Indeed, the number of those who perceived that they were more likely to suffer illegal arrest or to be treated by officials less equally and morally than before was always higher than that of those who believed the opposite (with respects to the last point, the differences appeared particularly significant in Ukraine).

In the end, did the respondents regret the collapse of the Soviet Union or not? The surveys conducted by White show that the Russians clearly did so, but in the other two Slavic countries, there picture was somewhat different. Indeed, as observed also by White himself and McAllister, if “the USSR” for the Russians indicated the Soviet system, with all its plus and minuses, for Ukrainians and Belarusians it was a period in which their countries were not independent states. Consequently, the regret for the collapse of the Soviet Union would have entailed the regret of the period in which they have been ruled by Moscow, and at the same time not regretting it meant the recognition of the importance of the national sovereignty, without necessarily implying a rejection of the Soviet political and economic system (it is worth noting however that in the 2007 survey in Ukraine, 48% of the respondent agreed with the statement “it is a great misfortune that the Soviet Union no longer exist”, as shown in table 3, by no means a meaningless figure)³⁸³. For this reason, White concludes asserting that it is necessary to “disaggregate” communist nostalgia: the surveys he conducted revealed very different assessments of the possibility to restore a unitary state in Russia and in Belarus and Ukraine, where it was basically



³⁸² S. White, 2010, cit.

³⁸³ S. White, I. McAllister, “Беларусь, Украина и Россия: восток или запад”, in *Вестник Общественного Мнения*, 95, 3(2008)

incompatible with their still relatively recent national independence. Still, there was an even larger constituency supporting the basic principles in which the USSR was based.

Overall, the sense of nostalgia for the Soviet times in the Russian population has known some fluctuations through time, and the data of the surveys conducted by the Levada Centre over the years allow the observer to adopt a broader time frame. Since 2005, the year when Putin described the Soviet collapse as a major geopolitical catastrophe of the last century, the percentage of respondents expressing regret for the fall of the USSR stabilised on a level that ranged from 65% to 55%, thus comprehending more than half of the interviewed. The moment of major decrease has been registered in 2011-2012, a period in which the level of consensus for the Russian government reached dangerously low levels and many manifestations of protest occurred throughout the country after the Putin-Medvedev swap (in November 2012, only 49% of the respondents expressed regret for the Soviet collapse, the lowest figure ever registered). Subsequently, the nostalgia feelings started to go back up to the previous levels, and in 2014, when the Russian Federation annexed Crimea and the war in the Donbass region broke out, 54% of respondents affirmed to regret the fall of the USSR. Finally, the *Moscow Times* on an article published on December 25, 2017 wrote that last year the percentage of the respondents expressing regret for the events of 1991 rose to 58%, thus constituting the highest figure since 2009³⁸⁴.

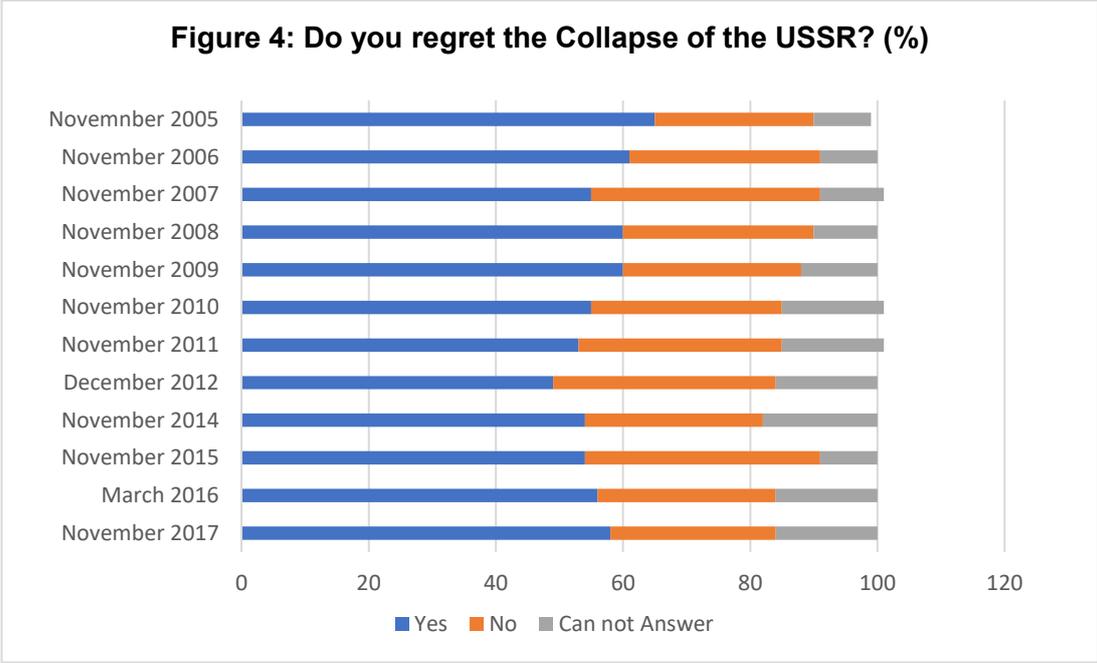
The surveys conducted by the Levada Centre (carried on groups of 1600 individuals aged from 18 years old onwards, living in 137 different localities located in 48 different regions of the country) are extremely useful for the adoption of a broad perspective in relation to the dynamics between the perceptions of the population, the rhetoric adopted by the president and the policies pursued by his government³⁸⁵. The particularly low figures of the years 2011-2012 are significant if we relate them to the analysis made by Hutcheson and Petersson that we discussed above, according to which defining the Soviet collapse as a major geopolitical disaster of the century constitutes an example of one of the elements at the base of Putin personal popularity, that of the creation of a myth about the “great power” status of Russia³⁸⁶. Indeed, the slump in Soviet nostalgia levels has been registered in a period when the popular consensus towards the president reached the lowest point of his career; those data seem to underline the nature of the ties between the regret the fall of the Soviet Union and the ideological discourse that constitutes the basis of the personal legitimation of Vladimir Putin as well as that of his policies. This can be considered to provide an explanation of the temporal match between the detachment from the Soviet nostalgia and the fall in popularity of the president, a conjuncture that can be considered to not have occurred by coincidence.

³⁸⁴ “Majority of Russians Regret Soviet Collapse – Poll Says”, in *The Moscow Times*, Dec. 25, 2017

³⁸⁵ For the data of the surveys, see <https://www.levada.ru/2017/12/25/nostalgija-po-sssr/?fromtg=1>

³⁸⁶ D. S. Hutcheson, B. Petersson, cit

Following the same line, the return of higher levels of regret for the Soviet collapse can be observed to correspond to the resurgence of the personal popularity of Vladimir Putin, who did not dismiss his point of view on the events in 1991, since in the 2015 documentary by Oliver Stone (see above) he described them using almost the exact same wording of the 2005 speech in front of the Federal Assembly. In this respect it is important to remember that the documentary, which has been strongly criticised in the West for the tendency to portray the Russian president exclusively in terms of firmness, rationality, patriotism and a pinch of masculinity, was broadcasted in the Russian television. The relation between nostalgia and popular consensus towards the president seems to be confirmed also by the fact that some months after The Moscow Times had written that the percentage of Russians regretting the Soviet collapse was hitting the highest figures in nearly a decade, in March 2018 Putin was re-elected president of the Russian Federation for the fourth time, office that he will occupy since 2024, with a 77% of the preferences expressed by voters.



In conclusion, it is possible to affirm that when Putin said that “the collapse of the Soviet Union was a major geopolitical catastrophe of the XX century” he was launching a message primarily to the Russian constituency, in line with the general “great power” rhetoric that he adopted throughout all his career, aiming at the promotion of the resurgence of the Russian Federation to the role of fundamental actor in the international arena. Undoubtedly, many of his initiatives, both in internal and foreign politics, were aimed at strengthening his personal power and extending the Russian sphere of influence through means that we can define at least questionable from the point of view of morality, human rights respect and international law.

The figure of Vladimir Putin, both personally and politically, is characterised by many contradictions, many lights and shadows, to the extent that scholars, historians and experts in international relations appear to be markedly divided on their opinion about the Russian leader. The words he pronounced in the 2005 address to the Federal Assembly, with all its possible interpretations and connections, confirm the elusive nature of Putin's personality and his ability to exploit this characteristic to the advantage of his personal power.

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