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Citation for published version

Casier, Tom (2020) Not on speaking terms, but business as usual: the ambiguous coexistence of conflict and cooperation in EU–Russia relations. *East European Politics* . pp. 1-15. ISSN 2159-9165.

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2020.1756784>

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Document Version

Author's Accepted Manuscript

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Not on speaking terms, but business as usual The ambiguous coexistence of conflict and cooperation in EU-Russia relations

Tom Casier

Abstract

Since the crisis over Ukraine erupted, the relations between Russia and the EU have been characterised by the coexistence of a dominant paradigm of competition and cooperation in certain areas. How can we explain this ambiguity? First, a distinction is made between the multi-actor structure of low politics versus polarised discursive positions in high politics. Construal-Level Theory is invoked to explain how low politics are characterised by immediate, concrete images, while high politics are characterised by abstract, ideologised images. Second, the paper considers the interaction between both levels, exploring whether contagion is likely, either the spill over of cooperative practices from low to high politics or the trickling down of conflictual practices from high to low politics. It is argued that the chances of contagion from more cooperative practices to a paradigmatic repositioning and defrosting of EU-Russia relations is unlikely.

Keywords: Russia, European Union, Construal-Level Theory, cooperation, conflict

Introduction

Since the Ukraine crisis erupted in late 2013, early 2014, the EU and Russia have found themselves in the deepest crisis since the end of the Cold War. Their Strategic Partnership was suspended. Sanctions and counter sanctions get renewed on a regular basis. Rhetoric on both sides is often sharp. Yet, in different specific policy fields, business seems to continue as usual. Trade has largely recovered. The import of natural gas has peaked. Educational exchanges still reach high levels. How can this ambivalence be explained? Why does business continue as usual, while Moscow and Brussels are not on speaking terms, at least not within an institutionalised setting like the Strategic Partnership?

To answer these questions, this article draws on the distinction between low and high politics. In low politics relations are based on multi-actor structures with diffuse interests. High politics, on the other hand, are characterised by a limited number of actors and strong paradigmatic positioning. Construal-Level Theory is used to explain the latter: greater psychological distance at the level of high politics leads to more abstract, essentialised ideological mental representations of the other, its behaviour and intentions.

Though taking a different, social psychological, theoretical approach, this article engages with the same questions underlying the conceptual framework of 'symbolic boundaries' presented in the introduction to this special issue (Mérand and Dembinska). It acknowledges that patterns of cooperation and conflict in specific 'geopolitical fields' of EU-Russia relations are partly autonomous and have their own dynamics. On this basis the question is raised why the patterns of cooperation

and conflict are so fundamentally different in the (constructed) categories of low and high politics, or in terms of this issue's conceptual framework why there is a gap between practices of conflict and cooperation between local geopolitical fields and the geostrategic macro-level. After that, the article deals with the vertical dimension. It investigates why bottom-up contagion from low to high politics has not occurred, as Liberal theories would expect. The other way around, it also considers the possibility of 'reverse contagion', top-down, from high to low politics. Related to this, it highlights attempts to reframe predominantly cooperative domains of low politics into issues of high politics, characterised by conflictual practices. The analysis draws in particular on the domain of EU-Russia energy relations to illustrate these processes.

The article argues that a contagion from the more cooperative levels of low politics to high politics is unlikely. Equally, turning issues of low into high politics is far from evident. Therefore the awkward combination of confrontation with diverse forms of pragmatic and selective cooperation may be the new normal in EU-Russia relations for a while to come. The staring contest which has characterised their relations over the last years may not come to an end soon.

The paradox of EU-Russia relations

When the EU and Russia embarked on a Strategic Partnership in 2003, this was accompanied by great optimism. The two parties agreed to cooperate in four common spaces: the common economic space; the common space of freedom, security and justice; the common space of research, education and culture; and the common space of external security.¹ They put in place a highly institutionalised framework for their relations: with no other country was the EU meeting more frequently at the highest level than with Russia. Trade volumes increased sharply until the 2008 financial crisis. Yet, despite this growth and despite a continued pragmatic cooperation, tensions accumulated already well before the eruption of the Ukraine crisis (Haukkala 2015) and trust dwindled, resulting in a 'logic of competition' (Casier 2016). Little progress was made, except for the largely symbolic Partnership for Modernisation of 2010. Brussels and Moscow did not manage to conclude a new agreement, as a follow-up for the 2004 Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), which was supposed to last until 2007 and since then is extended on an annual basis. Increasing competition and distrust spiralled out of control over Ukraine in late 2013, early 2014. The developments over the Euromaidan protests, the regime change in Kyiv, the Russian annexation of Crimea and its involvement in the war in Eastern Ukraine led to a suspension of the Strategic Partnership. The EU imposed sanctions, both economic and individual, and has renewed them every half year since then. The EU's unity on maintaining sanctions against Russia has surprised many. Before the Ukraine crisis the Union was traditionally highly divided on Russia. Moscow retaliated with counter sanctions, targeting agricultural and food products mainly.

For over six years, since the escalation of the Ukraine crisis, EU-Russia relations are in their most profound crisis since the end of the Cold War. Despite this deep crisis, there are some interesting ambiguities in current EU-Russia relations. One of them is in the field of trade. In 2015 the EU's import of Russian goods dropped with -25.2% and its exports to Russia with -28.6%.² In 2017, however, Russia recovered from its recession and problems in the financial sector and trade largely restored with +22.0% for imports and +18.8% for exports (DG Trade 2018). As a result, trade is now more or less back at the level it was before the Ukraine crisis, despite years of economic sanctions. The EU is still the first trading partner for Russia; Russia is the third trading partner for the EU. When looking at Foreign Direct Investments (FDI), 75% of FDI stocks in Russia come from the EU (Haukkala

2018, 54), though this includes Russian money kept in European banks and reinvested in the Russian economy.

In the field of energy the import of Russian natural gas in the EU reached a new peak in 2016. Not less than 39.9 % of imported gas was of Russian origin, in comparison to figures fluctuating around one third before the Ukraine crisis. For crude oil this was 31.6 % (DG Energy 2018, 26). Energy relations remain of key importance to both parties. The potential volume for the transmission of natural gas is further increased by the planned Nord Stream 2 pipeline.

In the field of education, cooperation remains strong, in particular in the field of mobility. From 2015 to 2017 the EU has increased the budget for Erasmus+ cooperation with Russia to almost 80 million EUR. No country scores higher than Russia when it comes to short term student exchanges. From 2015 to 2017 nearly 11,000 Russian and EU students participated in Erasmus+ exchanges. Over the same period 90 Jean Monnet projects were awarded to Russian institutions (European External Action Service 2017).

The stalemate in EU-Russia relations has also not stopped frequent bilateral contacts between Russia and individual EU member states. There are hardly any heads of government or state from EU countries who have not made an official visit to Moscow. The other way around, president Putin has paid numerous visits to EU capitals and made a mediatised private visit to the wedding of Austrian Foreign Minister Kneissl. During official bilateral meetings, commercial relations often top the agenda. This suggests a certain division of tasks, whereby issues of political relations and security are left to the EU. Also at that level, EU-Russia, we have seen an increase of bilateral visits at higher level over the last years, usually at foreign minister level or below.

In 2016 the EU formulated its five guiding principles for relations with Russia. They consist of: the full implementation of the Minsk agreements; strengthening relations with Eastern partners, including in Central Asia; strengthening internal EU resilience (in particular energy security, hybrid threats, strategic communication); selective engagement with Russia; support for Russian civil society and people-to-people contacts. In particular selective engagement is worth noting. It implies that the EU and Russia continue to work together in areas where they have common interests and consider collaboration useful. This includes issues such as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), also known as the Iran nuclear deal, in particular after the American withdrawal in 2015. It is also the case for counter-terrorism. This principle has introduced a stretchable pragmatic element into the EU's policy. Despite the deep crisis and sanctions, Brussels cooperates 'as usual' in selected fields. For other issues, such as the war in Eastern Ukraine, the EU has resorted to alternative channels, such as the Normandy format. It was within this setting that Germany, France, Ukraine and Russia negotiated and concluded the Minsk agreements, which were meant to put an end to the war in Eastern Ukraine. Richard Youngs argues that the EU seeks a balance between 'bounded containment' of Russia and trying to take into account its interests where possible (Youngs 2017, 220).

The overall impression is that, five years after the Ukraine crisis erupted, EU-Russia relations are a mixed bag. There are substantive and lasting sanctions, profound distrust, harsh rhetoric. At the same time, there is selective engagement, extended bilateral relations and business as usual in areas like trade and energy. To understand this paradox, the next section will situate the issues of conflict and cooperation along the dichotomy of low versus high politics. It will be clarified how EU-Russia relations are fundamentally different at these levels and which implications this entails. In doing so, this article takes a predominantly theoretical approach, which will be illustrated through the case of energy relations.

Low versus high politics

The distinction between high and low politics in International Relations is an ill-defined one. High politics usually refers to issues of security or survival of the state, but also to conventional state-to-state diplomacy. By extension it refers to all issues of geopolitical or strategic importance. Low politics, on the other hand, refers to relations in geostrategically less sensitive areas, such as commercial relations, cooperation on environmental matters, etc. In Realist literature the distinction assumes two things. First that both spheres are distinct and have their own autonomy (Barnett 2011). Second, as the terms themselves indicate, a hierarchy is assumed whereby high politics are seen as what fundamentally matters, while low politics are of secondary importance. This has led to critique the distinction between low and high politics as a 'false dichotomy' (Ripsman 2005).

In this article the terms are used in a different way from this Realist understanding, as a subjective categorisation in political discourse itself. What matters here is how policy makers or political leaders themselves categorise certain areas as of key strategic importance for the survival and core national interests of the state (high politics) or not (low politics). Also the supremacy of high over low politics is approached as a subjective category. Moreover, in line with the conceptual framework outlined in the introduction of this special issue, not only do the spheres of high and low politics have a relative autonomy. Also individual domains of low politics ('geopolitical fields' in terms of the special issue's conceptual framework) have relative autonomy vis-à-vis each other, implying that they display varying patterns of cooperation and conflict (Mérand and Dembinska).

Notwithstanding the difference in theoretical approach, some findings of conventional literature on high and low politics and on 'issue politics' are relevant to our analysis. In the 'issue politics paradigm' the issue position of key actors and decision-makers becomes itself the main dependent variable (Vasquez 1998, 378). Milner and Tingley even refer to the 'shaping of high and low politics' (Milner and Tingley 2015, 13) and how this is affected by domestic politics.³ This adds an element of construction of high and low politics to the issue areas literature, though it is not really developed theoretically by the authors. What is of interest to our analysis is thus how issues move *discursively* between the categories of low and high politics. Energy relations are a good case in point and will also serve as a case in this article. While conventionally seen as an issue of low politics, it can be elevated to high politics when it becomes seen as an issue of vital importance for the security of a state. This was the case with the OPEC oil embargo in 1973-74. It was also the case with the gas spats of 2006 and 2009 when several EU member states were cut off from Russian gas. Inside the EU this item was widely read as a security threat, requiring a strategic response. As a result it moved to the 'high politics' agenda.

Today EU-Russia energy relations are predominantly a low politics issue again, whereby most decisions taken have limited national strategic implications, are often of a rather technical nature and taken on the basis of routine. The interaction in the field of energy is between numerous actors, economic and non-economic, producers and consumers, in function of their own interests or preferences (Aalto et al. 2014). In other words, the daily practices of energy relations are constituted by millions of acts and decisions by a huge number of public and private actors. As a result, the interests are highly diffuse and driven by dispersed commercial interests rather than 'high' political national interests. In this area states often act as brokers and mediators for commercial contracts. Exactly this has remained unchanged in areas not affected by EU-Russia mutual sanctions.⁴ In other words, the daily practices of trade, energy relations, academic exchange, etc. take place within a complex multi-actor structure, characterised by direct interaction. The interests of this wide array of actors are diffuse.

A different image emerges when we look at high politics. Positions are taken by a limited number of actors, political leaders in the first place. They are governed by dominant, in this case diametrically opposed, discourses. EU leaders frame Russia – to different degrees – in terms of threat and as a state which has deviated from the EU's guiding model. Russian leaders accuse the EU and the West to follow a policy of neo-containment (Putin 2014a) and to impose its 'unilateral Diktat' (Putin 2014b) on other countries. The EU is seen as part of 'an elite club' using the extension of the liberal world order as an instrument of 'domination over everyone else' (Lavrov 2017).

What stands out in this process is the paradigmatic positioning of both actors. As Joan DeBardeleben has argued, the EU-Russia paradigm for interaction has shifted from a 'greater/common Europe' paradigm to one of 'competing regionalisms' (DeBardeleben 2018). Moscow puts itself on an anti-hegemonic position. It openly challenges the EU's imposition of its political and economic model and claims its right to make its own 'sovereign' choices. Brussels traditionally identifies with the position of 'normative' power, a non-geopolitical actor driven primordially by norms and values, rather than interests. The diverging narratives on both sides went through a process of escalation whereby positions got more entrenched and reactions more assertive.

The contrast between direct relations in complex, multi-actor structures with frequent, routinised interaction versus the polarised paradigmatic positioning of political leaders in foreign policy discourses does not feature in most International Relations theories. As a result, many theories struggle to explain the discrepancy between more cooperative relations at the level of low politics and more acrimonious relations in high politics. Realism assumes there is a strict hierarchy of issues whereby security and survival of the state dominate. Liberal approaches, on the other hand, expect close cooperation in areas of low politics to produce common interests and ultimately a more cooperative context for high politics, something that has clearly not happened in the realm of EU-Russia relations (Forsberg 2018). Here an alternative theory is presented which grasps this contrast better: Construal-Level Theory (CLT) (Trope and Liberman 2010). This theory offers a solid ground for explaining the difference between diffuse and often common interests at the level of low politics and strongly polarised discursive positions and disagreement at the level of high politics. CLT is a theory from Social Psychology. It starts from the idea that in order to think about something, we need to transcend the self and the immediate. We do this through the creation of mental representations or 'construals'. It argues that the 'construals' we create of objects, events or others, become more abstract ('higher') as the psychological distance from our direct experience grows. This distance may take different forms: social, spatial, temporal or hypothetical. The greater the distance along one of these dimensions, the more abstract the construal becomes: it is ruled by essentialised images, whereby the event or other is reduced to a few simple characteristics. The smaller the distance, the more concrete, specific ('lower') the construal is. In other words, 'CLT contends that people use increasingly higher levels of construal to represent an object as the psychological distance from the object increases. This is because high-level construals are more likely than low-level construals to remain unchanged as one gets closer to an object or farther away from it.' (Trope and Liberman, 2010, 441) When determining one's attitude towards something that is psychologically distant, it will be detached from the specific, local context or from the incidental attitudes or behaviour of others. Instead, it will be determined by abstract construals such as ideologies. These ideologies are abstracted from the reality of our direct experience and become the lens through which this behaviour is understood. It will be argued below that while interaction in domains of low politics implies small psychological distances and is therefore determined by the specific context and the direct experience of interaction with others, the level of high politics implies higher psychological distance and is ruled by abstract, ideological images, which may, in case of tensions, develop into enemy images.

The daily 'low politics' practices in trade, energy, academic mobility, interregional cooperation are driven by a multitude of actors who interact on a regular basis in a direct, very specific way, i.e. in terms of CLT, with small psychological distances. For example, in the field of energy, they interact as negotiators of commercial contracts, as technicians, as sales managers, etc. They have very specific interests or preferences (concluding a contract, solving a technical problem, selling a product) and are aware of those of the others (see Aalto et al. 2014). They see the other in a fairly concrete way, not in abstract images. As a result, their daily interaction will be less affected by abstract political images.⁵ High politics, on the other hand, happens exactly at the level of abstracted images of national interests. The behaviour of the other is judged in the first place on the basis of discursive representations and abstract images one has formed of the intentions of the counterpart. In a context of tensions, whereby distance grows further, abstract negative images easily get radicalised (Trope and Liberman, 2010). This makes political leaders more prone to stereotypical paradigmatic positioning and even enemy thinking.

Again, this finding displays a parallel with the more conventional approaches to issue areas. On the basis of empirical research and refining Rosenau's 'issue area typology', Vasquez has argued that 'as issues become more tangible they will become more cooperative, and as issues become more intangible they become more conflict-prone' (Vasquez 1983, 188). This relation becomes more outspoken when certain variables are present. Intangible aspects of an issue, for example, will generate more conflict if there is 'frequent contention over the issue' and 'it is not linked to other issues' (Vasquez 1983, 189). The other way around, 'issues with tangible ends and means ... tend to be cooperative, especially when there is a high number of actors.' (Vasquez 1983, 189). The logical question that emerges from this, is whether contagion is possible. Can concrete images from domains of low politics spill over into high politics and affect more abstract construals? And may more cooperative patterns in certain local domains of low politics in this way change more conflictual patterns in high politics? The other way around, do abstract construals at the level of high politics trickle down to domains of low politics and negatively affect patterns of conflict and cooperation? These questions will be dealt with in the next two sections.

Contagion: a spill over of cooperative practices from low to high politics?

Is a contagion of more cooperative practices from certain domains of low politics to high politics likely? Have the pragmatic interaction and links that exist at bilateral level the potential to produce a normalisation of relations? These questions deal with the vertical hypothesis presented in the introduction to this special issue (Mérand and Dembinska), more specifically a bottom up change of conflictual patterns at the geostrategic level through contagion by more cooperative practices in specific domains of low politics.

Drawing on the theoretical perspective given above, Construal Level Theory, a bottom up contagion is unlikely because concrete low-distance images do not simply spill over into abstract high-distance images. As explained above, there is a strongly polarised discourse at the level of high politics, in which Russia puts itself in an anti-hegemonic position, while the EU legitimises its position on the basis of the threat posed by Russia.

The very idea that intense economic cooperation and interdependence generate common interests and form the basis for interstate cooperation is a liberal proposition. It was one of the core theoretical narratives about EU-Russia relations throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. Developments have proven this interpretation wrong (Forsberg 2018).⁶ Strongly interwoven economic interests at low politics level were unable to produce stable political relations between

Russia and the EU. Romanova has analysed how transgovernmental and transnational energy institutions were unable 'to cushion the crisis' (Romanova 2018, 73). Krickovic has even argued that interdependence in the energy sector has generated a security dilemma, rather than fostered cooperation. Both parties have tried to reduce respectively their demand and supply dependence, but this has triggered concerns on the other side of asymmetrical interdependence and insecurity (Krickovic 2015).

As explained in the conceptual section above, this analysis sees the domains of high and low politics as constructed domains. This implies that issues get discursively defined by political actors as high politics or not. Whether an issue gets defined as belonging to the realm of high or low politics ultimately depends on the criterion against which domains of EU-Russia interaction are defined as vital or not to the interests of the Russian state or of the European Union.⁷ It is in these areas that Russia and the EU get entangled in a 'logic of competitive influence seeking': 'the Kremlin vies with the West for influence, considering any loss of such influence ultimately as a threat to its role as a regional hegemon and its aspirations for global major-power status' (Malyarenko and Wolff 2018, 193). Areas where a loss influence is not seen by the actors as a threat to vital interests are understood as low politics.

In the Constructivist tradition these vital interests are not exogenously given, but a social construction. Extending this to our social psychological CLT approach, the definition of an issue as vital interest is a function of the degree to which the construals of the other or the situation are abstract or concrete. In other words, the images held and the level of abstraction determine how they define the situation (when is rivaling influence threatening?), how they interpret the behaviour of their counterparts and attribute certain intentions to them. The latter is of particular importance. Intentions of the other are in interstate relations a classic uncertainty⁸, thus not based on concrete, direct experience. As a result, images about intentions are almost per definition 'high distance' and thus abstract. Related social psychological theories of attribution have argued that, in particular in a contexts of escalating tensions and high psychological distance, the actions of the other party are not understood in the first place on the basis of their actual behaviour, but on the basis of the intentions attributed to them on the basis of the abstract images formed (see for example, Kowert 1998). In the field of Russia's relations with the West, where there is a disproportionate emphasis on intentions (in particular speculation about Russia's long-term geostrategic intentions), this is of utmost importance.

In sum, with uncertainty about intentions abounding in EU-Russia relations, negative abstract images at the level of high politics are unlikely to be affected by more positive concrete images in certain fields of, for example, economic interaction. Moreover, this polarisation has been entrenched through the dualistic structures which have taken form in Europe. This dualism refers to the two-pronged institutions and structures of governance which have been created around the Euro-Atlantic Community on one hand and around Russia on the other. It is clearly visible in the security field (NATO versus the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, CSTO), as well as in the field of economic cooperation (Eastern Partnership versus Eurasian Economic Union). This type of dualistic structures tends to stimulate highly abstract images of the adversary and his intentions rather than mitigating them. Besides, dualistic structures imply the absence of a shared normative framework of agreed principles that underpins multilateralism (Ruggie 1982; Ruggie 1992). What we have witnessed is the gradual erosion of the shared post-Cold War framework, formulated in the 'Charter of Paris for a New Europe' of 1990 (CSCE 1990) and translated into various agreements and institutions afterwards. This thinning out of shared principles in relations between Russia and the West in general and the EU more specifically, risks to foster polarisation at the level of high politics, where abstracted paradigmatic positions dominate.

Reverse contagion: the trickling down of conflictual dynamics from high to low politics?

If bottom up contagion (from low to high politics) is unlikely, as argued in the previous section, how about top down contagion? Can specific domains of low politics be negatively affected by the conflictual patterns at the level of high politics? In other words, may the logic of competition at geostrategic level trickle down to specific, local geopolitical fields?

A distinction needs to be made between deliberate political decisions introducing conflictual practices into domains of low politics versus spontaneous trickle down effects. The former is best illustrated through sanction regimes.⁹ Hereby political actors decide to introduce sanctions in specific fields of low politics, thus imposing a conflictual logic on these domains. The EU has progressively introduced sanctions since the Russian annexation of Crimea and has renewed them every half year since then. In the economic field, the restrictive measures concern inter alia Russian access to capital markets, to certain sensitive technologies in the field of oil exploitation and the implementation of certain cooperation programmes (Council 2019). Russian counter sanctions targeted the import of agricultural products from EU countries. These forms of extension of conflictual dynamics to local domains of low politics can be seen as extension by force. Interestingly they have not triggered a conflictual dynamic in other fields of low politics. Conflict over the Russia embargo against EU agricultural products, for example, has not spilled over to other fields of trade. As illustrated above, the total volume of EU-Russia trade has recovered and is back at the level before the Ukraine crisis. The effects of the sanctions are thus divergent and have not led to a spill over of conflictual dynamics into other areas of low politics.

On the other side of the spectrum is spontaneous top-down contagion: the trickling down of conflict dynamics from high politics into domains of low politics. Looking again at the area of EU-Russia energy relations, little can be discerned in case of trickling down effects. In contrast to the widespread speculation on the eve of the Ukraine crisis that Russia would cut off gas supplies in case of a conflict, energy relations between Russia and the EU have continued as normal since the Ukraine crisis (Stulberg 2015) and have clearly been approached predominantly as domain of low politics.¹⁰ As indicated above, the import of Russian gas into the EU even broke a new record in 2016, hitting almost 40% (DG Energy 2018, 26). This absence of conflict stands in sharp contrast with the gas conflicts of 2006 and 2009. Twice Russia shut down gas supplies over debt issues with Ukraine, disrupting the supplies of natural gas to several EU member states. This caused a shock effect in the EU and led to calls for emergency measures and reinforced energy security. The events of 2006 and 2009 did not repeat themselves after the last gas spat due to the signing of an Early Warning Mechanism between Russia and the EU. The mechanism was invoked on several occasions and prevented further escalation. Also the agreement on the Nord Stream 2 pipeline in June 2015, a good year after the eruption of the Ukraine crisis, indicates that conflictual dynamics did not trickle down to the energy sector. Though controversial within the EU, Nord Stream 2 is a project based on cooperation between Gazprom and partners from different EU member states: Uniper and Wintershall from Germany, Engie from France, OMV from Austria and British-Dutch Shell.

As explained, energy relations are characterised by their multi-actor nature, whereby a multitude of actors with their own interests and preferences interact and produce a high variety of particular intentions rather than clear collective intention (Aalto et al. 2014). A trickledown effect would imply that the multitude of individual intentions and practices are brought in line with a collective, consensus-based strategic goal. Given the many particularistic interests in the energy sector, commercial ones in the first place, this alignment would be extremely difficult. On top of that, there

was a shared, pragmatic understanding in both Brussels and Moscow that the disruption of highly important energy relations would inevitably damage economies severely. While the EU is strongly dependent on the supply of Russian natural gas, Russia is strongly dependent on demand from the EU (Casier 2016).

However, there is a third possibility whereby the dynamics of high politics are not simply trickling down or imposed, but whereby a domain of low politics is discursively reframed as touching vital interests and thus relabelled as field of high politics. Again, this can be illustrated in the field of energy, this time on the basis of an external attempt to convert energy into an issue of high politics. More specifically, there has been tremendous American pressure on the EU to reduce supply dependence on Russian natural gas by buying US Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG). The pressure is not new; it existed already under the Obama administration. But under the Trump administration it has taken unprecedented forms and is more 'bullish and vocal' (Mitrova and Boersma 2018, 35). US Secretary of Energy Rick Perry, stated: 'The United States is not just exporting energy, we're exporting freedom. ... We're exporting to our allies in Europe the opportunity to truly have a choice of where do you buy your energy from. That's freedom. And that kind of freedom is priceless.' (Perry quoted in Cama 2018). The American ambassador to Germany, Richard Grenell, threatened in a letter to German energy companies with sanctions against companies supporting the building of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, for they are 'actively undermining Ukraine's and European security' (Grenell 2019). In a reaction to the American mounting pressure, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov spoke of 'a big battle': 'the United States wants to use the current situation in order to separate Europe from Russia economy-wise and bargain for the most favourable conditions for themselves in the context of the ongoing negotiations on the creation of a transatlantic trade and investment partnership' (Lavrov quoted in Mitrova and Boersma 2018, 36). In December 2019 the National Defence Authorization Act was approved in the United States, providing for sanctions on the companies involved in the construction of Nordstream 2. This led main contractor Allseas to withdraw from the project and provoked sharp reactions from Moscow, Brussels and Berlin.

Behind the American framing of the European choice as one between Russian natural gas or American LNG, is a changing energy reality. The US evolves from a net importer to net exporter of energy. In 2019 it became the world's third LNG player (EIA 2018, Stratfor 2018). In January-April 2019 35% of American LNG export went to the EU and considerable increases are projected (European Commission 2019). American LNG imports have been increasing in Europe with 14% in 2019, but companies are confronted with an oversupply on the European market. This puts them in direct competition with Russia and explains the drastic efforts of Washington to 'break into' the European gas market, in which Russia is the biggest player.¹¹

Self-evidently this is open for discussion, but there are strong indications that the main motive of the Trump administration is commercial rather than geopolitical: 'It does seem like the current [Trump] administration is pushing European countries to wean themselves off Russian gas and switch to American gas in a move that would benefit American companies.' (Mitrova and Boersma 2018, 35) In this case, geopolitical and security arguments are only a pretext to increase the American share of the gas market.¹²

Whether American attempts are effective to turn the predominantly commercial issue of energy into a high politics issue on the basis of simple, abstract images of security and freedom, is a different question. As things look now, the US approach mainly seems to work in EU member states who have already made it a priority to drastically reduce their dependence on Russian gas. Poland, for example, increased its imports of American LNG considerably as part of its ongoing strategy to reduce dependence on Russian gas. It signed major deals with American LNG companies in 2018, amounting

to the equivalent of almost 40% percent of Polish gas consumption (Crooks 2018). Along the same lines, some actors within the EU continuously attempt to reframe energy relations with Russia in security terms and make it an issue of high politics. So far, at least until the American imposition of sanctions, they have been little successful. This stands in sharp contrast with the crisis atmosphere surrounding the Russia-EU gas conflicts in 2006 and 2009, when energy was framed as a high politics issue.

To sum up, attempts are definitely undertaken to extend the conflictual dynamics of high politics to specific domains of low politics by reframing them as affecting vital interests. Yet, these attempts are not necessarily driven by geostrategic motives, but they may follow from particularistic motives, such as commercial interests. That success of these actions has so far been limited, seems to confirm the relative autonomy of different local domains of low politics. Reverse contagion, from high to low politics, does not occur easily in the absence of a political decision, for example to impose sanctions in these areas.

Conclusion

Relations between the EU and Russia display a major ambiguity. On one hand, relations are at their worst since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The EU-Russia Strategic Partnership has been suspended. Sanctions and counter sanctions are in place. Trust is at an all-time low and there are very few signs that the current staring contest may come to an end. On the other hand, bilateral diplomatic activity between Moscow and EU member states seems to flourish. Trade has recovered from the dip after the start of the Ukraine crisis. This is even more the case for energy. In 2016 a new record was hit for Russia's share in EU natural gas imports.

This confirms that even today, in a context of crisis, a simple paradigm of conflict still does not suffice to grasp the essence of EU-Russia relations.¹³ What needs to be explained is the ambivalence: the deep conflict between the EU and Russia going hand in hand with business as usual in some areas. This article explained this awkward combination on the basis of the distinction between low and high politics, understood here as subjective categories. The continued cooperation in fields labelled as low politics, like trade and energy, mainly results from the interaction between a multitude of actors (private and public) in a multi-actor structure. On the basis of Construal-Level Theory, this interaction was understood as relations of low psychological distance, i.e. dominated by rather concrete mental representations of the attitudes and behaviour of the other, based on direct experience. For example, in the conclusion of an energy contract, the images the parties hold of each other are specific and immediate. In high politics, on the other hand, the mental representations of the attitudes and behaviour of the counterpart, are characterised by high psychological distance. They are abstract, essentialised images of the intentions of the other. They are more disconnected from the daily 'reality' of interaction and governed by ideologised images and more prone to enemy thinking. The two parties thus tend to position themselves discursively in a strongly antagonistic way in areas which are framed as affecting vital interests.

On the basis of the above, the article studied the possibility of contagion effects between domains of low and high politics against the background of Construal-Level Theory. Bottom-up contagion effects imply that (more) cooperative practices would spill over from domains of low politics into high politics. Reversely top-down contagion effects imply that (more) conflictual practices would trickle down from high politics to domains of low politics. Drawing on the case of EU-Russia energy relations since the start of the Ukraine crisis, little support was found either for bottom-up or top-down contagion.

In others words, there is little chance that continued cooperation in fields like trade and energy will lead to a shift in the foreign policy positions of Russia and the EU and defrost relations. This is the case because concrete low distance images do not easily contaminate abstract, high distance polarised images. The dualistic structures which exist in wider Europe help to maintain high psychological distance and entrench polarisation. On the contrary, we continue to face active attempts to turn issues of low politics into conflictual high politics issues. A case in point are the attempts of the Trump administration to frame the EU's choice between Russian natural gas and American LNG not as a commercial one, but as a vital choice over security and freedom.

In conclusion, the pragmatism that has survived in some specific areas, is unlikely to provide the basis for a U-turn in EU-Russia relations. Changing the polarised discursive positions of both actors and the abstract, high distance representations they have formed of each other will be an inevitable step. It is clear that this cannot happen overnight, but will require a long and winding road of trust building and normalisation.

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¹ The cooperation in these four common spaces was translated into Roadmaps, agreed in Moscow in 2005 (Roadmaps 2005).

² Russia's global trade in goods dropped in 2015 by 19.7% (DG Trade 2018).

³ Some authors have argued that domestic politics matter considerably for the issue position of leaders (Putnam 1988), a factor which is often related to the distribution of costs and benefits over domestic actors (Milner and Tingley 2015, p. 14).

⁴ The same holds for student mobility and collaborative research projects: they result from a multitude of decisions by individual students and academics and as such do not imply high political decisions.

⁵ For a more extended argumentation about low psychological distance in energy relations between Russia and the EU, see Casier 2016.

⁶ Despite this negative evaluation Forsberg notes that interdependence 'can be regarded as a factor that has prevented the parties from further escalating their confrontation' (Forsberg 2018).

⁷ Scholars themselves differ over what exactly Moscow defines as its vital interests and analysts have variously emphasised geopolitical control, power distribution, status or regime survival. See among many others: Götz 2015, Mearsheimer 2014, Forsberg 2014, White 2018.

⁸ Rathbun argues that uncertainty is central to all traditions in International Relations theory, but is understood differently across them (Rathbun 2007).

⁹ On sanctions between the EU and Russia, see inter alia Romanova 2016.

¹⁰ Note that this also contrasts with the gas spats of 2006 and 2009 when the disruption of Russian gas supplies to some member states sent shock waves through the EU and became seen as an issue of high politics.

¹¹ In terms of the effects of an increased presence of US LNG on the EU energy market, it has been argued that the increasing American share is unlikely to outcompete Russia, but rather to make the European gas market more competitive and flexible (Mitrova and Boersma 2018).

¹² Geopolitical motives need to be distinguished from the geopolitical 'wrapping', i.e. the use of geopolitical and security arguments to gain commercial benefit, as described in this article. As to the former, it has been argued that Russia has the geopolitical objective with Nord Stream 2 to bypass Ukraine. In the case of Southern routes, both the EU (with the Southern Gas Corridor) and Russia (with Turkstream) had geopolitical objectives (Siddi 2019).

¹³ A similar statement was made before the Ukraine crisis in Casier 2012.