Attributional bias and the geopoliticisation of EU-Russia relations

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Introduction

For many years EU-Russia relations have been characterised by a striking paradox. While both recognised each other as strategic partners and regarded their economies as strongly interdependent, the perception of competition steadily increased and mistrust spiralled over time. The recent confrontation over Ukraine and Crimea is a radical new step in this escalating logic of competition between Russia and 'the West'.

This article seeks to understand how we got to this point of geopolitical tensions. In the first part of the article we retrace the long term evolution of Russia-EU relations from cooperation over pragmatic competition to confrontation. In the second part we seek to explain this evolution against the background of a geopolitical logic that developed incrementally over time. It will be argued that this logic goes against the original foreign policy objectives of both Russia and the EU.

Three stages in EU-Russia relations

Relations between the EU and Russia have undergone radical change over the last two decades. Simplifying a more complex story, we could distinguish between three stages. The first roughly coincides with the 1990s; the second is linked to the 2000s, though it would take until 2004 before the new contours became fully clear. The third stage is the radically new situation that is still unfolding since developments in and over Ukraine from November 2013 onwards.

The stage of cooperation

During the first stage, the relations were based on a willingness to cooperate, but were strongly EU-centric. The EU was the dominant agenda setter and agreements asymmetrically reflected its preferences. Its long term agenda aimed at structural and sustainable change, relying heavily on mechanisms of conditionality.

The dominant feature of this first stage was that of an EU aiming to reshape Russia in its own image, by promoting its principles, rules and norms to trigger change in its economic, political and legal structures. It was thus a clear instance of 'structural diplomacy'[1], in which the EU explicitly promoted political and economic norms. Formally relations were based on shared values, laid down in the PCA. The EU had 'normative hegemony'[2], though its success in effectively diffusing norms to Russia is seen as limited.

Brussels put itself in the position of helper (providing assistance in such diverse fields as economic reconversion, democratisation and disarmament) and guide (promoting democratic and neo-liberal norms and transferring its rules and legal principles). This approach was part of a broader, fairly

monolithic EU policy towards the NIS. This policy had similar objectives and rested on similar financial (TACIS[3]) and legal instruments (PCA's) for all target countries. Brussels also respected a clear hierarchy within this one-size-fits-all policy, in which Russia was usually the first to sign new agreements and to benefit from EU funding.

The stage of pragmatic competition

In the second stage, the partnership gradually lost its EU-centric focus and became a continuous balancing exercise between the preferences of the EU and Russia, with sometimes mixed outcomes, but often no significant progress. The relations developed independently from the EU's policy in the rest of the post-Soviet space. The concept of an EU-Russia strategic partnership sneaked into statements and documents in the late 1990s, but only gained real significance once Russia's path clearly separated from that of other East-European states. This happened when Russia decided not to join the EU's new regional foreign policy: the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). As a result, the Union's ambition to transfer its rules and norms to an increasingly unwilling Russia was gradually replaced by the objective to position itself as an international actor on the basis of a strategic partnership with Russia and a broader 'strategic vision'[4], in which interests received a more explicit recognition.

Gradually competition and rivalry increased, but - despite tensions - the willingness to talk and to find pragmatic solutions survived. On the EU's side, the new credo became 'constructive engagement'. As a result, structural diplomacy faded into the background and normative references shifted to the periphery of the agenda.[5]

While it may be assumed that Russia's recalcitrance to play the game by the rules of the EU has also to do with domestic changes and economic recovery, there are likely also more structural reasons to explain this change of policy. Some authors refer to 1999 as a watershed, a point where a national consensus emerged that the West was exploiting Russia's weakness by acting against its interests.[6] Three events, occurring in the time span of weeks only, triggered a defensive attitude: the Kosovo military operation (without UN mandate and without consulting Russia), the first Eastern enlargement of NATO (when former communist states acceded to the alliance) and NATO's Washington Strategic Concept (which made it possible to operate outside NATO territory). This is seen by other authors as further reinforced by the coloured revolutions, most importantly the Orange Revolution of 2004 in Ukraine.[7]

The strategic partnership between Russia and the EU implied three important changes. First it was clear that Russia wanted to be treated as an equal partner and would no longer be willing to accept a largely EU-steered policy. Secondly it was the beginning of the decoupling of the EU's Eastern Europe policy.[8] Whilst structural diplomacy remained strong towards East European states like Moldova or Ukraine, from now on the relations with Russia would be between two formally equal partners, willing to recognise each other as strategic partners, but with fundamentally different preferences and concerns in certain areas. The relationship now became one of seeking balances and compromising between diverging interests, an exercise which proved to be particularly difficult in a climate of declining trust. The latter was further damaged when the EU launched the Eastern Partnership (EaP) in 2009, which was perceived very negatively in the Kremlin, while Brussels seemed unable to accommodate or even acknowledge the concerns of its strategic partner. The third implication was that the old hierarchy that characterised the EU's policy towards the NIS was under

pressure. With some member states preferring cooperation with Eastern Partnership states over that with Russia, the 'logical order' of things in which Moscow came first, was replaced by a complex, multi-dimensional process of prioritisation. Depending on the issue at stake and the preferences of influential member states, the hierarchy would shift in favour of either Russia or Ukraine.

A new stage of confrontation

The pragmatic competition that characterised post-2004 relations drastically shifted to a new era of direct confrontation between the West and Russia as a result of developments around Ukraine by the end of 2013 and in the first half of 2014. From Ukrainian president Yanukovych's decision not to sign the Association Agreement with the EU on, we witnessed an unlikely sequence of events, from the Maidan protests, over the ousting of Yanukovych, to Crimea and the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. The events disrupted the diplomatic relations between the West and Russia, led to American and EU sanctions as well as Russian retaliations. The events signalled a radicalisation of the geopoliticisation of EU-Russia relations, which now became focused on issues of security and control over territory.

The geopolitical reading of the strategic setting in Europe, however, was all but new. Tensions had grown for many years, in particular over incompatible integration projects: the Russia-led Eurasian Customs Union with Belarus and Kazakhstan (and more recently the agreement on an Eurasian Economic Union, signed between the same three countries on 29 May 2014) and the EU's Eastern Partnership, which has produced three Association Agreements with so-called deep and comprehensive free trade provisions (agreements were signed with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia). Formally, the issue at stake is a legal incompatibility between the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) of the Association Agreements and the Common External Tariff which the Eurasian Customs Union implies. However, there is a more fundamental issue at stake: the EU and Russia are pursuing rivalling structural policies in the same geographic area. This has generated a mutual mistrust of each other's regional ambitions and fuelled a geopolitical logic of competition.[9] In the next section we analyse how this geopolitical reading of relations sneaked into EU-Russia relations long before this stage of direct confrontation.

The geopoliticisation of EU-Russia relations

The evolution described above reflects an incremental but strong geopoliticisation of relations between Russia and the EU. Never since the end of the Cold War, has international politics in Europe been more geopolitical than today. Territory, control, geostrategic interests are at the centre of all headlines on Ukraine and Crimea. But geopolitics is something that exists in the first place in the minds of political leaders, not something that is objectively given or 'inevitable'. Russia, and to a lesser extent the EU, ended up with a foreign policy in Eastern Europe which is strongly geopolitical, while this is exactly where they did not want their policies to lead them originally. The geopolitical tensions we are facing today have grown in an incremental way in a process of growing competition.

The hallmark of Putin's early years as president was the economisation of foreign policy.[10] After Russia had militarily disengaged at global level in the 1990s, Moscow aspired to reconquer its global position by integrating itself into the world economy and by making strategic use of its assets, oil and gas in particular. With images in the Kremlin growing stronger that the EU was seeking to increase its

influence through the Eastern Partnership at Russia's expense, a new discourse of geopolitics and spheres of influence gained ground. It was steadily radicalised as the mutual logic of competition with the EU gathered strength. Moscow's foreign policy thus got incrementally geopoliticised, more on the basis of negative images of the West's intentions than as a positive decision. In other words, if geopolitical images came to occupy a central place in Russia's policy, it was more the result of forces of action and reaction, of radicalising images than of conscious choice. Ultimately the current confrontation may have a deep impact on the Russian economy, which was already struggling. More than from the Western sanctions, Russia may be suffering from a decreasing attractiveness for foreign investors and capital flight. It may also not foster its chances to break out of the relative isolation in which it has found itself in the post-Cold War world.

A form of accidental geopolitics may also be discerned in the EU's policies. Brussels may not have been phrased its strategy in explicit geopolitical terms, still the outcome of its policies towards Eastern Europe has become highly 'geopolitical'. In an attempt to avoid new dividing lines in Europe after enlargement and to create stability beyond its borders, the EU launched first the European Neighbourhood Policy, later the Eastern Partnership (EaP). Doing what it is good at as an institutionalist actor, it tried to extend the EU's model beyond its borders by transferring rules and standards. The project was one of partial integration and extending an economic system, more than conventional strategic control. The outcome, however, was not power-neutral and had clear geopolitical implications. Through the Association Agreements the EU sought to anchor its neighbours firmly into a European economic system that goes much beyond classic free trade agreements, making them part of an EU steered regulatory framework. This reinforced the 'normative hegemony'[11] of the EU in a global competitive environment where power is increasingly derived from getting one's standards and regulations accepted. With Ukraine, this model of expanding the European market and regulatory system resulted in a direct confrontation with Moscow, where this evolution was read in strongly geopolitical terms. The EaP was perceived from the beginning as an attempt to build a sphere of influence.[12] In a process of action and reaction, Moscow's protests and its alternative integration project around the Eurasian Customs Union[13] were seen negatively by the West as 'geopolitical' attempts to gain control over former Soviet states and to block EU initiatives in the area. The Association Agreements (because of their incompatibility with the Customs Union) forced some neighbouring countries to make a radical and tough choice between the EU and Russia, that possibly may not have been intended to be a geopolitical choice but was ultimately doomed to become exactly this. Also in the case of the EU, this development goes against its foreign policy goals which were aimed at stability in the neighbourhood and the creation of trade and investment opportunities.

A fertile ground for geopolitical perceptions: the attributional bias

The previous section argued that the prevalence of geopolitics in EU-Russia relations may be the accidental result of an escalating logic of competition rather than of a conscious, meticulously planned policy on either side. It may have grown incrementally in a context where Russia and the EU have increasingly interpreted *each other's* behaviour as geopolitically motivated and inimical, while tending to see its own as reasonable and justified. It has taken us from increasing competition to outright confrontation. This can be explained on the basis of the concept of 'attributional bias'.[14]

Following Kowert, whose approach is embedded in cognitive psychology, 'the ordinary function of human cognition cleaves the social world into "self" and "other" categories of agency'.[15] Simple divisions between groups are enough to create categories of in-group and out-group which are linked to diverging identities. As 'political categories become more salient'[16], the parties will exaggerate the identities both of the in-group and of the out-group. From cognitive psychology and specifically from the 'minimal group paradigm', Kowert concludes that there is a tendency 'to exaggerate differences between political groups and to underestimate differences within these groups'.[17] In other words, the coherence of the in-group is overrated, as well as the differences with the out-group. Moreover, there is a tendency 'to attribute the behaviour of political out-groups to the intent or desire of those groups; in-group behaviour, however, will more often be attributed to the influence of environmental constraints. Perceived increases in the power of out-groups will strengthen the tendency to assume intent (attributional bias).'[18]

Translated to the evolution of EU-Russia relations prior to the current crisis, this means that the negative images which Moscow and Brussels held of each other got reinforced throughout their interaction. The way they behave, gets more and more disconnected from what the counterpart has actually done and becomes increasingly based on what one party *believes* the other has become. Differences between the 'Self' and 'Other' get aggrandised and – in a context of acrimonious relations – they read bad intentions into each other's behaviour.[19]

Intertwined with a process of changing identities, Moscow and Brussels thus increasingly understood the geostrategic context in which they operated as a competitive one, in which both parties had opposite, incompatible interests, not least in their common neighbourhood. A shared understanding of competition differs from an understanding of relations as conflictual.[20] Pragmatic cooperation continued to dominate a large part of the agenda. But the two parties became much more suspicious of each other's intentions, not least in their common neighbourhood where the counterpart was increasingly seen as an influence maximiser and its behaviour understood in zero-sum terms. The behaviour of the 'Other' is attributed to its bad intentions. One's own behaviour, on the other hand, is understood in function of environmental constraints, leaving no choice but acting in a certain way. In other words, competition in the region is seen from both sides (Moscow and Brussels) as the result of the negative behaviour of the counterpart, seeking an inappropriate degree of influence at the expense of the other. At the same time Russia and the EU understand their own behaviour as reasonable given the setting, for which they bear no responsibility. Both parties understand their own policies as an inevitable response to the malicious policy of the other. The result was an escalation of the competition logic, eventually leading to a fundamentally new and dangerous stage of Russia-EU relations, with both clashing over Ukraine.

Conclusion

EU-Russia relations have undergone a substantial transformation over the last two decades. This article distinguished between three stages: cooperation, pragmatic competition and confrontation. Looking at the long term evolution, it explained this evolution on the basis of an incremental geopoliticisation of relations, resulting in spiralling distrust and ultimately a geopolitical 'radicalisation' over Ukraine. While recognising that this evolution is the result of a much more

complex set of domestic and international factors, it was argued that the evolution of geopoliticisation is rooted in the internal logic of relations between Russia and the West. This logic has been based increasingly on an understanding of the strategic context as competitive and on mutual images of the counterpart as an actor with the 'bad intent' to build a sphere of influence, to enhance its power and to pursue its interests at the expense of the other. Focusing on Russia-EU interaction specifically, it was argued that their relations were characterised by a strong 'attributional bias' resulting in an escalation of tensions.

This evolution fundamentally and unwillingly risks to undermine one of the key characteristics of Russia's post-communist foreign policy, namely its strategic objective to regain its position as a big power by using its economic assets. It may also jeopardise its chances of breaking out of relative isolation. In the EU's case it undermines the chances of creating stability in the neighbourhood and new economic opportunities beyond its borders. It also highlights the ambiguity of the two projects Brussels was trying to run simultaneously: associating its eastern neighbours and maintaining a strategic partnership with Russia.

[1] Keukeleire, S. & J. MacNaughtan (2008), *The Foreign Policy of the European Union. (*Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan)

[2] Haukkala, H. (2008) 'The European Union as a Regional Normative Hegemon: The Case of European Neighbourhood Policy', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 60, 9, 1601-1622; Haukkala, H. (2010), *The EU-Russia Strategic Partnership: The Limits of Post-Sovereignty in International Relations*. (London: Routledge)

[3] As major funding programme for the NIS, TACIS ran from 1991 to 2006 and was aimed at promoting democracy, the rule of law and the transition to a market economy.

[4] Allen, D. & M. Smith (2012), The EU, strategic diplomacy and the BRIC countries. Policy paper 11 [Diplomatic System of the EU Network], February 2012, p. 2.

[5] See: Timmins, G. (2002) 'Strategic or pragmatic partnership? The European Union's policy towards Russia since the end of the Cold War', *European Security*, 11, 4, 78-95, p. 88.
Haukkala 2010, *op. cit.,* p. 122-125.

[6] Light, M., White, S., and Löwenhardt, J. (2000) 'A wider Europe: the view from Moscow and Kyiv', *International Affairs*. 76(1): 77-88.

[7] De Haas, M. (2010), *Russia's Foreign Security Policy in the 21st Century*. (Oxon: Routledge), p. 157.

[8] Wolczuk, K. (2009), Implementation without Coordination: The Impact of EU Conditionality on Ukraine under the European Neighbourhood Policy. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 61, 2, 187-211.

[9] Averre, D. (2009) 'Competing Rationalities: Russia, the EU and the 'Shared Neighbourhood', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 61, 10, 1689-1713.

[10] Ivanov, I. (2002) *The New Russian Diplomacy,* Washington: Brookings Instutions Press, p. 141.

[11] Haukkala 2010, *op. cit*.

[12] See for example Foreign Minister Lavrov quoted in: 'EU expanding its "sphere of influence," Russia says', *EU Observer*, 21/03/2009, http://euobserver.com/24/27827 (accessed August 2011).

[13] See Putin's original presentation of the integration project: Putin V. (2011), 'Novyi integratsionnyi proekt dlya Evrazii – budushchee, kotoroe rozhdaetcya'. *Izvestiya*, 3 October 2011, http://www.izvestia.ru/news/502761 (accessed October 2011).

[14] Kowert, P. (1998), Agent versus Structure in the Construction of National Identity. In: V. Kubalkova, N. Onuf and P. Kowert (eds.), *International Relations In a Constructed World.* (New York: M.E. Sharpe), 101-122.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 106

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 110

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 108-109

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 109

[19] Self-evidently this is not an isolated process. As Sakwa has argued in the context of Russia's relation with the West, the domestic and the international are intertwined. Identity formation happens 'at the interface of domestic and international processes'. Sakwa, R. (2012), The problem of 'the international' in Russian identity formation. *International Politics*, 49, 4, 449-465, p. 972.

[20] Hayes-Gries, P. (2005), Social Psychology and the Identity-Conflict Debate: Is a 'China Threat' Inevitable? *The European Journal of International Relations*. 11, 2 , 235-265; Zagorski, Andrei (2010), *Eastern Partnership from the Russian Perspective.* Friedrich Ebert Stiftung [paper], also available at: http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/ipg/2011-3/05_zagorski.pdf (accessed October 2011).