

Still entrenched in the conflict/cooperation dichotomy? EU-Russia relations and the Ukraine crisis

Dr. Cristian Nitoiu, LSE IDEAS

Introduction

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union relations between Russia and the EU (European Union) have been characterised by the conflict/cooperation dichotomy (Averre, 2005; Dragneva and Wolczuk, 2012; Webber, 2000). On the one hand, EU and Russian official rhetoric often stressed shared interests and values. On the other hand, both actors pursued their interests in an exclusive manner, leading at times to more or less open conflict. Cooperation occurred primarily in the economic and energy sectors, where the member states and Russia found common ground for mutually beneficial deals. In order not to damage these deals rarely during this period did the EU and Russia engage in meaningful dialogue on core issues of contention – e.g. the post-Cold War security order of the European continent. Hence, conflict has been always latent, with the constant danger for the grievances on both sides to reach the boiling point and drive EU-Russia relations on a clear path towards open confrontation. The Ukraine crisis caused the EU-Russia relationship to enter in a period of ‘deep freeze’. For the first in time in the last 25 years the EU framed Russia as a direct adversary in the post-Soviet and a spoiler to democracy promotion in the post-Soviet space (Delcour and Wolczuk, 2015).

Indeed the Ukraine crisis signals the fact that EU-Russia relations are entering a period of conflict. However, is this a radical departure from ‘well worn’ dynamic underlined by the conflict/cooperation dichotomy in EU-Russia relations? In this sense the aim of the article is twofold. Firstly, it explores the way the Ukraine crisis affected the main characteristics of conflict/cooperation dichotomy. It concludes that that the dichotomy is the optimal type of dynamic preferred by both Russia and the EU in their mutual relations. The adoption of common EU sanctions and Russian countersanctions, together with the virtual breakdown of the strategic partnership might be seen as evidence for change in the dynamic of EU-Russia relations. In reality the Ukraine crisis only exacerbated the opposing forces and tendencies which have characterised the post-Cold War dynamic of EU-Russia relations (i.e. the conflict/cooperation dichotomy). When confronted with a severe external crisis in the shared neighbourhood the EU and Russia reverted to and reinforced the tensions which in the past precluded fully fledged cooperation to get off the ground. What the Ukraine crisis has actually determined is a gradual recalibration of the dynamic EU-Russia relations along the lines of the conflict/cooperation dichotomy.

Secondly, in tune with neoclassical realism¹ the article aims to account for the relative persistence of the conflict/cooperation dichotomy. It argues that the dynamic of EU-Russia relations remained rather stable due to the fact that neither the EU nor Russian foreign policy has undergone major transformations (of both power, scope and organisation) that would provide sufficient incentive or constraints for a complete overhaul of the conflict/cooperation dichotomy. Moreover, the article claims that the relative stability of world politics since the start of the Ukraine crisis has not given the EU and Russia incentives – or constrained them – to seek to change the overall dynamic of their relationship. The refugee crisis, or the escalation of the Syrian war are indeed recent salient developments and evidence of increasing disorder in international relations but they have not led to a deep transformation of

the regional or global order, in a way that genuine critical junctures would – e.g. dissolution of the Soviet Union or 9/11.

The article proceeds as follows. The first part focuses on the main characteristics of the conflict/cooperation dichotomy, and shows that they have remained rather stable during the Ukraine crisis. The second part aims to explain the persistence of this dynamic in EU-Russia relations by claiming that no major transformations have occurred since the start of the Ukraine crisis in: Russian and EU foreign policy, and the regional or global orders. 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 Moscow, Brussels and a series of other EU capitals.

The conflict/cooperation dichotomy in EU-Russia relations

On the surface the dichotomy seems to have swayed towards full blown conflict due to the Ukraine crisis (Haukkala, 2015). However, in spite of sanctions, cooperation continued between the member states and Russia in the energy sector – e.g. in the case of gas production and exploration (Zubacheva, 2016). Consequently, we can identify a pattern of continuity rather than change in the main characteristics of the traditional conflict/cooperation dichotomy: the post-Cold War order on the European continent, values and worldviews, perceptions of self and other, and policies towards each other and post-Soviet space.

The post-Cold war order

The Ukraine crisis has not prompted the EU or Russia to start revising the post-Cold War order on the European continent. The way the West managed the end of the Cold War (coining it as a victory) left Russia deeply disaffected. In the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union the Kremlin hoped that the West would create a pluralistic world order – Gorbachev’s ‘European home’ project – and would give Russia an equal role in shaping it (Lukyanov, 2010). According to the Russian narrative, throughout the 1990s and 2000s the West promoted a monistic project on the European continent based around the expansion of the EU. This EU-centric order implied adopting wholeheartedly the EU’s menu of values, norms, rules and regulations (Lavrov, 2013).

In turn Russia advocated a series of initiatives in order to counterbalance the EU-centric understating of Europe: e.g. the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Eurasian Customs Union, the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) or the Collective Security Treaty Organisation. These initiatives were mostly reactive, with very few prospects of being implemented effectively (Kanet, 2012; Krastev, 2008). They served the purpose of challenging the EU-centric understanding of the European order and the EU’s expanding influence in the post-Soviet space. In this sense, the conflict/cooperation dichotomy has been a result of the constant tension between the EU and Russian understandings of the post-Cold War European order, and their mutual unwillingness to engage with each on this issue. On the one hand, the EU adopted a sort of morally condescending stance which rejected from the start as inferior competing interpretations of the European order (De Zutter, 2010). The expansion of NATO and the EU were a logical and positive step for European policymakers, while the Kremlin perceived these developments as a sign that the West does not see Russia as an equal (Rühle, 2014). On the other hand, Russia failed to adapt on its own terms to the EU-centric order, and with the mid 2000s gradually chose to isolate itself and seek to construct a different identity –

which is not essentially ‘European’ anymore (White and Feklyunina, 2014). The Ukraine crisis has, to that extent, accelerated Moscow’s drift towards a less-‘European’ identity based, according to Vladimir Putin, on the *Russian world* which is comprised of people ‘not necessarily of Russian ethnicity, but everyone who feels to be a Russian person’ (Putin quoted in Socor, 2014). The crisis also made the EU firmly reaffirm the universality and normative nature of its model of *Europe*, as highlighted by former Commissioner Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy Füle (2014):

We will always support and stand by those who are subject to undue pressures. The main principle of the Eastern Partnership is that we engage on the basis of common values – the respect for and the promotion of human rights and freedoms, democracy, and the rule of law.

Nevertheless, while choosing to ignore the increasing incompatibility between their understandings of the European order, both the EU and Russia still declare their common history and shared values (Nünlist & Thränert, 2015) – a dynamic which does not depart from the logic of the conflict/cooperation dichotomy.

Values and worldviews

The conflict/cooperation dichotomy has also been predicated on the contrasting values and worldviews promoted by Russia and the EU (Headley, 2012). Cooperation occurred only in the case of clear common interests or issues on the international agenda which do not question both actors’ values and worldviews – e.g. the Iran nuclear deal. However, in the background neither Russia nor the EU sought to accommodate each other’s worldviews, making conflict a latent feature of their mutual relationship (Casier, 2013). While the EU puts

emphasis on solidarity and ethical behaviour, in Russia's view of legitimate action in the international arena the focus is more on legality and constitutionalism rather than morality. Moscow prefers a pluralistic world order where international law represents a source of stability in the context of increasing contestation of international norms (Gvosdev and Marsh, 2013). The EU, in turn, for the past decade did not pay too much attention to Russia's worldview, dismissing it as nonsense stemming from a less-civilised (slightly inferior) way of understanding international relations (Sakwa, 2015). Moreover, the EU has been entrenched in the perception that its values and model of integration are universal in absolute terms, and their application can only lead to positive outcomes. For example, according to former High Representative Solana (2002):

The values rooted in our founding texts are common to all. They are shared also with those who cannot be in Helsingborg - the victims of conflict whether in the Balkans, in the Middle East, on the Horn of Africa and in Central Africa. Our purpose is to enable these values to flourish and find expression where they already have deep roots.

The Ukraine crisis highlights the instrumentalisation of Russia and the EU's contrasting worldviews. For example, Putin maintained throughout the crisis that the world order has become more disordered as Russia failed since the end of the Cold War to assert its worldview and interests (RT, 2016). On the other hand, EU leaders repeatedly challenged Russia's claim to maintaining a sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space (Traynor, 2014). According to Sakwa (2015), the EU has also embraced transatlanticism, as a way to back up through military force its liberal agenda – making accommodation increasingly difficult. The preservation of the differences between Russian and EU values, their understandings of world politics and their unwillingness to accommodate each other on this matter fit within the remits of the dynamic of the conflict/cooperation dichotomy.

Perceptions of self and other

Perceptions or misperceptions of self and other have also influenced the dynamic of EU-Russia relations. Throughout the post-Cold War period both Russia and the EU overestimated their own power and influence in the post-Soviet space, and underestimated that of the other (Averre, 2009; Tsygankov, 2008). While some perceptions were deepened or reinforced in the context of the Ukraine crisis, others were almost completely overhauled. More radical shifts occur in the EU's perception of Russia's intentions in the post-Soviet space. Before the crisis the EU was entrenched in the conviction that its integration project in the post-Soviet space was purely economic in scope and did not have a geopolitical component as it did not seek to alter the regional status quo. The EU also acted on the assumption that Russia was primarily concerned with preserving the security status quo of the region (Boedeltje and Houtum, 2011). However, the Ukraine crisis made clear to EU policymakers that Russia views external influences in the post-Soviet space as a threat, and that Moscow would not hesitate in mounting a swift and powerful response. This shift became evident shortly after the annexation of Crimea – nevertheless, the EU still sought to cooperate with Russia: for example, in May 2014 former President of the Commission Barroso (2014) argued that

The 'Great Game' of geopolitics has made an unwelcome return (...). Unfortunately the actions of some actors are based on a logic we cannot share. Because the European idea stems from a different perspective. For us the rule of law prevails over the rule of force. Sovereignty is shared and not limited. The logic of cooperation replaces the logic of confrontation.

The EU realised throughout the crisis that Moscow changed its foreign policy and did not wish anymore to invest the strategic partnership (Wiegand, 2014). Nevertheless, the EU's perception – which was at the root of deep tensions and latent conflict from the point of view

of the Kremlin – of its own benign influence and interests in the post-Soviet space, together with its role as a normative power in the region have not been affected the crisis. If anything, the EU has been keen to stress that it is firmly committed to upholding its values, as stressed by High Representative Morgherini (2015): ‘We must finally take responsibility to live up to our values, to the values of our history, to the challenges of the most difficult times in our recent history, to our global role’. What became salient for European policymakers was the perception that the EU was misled that Russia would seek cooperation – which Moscow believed was not on its own terms (Headley, 2015). Nevertheless, this perception did not alter the dynamic of the conflict/cooperation dichotomy, as the EU, rather than opting for full blown confrontation with Russia, chose to keep the door open for dialogue and negotiations – to quote Morgherini again (quoted in Sputnik, 2015a):

The European Union today is extremely realistic about the developments in Russia, but we’ll never be trapped, or forced, or pushed, or pulled into a confrontative attitude. We still believe that ... not only in our continent, but around our continent cooperation is far better than confrontation.

Starting with Putin’s second presidential term the Kremlin considered that it had achieved the great power status and developed the perception of an ineffective EU in international relations (Trenin, 2015). With the Ukraine crisis the Kremlin reinforced its perception of a weak and indecisive EU, due to the member states’ inability to counter the annexation of Crimea or the Russian support for separatists in the Donbas. This view first emerged in the aftermath of the Georgian-Russian war of 2008 when Moscow realised that the EU would not mount a serious challenge in the face of Russian military intervention in the post-Soviet space (Lavrov, 2008). Indeed the adoption of EU sanctions did provoke surprise in the Kremlin, as Lavrov stated after the first wave of sanctions in March 2014: ‘I am surprised not only with the adherence of our Western partners, in which they are increasingly

wrapped up, to unilateral imperative measures as regards other countries, but also with the concrete forms which this unjust indignation takes' (Lavrov quoted in JRL, 2014).

Up until the Ukraine crisis, the Putin regime perceived the EU as a weak and indecisive actor which when push comes to shove would not risk damaging its economic ties cooperation with Russia (Samokhvalov, 2015). In fact throughout his first two terms as president and short intermezzo with Medvedev, Putin advocated cooperation in order to reap the economic benefits that the EU could offer to individuals close to his regime (Light 2008). Confronted with the reality of sanctions, Russia also started to invest less effort in trying to cooperate with the EU, and moved its sights eastwards towards China and Central Asia (Hille, 2016). Similarly to the EU, self-perceptions have not been altered significantly by the Ukraine crisis. Rather the emerging perception that Russia had become a great power was reconfirmed if not reinforced in the Kremlin by the Ukraine crisis: 'the allegations and statements that Russia is trying to establish some sort of empire, encroaching on the sovereignty of its neighbours, are groundless. Russia does not need any kind of special, exclusive place in the world – I want to emphasise this' (Putin, 2014). What the brief analysis of perceptions of self and other shows is that in spite of major changes in the way the EU viewed Russia's intentions, the range of perceptions which fuelled the traditional conflict/cooperation dichotomy are still in place, with some have been even reinforced.

Policies

A key aspect of the conflict/cooperation dichotomy has been during the last decade the rather symbolic nature of the Russia-EU relationship as both actors avoided to institutionalise their cooperation in an effective manner (Light, 2008). The EU's approach was to provide assistance for Russia to become a democracy and participate in the liberal multilateral system of international relations. However, this approach did not envisage giving Russia any sort of

influence on the EU's development: this is captured by former President of the European Commission Prodi's (2002) concept of sharing with Russia 'everything with the Union but institutions'. Hence, the EU was reluctant to allow Russia the opportunity to shape the course of European integration. Rather the EU's institutions sought to integrate and empower Russia in various multilateral settings: e.g. the G8, the Kyoto Protocol or the World Trade Organisation (WTO). However, most of these initiatives were perceived by Moscow as a way of undermining its own views of a global world order based on sovereign interests (Tsygankov, 2012).

Russia had a similar approach to the EU, whereby it sought to cooperate only on issues where it could advance its interests (mainly economic) without giving up too much of its sovereignty. Moreover, Moscow encouraged the member states to develop bilateral relations with it rather than act through the common framework of the EU (David et al., 2013). This meant that the member states could agree only on a limited number of policies towards Russia: these include migration, a limited number of trade regulations, visa regimes or transfer of technical standards. As the member states have been torn between developing preferential energy and economic deals with Russia and the goal of developing a common stance towards Moscow, the EU's policy has been frequently seen as incoherent at best (Schmidt-Felzmann, 2014).

The conflict/cooperation dichotomy has been most evident in the area of energy relations. On the one hand, member states like Germany, France or Italy managed to establish profitable partnerships with Russia. On the other hand, the Kremlin frequently used its gas supplies in order to put political pressure on the post-Soviet countries and the Central and Eastern European (CEE) member states (Casier, 2011). While the EU enacted sanctions in the context of the Ukraine crisis and started to diversify its supplies under the umbrella of the third energy package, most of the energy deals made before the crisis with Germany or Italy

are still in place (Windheim, 2016). Conversely, the Ukraine crisis made the CEE member states wearier of Moscow's intentions and set them on path towards achieving gradual independence from Russian gas (Chyong & Tcherneva, 2015). The EU recently made small steps in decreasing the potential of Moscow to use of gas supplies as a political weapon: such as diversifying energy suppliers, increasing connectivity, building new liquefied natural gas infrastructure, or pushing for market liberalisation (Harrison & Princova, 2015). In essence the persistence of contrasting approaches to cooperating with the Russia in the energy sector has continued to undermine the EU's common approach and foster the conflict/cooperation dichotomy.

Incompatibly between the policies of Russia and the EU towards the post-Soviet was before the Ukraine crisis an integral part of the dichotomy. This created intense competition for influence in the post-Soviet countries between Russian and EU integration projects. The latter was particularly exclusive and did not allow the eastern neighbours to associate with other regional integration projects – and subsequent free trade areas (Cadier, 2014). However, the EU's policies were limited only to fostering economic and democratic reforms in the region, and did not seek to change the security status quo (European Commission 2008b). In spite of assurances that European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) or the Eastern Partnership (EaP) were far from having a geopolitical agenda, the tension between conflict and cooperation developed throughout the last decade as Russia essentially viewed the EU's aim to integrate the post-Soviet space as a security threat and an effort to hijack its sphere of influence (Baczynska & Hudson, 2014). As a response to the EU's policies in the region – but also to the growing domestic disapproval towards his regime – Putin constructed an alternative to the EU model of integration in the post-Soviet space: namely the EEU. Some have argued that the EEU is in reality a project meant to export Russia's type of authoritarian political system to the post-Soviet space, while achieving levels of economic integration

similar to those of the Soviet Union (Dragneva and Wolczuk, 2012). In Putin's design of the EEU Ukraine was supposed to be a key pillar (Lukyanov, 2013). However, in light of the Ukraine crisis the Kremlin has given up on the idea of building the EEU around Ukraine, and re-focused on the Central Asia (RT, 2015).

Before the Ukraine crisis EU officials were weary of interacting with the EEU, however, as the crisis progressed the EU started acknowledging the need to engage in some sort of dialogue with the EEU (Sputnik, 2015b). In practice neither Russia nor the EU has taken any practical steps to accommodate the two integration projects. There have indeed been talks of a sort of free trade area between the EEU the EU, or of a series of arrangements that would permit post-Soviet states to opt simultaneously for both integration projects (Beary , 2015). Moreover, the EU reconfirmed its support for the countries in the region and the belief in its positive influence. For the first time in official documents, the 2015 review of the ENP includes direct references to the EU's ability to manage the frozen in the eastern neighbourhood (European Commission, 2015b). In this context, the dynamic of EU-Russia relations has persisted, with the competition for influence in the shared neighbourhood still undecided.

Accounting for continuity in EU-Russia relations

This section argues that the relative stability of the conflict/cooperation dichotomy in EU-Russia relations can be attributed to the fact that the Ukraine crisis has not provided sufficient constraints or incentives (and opportunities) that would encourage both actors to seek to alter it (the dichotomy) in a significant manner. In evaluating the constraints and incentives offered by the Ukraine crisis the article focuses on: a) the actor level – the way the foreign policies of the EU and Russia have adapted to the Ukraine crisis; b) the systemic level: the way the

structure of world politics has evolved since the autumn of 2013. By focusing on both actor and systemic levels the article provides a holistic understanding of change and continuity in EU-Russia relations. The two levels of analysis resemble the approach embraced by neoclassical realists which has become increasingly popular during the last two decades (Rose, 1998). Neoclassical realism posits that both actor and systemic level incentives and constraints play a key role in understanding change in foreign policy. On the one hand, it acknowledges the main tenet of neorealism that the structure of world politics mirrors the distribution of power among states. Changes in the distribution of power ultimately create incentives and constraints on the foreign policies of states. On the other hand, neoclassical realism contends that states have difficulties in efficiently predicting or understanding in the short term changes based on purely systemic analysis. This is why neoclassical realism stresses the importance of actor level analysis in evaluating the role of constraints and incentives on change in foreign policy (Kropatcheva, 2012). In the short term changes in relations between states are to a larger extent influenced by the adaptation of their own foreign policies than by their interpretation of the international system (Rose, 1998). Moreover, neoclassical realism broadens the scope of neorealism by focusing not only on power (primarily translated in material capabilities), but also on the role of, for example, ideas, beliefs, and institutions (Becker et al., 2016). Consequently, in what follows the article focuses primarily on the adaptation of the foreign policies of Russia and the EU to the Ukraine crisis, and the emerging patterns of change in world politics. In tune with neoclassical realism, incentives and constraints on the willingness of the EU and Russia to alter the dynamic of their relationship are evaluated not through primarily exploring the distribution of power, but rather the role of institutions, decision-making, policies, values, perceptions or norms.

EU foreign policy

The most important transformation in EU foreign policy in the context of the Ukraine crisis is the agreement between the 28 member states on the adoption of sanction against Russia. Before 2014 this seemed very improbable due to the various divisions between the member states regarding Russia, or the inability of the EU's institutions to set the agenda of a united approach. This unprecedented level of solidarity, at least in principle, can spill over to other areas of the relationship (Gros, 2014). The willingness of the member states to set aside their economic interests could also in theory provide the opportunity for the EU's institutions – the European Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS) – to set agenda in developing a common approach towards Moscow (European Commission, 2008a).

However, the EU's institutions have not managed to bank on the opportunity to spearhead a united approach outside of the sanctions regime. Instead we see self-withdrawal from the European Commission and the EEAS, as they abandoned investing in the strategic partnership with Russia and the policy of integrating Moscow in liberal multilateral institutions – and lost hope in Russia's ability to play according to international norms and regulations (VoteWatch Europe, 2015). This should not be seen as a major change in the dynamic of EU-Russia relations as the strategic partnership or Moscow's presence in the G8 and WTO were never perceived by either side as more than symbolic (Sakwa, 2013).

The EU indeed adopted a more antagonistic approach towards Russia, but the willingness to cooperate persisted, even though it is now more symbolic than ever. The focus of cooperation in EU-Russia relations moved from seeking technical assistance in the framework of the strategic partnership to firefighting through the high level leadership of Germany and France the multiple crisis where Moscow is playing a key role (Ukraine or Syria): for example at the start of the Russian intervention in Libya, German Chancellor Merkel underlined the need to cooperate with Moscow (Reuters, 2015). In this context

bilateral relations between the member states and Russia (and their leaders) have become even more salient. The member states that have traditionally had close economic ties with Russia (e.g. Germany, Italy and France) still prefer to foster individual relations with Russia (Russia Insider, 2015) even though they do it in a more cautious manner (Barker, Wagstyl & Olearchyk, 2015).

It is true that in the area of energy security the EU accelerated its effort to diversify the energy supplies of the member states in a bid to decrease dependency on Russian gas – which Moscow frequently used in the past in order to put political pressure on other states (European Commission, 2015a). This can provide the opportunity for solidarity among the member states to be extended to the energy sector, and thus change the dynamic of EU-Russia relations in a significant manner. The Commission made sustained efforts to foster solidarity, through the third package on energy, the Nabucco project or the policy to diversify energy supplies. Moreover, some of the CEE member states started to test to the limit their gas contracts with Gazprom by redirecting gas flows to Ukraine (DW, 2014). Nevertheless, the opportunity to foster solidarity has not materialised as Russia's most important energy deals with member states like Germany, France, Italy or Austria have been to large extent unaffected by the crisis (Schmidt-Felzmann, 2014).

Misperception of Russian attitudes towards the EU's policies in the post-Soviet space has remained a constant in Europe. For example, in the beginning of the crisis, the EU failed to understand that the Maidan protests and the exclusive character of the Association Agreement offered to Ukraine made Moscow deeply disillusioned with the EU's integration project (Gromyko, 2015). Misperceptions can be partly attributed to the lack of expertise on Russia and the post-Soviet states found in many EU capitals. With the Ukraine crisis some EU governments have started to recognise the problems caused by low quality expertise and invest new departments and personnel: this was emphasised by the House of Lords (2015),

while Germany planned to create a new think tank (Rinke, 2015). However, this is a long-term process which may take years to yield practical results in terms of shaping official policies, and will likely still constrain the EU's ability to interpret Russia's actions. Moreover, the 'Brussels bubble' tends to entrench EU bureaucrats in a culture that has at its core a deep belief in the benign and normative scope of EU foreign policy (Panichi, 2012). This frame of mind precluded officials in Brussels from coming to terms with the fact that some states (including Russia) might not see the EU as a benign power – this has been a constraint which remained largely in place during the Ukraine crisis .

Above all the Ukraine crisis contributed to undermining the perception that the EU was acting in a stable environment. This constrained the EU to revise its global approach, but also gave it the opportunity to develop a coherent strategy for dealing with the multiple and complex challenges which stem from the increasingly multipolar and disordered world (European External Action Service, 2015). The EU seems to have come to grips with the fact that its integration project in the post-Soviet space is perceived by Moscow a geopolitical threat. For example, EU leaders stressed that even though the Union does not act in geopolitical terms, it needs to acknowledge that other states view international relations in this way (European External Action Service, 2015). In spite of the realisation that Russia views world politics through a completely different frame, the new Security Strategy is unlikely to set out precise terms for a new type of engagement with Moscow, as it will rather lay more general guidelines for the way the EU should act globally (House of Lords, 2016).

Adopting a more general and equally vague strategy leaves unchallenged many issues and perceptions in EU-Russia relations, and would perpetuate both the symbolic nature of the relationship and the constant limbo between conflict and cooperation. Moreover, during the Ukraine crisis, there were almost no signs that the EU is willing to respond to Russia's grievances and to discuss the security order of the European continent (de Rousiers, 2015).

Opposition within the EU to such debate is stark and comes mostly from the CEE member states, which are keen to *keep Russia within its borders*, and give the security order on the European continent a strong transatlantic dimension (Foy, Hille & Milne, 2015). Nevertheless, debate has started to some extent through other channels: e.g. the report published in the December 2015 by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Panel of Eminent Persons which argued that European states should go back to the drawing board and through diplomacy start discussions on a possible Helsinki 2 agreement (OSCE, 2015). Nevertheless, these views remain only marginal in the EU, while willingness to discuss the post-Cold War security order is unthinkable for most member states in the context of the Russian aggression in Ukraine.

In theory making the EU integration model complementary to the Russian one would create the opportunity for altering the conflict/cooperation dichotomy. In this sense, the persistence of the dichotomy is also predicated on the fact that the EU has not undertaken significant steps in order to make its integration project in the post-Soviet less exclusive. On the one hand, the EU reconfirmed its commitment to helping the countries in the eastern neighbourhood develop by promoting values such as democracy, human rights, and free trade. Hence, the EU's self-perception as a normative power in external relations persisted together with the tension it caused in relations with Russia (David, 2014). On the other hand, the 2015 revision of the ENP does not give the countries in the region the choice to opt simultaneously for two integration projects – even though it allows them to choose and apply at their own pace elements of the EU's menu of regulations (European Commission, 2015b). In practice though, the revised ENP does not seek to change the dynamic of EU-Russia relations; rather, the new ENP highlights that the EU will continue to gloss over Russia's concerns in the region and that it is not willing to sit down and discuss with Moscow the regional order in the post-Soviet space.

Russian foreign policy

Throughout the Ukraine crisis the Kremlin intensified its claims for renegotiating the post-Cold War order of the European continent. This is long term effort as Moscow had been stressing for more than a decade that it is not satisfied with the security architecture in Europe. Firstly, the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) towards CEE was seen a Western betrayal and represented a key aspect of the Kremlin's rhetoric during the Ukraine crisis (Williams , 2014). Secondly, Russia felt that the rules of the game in Europe were changing in the wake of Kosovo's independence (BalkanInsight, 2014). Thirdly, after the 2008 Russian-Georgian war Moscow started being interested in preserving both the security and the economic order in the post-Soviet space (Trenin, 2015). The recent increase in Russian demands for rethinking the post-Cold War order on the European continent fits into the logic of the conflict/cooperation dichotomy, as Moscow has not tried to change unilaterally the order, with the exception of limited attempts at the margins of the continent (i.e. Georgia and Ukraine).

During the Ukraine crisis Russia maintained and even reinforced its perception of the EU (and its integration in the post-Soviet space). This provided both constraints and opportunities for Russia not to alter the conflict/cooperation dichotomy. Firstly, Russia has been constantly claiming since the launch of the ENP in the mid-2000s that the EU aims to become a geopolitical hegemon in the post-Soviet space. The ENP and the subsequent EaP were seen by the Kremlin as tools meant essentially to promote the EU's interests. Hence, for the Kremlin the EU's ambition to expand its rules and regulations in the post-Soviet space is the main cause of the Ukraine crises (Gotev, 2013). Secondly, the Kremlin deepened its perception of the fact that the West is aiming to squeeze Russia out of the post-Soviet space (VOA, 2015). In this sense, Moscow enhanced its efforts to demonise the West, framing it as an existential threat to the Russian state – a process which actually has its origins much

earlier in Putin's second term as president. Building the narrative of the castle under siege allowed Putin to rally public opinion in backing an assertive and apparently defensive foreign policy (Laruelle, 2015).

Thirdly, in spite the agreement between the 28 member states on sanctions, Russia still views the EU as a weak and divided actor (Hewitt, 2014). After the Russian-Georgia war of 2008 the Kremlin realised that the EU would not be willing to come militarily to the aid of post-Soviet states, and that European leaders would be easily caught off guard by potential Russian military actions (Trenin, 2015). However, the Russian narrative recently started highlighting that the EU is on the brink of disintegration based on: the way the EU is handling the refugee crisis, the Grexit and Brexit debates, or the EU's instability to foster sustainable reforms in Ukraine or Moldova (Karaganov, 2016).

With Putin's third term and especially after the annexation of Crimea, Russia embraced conservative views emphasising stability of the state or its political system, together with values related to the primacy of the family, church or patriarchy. This move constrained Putin to adopt an even more assertive stance towards the West (Kaylan, 2014). Russia's conservative values partly led to the creation of the EEU. The EEU draws on a series of ideas which were rather marginal until the end of 2000s and argue that Russia is at the centre of a distinct Eurasian culture and civilisation. In this reading the EEU represents a challenge to the model of EU integration in the post-Soviet space. While the Ukraine crisis encouraged the turn towards conservative values in Russian foreign policy and in the public sphere, Kyiv's enthusiastic pro-EU attitude made the Kremlin redirect the EEU towards Central Asia. This should not, however, be seen as a major transformation in Russian foreign policy – or an opportunity to alter the dynamic of EU-Russia relations –, as even before the Ukraine crisis the Kremlin was not entirely convinced of the success of the EEU (Lukyanov, 2012).

The Ukraine crisis highlights also the shift in Russian foreign policy from empty aggressive discourse to posturing backed up by the practical use of force (i.e. in Ukraine). However, this shift fits within the broader trend towards assertiveness seen in Russian foreign policy roughly during the last decade (Gvosdev and Marsh, 2013). In this context, Russia preferred a vague relationship with the EU which would allow it to reap some economic benefits, whilst avoiding clear agreements with the EU which would constrain its assertiveness in the post-Soviet space (Casier, 2013). The Ukraine crisis indeed made Russia value less the strategic partnership (and subsequent recognition from the EU) with the EU, but did not make it seek to change the dynamic of the relationship altogether, as the limbo between conflict and cooperation allows it to operate somewhat freely. Rather, Russia stopped mimicking its desire to accommodate EU values and regulations, demanding in turn the depoliticisation of economic cooperation with Europe (Lavrov, 2015).

The evolving regional and world arenas

During the last five years the EU's neighbourhood has become less stable, and transformed from a 'ring of friends' to a 'ring of fire' (Taylor, 2015). This made the EU revise its global strategy and recognise that the neighbourhood and the world arena are much more disordered than years ago. In spite of these developments no major shift or critical juncture (similar for example to the end of the Cold War or 9/11) has occurred that would prompt the EU to seek to overhaul completely its approach towards other international actors. The various crises erupting in the neighbourhood have not led to a major redefinition of norms, values, commonly accepted understandings of legitimate action, or the balance of power. From a broader perspective these crises (i.e. the Syrian, Libyan, Ukrainian, or the refugee ones) are situated at the margins of the international system and have not yet posed a major challenge

to its core principles. From the perspective of the structure of international relations the conflict/cooperation dichotomy is still the most optimal dynamic preferred by both the EU and Russia and their mutual relationship.

Firstly, the EU has not been constrained (or convinced) by recent international crises to pay more attention to Russia's demands for renegotiating the post-Cold War order on the European continent. On the contrary, the EU has become more entrenched in transatlanticism, with a significant number of member states advocating increased NATO presence on their territory (Sakwa, 2015). In parallel, as was noted earlier, some European governments tried to engage with Russia on the European order, through other venues such as the OSCE. The US has also been rather cautious in responding to the pleas of the CEE member states for strengthening the 'eastern flank', and tried to reassure Moscow that NATO is aimed against Russia (Lyman, 2016). From the perspective of the EU these parallel and contrasting approaches contribute to the persistence of the conflict/cooperation dichotomy. During the Ukraine crisis, Russia intensified its calls for a new order on the European continent. On the other hand, the Kremlin claimed that even if the West would start negotiating a new European order, the strategic impasse of the last 25 years on the continent has already damaged almost beyond repair Russia's trust in the Europe (OSCE, 2015). Moscow's strategy since Putin's second presidential term has been to try to challenge the Western led-world order by siding with other emerging powers disaffected with the West. The Ukraine crisis made Russia move even more towards the East, seeking a closer partnership with China (RFERL, 2016). However, China currently has no incentive to join Russia in revising the post-Cold War order in Europe; it rather wishes to maintain profitable relations with the EU and the US that could give an increasingly central role in the current world order (Heath, 2015). Hence, moving towards China does not provide Russia a much

better position to challenge or abandon the current order on the European continent, and revise the conflict/cooperation dichotomy in a significant manner.

Secondly, the transition towards a less stable and a more multipolar world has only marginally affected Russia and the EU's values and worldviews, or their perceptions of self and other. In spite of the fact that the refugee crisis seems to have strained European values and solidarity, the EU is still committed to promoting its values in the neighbourhood and helping the countries in the region (Morgherini, 2015). The EU also held on to its self-image as a 'force for good', while becoming more conscious of Russia's willingness to use force in the post-Soviet space. Conversely, the Kremlin read the Ukraine and the refugee crises, in a completely different frame, and interpreted them as a sign that the EU is in free fall and heading towards disintegration (Xinhuanet, 2015). This reinforced Russia's perception developed during the 2000s that the EU was a weak and divided international actor. Moreover, conservative values became even more prominent in Russian official discourse or the public sphere, with the Putin regime painting itself as the only legitimate force that could protect the country against the West. Nevertheless, throughout the crisis the EU and Russia still emphasised the need to cooperate with each, even if neither had in mind anything more than symbolic cooperation. Discussions for creating complementarity between the EU's and Russia's integration projects in the post-Soviet space have indeed started, but have not really managed to get off the ground, as neither Moscow nor Brussels see any value real value in achieving complementarity (Popescu, 2015). Consequently, the post-Soviet space is bound to be stuck for the near future in the middle of the competition between the integration projects.

Conclusions

The article highlighted that the traditional conflict/cooperation dichotomy which characterised the dynamic of EU-Russia relation during the post-cold War period has remained stable throughout the Ukraine crisis. Even though relations between Russia and the EU have been practically frozen, the main characteristics of the dichotomy have remained in place. Hence, the article shows that the EU and Russia are still very much entrenched in the limbo between conflict and cooperation, even though their relationship has been recalibrated. Nevertheless, the article does not claim that the dichotomy remained fixed, as some of its four main aspects have evolved. The most significant transformations occurred in the way Russia and the EU perceive each other. Russia was surprised by the EU's ability to agree on common sanctions, as it previously viewed the Union as a deeply divided international actor. However, the image of a weak EU still persisted in the Kremlin, due to the Union's poor track record in managing the crises in its neighbourhood, the financial crisis or the potential for disintegration due the Brexit and Grexit debates. The EU also became more conscious of Russia's assertive stance in the post-Soviet space. In terms of practical policies both Russia and the EU abandoned investing in the strategic partnership, while cooperation in the energy sector remained rather stable. This should not be seen as a departure from the conflict/cooperation dichotomy, as the EU and Russia were not committed before the crisis to a more than a symbolic strategic partnership.

The second part of the article aimed to account for the relative stability in EU-Russia relations. The article shows that the Ukraine crisis did not provide sufficient opportunities or constraints that would prompt the EU or Russia to transform in a significant manner the conflict/cooperation dichotomy. For example, the adoption of sanctions could have had a more profound effect, as the level of solidarity achieved by the member states could have fostered a united approach in other areas of EU-Russia relations. However, the adoption of

sanctions is merely the result of lowest common denominator between the views of the member states on the most appropriate policy towards Russia. At the systemic level, the Ukraine crisis has not brought about a major redefinition of world politics that would prompt both Russia and the EU to alter the dichotomy. In this context, more global issues such as the war in Syria, or the case of Iran and North Korea could provide future space for increased cooperation as they do not affect Russia and the EU's vital interests.

Notes

1. Similarly to neoclassical realism, the article locates change and continuity in EU-Russia both at the systemic and actor levels, while focusing not only material power, but also the role of ideas, institutions, perceptions, or beliefs (Becker et al., 2015; Kropatcheva, 2012). Nevertheless, contrary to neoclassical realism which focuses on states, it assumes that international organisations such as the EU can be considered fully fledged international actors, and thus construct distinguishable foreign policy. While space constraints do not permit a full discussion of the debate on the international actorness of the EU (Smith, 2005), the focus on the EU is justified by the fact that the role of individual member states is broadly understood in the scholarship as merely one aspect among others of the EU's foreign policy towards Russia (Diesen, 2015; Haukkala, 2010; Medvedev, 2008).

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