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The Ukraine crisis and the conflict/cooperation dichotomy in EU-Russia relations

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Abstract

The Ukraine crisis and Russia's contribution to it have raised numerous concerns regarding the possible emergence of a new 'Cold War' in Europe. At the same time, Ukraine's popular choice and enthusiasm for European integration expressed clearly on the streets of Kyiv seems to have caused Russia to adopt a (neo)revisionist attitude. In this context, relations between Russia and the EU (and the West for that matter) have been frozen and been directed on path towards conflict. This article analyses how the traditional dichotomy between conflict and cooperation in EU-Russia relations was replaced by conflict in the context of the Ukraine crisis. The article contends that the breakdown of the symbolic and peaceful cohabitation between the EU and Russia has been influenced by the fact that both actors have chosen to ignore key tensions that characterised their post-Cold War interactions. The article identifies three such tensions: the first emphasises divisions between member states and their impact on coagulating a common EU approach towards Russia; the second (geopolitical) tension highlights the almost mutually exclusive way in which the EU and Russia's security interests have developed in the post-Soviet space; finally, the third contends that a clash of values and worldviews between the EU and Russia makes conflict virtually unavoidable.

Introduction

The Ukraine crisis and Russia's contribution to it have raised numerous concerns regarding the possible emergence of a new 'Cold War' in Europe (Gromyko 2015; Kroenig 2015; Monaghan 2015). At the same time, Ukraine's popular choice and enthusiasm for European integration expressed clearly on the streets of Kyiv seems to have caused Russia to adopt a (neo)revisionist attitude. In this context, relations between Russia and the European Union

(EU) – and the West for that matter – have been frozen and been directed on path towards conflict. However, EU-Russia relations have traditionally been characterised by the dichotomy between conflict and cooperation (Averre 2009). Periods of cooperation have succeeded or overlapped with more conflictual ones, pointing to the ever shifting and complex nature of EU-Russia relations. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union both the EU and Russia have preferred to engage in peaceful cohabitation, aiming at least symbolically to strike a partnership – which for some resembled a *cold peace* (Sakwa 2013; Bugajski 2004). Genuine cooperation has mostly occurred between Moscow and individual member states, primarily in the areas of trade and energy security (Webber 2000; Haukkala 2015).

Moreover, the 1990s and early 2000s was a time of compromise and ignorance. On the one hand, Russia realised its declining position in the international arena and sought recognition as an equal from the EU – and the West (Light 2008). This made the Kremlin willing to compromise and accept parts of the EU's liberal agenda. On the other hand, the EU hoped that a modern and liberal Russia was well within reach, and failed to notice the resentment developing in Russian society towards the West. Moreover, during Putin's rule the EU ignored most of the warning signs which stressed that Russia was not willing to compromise anymore, in this sense creating an increasingly deep chasm in EU-Russia relations. The Ukraine crisis seems the ultimate expression of this rift, with the traditional conflict/cooperation dichotomy leaning almost entirely towards conflict.

This article analyses how the traditional dichotomy between conflict and cooperation in EU-Russia relations was replaced by conflict in the context of the Ukraine crisis. The article contends that the breakdown of the symbolic and peaceful cohabitation between the EU and Russia has been influenced by the fact that both actors have chosen to ignore key tensions that characterised their post-Cold War interactions. The article identifies three such tensions: the first emphasises divisions between member states and their impact have on coagulating a

common EU approach towards Russia; the second (geopolitical) tension highlights the almost mutually exclusive way in which the EU and Russia's security interests have developed in the post-Soviet space; finally, the third contends that a clash of values and worldviews between the EU and Russia makes conflict between them virtually unavoidable. The development of the three tensions since 1991 is explored in first parts of the next three sections, with a claim that both the EU and Russia conspicuously chose to ignore them. The three sections then focus on the period of the Ukraine crisis and highlight how these three tensions in various degrees were heightened, causing the conflict/cooperation dichotomy to lean almost entirely towards conflict. The concluding section argues that the Ukraine crisis managed to mitigate these tensions only in a limited manner. This means that even though future cohabitation might be sought by both the EU and Russia, this will be achieved on unstable foundations, with the constant potential of the three tensions arriving again at the boiling point and causing a new, possibly even more severe crisis. Empirically, the article relies on official documents and statements, secondary data from media and academic reports, together with participant observations from interviews conducted with experts and policymakers between 2011 and 2016 in Brussels, Moscow, London and Berlin.

Division among the member states

The first tension focuses on division among the member states in coagulating a common approach towards Russia and its influence on the EU's lack of coherence in dealing with Moscow (Schmidt-Felzmann 2011). This can be thought to be a symptom of the general inability of the EU to speak with a single voice on most foreign policy issues (Hill 2003). However, even more than in other issues areas in foreign policy, here big member states such as France, Germany or Italy prefer to deal bilaterally with Russia – and have even constructed

special relationships with it. These relationships have been built on shared economic and energy interests, whereby member states sought to boost their trade with Russia or receive preferential energy prices (David, Gower, and Haukkala 2013). In this background, the EU's approach towards Russia has lacked solidarity among the member states, leaving some of the Central and Eastern European (CEE) member states highly sensitive to Moscow's use of energy supplies and prices as political tools (Baev 2012). On its part, Russia has opted towards a geopolitisation of the strategic partnership with the EU, and has sought to profit from the lack of unity among the member states (Kuzemko 2013, 10). It has adopted a *divide et impera* approach, trying to play member states against each other, in order to gain as much as possible from each bilateral relationship and weaken or prevent a strong united EU approach (Schmidt-Felzmann 2008).

The tension caused by divisions between the member states in dealing Russia became more acute with the 2004/2007 Eastern enlargement. In its aftermath some of the new CEE member states expressed deeply critical views of Russia and did not envision that their support for the Eastern Partnership (EaP) might create tension with Moscow in the post-Soviet space (Gvosdev and Marsh 2013). The activism of countries like Poland or Romania in the EaP can be seen to derive from the intense cultural, historical or economic ties with the countries in the region. Nonetheless, their views have often conflicted with those of Germany or France, who put more or less formal pressure on the CEE member states to tone down their discourse towards Moscow. In the literature, the CEE member states' critical stance regarding Russia is seen by some scholars as a sign of immaturity and evidence that they have not fully internalised European norms and values. By promoting a conflictual attitude towards Russia these member states depart from the values which reside at the foundation of the European project and have maintained peace on the continent for the past 60 years (Kazantsev and Sakwa 2012; Headley 2012).

This tension has throughout the last 25 years led to a rather disjointed common EU approach towards Russia, with the strategic partnership or the Partnership for Modernisation being no more than symbolic and doomed to fail from the start (Casier 2013). As both Russia and some of the more influential member states (Germany, France or Italy) sought to advance their economic interests by constructing bilateral relations, key issues of contention (particularly the security order of the post-Soviet) were conspicuously swept under the rug. Moreover, these member states promoted within the EU a *Russia first approach*, whereby EU policies would be proposed or implemented in the eastern neighbourhood only if they did not conflict with Moscow security interests (Krok-Paszkowska and Zielonka 2005). In practice this meant that the EU made relatively unambitious commitments to the countries in the region (Delcour 2010), and led in Russia to the conclusion that the Union was actually an ineffective and divided international actor (Haukkala 2010a). When the Ukraine crisis erupted in late 2013/ early 2014, the tension caused by the division between the member states heightened, contributing to the freezing of EU-Russia relations. This happened because the big member states were gradually constrained to renounce their *Russia first policy*, and Moscow had increasingly to deal with a seemingly more united and conflictual approach from the EU.

United but still separate during the Ukraine crisis

Before the Ukraine crisis the strategic partnership that the EU sought to develop with Russia remained merely symbolic and was constrained due to the preference of the member states to invest more in bilateral relations with Russia. In fact, Russia has preferred such a partnership and not having clear agreements with the EU which would have constrained its actions in the post-Soviet space (Casier 2013). In the absence of a coherent strategic partnership, Russia

accepted only proposals from the EU that suited its interests. Moscow pursued the idea of a strategic partnership only as long as it viewed it as a prerequisite for being recognised as a great power (Forsberg 2014). As a consequence, when the Ukraine crisis erupted both the EU and Russia abandoned almost entirely investing the strategic partnership (European Parliament 2015). On the one hand, the prospect of a strategic partnership could not mask the individual approaches of the member states. On the other hand, the adoption of common EU sanctions and a tougher stance on Russia decreased the symbolic value of the strategic partnership in the eyes of the Kremlin (Vieira 2015).

Even though traditionally the member states have preferred to construct bilateral relations with Russia and push in various degrees for a more or less appeasing approach towards Moscow, the development of the Ukraine crisis seems at first reading to have led to a common EU approach. In practice this is primarily evidenced by the sanctions regime that the member states commonly imposed on Russia. Support for sanctions varied according to the development of the situation in Ukraine (BBC 2014). In the initial phases of the crisis the EU was deeply split, which translated in a lack of practical actions. The CEE member states from the onset of crisis pushed for the EU to impose a severe set of sanctions against Russia. On the other hand, Germany, the United Kingdom (UK) or France pushed for sanctions in the wake of the annexation of Crimea, the May 2014 referendums in Eastern Ukraine, the MH17 tragedy or the offensive against the Ukrainian military in August. In between these moments they were rather reluctant to adopt increased sanctions. The breakthrough came, nevertheless, in the wake of downing of the commercial airliner and intense fighting in eastern Ukraine during the summer of 2014. This made the member states to unequivocally adopt a tougher sanctions regime towards Russia. However, even when they pushed for broader sanctions, the US criticised the big EU member states for trying to soften the West's response to Russia's aggressive behaviour (MacAskill, Walker and Roberts 2014).

EU sanctions towards Russia have, nonetheless, not affected key areas of trade such as energy or transfer of technology, and have not targeted key individuals around Putin (Gorodiloff 2015). To a large extent, sanctions have been the result of Germany's reluctant leadership during the Ukraine crisis. Berlin was constrained to take the lead in the EU as no other member states were willing to assume responsibility. The result has been an approach which is influenced by the tension caused by Germany's economic interests and the pressure to have a common EU approach. It has also been the lowest common denominator between the interests and the views of the member states: with some being more appeasing (such as Italy, Greece or Hungary), some rather disinterested (Spain or Portugal), others asking for an assertive stance and feeling threatened by Russia (the CEE member states), and Germany or France balancing between their economic interests and the need to have a strong EU response. On its part Russia was caught by surprise by the adoption of EU sanctions as it thought that divisions between the member states could not be overcome (Rankin 2014).

In spite of the agreement on sanctions and common declarations condemning Russian aggression in Eastern Ukraine, the approach of individual member states towards Russia has not changed dramatically. There is still a preference for dealing on bilateral terms rather than through the common framework of the EU. Consequently, the tension underlining the various approaches of the member states towards Russia is still present, although in a less significant degree. For example, throughout the Ukraine crisis Germany, France and UK preferred to have bilateral contacts with Russia rather than empower the High Representative, Ashton or Morgherini. Putin spoke to German Chancellor Merkel and British Prime Minister Cameron very frequently, but most times no real progress was made towards solving the crisis. The Normandy format in which the Minsk agreements were negotiated also led to the perception that Germany and France's individual approaches towards Russia were the only salient ones and set tone within the EU (Socor 2015).

Space constraints do not allow a review of way the individual approaches towards Moscow of all the member states remained rather constant during the Ukraine crisis. Compelling evidence for this can found in the case of Germany (as an example of a moderate approach) or the CEE country (as examples of conflictual approaches). Forsberg has recently shown that even though Berlin is more willing to criticise openly Russia, the post-Cold War *Ostpolitik* has not transformed, as there is still a deep desire for dialogue, cooperation and conciliation with Moscow (Forsberg 2016, 41). While Germany warned Russia of the economic cost of continuing its aggressive campaign in Ukraine, Berlin was reluctant to adopt hard-line measures. Szabo contends that 'in the Ukraine crisis, Germany's commercial realism (allowed) it only economic tools with which to respond to Russia's use of military power' (Szabo 2014, 124). Berlin also understood that Russia's economic interests in Ukraine outweighed those of Germany or the EU. Freedman highlights that most German leaders were not keen to undermine the country's political and economic relations with Russia (Freedman 2014). On the other hand, Chancellor Merkel maintained a flexible and somewhat ambiguous attitude, presenting mild criticism but also appeasement of Putin's actions. The Kremlin also repeatedly tried to appeal to Germany to maintain its post-Cold War *Ostpolitik.* For example, in his address to the Russian Duma after the annexation of Crimea Putin argued that:

> I believe that the Europeans, first and foremost, the Germans, will also understand me. (…) Our nation, however, unequivocally supported the sincere, unstoppable desire of the Germans for national unity. I am confident that you have not forgotten this, and I expect that the citizens of Germany will also support the aspiration of the Russians, of historical Russia, to restore unity (Putin 2014a).

The individual attitudes of the CEE member states have also not transformed in a radical manner as a result of the Ukraine crisis; they have become even more conflictual towards

Russia. The CEE member states called for the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) to expand its military presence on their territory and have a stronger attitude towards Russia's aggressions in Ukraine (Barnes 2015). During the Ukraine crisis, US leaders visited these countries on a weekly or monthly basis and reassured them of 'the commitment of the United States (US) to collective defence under the umbrella of NATO' (Office of the Press Secretary 2014). The US increased its naval presence in the Black Sea and NATO troops were sent for exercises both in Poland and in the Baltic states. Russia highlighted that NATO's moves represented a violation of the Fundamental Act of the NATO-Russian Council, which states that 'there must be no permanent excessive military presence on the territories of the Eastern European states' (RFE/RL 2014). According to the Kremlin, the attitude of the CEE member states forced NATO's decision and could have destabilising effects for European security (BBC 2015). The overt anti-Russian discourse of the CEE member states has perpetuated the deep division within the EU as how to respond to Russia. At the same time, rather than making Europe more secure, the conflictual approach the CEE member states has made Russia increasingly weary of the EU and the way in seeks to outsource its security needs to NATO (Gromyko 2015).

The geopolitical tension: the EU's expansion in the post-Soviet space

Both the EU and Russia have been motivated to spread their influence in the post-Soviet space primarily by the need to preserve or enhance their status in the international arena (Forsberg 2014; Paul, Larson, and Wohlforth 2014). The collision of their subsequent efforts has led to a geopolitical tension in EU-Russia relations. More specifically, this tension emphasises the gradual geopolitical conflict caused by the expanding influence of the EU in the post-Soviet space. Russia disapproves of any changes to the status quo of the post-Soviet

space, and has sought to counter the EU's advance and influence the region (Samokhvalov 2014; Allison 2013). This tension can be traced back to the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the way the West chose to handle it. Some have argued that in the absence of a treaty that would regulate security relations on the European continent following the end of the Cold War both Russia and the EU have been trapped in a *cold peace* or *strategic impasse* (Sakwa 2013). During the early 1990 and early 2000s, Russia appeared to be looking towards the West and seeking to embrace a liberal understanding of international relations. However, Russian elites never gave up the ambition of restoring control over the post-Soviet states (Bugajski 2010).

The tension caused by the EU's expansion in the post-Soviet was never entirety clear for European policymakers up until the Ukraine crisis. For example, during the coloured revolutions Moscow was not strong enough to take decisive action against the EU's 'intrusion' in the eastern neighbourhood; this made the EU think that its approach in the region was not seen by Russia as a security threat (Haukkala 2010b). In reality, Russia perceived the coloured revolutions as a battle in its strategic competition with the West, criticising the latter's interventionism (Gromyko 2015). The tension was made even more acute following the Georgian-Russian war of 2008 when European policymakers came to the conclusion that Russia was interested only in the security of the post-Soviet space, and that it did not view the economic order of the region as a threat to its vital security interests (Larsen 2012); however, the Kremlin understood the situation in the completely opposite way (Snetkov 2014). Moreover, the geopolitical tension has increased due some EU member states' calls for US and NATO involvement in the security order of the post-Soviet space – i.e. their overt transatlanticism (Sakwa 2015a).

The Kremlin has made use of the geopolitical tension in order to strengthen its grip on Russian society and increase its domestic legitimacy. By framing the EU as the perpetual

enemy that was threatening the Russian *hinterland*, and that his leadership was the only one capable of fending it from the West, Putin (especially in his third term as president) aimed to rally public opinion and silence his critics in the public sphere (Saari 2014). Moreover, Putin's inner circle seems now to be dominated by Euroasianists who push for a closer alliance with China and a focus on restoring the influence of the Soviet Union in the post-Soviet space (Tsygankov 2008, 51).

At the same time, the EU's expansion in the post-Soviet space together with its lack of decisiveness in this endeavour transformed the economic competition between the Union and Russia into a geopolitical, zero-sum game (Taras 2014). The EU's integration project developed in an exclusive and asymmetric manner as it merely imposed European rules and regulations on the neighbourhood states and did not allow them to associate simultaneously with a competing integration (Dragneva and Wolczuk 2012) – i.e. the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). However, this new type of engagement overestimated the EU's own abilities and its willingness to significantly involve in the politics of the countries in the region. For example, Langbein and Börzel (2013) find that the EU's power in its eastern neighbourhood has manifested only in relation to a limited number of policy areas. Moreover, the EaP was condemned vehemently by Russia, although it aimed to reinforce in a rather limited manner the structures and mechanisms already present in the European Neighbourhood Policy (Trenin 2013). In practice, the geopolitical tension also allowed leaders from the region to adopt an opportunistic attitude and play the EU and Russia against each other in order to get as many benefits as possible from each of them (Gnedina 2015).

The Ukraine crisis: Boiling geopolitical tensions
The geopolitical tension started to become obvious for European policymakers in the summer of 2013, when the EU increased its pressure on the Ukrainian government to sign the

Association Agreement (AA) at the summit which was supposed to take place later that year in Vilnius. Until that time the Kremlin did not really take seriously the EU's integration project in the region, and believed that the Union would not be able to have a coherent approach towards Ukraine (Haukkala 2010b). As a result Russia also increased its pressure on Yanukovych in order to convince him not to sign the AA and opt instead for the EEU. In the summer of 2013 Putin had a long chat with Yanukovych in Sochi which apparently had a decisive effect in making the Ukrainian government reconsider singing the AA (Neweurope 2013). To a large extent throughout the second part of 2013 the EU was rather ignorant to the pressure exerted by the Kremlin on Ukraine. The EU also ignored the geopolitical tension which Putin made clear in his famous 2011 article in Izvestia on the future of an Eurasian Union (Putin 2011). In fact, the term 'Eurasian' was misleading as Putin was referring more to an alternative Russia-led project in Eastern Europe that would have had Ukraine as one its main pillars. Moreover, with the summer of summer 2013 the geopolitical tension became more salient as the Kremlin increasingly equated the EU's integration project (i.e. the AA) with a threat to its vital security interests (Walker 2013). The EU did t eventually during the Ukraine crisis start to understand the importance of the geopolitical tension as it postponed the implementation of the economic part of the AA with Kyiv (EurActiv 2015). Nevertheless, Russia's hopes of convincing or coercing Ukraine to enter the Customs Union have all but dwindled, with the Kremlin's integration project assuming now a genuine 'Eurasian' identity towards China and Central Asia (Batchelor 2015).

Throughout the crisis Russia maintained its perception of a weak and indecisive EU, in spite of the sanctions regime. The Kremlin understood that in comparison to the US, the EU would be much more willing to appease Russia and seek accommodation, as it was not fully committed to defending Ukraine or the post-Soviet space (Cerulus 2014). Russian leaders were was also aware of the weakness in the EU's approach in the region, as the Union had

not managed to influence significant domestic changes and reforms during Yanukovych's term (Langbein 2015). For example, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov argued that the crisis would have been much easier to resolve if it remained contained to Europe and Russia (RT 2014b). In this context the geopolitical tension became heightened as Russia's perception of its own power relative to that of the EU increased. In comparison to the coloured revolutions a decade earlier or even the 2009 war with Georgia, Russia believed it had a much stronger military position. Moreover, the Kremlin realised after the EU's reluctance to mount a strong resistance to Russia's intervention in Georgia that the Union would not go out of its way to stop Moscow from further intervening in the post-Soviet space (Berryman 2012).

To that extent, the Kremlin has been seeking to exploit the geopolitical tension to perceived advantage and waiting for a suitable opportunity to arise in the region. There is also a strong possibility that Russia might have devised plans for a possible annexation of Crimea after the war in Georgia when it became obvious that the EU or NATO were not committed to take strong measures in the post-Soviet space (Kravtsova 2014). For example, Allison argues that the rapid speed with which Russia managed to act in Ukraine suggests not only defensive military planning for Crimea, but also a more long-term effort to restore the peninsula as a platform for power projection into the Black Sea region and beyond (Allison 2014, 1280).

Russia's desire to exploit the geopolitical tension can be attributed to its (neo)revisionism and the way it perceived the West as trying to unilaterally shape the world order and change the rules of the games (Sakwa 2015b) – conventional Russian evidence for this is the unilateral independence of Kosovo, the Iraq intervention or the one in Libya. The Kremlin has continuously for the past decade denounced the failure of the West to create a pluralistic post-Cold War order that would integrate Russia's views and interests (Putin

2014b). In the post-Soviet spacemRussia viewed the EU's expansion in a zero-sum logic and 'did not believe in the supposed win-win opportunities often advocated by the EU' (Stewart 2014, 3). However, Russia has never openly admitted its desire to shape *unliterary* the world order, and gave Western leaders reason to think that the geopolitical tension was rather insignificant. For example, in his address to the Russian Duma after the annexation of Crimea Putin stressed that even though Russia has strived to maintain a sustainable dialogue with the EU, the West has taken actions which were 'aimed against Ukraine and Russia and against Eurasian integration' (Putin 2014a). Germany indeed towards the end of 2015 started acknowledging some of Russia (neo)revisionist grievances by supporting the report of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe group of eminent persons. The report argues recognizes that the post-Cold War security architecture on the European continent has not taken into account Moscow's concerns. However, the Kremlin argued that this acknowledgement came too late, and it does not really mitigate the geopolitical crisis or the *strategic impasse* in relations between Russia and Europe (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe 2015).

Domestic developments in the last five years in Russia have also contributed to the aggravation of the geopolitical tension. On the one hand, in the aftermath of 2012 protests following the election of Putin for a third presidential term, the Kremlin began to foster a more nationalistic and militaristic atmosphere in the country (Medras 2015). The West and its expansion in the post-Soviet space (i.e. Russia's sphere of influence) started being presented internally as a sign that Moscow is under siege, which, in turn, facilitated the acceptance of Russia's involvement in the Ukraine crisis by the Russian people (Trenin 2015). On the other hand, Putin's actions in Ukrainian have been fuelled by his fear that popular unrest might spill over into Russia and be directed against his authoritarian style of leadership. This concern stems from the deep scar that the coloured revolutions left on the post-Soviet space,

where through street demonstration (and with the support of the West) authoritarian regimes were replaced (Ambrosio 2007). Nevertheless, during the Ukraine crisis both Moscow and the EU did not address the rising nationalism in Russia and the Kremlin's concerns for political survival – in this way heightening even more the geopolitical tension.

The clash of values and worldviews between the EU and Russia

The last tension emphasises the EU and Russia's contrasting understanding of norms, values and legitimacy in the international system (Tsygankov 2014; Rutland 2012; White and Feklyunina 2014). On the one hand, the EU puts emphasis on multilateralism solidarity and ethical behaviour in international relations. On the other hand, Russia values national sovereignty and stability in the international system. The Kremlin advocates a pluralistic view of the international system, where international law represents a source of stability in the context of increasing contestation of international norms – presenting mostly a rigid interpretation of international law (Karagiannis 2014). Moreover, Moscow argues that great powers can have a legitimate claim to preserving spheres of interest in their neighbourhood (Gretskiy, Treshchenkov, and Golubev 2014). This is in clear contradiction with the understanding of the West which emphasises equality among states.

In terms of values, the EU promotes in its foreign policy a liberal agenda focused on human rights and democracy (European Commission 2007). Russia has increasingly embraced in the last decade an overtly conservative agenda which stresses, for example stability, family values or the central role of the religion in society (Freire 2012). In the post-Soviet space both Russia and the EU have sought to promote their values and soft power. With the EU becoming increasingly more attractive (economically and culturally) for the states in the region during the post-Cold war period, the Kremlin started in the last decade an intense campaign to promote its values in the region (Laruelle 2015). This has indeed

gradually led to a deep polarisation of the societies in the region and increased the values tension between the EU and Russia.

A significant aspect of the tension is the different way in which the EU and Russia view the legitimate use of force in international relations. For the former, the use of force seems to be an instrument of last resort in foreign policy, while the Kremlin sees it as a normal aspect of world politics. Moreover, the Kremlin has not hesitated in the case of Georgia or Ukraine to use force in order to defend the rights of its citizens or Russian speakers. In this sense, Russia's understanding of the responsibility to protect principle (R2P) does not place significant weight on democratic governance and human rights. Moreover, the Russian understanding of the principle differs from that of the West and is somewhat contradictory (Kurowska 2014; Sinkkonen 2011). Moscow does not claim to have a moral duty to intervene and protect peoples in the context of widespread violence and conflict. Russia sees the principle referring more to the responsibility deriving from sovereignty, together with the need to safeguard its citizens living in other states. In practice Russia has associated the R2P principle with the fear and instability created by the frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space in order to challenge the rules of international system (Dunn and Bobick 2014). In this sense the Ukraine crisis saw the radicalisation of the way Russia uses the R2P principle and a growing contrast with the EU's own understanding of the principle. Nevertheless, neither the EU or Russia have made any significant steps during the last 25 years in order to start a dialogue and accommodate their different understanding of the legitimate use of force in the international arena. With the Ukraine crisis this tension also reached the boiling point and influenced the turn towards conflict in EU-Russia relations.

Deeper polarisation and clash of values?

The contrast between the way in which the EU and Russia understand world politics – and the underlying tensions it creates – influenced the way both actors acted during Ukraine crisis. Moreover, as a consequence of the breakdown of cohabitation and the emergence of conflict in Ukraine, Russian and European approaches to international relations have drifted apart even more. On the one hand, the EU has remained firm in its support for multilateralism in solving international crises, while on the other, Russia has reasserted its preference for a more pluralistic environment where sovereignty rather than multilateralism should be the key principle driving world politics (RT 2015). For example, Russia claimed that Crimea was crucial for maintaining its sovereignty as its Black Sea fleet and military forces were under impeding threat from the 'fascist' government in Kiev. Putin also made a challenge to Ukraine's statehood and sovereignty by denouncing all previous bilateral accords made with Kiev (Itar-Tass 2014). Russia's approach should be understood to be part of Putin's aspiration to redefine the principles of international law, in order to favour a multipolar and pluralistic view of the international system where major international players (such as China and Russia) could develop and maintain exclusive spheres of interests.

Part of Russia's (neo)revisionism has been to try to shape the way in which force can be used legitimately in world politics. According to Dunn and Bobick (Dunn and Bobick 2014, 409), Russia has been actively transforming the principle of legitimate intervention in Ukraine by creating a hybrid war without acknowledging direct intervention and staging a performance which is meant to coerce the states in the region, but also the West, into accepting Russia's dominance. In Ukraine, Russia claimed that its actions were justified by the right to protect its citizens living abroad from the aggression of the 'fascist' government in Kiev, to respond to the will of the people expressed through referendum to be independent or part of Russia, or to safeguard Russia's sovereignty. Out of these, the protection of Russian citizens was the foundation of Russia's justification. The R2P principle was legitimised

through the Constitution of the Russian Federation which guarantees 'its citizens defense and patronage beyond its boundaries' (The Constitution of the Russian Federation 1993). Moreover, Russia's approach was based on widespread support among its citizens, and according to Putin 'drew its firmness from the will of millions of our people, our national unity and the support of our country's main political and public forces' (Putin 2014a). Russia also felt compelled to act in order to stop a potential humanitarian refugee crisis. For example, Russian leaders emphasised that in the absence of Russian volunteers, local defence units or peacekeepers a genocide would have occurred both in Crimea and eastern Ukraine.

Throughout the crisis Russia sent contradicting messages to the US and the EU regarding its actions in Ukraine; on the one hand, it argued that it had no intentions to invade or annex parts of Ukraine or that its troops were not present in Ukraine. On the other hand, the Russian intervention in Ukraine was framed to counter external opposition and the need to defend Moscow's national interest or its understanding of peace in the international system. Intervention 'in full accordance with international law' was a necessary course action for Moscow in order to defend the legitimate interests of Russians (RT 2014a). This type of ambiguous discourse is best portrayed in Putin's justification to the Russian people of the annexation of Crimea:

Obviously, we will encounter external opposition, but this is a decision that we need to make for ourselves. Are we ready to consistently defend our national interests, or will we forever give in, retreat to who knows where? (…) At the same time, we will never seek confrontation with our partners, whether in the East or the West, but on the contrary, will do everything we can to build civilised and good-neighbourly relations as one is supposed to in the modern world (Putin 2014a).

A mix of denial of being present in Eastern Ukraine together with European unwillingness to accept Russian views on the legitimate use of force in world politics or the R2P principle has meant that no real dialogue has emerged between the two regarding their contrasting understandings of world politics. This has also led in the post-Soviet space to a deep polarisation of societies along ideological lines. On the one hand, the EU is seen by a large part of the people in the region as a beacon of liberalism and a path to economic development and democratisation. On the other side of the spectrum the conservative ideas promoted by Russia managed to attract those people in the region who have been deeply disillusioned by the post-Soviet transition period and the continuous failure of their countries to modernise under EU supervision. Moscow's attraction has been complemented by its soft power which relies on the legacy of the Soviet Union and the business links, culture, informal links, linguistic, cultural and religious ties or the economic integration developed during the time of the Cold War (Sherr 2013). Russia has been increasingly using its transformative power in Crimea during the last ten years. This has involved funding NGO's, training officials working for the local administration, fostering both open and underground business ties with the region, together with increasing its military and intelligence presence (Roslycky 2011, 313). While polarisation was present before, the Ukraine crisis (and Russia and the EU's subsequent actions and rhetoric) have highlighted two mutually exclusive alternative ideologies. In the long term this polarisation could spill over and create other conflicts similar to the Ukraine crisis, because as elites in the region will be forced to opt wholeheartedly for one ideology and integration project, they will leave disheartened a large part of their societies – which might become violently reactive.

Conclusion

The Ukraine crisis shifted the traditional dichotomy between conflict and cooperation in EU-Russia relations towards conflict. This article has argued that the shift towards conflict is a result of the heightening of three tensions. These tensions have been developing in EU-Russia relations since the end of Cold War, but have never been addressed in a coherent manner by neither side. Rather than mitigating these tensions the Ukraine crisis has (with some exceptions) further deepened them. Preserving and ignoring these tensions in the long term might led to even more severe conflicts erupting between the EU and Russia in other geographical areas or in relation to more sensitive issues for continental and global security.

Firstly, even though sanctions seem to have made the problem of forging a common EU policy towards Russia slightly less relevant, the member states have largely maintained their individual approaches towards Moscow. For example, Germany's behaviour during the Ukraine crisis does not signal a major shift from its traditional post-Cold War *Ostpolitik* as it was cautious in pursuing a tougher stance towards Moscow, and was keen to leave the door open for cooperation and dialogue. Conversely, the CEE member states felt even more threatened by Moscow and increased their traditional calls for NATO and the US to increase their military presence in the region. In a nutshell, the member states still prefer to construct individual approaches towards Russia, even though agreement on sanctions is a step further towards forging a common EU approach. The tension is, nevertheless, no less significant from the perspective of the Kremlin, as the embrace of transatlanticism by more member states can increase Russia's feeling of being cornered and make its leaders engage in further aggressive actions.

Secondly, the geopolitical tension was partly mitigated as the EU understood during the Ukraine crisis that Russia equated economic interests to vital security interests in the post-Soviet space. Moreover, the Kremlin rather than dwelling too long on the prospect of having

'post-Maidan' Ukraine as one of the building blocks of the EEU, refocused its attention towards Central Asia in order to advance the Eurasian project. Nevertheless, Russian and European mutual perceptions of their relative power in international relations have remained rather fixed. Similarly to before the Ukraine crisis, both the EU and Russia continue to overestimate their power and influence in the post-Soviet space while underestimating that of the other. The geopolitical tension has also been heightened during the Ukraine crisis as the EU has not acknowledged (and ignored) Russia's (neo)revisionist efforts to shape the regional and global order. At the same time, the Ukraine crisis entrenched even more nationalist discourse in Russia, with the EU unable (or unwilling) to dispel concerns about the West increasingly cornering Moscow, and aiming to overthrow Putin through a coloured revolution.

Thirdly, the contrast between European and Russian values and worldviews has become sharper with the Ukraine crisis. The Kremlin is increasingly entrenched in a rigid and opportunistic understanding of international law, where concepts such as sovereignty, the R2P principle or the legitimate use of force are understood in a discretionary manner and upheld only when they suit Russia's interests. This attitude partly resides from the deep disaffection felt by the Kremlin as a result of the perception that the West has unilaterally imposed its values in international relations. Moreover, in the post-Soviet the contrast between the models promoted by the EU and Russia has become even greater, leading to deep polarisation within the countries in the region. More worryingly is the fact that neither Russia or the EU (and the West) seem too willing to try to accommodate each other's worldviews and values. As the three tensions are still very much present in EU-Russia relations – some even more salient than before the Ukraine crisis – the potential for conflict escalate has reached the highest levels since the end of the Cold War.

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