Russia and Its Neighbours: Possessive Love, Abusive Friendship?

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Introduction

The crisis in Ukraine and Russia's reaction to it made questions related to the geographical *periphery* of Europe *central* for the EU both institutionally and normatively. For EU member states the most important issues raised in this conflictual context - such as the future of the Eastern Partnership (EaP), the perspective of European solidarity, the institutional commitments of the EU and NATO - are deeply political, as are the dilemmas of *engaging* with Russia versus *containing* Russia, or playing a Cold War-like power balancing game, as opposed to promoting democracy. Both economic rationale and legal considerations fall victims to the ongoing politicisation, thus putting many theories on trial, especially those grounded in the supposedly diminishing importance of borders in a globalising world and the seemingly positive effects of economic interdependence.

The political content of the bilateral EU- Russia relationship is especially obvious as seen from the perspective of approaching both parties as two communities-in-the-making with blurred identities and futures. The two are in the process of a painful (re)negotiating/bargaining over the contours of their bound-

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aries, both political (including spheres of influence and "red lines"), cultural /civilisational/ and on the question of identity. The EU-Russia collision of interests and values reconfigures the choices faced by actors located in between the two competing poles and forming a group of borderland regions, to include Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus, and the Black Sea region.

In this article I seek to unpack the content of the conflict-ridden Russia's policy towards the EU and those neighbouring countries that display pro-Western intentions. I will describe EU-Russia relations from a structural viewpoint, then explicate the controversies of Russia's policies towards its both EU and non-EU neighbours, and finally address implications of the dominating trends for borderland countries in general and the Black Sea region in particular.

Structural features of Russia - EU conflictual communication

Political dynamics in the whole realm of EU-Russia relations is predominantly defined by the irreconcilable competition of two universalistic projects, each one sustained by its own vision of global normative order. Of course, the EU and Russia might coincide on certain points – such as, for example, the desirability and benefits of a multi-polar structure of global relations, or on de-bordering policies towards their neighbours, yet on most accounts positions taken by the two competing poles are drastically dissimilar. Seen from this perspective, the current EU-Russia confrontation can be explained by the collision of two "politics of truth-seeking", to borrow a concept from the French political philosopher Alain Badiou. Russia's defence of moral and political conservatism and its obsession with combatting "falsifications

of historical truth" are in disharmony with the European norma-tive project in which the key nodal points are liberal emancipa-tion, tolerance, multiculturalism, transparency and democratic accountability. For both hegemonic projects external othering of each other on normative grounds is a core condition of their functioning.

In openly contesting the EU normative hegemony, Russia plays a role of politicising actor, having challenged the conventional perception of the 1989–1991 events as a watershed in the history of Europe, and intentionally revitalises many Soviet-era prac-tices. The debate on international democracy dating back to the end of the 1990s had become perhaps the first sign of the grow-ing detachment of Moscow from an earlier largely depoliticised vision of international relations during Boris Yeltsin's presidency in the 1990s. In the context of post-Kosovo political rifts between Russia and the West, the idea of international democracy was supposed to bear two chief meanings. *First*, it was meant to lam-bast the Western-centric (and thus US-led) world order as un-democratic not only formally (by equating democracy with a mere plurality of meaningful policy positions), but also substan-tially and qualitatively as allegedly conducive to structural im-balances dangerously disruptive for global security. *Second*, the international democracy concept, as promoted by the Kremlin, has as its effect de-valorisation of liberal democracy as the glob-ally hegemonic discourse, and the de facto acceptance of each national subjectivity, regardless of the nature of domestic regimes. All key elements of Russian foreign policy under Putin's presidency – the fierce resistance to NATO enlargement, the fear of colour revolutions, and claims for Russian sphere of influence reminiscent of a new edition of Russian imperial momentum - embrace these two key points of reference.

Russia's soft power project for Europe

Soft power has to be understood as an ideational phenomenon, grounded in operationalisation of attractive ideas for engaging with other members of the international society and getting responsive feedback from them. In the meantime, soft and hard types of power can often be complementary rather than antithetical instruments, and soft power resources can be converted into hard power gains, which Russia demonstrated by annexing Crimea in the immediate aftermath of the Sochi Olympics, an event that was designed - and widely perceived - as the heyday of Russia's soft power exposure.

In this respect Russia conceptually differs from the EU. The latter uses its soft power resources to expand the scope of choices and alternatives for countries of the common neighbourhood, and acts in accordance with the concept of governmentality, conceived by Michel Foucault as a de-politicised and mostly technocratic form of power, that presupposes empowering, rather than dominating. "Instead of direct governance, the state steps back and encourages people to become more active, enterprising and responsible for their own decisions and life choices"[2]. Russia's soft power, on the contrary, is meant to reduce and limit the scope of free choice for neighbouring countries. The EU soft power is predominantly of liberal background, while its Russian equivalent is inherently conservative and in many respects retrospective. Being explicitly illiberal, Russian soft power project aims to reach audiences in neighbouring countries and EU member states that share anti-EU, anti-multiculturalism, anti-tolerance, and anti-globalist policy tenets.

[2] Jonathan Joseph, "Governmentality of What? Populations, States and International Organisations", *Global Society*, 23(4), 2009, pp. 413–427.

In so doing, Russia portrays itself as a global harbinger of the comeback of the era of sovereign nation states. Yet in Putin's Russia, sovereignty is very limited economically and financially, as epitomised by the fall of the ruble and the critical deterioration of market conditions in Russia as a result of its policy in Ukraine. Russia is simply too weak to challenge the West, and economically has every chance of turning into a junior partner of China, thus indirectly losing its sovereignty.

Against this backdrop, normative issues play a key role in substantiating Russian ambitions. In the past decade Moscow did its best to infuse Russia-specific meanings into Western concepts of democracy and human rights. Thus, democracy in the hegemonic Russian discourse is domestically associated with majority rule (which does not prevent Moscow from harshly lambasting Baltic countries for their alleged policies of discriminating against Russian minorities living there); human rights are mostly seen through an economic and social - rather than political - prism; and the ideas of responsibility to protect and solidarity are congruent with the "Russian world" ideology that presupposes the support for military rebellions in neighbouring countries (as the experience of Ukraine made clear). By the same token, the most controversial steps undertaken domestically and internationally are always justified by the Kremlin through references to supposedly similar Western experiences (the recognition of independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as a political equivalent of the recognition of Kosovo; the annexation of Crimea as being allegedly symmetric with the reunification of Germany; the infamous "foreign agents" legislation as having its precedents in the US, and the idea of "sovereign democracy" as rooted in European political traditions).

Yet the third presidential term of Vladimir Putin was marked by the direct contestation of the Western-centric normative order. Kremlin's reaction to the crisis in Ukraine made clear that Russia's soft power contains a strong geopolitical component inherited from its imperial and Soviet past, almost completely rehabilitated by Putin, as exemplified by the de facto renaming of Volgograd as Stalingrad for national holidays, the justification of the war the USSR waged in Afghanistan, along with the "normalisation" of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. The moral apology for Russia's involvement in the crisis in Ukraine betrays an essential point in the Kremlin's foreign policy philosophy that is bent on legitimising imperial impositions as justifiable and conducive to the reproduction of traditionally successful, in Moscow's eyes, patterns of international relations.

In the long run, Russia's strategy aims to split Europe apart and thus question the rationale of the European project, or at least to make the EU react to the unexpectedly sharpened hard security problems, to which the EU by its very design is functionally not up to effectively respond. Two elements of Russia's strategy play the most important roles. First, Russia intends to de-legitimise the EU and NATO, to this end using contacts with far-right and far-left parties in many European countries. Second, Russia is eager to detach neighbouring countries from the EU and NATO, and for this purpose tries to publicly expose an institutional futility of both the EU and NATO by demonstrating a) their operational weakness and inability to protect interests of their members, and b) undue dependence on the US. The Russia-spurred politicisation of relations with the EU is conducive to the reproduction of the binary logic of "either – or" confrontation reminiscent of the Cold War, which ultimately leads to the dangerous securitisation of the relationship.

Russia's recourse to ideological rhetoric as a pivotal element of its diplomacy is inherently reactive, and is grounded in a comprehension of its own inability to meet high standards of EU-centred normative order, which unleashed a self-inflicted discourse of marginalisation and victimisation. Yet paradoxically, this "enforced ideologisation" makes Russia a rather trans-ideological type of actor that feels free to pragmatically transcend, if not disregard, all possible ideological divides. Russia's regime is not a source of a strong ideological project of its own - it only plays with political ideologies and pragmatically uses them. Thus, Russia can exploit the widely spread pro-Russian/anti-sanctions sentiments among "Russia understanders" who articulate their policies in explicitly ideological terms (far left and far right), being happy to appease and accommodate Moscow's neo-imperial momentum. Moscow can also take advantage of political and ideological rifts within Europe that are based on geography ("old" and "new" EU member states), and on different historical experiences of dealing with Russia. And, of course, the Kremlin may profit a lot from policies of bracketing Ukraine out of the European context, which potentially may be conducive to the de facto acceptance of Russia's sphere of influence. EU's Eastern Partnership fatigue and uncertainty with its prospects contributes to this.

Problems for Russian integrationist policy towards its "near abroad" are further exacerbated by an apparent discrepancy between the ideas of the Russian world and Eurasianism. The distinction between the two is substantial: the Russian world is a *biopolitical* doctrine premised on protecting an imagined trans-territorial community of Russian speaking population allegedly sharing a common macro-identity, while Eurasianism is a set of *geopolitical* ideas more focused on governing and managing ter-

ritories than on articulating identity discourses. We shall dwell on each of these concepts in further analysis. Both doctrines are bent on the idea of representation (i.e. Russia representing something that stretches beyond its borders - either the global community of Russian speakers, or a group of Russia's neighbours), yet this idea is differently articulated and thus might bring different effects.

The "Russian world" as a soft power tool

So far Russia has failed to use its soft power resources to strengthen its positions in the post-Soviet area. The Eurasian Union is a particularly problematic case for Russia: within the Eurasian project the ruptures and rifts are so significant that it is hard to find a good example of these countries co-ordinating their policies in issues of primordial importance for Russia. In particular, Alexandr Lukashenko's illustrative remark that Belarus is not part of the "Russian world" is quite telling of how self-defeating Russia's neo-imperial policies can be.

The roots of the troubles are to be sought in the grounding of the "Russian world" idea in a mixture of misperceptions, reductive primordialism and post-imperial nostalgia. All these components were particularly exposed by prime minister Dmitry Medvedev who claimed that there are "natural", "objective" factors sustaining Russian hegemony in Eastern Europe - a commonality of cultures, beliefs, historical experiences, etc. In other words, the cultural affinity is not a constructed phenomenon for Medvedev, but an asset that has to be taken for granted as a supposed part of "reality". The cultural proximity between Russia and Ukraine, the Russian prime minister believes, is unique - a statement that not simply discards other cases of countries shar-

ing cultural similarities (Estonia and Finland, Azerbaijan and Turkey, Canada and USA, Austria and Germany, etc.), but politically is meant to regard Ukraine as an exception and thus legitimise the way Russia treats it. The obvious Russia-centrism of the official Moscow discourse is perfectly manifest in a series of self-exposed misperceptions from the Russian side, which betrays the degree of insensitivity inherent in the Russian discourse. Thus, in Medvedev's words, "we perceived Ukrainian songs as ours", "we read the same books, admired same artists, watched same movies, spoke one language" (which is obviously Russian), and "we thought that there will be no boundaries in cultural and spiritual communication between us"[3]. Yet Russia's intentions to use soft power arguments in its policy toward Ukraine are dramatically damaged by the self-exclusion of Russia itself from the conversations over the topical issues of power, history, and cultural identity. This discursive strategy is fully grounded in a misperception that is central for Russia's concept of soft power, namely that one distinguishing between a "good reality" of Russia's policies and a "bad image" that is artificially created by its ill-wishers.

The concept of the "Russian world", a key ideological tool in Russia's support for the military insurgency in eastern Ukraine, might in many respects be detrimental for the implementation of the Eurasian project, especially given the fact that it was exactly the "Russian world" mythology that justified the military rebellion in Donbas. It also rendered two controversial effects for a wider Moscow's policy in the entire post-Soviet area. First, the "Russian world" concept is grounded in cultural and religious

[3] Dmitry Medvedev, "Rossiya - Ukraina: zhizh' po novym pravilam", *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 15 December 2014. Available at: http://www.ng.ru/ideas/2014-12-15/1_medvedev.html

tenets of identity. The earlier versions of this doctrine, based on the technocratic logic of using human capital as a competitive advantage, were superseded by political reasoning that contained strong exclusionary notes. In particular, Central Asia is gradually bracketed out of Russian foreign policy calculations, which is definitely an important factor in the changing balance of power between Russia and China. Besides, Central Asia might become an object of growing interest from the EU, as manifested by the Latvian presidency priority list in 2015.

Second, being a biopolitical doctrine, the Russian world does not serve the practical purposes of governance and lacks a clear and consistent picture of Russia's regional policies. This is especially the case of regions (such as the South Caucasus) where the ethnically Russian population is statistically miniscule and cannot constitute a viable political resource for imperial impositions.

The Eurasian temptation: a solitary actor in search for collective action

The concept of Eurasianism that in many respects constitutes an alternative to the "Russian world" can be interpreted as an attempt to provide an institutional response to the Achilles heel of Russian foreign policy, which is chronic unilateralism. By promoting the idea of Eurasian integration, Russia tries to overcome its diplomatic solitude - if not isolation - by institutionally binding those post-Soviet states that need security protection (Armenia), are susceptible to Eurasianist ideology (Kazakhstan), are economically dependent on Russia (Belarus) or vulnerable to Russia's military pressure (Ukraine).

There are at least three explanations for the weakness of Russia's multilateralism. The first one is of a historical nature: it was from the first years after the fall of the Soviet Union that Russia - as the legal and political successor of the USSR - has had to deal alone with security challenges in Transnistria, South Caucasus and Central Asia. Secondly, there is a conceptual reason: Russia sticks to a thin concept of international society, as opposed to a thick one, which means that it often disfavours institutional commitments as too binding and potentially detrimental to sovereignty as the most cherished political concept in Moscow. The feeling of false self-sufficiency has certainly contributed to this mistrust in international institutions where Russia cannot play the leading role. Thirdly, there is a structural explanation: it is impossible to build sustainable multilateralism without a clear understanding of the nature of relations of friendship and enmity. Yet this is exactly what characterises Russia's foreign policy - a blurred line between "partners", "allies", "rivals", "competitors" and "opponents". For instance, what is on paper – "strategic partnership" between NATO and Russia - does not correspond to reality. Ukraine might be called a "brother nation" and an enemy simultaneously. The distinctions between "trustworthy" and "untrustworthy" is "a line in the sand", which definitely complicates the building of multilateral coalitions.

The resulting problem is not only that Russia is predominantly a solitary actor. The problem is also that in relatively rare cases of multilateral diplomacy Russia fails to capitalise on its potential. There are no convincing examples of Russia-led multilateral diplomacy initiatives conducive to either enhancing Russia's legitimacy on the international scene, or developing its soft power resources. Vice versa - being unable to act multilaterally, Russia

only de-legitimises its stand in the collision with Ukraine, and fails to strengthen its soft power resources, even in the post-Soviet area.

A good example is the German–Polish–Russian trialogue, which was basically part of Germany's *Ostpolitik*. Its only tangible result was the visa-free arrangement for Kaliningrad *oblast* and the neighbouring Polish *voivodships*. But Russia failed to convert the trialogue into a sustainable and self-reproducing springboard for reaching beyond the issue of Kaliningrad. Neither Warsaw nor Berlin are any more among Russian lobbyists in Europe, and the intention of the state Duma to question the legitimacy of the German reunification is a good sign of the deep crisis in Russian-German relations.

The Baltic Sea region is another example. As a direct impact of its policy in Ukraine, Russia is de facto isolated within the regional institutions and lost credibility among its Baltic and Nordic neighbours, which resulted in the cancellation of the Council of Baltic Sea States summit in June 2014 in the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea.

Seen from this perspective, for Russia the dilemma unilateralism vs. multilateralism resonates much stronger than for most European countries. Indeed, it is hard to give an example of a unilateral action taken by an EU member state in a substantial foreign policy/security issue. Russia in this sense is a drastically dissimilar example of a country that has a long record of acting unilaterally on policy issues of high importance and relevance for Russia, being only capable of forming anti-Western counter-coalitions in the UN. One of illustrations of this can be the conflict with Estonia over the Bronze soldier monument in 2007, in

which Russia defended the historical heritage of all post-Soviet states, but no country joined Russia in lambasting Estonia for "rewriting history". Russia's war with Georgia in August 2008 can serve another example: despite Moscow's description of the Georgian attack against Russian troops as a direct security threat, Russia had to react unilaterally, despite its membership of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Finally, in its confrontation with Ukraine that started in 2014, Russia has no coalition behind either.

Against this backdrop, Eurasian multilateralism is not a purely technical blueprint: it contains political meanings related to both Russia's identity and its foreign policy strategies. Multilateralism is definitely one of the sources of soft power, since it is only through communication and persuasion that Russia can make others do what it wants, to refer to the famous definition by Joseph Nye. Eurasian integration is one of the few mechanisms of international socialisation available for Moscow, even if takes the form of claims for spheres of influence. The Eurasian Union might also be seen as a tool for enhancing Russia's international legitimacy.

Yet multilateralism is not a norm that Russian diplomacy adheres to on principled grounds, but rather a situational policy tool that the Kremlin uses for a rather limited set of purposes. Basically these goals boil down to forcing the West (the EU in particular) to accept the role of Russia as a great power, which includes Russia's claims for its sphere of influence and a voice in solving issues of global importance.

Conclusions and implications for borderland regions

The conflict between Russia and the EU - over Ukraine, but also in a wider sense - not only represents an existential challenge to countries constituting their common neighbourhood. It also signals a serious crisis of the models of regionalism that have been designed after the end of the Cold War and introduced as important elements of the building of a wider Europe through gradually engaging Russia and other EU partner countries into a European normative order. Russia's Ukraine policy made clear that Russia's valorisation of multipolarity as a key concept in its foreign policy does not go as far as accepting the values of multiregionalism that is one of the pivotal concepts for EU diplomacy. There is little doubt that Russia is not a committed region-builder even in those EU-Russia borderlands (such as the Baltic Sea region) where co-operation with neighbours brings it tangible benefits.

It is basically to the revisionist policy of the Kremlin that borderlands that were supposed to suture Russia and the EU, first of all the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea regions, are increasingly securitised and militarised. Putin's open declaration of Russia's readiness to use nuclear weapons to defend the annexation of Crimea is illustrative of the dangers of Moscow policies. Russia shows its high sensitivity to any signs of NATO-related military activity in the Black Sea region, refusing to accept its reactive nature and causal relations between Russia's policy in Ukraine and the ensuing feeling of insecurity among many of Russia's neighbours. This attests to Russia's penchant to treat regions of the common neighbourhood not only as Russia's geopolitical "backyard", but also as playgrounds for a new balance-of-power game initiated by the Kremlin.

The dilemma for countries located in-between Russia and the EU (like Ukraine or Georgia), as well as at the EU's eastern periphery (like Bulgaria and Romania), is that regionalism without Russia would be incomplete, but with Russia it is dysfunctional. Under these conditions, borderland regions can produce a model of relations that might be dubbed anarchic regionalism, i.e. that one lacking strong integrative institutions and common normative basis. It can be polycentric, giving to regional powers (like Turkey in the Black Sea region) their say. But still regional arrangements in this scenario are to rather reflect than assuage or mitigate rivalries and collisions between key actors – the EU and NATO on the one hand, and Russia on the other.