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RUSSIA'S NEIGHBORHOOD POLICY: CONFLICTUAL CONTEXTS AND FACTORS OF CHANGE

Introduction

In this paper I analyze Russia's relations with countries of Eastern Partnership (EaP) against the background of a wider framework of Russian neighborhood policy. What stands behind the emotional appeals for equality and respect, is a number of largely realist concepts of multipolarity, spheres of influence, great power management, and balance of power, all of them based on the centrality of sovereignty of great powers as the organizing principle of international relations. In the meantime, these concepts are complemented by regular references to the desirability of procedural / technical approximation between the EU and the Russia-patronized Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), boiling down to the reiteration of the decade-long idea of a Europe from Lisbon to Vladivostok and reducing Europe to a relatively small part of Eurasian geopolitical imagery.

My analysis starts with a brief critical engagement with the conceptual underpinnings of Russian foreign policy, to be followed by their projection on Russia's neighborhood policy. My intention is to see whether the drastic changes in Russia's foreign policy behavior since 2014 – from the annexation of Crimea to a fully-fledged crisis in Russia's relations with major Western institutions (the EU, NATO, G8) – were conducive to attaining the strategic goals of the Kremlin in the international arena.

The paper is divided into four parts. In the first one I sketch the key elements of Russia's foreign policy in general and the EU– Russia relationship in particular. In the second section I single out main points in Russia's policy towards its post-Soviet neighbours. In the third part I identify a group of factors that influence this policy, and discuss their impact. In the fourth section I turn to those scarce opportunities that might be explored for the sake of avoiding further confrontation.

Russia's Foreign Policy Landmarks and EU-Russia Frictions

Since the times of Evgeniy Primakov at the head of Russian diplomacy in mid-1990s, the driving force behind Russian foreign policy was an idea of multipolarity that became a structural justification for legitimizing its sphere of influence as a precondition for a world-class status and a role of one of major poles on the international scene. Yet in recent years the concept of multipolarity was put in a more critical context of debate. Many in Russian expert community in fact recognized that multipolarity leads to a more conflictual world, both ideologically (with “liberal Europe” against “conservative Russia” as a key divide) and militarily, which in practice explains Russia’s resort to coercive force against the EU-projected normative order¹. The multipolarity lens also implies dealing with countries of common neighborhood predominantly through the prism of Russia’s highly complicated relations with other big players, including the EU. In this context, Russia’s policy of punitive reactions to what it considers unfriendly moves by other major players – the EU, NATO and Turkey – leaves Moscow with a rather limited scope of options towards its neighbors. Many in the Kremlin seem to understand financial and political risks related to incorporating territories seceded from neighboring states with Russia, which works as a constraining factor for Russia’s policy. Besides, Russia’s (still hypothetical) consent to fully integrate South Ossetia – that is legally considered as part of Georgia by the bulk of the world community – would obliterate all efforts of Russia’s soft power (to be understood as power of attraction, as opposed to that of coercion) undertaken since 2008².

Against this backdrop, Russian foreign policy discourse has started shifting to a greater emphasis on the idea of a common European-cum-Eurasian economic space, rather than on multipolarity as such. Ideas of “Greater Europe” as an alleged territory of freedom of movement and common rules again gained popularity among Russian mainstream experts³. For the sake of retaining Europe as a nodal point for Russian foreign policy, some of them are ready to presume that the Ukraine crisis was intentionally masterminded (allegedly by Washington) to detach Russia from Europe⁴. Some signals were sent from authoritative institutions such as Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) that Moscow “is interested in preserving the stability and the effective functioning of the EU, as well as in the moderately positive economic development of its member countries. Any kind of destabilization of the EU will mean increased economic, political and even military-political risks, particularly in Central Europe, and could also lead to

¹ Karaganov, Sergey. 2016a. *Novaya ideologicheskaya bor'ba? Russia in Global Affairs*, April 21. <http://www.globalaffairs.ru/pubcol/Novaya-ideologicheskaya-borba-18119>

² Fenenko, Aleksei. 2016. Kart-blansh. Final igry. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, April 20. http://www.ng.ru/cis/2016-04-20/3_kartblansh.html

³ Evgeny Ilyin. 2016. Why we need to build a greater Europe. Center for Continental Cooperation web site, February 27, available at <http://greater-europe.org/archives/578#comment-1284>

⁴ Karaganov, Sergey. 2016b. Ukrainskiy krizis byl razygran, chtoby otorvat' Rossiyu ot Evropy. *Izvestia*, April 7. <http://izvestia.ru/news/608854>

the United States bolstering its influence in Europe. The most advantageous situation for Russia would be for the influence of the major players in the EU to grow, along with their ability to contribute to maintaining the stability and governability of countries at the periphery.“⁵

In this framework the Kremlin tries to deal with major European actors committed to pragmatic, if not “business-as-usual“ approach, as exemplified by President Putin’s meeting in April 2016 with the German corporate elite in Moscow⁶. In May 2016 Putin reiterated Russia’s commitment to the eventual building of a zone of economic and humanitarian cooperation from the Atlantic to the Pacific⁷. The Council on Foreign and Security Policy (SVOP), a think tank close to the Kremlin, proposed an even broader (though very vaguely articulated) blueprint of a “Greater Eurasia from Lisbon to Singapore”⁸ – a model that envisages only a limited role to Europe as an associate to Eurasian institutions, as understood in Moscow.

Russia’s renewed emphasis on reengaging with the EU for the sake of bigger integrationist projects is harmonious with many authoritative voices in Europe. This is the case, in particular, of the model of “tentative compatibility” proposed by the Clingendal Institute⁹, consonant with approaches of many Russian policy experts¹⁰ as well.¹¹ In a recent study the Friedrich Ebert Foundation charted a future of EU – Russia relations in categories of a “shared European home” which, unlike a “common home”, does not presuppose value-based convergence.¹²

⁵ Kaveshnikov, Nikolay. 2016. Four Scenarios for European Integration. RIAC, April 11.

http://russiancouncil.ru/en/inner/?id_4=7530#top-content

⁶ Putin trifft Deutsche Top-managers. 2016. *OstExperte*, April 11.

http://www.ostexperte.de/putin-trifft-deutsche-top-manager/?utm_content=buffer9531d&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_campaign=buffer

⁷ Putin, Vladimir. 2016. Rossiya i Gretsia: sotrudnichestvo na blago mira i protsvetaniya.

Russian President’s official web site, May 26, available at

<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/51997>

⁸ Strategiya dlia Rossii. Rossiiskaya vneshniaya politika: konets 2010-nachalo 2020 godov.

Moscow: SVOP, 2016, available at http://svop.ru/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/ТЕЗИСЫ_23мая_см.pdf

⁹ Van der Togt, Tony; Francesco Saverio Montesano; Iaroslav Kozak. 2015. From Competition to Compatibility: Striking a Eurasian Balance in EU-Russia Relations. Clingendal Report, October.

http://www.clingendael.nl/sites/default/files/Eurasian_Union_Report_FINAL.pdf

¹⁰ Petrovskiy, Piotr. 2016. Evraziiskiy vykhod iz krizisa Vostochnogo Partnerstva ES. *EvrAsia Expert*, April 21. <http://eurasia.expert/evraziiskiy-vykhod-iz-krizisa-vostochnogo-partnerstva-es/>

¹¹ See also chapter by Raik in this volume

¹² A Shared European Home. The European Union, Russia and the Eastern Partnership. 2016. Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, available at <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id-moe/12546.pdf>

Evidently, the idea of spheres of influence might be problematic in many of these contexts. Russia's verbal commitment to the common EU-Russian-Eurasian future is in sharp contradiction with Russia's neighborhood policy that often boils down to preventing post-Soviet countries from too closely associating with the EU. Georgia appears to be a good illustration of this: shortly after it "ratified the AA/DCFTA, Russia introduced the Treaty on Alliance and Strategic Partnership with Abkhazia [...] These treaties are Russia's response to Georgia moving towards the EU. They are a message to other former Soviet states about the price of integrating with the West"¹³. In this reading, Russia claims its exceptionality through reserving for itself a role of the key communicator with the West when it comes to any integrationist project affecting the post-Soviet macroregion.

Neighborhood and Russia's Foreign Policy

In this section I briefly discuss what Russia's neighborhood policy looks like in terms of policy models and visions that Russia adheres to.

Foreign policy models. For Russia, the "near abroad" is the terrain for spheres of influence, an indispensable condition for Russia's status of a great power in a multipolar world. Russia sees neighborhood as its geopolitical resource that might be helpful for great power management (concert of great power). Russia's ideal would be a "Europe from Lisbon to Vladivostok", where major actors would negotiate among themselves and decide on major issues, yet (in contrast to the EU's neighborhood policy¹⁴) with no binding normative agenda, on which Russia is extremely weak and sees hostile towards its interests. From Russia's perspective the biggest threat is the loss of its central role in the neighborhood area.

Vision of the neighborhood. Russia's view of the neighbouring area is predominantly dichotomous, differentiating between the EU-controlled Europe and the post-Soviet space. Moscow sees in-between positioning of new EU associated partners (Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia) as a challenge to Russia's strategy of integrating the post-Soviet republics under Russian-dominated EAEU. Moreover, Moscow deems that EU-type regionalism is a threat to both Moscow and the entire Westphalian system of national sovereignties. Region-building of this sort is not part of the Kremlin's neighbourhood policy; in its stead Russia offer a top-down model of Eurasianism as a neo-imperial, rather than regionalism, form of association.

¹³ Paul, Amanda. 2015. *The Eastern Partnership, the Russia – Ukraine war, and the Impact on the South Caucasus*. Rome: Istituto Affari Internazionali, IAI Working Papers 16/06, February. <http://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaiw1506.pdf>

¹⁴ See chapter by Raik in this report

Developmental models. Russia mostly supports illiberal and conservative attitudes in neighboring countries, and is not interested in bolstering transformative changes. In particular, Russia's perspectives of influence in Ukraine depend on its relations with the 'old guards' of inert and corrupt parts of the political class¹⁵. Countries with strong conservative traditions might see Russia as a source of illiberal practices, as evidenced, for example, by the debate in Georgia in the "blasphemy law" that might defend "religious feelings" and, in fact, criminalize criticism of the Church.

Foreign policy tools. Russia's toolkit includes hard power, energy diplomacy, and counter-normative power - namely, Putin's conservative project that is projected outwards in a form of religious diplomacy and a hybrid version of soft power that includes propaganda mixed with geocultural elements. The cornerstones of Russia's counter-normative project are: a) the Russian world, an imagined community of allegedly and potentially kindred ethnic compatriots; b) civilizational constructs such as Eurasianism; and c) religious discourse exemplified by the concept of "holy Russia" bound together by spiritual links of politicized Orthodoxy. All three are relatively insensitive to the legally extant borders between state (national) jurisdictions. The very design of their optics allows for transcending, if not disregarding, some of these borders. Within the framework of the Russian world it is much easier to relativize borders between Russian Federation and Russian speaking communities living in neighboring countries. Through the prism of Eurasianism it is feasible to include Kazakhstan or Armenia in the civilizational domain of Russian interests. The lens of religious traditionalism and conservatism makes possible to perceive Georgia not as a full-fledged independent nation, but rather as an extension / projection of Russia-patronized Orthodox ideology.

Each of these three counter-normative elements of Russian neighborhood policy is grounded in the impossibility to contain national revival within Russia's border; which explains why the most consistent versions of Russian patriotism and nationalism is imperial in a sense of permeating, penetrating and challenging existing borders. This makes any detachment of Russia from its neighbors incredibly harsh for Moscow. This explains why Russia so staunchly declines to accept the guilt of annexing Crimea and interfering into eastern Ukraine – the borders that are constitutive for Ukraine and the whole Europe are much less real (if existent at all) for Russia's mainstream exemplified not only by the Kremlin, but also by the proverbial "Putin's majority".

¹⁵ Gressel, Gustav and Borja Lasheras, Francisco. 2016. How old Ukraine Threatens New Ukraine and What Europe Should Do about It. *Intersections*, April 21. <http://intersectionproject.eu/article/russia-europe/how-old-ukraine-threatens-new-ukraine-and-what-should-europe-do-about-it>

This only allows expansion; needless to say that Russia's own borders are as important to it as to any other actor, especially if someone challenges them.

In Russia, the very concept of the nation state faces existential challenges from alternative conceptualizations of Russian identity based on imperial underpinnings. As articulated through different discourses of Eurasianism and/or the 'Russian world(s), Russia's identity narratives contain the idea of 'incompleteness' of the country and its incongruence with 'genuine Russia'. Russia is not sympathetic at all with EU's policy doing away with national sovereignties for the sake of a trans-national and cross-border dispersion of power; on the contrary, in many important respects Russia sticks to traditionalist, conservative policies, including in its immediate neighbourhood. The concept of the Russian world implies that Russian nation-building project cannot be confined to Russian domestic polity only; due to Russian speaking community widely dispersed all across the post-Soviet space Russian nationalism inevitably spills over Russian borders and becomes trans-national. This explains the high level of Russia's insensitivity to what constitutes the sacrosanct core of European political order – the inviolability of post-Cold War borders. Paradoxically, Russia is a proponent of a return to a nation states system as a foundation of the whole structure of international relations, but Russia itself is far from being a nation state, with imperial temptations outweighing the idea of national integrity.

Factors of Change

There are six major factors that influence Russia's neighborhood policy. With all due understanding of their different importance and long-term relevance, as well the likelihood of new destabilizing factors to emerge, I shall briefly discuss each of them from the viewpoint of their possible policy impacts on Russia's neighborhood policy.

The *first* set of factors reflects the complex dynamics within the EU and includes the divisive effects of the Eurozone crisis, including debates on Grexit; the refugee crisis that challenges the future of the Schengen zone; the mature Euroscepticism in the UK, France, the Netherlands, Hungary, and Poland, a tendency that includes the rise of far-right parties all across Europe; and the de-facto crisis of EU's Eastern Partnership.

These developments might be seen as beneficial for Russia since they question the integrity of the EU and weaken its ability to speak by a single voice in its eastern policy. Yet by supporting far-right and radical left parties in Europe, Russia in fact helps rocking the EU edifice, which, having in mind historical analogies, does not necessarily guarantee a higher level

of security for Russia itself¹⁶. As a reaction to Russia's policies some of its western neighbors had already undertaken measures to protect their interests in hard security domain, including common military units of Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine, an enhanced military cooperation among Visegrad Group countries and Ukraine¹⁷, as well as between Ukraine, Romania and Bulgaria. This creates a new, more complex structure of security relations in Europe's east and means greater, not lesser, securitization in close vicinity of Russia's borders.

The *second* factor to be taken into account is the development within Ukraine that is characterized by a crisis of governance and the growing disappointment of a significant part of population in the ruling regime¹⁸. As in the first case, these domestic developments are largely seen as advantageous to Russia's ambitions: they legitimize a key Russian argument of portraying Ukraine as an almost non-state with zero chances in Europe, and open up new prospects for manipulation and propaganda. The negative outcome of the Dutch referendum on April 6, 2016 only added score in Moscow's favor.

Yet, as I have mentioned earlier, it becomes obvious that Russia perceives the economic and administrative problems in Ukraine not so much in the context of bilateral relations with this "fraternal" neighbor, but largely as part of its acid polemics with the EU whose Eastern Partnership policy Moscow sees as a failure. "In fact, it led to the collapse of two major Eastern European states – Ukraine and Moldova. They were on the verge of the civil war. If the EU wants to apply this experience in Central Asia, it means another crisis is looming."¹⁹ But Russia itself lacks a positive agenda to be pursued politically and economically towards countries that face harsh challenges in their transformation process.

The *third* factor to consider is Russia's Syria campaign that, in Moscow's eyes, was supposed not only to divert attention from Russia's Ukraine operation to a new, much more distant battlefield, but also to convince the West (both NATO and the EU) in the indispensability of forming a security alliance – even informal – with Russia against the radical Islamism and thus to break Russia's current political isolation. The question of whether Russia achieved something in this regard remains a matter of interpretations.

¹⁶ Inozemtsev, Vladislav. 2016. Opasnoe ravenstvo. Pochemu mnogopoliarniy mir vediot k mirovym voynam. *Slon*, April 21. <https://slon.ru/posts/66971>

¹⁷ EU Global Strategy: Role and Engagement of Eastern Partnership in European Security. 2016. Conference Report, March, Vilnius. http://www.eesc.lt/uploads/news/id918/Conference%20Report_EU%20Global%20Strategy_Eastern%20Partners%20in%20European%20Security_final.pdf

¹⁸ Minakov, Mikhail. 2016. Ukraine from Revolution of Dignity to Government of Shame. Carnegie Europe, April 11. <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/?fa=63293>

¹⁹ Kelin, Andrey. 2016. Russia is still searching for a new normal in its relations with the EU. *Russia Direct*, April 7. <http://www.russia-direct.org/qa/russia-still-searching-new-normal-its-relationship-europe>

From a German perspective, “Russia was helpful in diffusing tensions with Iran, and has been helpful to the West over Syria. Only Ukraine remains a sticking point”²⁰. Yet there is a chorus of voices who deem that Moscow failed to convert its investments in fighting a common threat in Syria into a basis for legitimizing Russia’s policy in Ukraine and thus get acceptance from the West of Russia’s great power status. This opinion is backed by a widely shared assessment of the Russian campaign in Syria as deceptive, brutal and ultimately having little to do with striking ISIS. The conclusion that many analysts deduced from Syria is that Putin’s regime becomes less cooperative and needs to be deterred in other areas where Russia’s interest might intersect with those of the West²¹.

Therefore, Russia is eager to take advantage of its operation in Syria for playing a key role in international war on terror and thus convincing the West to accept Russia in this capacity. Yet so far Russia can’t convert the benefits of its Syria campaign into policy capital to be used in bargaining with the EU and NATO in the common neighbourhood. In particular, reactions from Russia’s military allies to the operation in Syria show a lack of unified position within the Collective Security Treaty Organization.

The *fourth* factor is Russia’s conflict with Turkey that was detrimental for Russia’s neighborhood policy due to several reasons. First, it created a new zone of tensions with a NATO member state and an influential actor in what Russia considers to be its “near abroad”. On this account Russia might face an additional lobbyist for Georgia and Ukraine in NATO²². Second, Russia lost Turkey as a constructive interlocutor by the role it played after the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia. Moreover, Russia’s conflict with Turkey gave rise to a new discourse on a possible interest of the latter in strengthening its security relations with countries (like Ukraine, but also Poland and Baltic states)²³ that feel threatened by Russia.²⁴

The *fifth* factor is the sharpening of the armed conflict in Nagorno Karabakh in April 2016. Russia’s major advantage, almost consensually recognized by most international observers, is its mediation role and brokering resources that it applied in the absence of a clear

²⁰ Steinmeier: It’s Time to Talk. 2016. *Handelsblatt*, April 22. <https://global.handelsblatt.com/edition/415/ressort/politics/article/steinmeier-its-time-to-talk>

²¹ Czuperski, Maks; Eliot Higgins, Frederic Hof, Ben Nimmo, John Herbst. 2016. *Destruct. Deceive. Destroy. Putin’ at War in Syria*. Atlantic Council. <http://publications.atlanticcouncil.org/distract-deceive-destroy/>

²² Turkey Supports Georgia NATO Membership. *Daily News*, February 17, 2016, available at <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-supports-georgias-nato-membership.aspx?pageID=238&nID=95342&NewsCatID=355>

²³ Umland, Andreas. 2016. An East European – Turkish Pact against Russian Neo-imperialism. *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, April 22. <http://turkishpolicy.com/blog/13/an-east-european-turkish-pact-against-russian-neo-imperialism>

²⁴ See chapter by Alaranta in this report

EU policy²⁵. Yet the conflict poses a strong political challenge to Moscow's stand in the whole South Caucasus, which is basically due to Russia's traditional policy of supplying military armament to both Armenia and Azerbaijan. Yerevan's disillusionment with this dubious approach "leaves it with the imperative for a wholesale revision of its foreign policy. The flare-up has also spurred a debate among the Armenian public: sacrificing democracy for security has resulted in less, not more security"²⁶.

The conflict in Nagorno Karabakh in fact raised the price of Armenia's loyalty to Russia. According to the information leaked from the Russian Embassy in Yerevan, "the work here became more complicated... If earlier Russia could do its job on the basis of confidence, now it won't work. In four days (of hostilities with Azerbaijan in April 2016 – A.M.) the Armenians have lost their children and young countrymen"²⁷, and are much more demanding towards Russia. Indeed, the April 2016 resumption of hostilities has "provoked an unprecedented outburst of skepticism to Eurasian integration in Armenia and the reciprocal skepticism to Armenia in Belarus and Kazakhstan. The failure of the Minsk process could equalize Russia with all other parties and, on the contrary, increase the roles of Turkey and Iran... The loss of Nagorno Karabakh can draw a thick line in Russian – Armenian alliance, especially taking into account that for Azerbaijan friendship with Russia in this case won't be that indispensable"²⁸.

Therefore, Russia's policy towards Azerbaijan is also on trial. There are voices in Moscow claiming that "Azerbaijan, undoubtedly, shouldn't become a second Georgia for us. We should avoid losing it; moreover Azerbaijan is much stronger than Georgia, and it has behind it Turkey, whose strengthening role in the whole Caucasus, up to Dagestan, isn't the best option"²⁹. Again, we see that security environment in this particular segment of Russia's sphere of interests becomes increasingly more complex and less easy to deal with.

The *sixth* factor is the toughening of regime of power within Russia, with regular repressions against opposition, decreasing media freedom, centralization of government and eradication of political pluralism. This devolution of Putin's regime that Russian independent analysts overtly compare with the well-known Soviet models might be disadvantageous to the

²⁵ EU must up its game in Karabakh, say experts in Brussels. 2016. *Common Space* web site, April 21. <http://www.commonspace.eu/eng/azerbaijan/6/id3524>

²⁶ Shirinyan, Anahit. 2016. Four-day battle over Nagorno Karabakh can be a prelude to a new war. Chatham House, April 22. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/four-day-battle-over-nagorny-karabakh-may-be-prelude-new-war>

²⁷ Baikova, Tatiana. 2016. S.Sh.A. pytayutsa isportit' armiano-rossiiskie otnoshenia. *Izvestia*, April 22. http://izvestia.ru/news/611133/?utm_source=FB

²⁸ Markedonov, Sergey. 2016. Kak pomenialo Kavkaz poslednee obostrenie v Karabakhe. Carnegie Moscow Center, <http://carnegie.ru/commentary/2016/04/11/ru-63289/iwx2>

²⁹ Markedonov 2016.

prospects of Russia's normative leadership in the post-Soviet world. In the meantime it is exactly this growing autarchy that decreases the sensitivity to the application of military force within the society and makes it more compliant with the securitized vision of the neighborhood. One may agree that as a result of authoritarian rule, "Russia is neither more secure, prosperous nor respected abroad than before; if anything the Kremlin's domestic support has consolidated, but if the annexation of Crimea was the most rational way of achieving that we face a far bigger problem with Russia than if we suggest that the decision was based on miscalculation"³⁰.

Windows of opportunity

On a general note, Russia perceives itself as being intentionally marginalized by a malign West, yet challenging this reality has proven to be costly and ultimately unsustainable, as the annexation of Crimea made has clear. Hence, Russia tries to hammer out its own policy tools that would smooth out the troubles Russia faces in its relations with the West.

In spite of a generally negative background of Russia – EU interactions in the common neighborhood, there are some glimpses of hope for a more cooperative relationship. Russia shows some signs of readiness to tone down its militant posture in the Ukraine conflict. For example, Putin does not exclude the deployment of peacekeepers under the aegis of the OSCE in the frontline zone³¹ – an option that has been discussed earlier in fall 2014 by a US—Russia group of experts moderated by the Finnish Foreign Ministry³². There might be – hypothetically – some chances for a consensus between Russia and the West (the EU and NATO) on a future status of Ukraine comparable to that one of Switzerland's or Austria's neutrality³³.

As mentioned above, Russia's compliance might be grounded in the due understanding of a heavy financial burden of sustaining ailing economies of break-away territories for Russian budget. This is particularly the case of Transnistria: Moscow nowadays is reluctant to keep

³⁰ Forsberg, Tuomas and Hiski Haukkala. 2016. Could It Have Been Different? The Evolution of the EU-Russia Conflict and Its Alternatives. In: *Avoiding a New 'Cold War': the Future of EU-Russia Relations in the Context of the Ukraine Crisis*. Dahrendorf Forum and London School of Economics, Special Report SR020, March: 8-14.

³¹ Arbatov, Alexei. 2016. Vooruzhonnii mirovtvortsy. Kak razblokirovat' uregulirovanie v Donbasse. Carnegie Moscow Center. <http://carnegie.ru/commentary/2016/04/22/ru-63406/ixft>

³² Mnogie iz polozheniy nashogo plana okazalis' polezny. 2014. *Kommersant*, December 1. <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2623317>

³³ Valenta, Jiri. 2016. Ukraine: a Bridge Linking the West and Russia. *World Affairs*, April 15. <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/blog/alexander-j-motyl/ukraine-bridge-linking-west-and-russia>

financing this secessionist part of Moldova and even reproaches its leaders for inefficiency³⁴. This contains a lucid message to Donbas as well, strengthened by Russia's verbal commitment to reintegration of this region to Ukraine. The postponement of referendum in South Ossetia on joining Russia from 2016 to 2017 is also a sign of Russia's search for a wider space of maneuvering and reluctance to rush with decisions that might be detrimental for its relations with Georgia and – unavoidably – the EU.

The exchange in May 2016 of Nadezhda Savchenko, a Ukrainian pilot sentenced in Russia, for two Russian military officers jailed in Ukraine for their participation in military operations in Donbas, further complicated Moscow's stand on Ukraine and exposed its vulnerability. Observers have noted a strong contrast between highly emotional comeback of Savchenko to Kyiv, including her immediate audience with President Poroshenko, and an almost silenced return of the two Russians to Moscow. The two drastically dissimilar contexts of the prisoners' swap lucidly illustrates Russia's role as a foreign encroacher and Ukraine's role as a victim of intrusion, which Russia de-facto acknowledged. The absence of celebratory and triumphalist notes in Russia's narrative of the swap attests to the diminishing appeal of belligerent approaches in the Kremlin's toolkit.

Conclusion

Russia seems to slowly learning lessons of its policy towards Ukraine, and appears to gradually understand the dear price it pays for Crimea and Donbas. As a way out of the current stalemate, the Kremlin resorts to a rather traditional tool of playing down with the importance of political issues in relations with the EU, and prioritizing its depoliticized (financial, economic, administrative and managerial) aspects. Nevertheless, the refocusing on non-political integrationists projects with the EU and common neighbours does not go as far as to relinquishing Moscow's cherished doctrine of vital zones of interests and spheres of influence. As this analysis has shown, Russia's neighbourhood policy is very much grounded in capitalization on domestic weakness of the EU, as well as on vulnerabilities of EaP countries.

In the absence of even relative consensus on political issues depoliticized projects can be only temporary fixtures. However, in a practical sense, at certain point the EU might indeed engage with some kind of technical and, perhaps initially, semi-official contacts with the EEU, The rationale for that could lie in the fact that the EEU, with all duly understood Russia-centrism, includes a group of other post-Soviet countries that are both dependent on Russia and

³⁴ Tischenko, Mikhail. 2016. Po susekam. Kak Rossiya finansiruet Pridnestrovie v krizis. *Slon*, April 20. <https://slon.ru/posts/66931>

eager to have a greater freedom of hands in their outside communications and interactions. Some of them have their own opinions that might contravene Russia's policies – for example, Kazakhstan and Belarus are much more inclined to cooperate with Azerbaijan than incorporate Armenia in common institutions. EU's contacts with the EEU would not mean any solidarity with Russia or support for its policy towards Ukraine; these contacts might imply that the EU treats Russia as just one of Eurasian countries in a group of its equally important eastern neighbours.

This strategy might make sense, especially bearing in mind that cultural and political distance between most of the post-Soviet borderlands and Russia won't diminish in the foreseeable future. Even countries favourable to the EEU either prefer to limit this project to a purely economic inter-governmental coordination mechanism (Kazakhstan and Belarus), or are forced to accept Russia's sphere of influence because of security vulnerabilities (Armenia). A significant divergence exists between nation-building projects in neighboring countries and Russia for whom strong national identities are conceptual challengers to its major foreign policy platforms, including the civilizational concept of Eurasianism, the Russian world doctrine, and the neo-Soviet revisionism. In all neighboring countries there are multiple local discourses of othering Russia as an external actor that needs to be kept at a certain distance and even counter-balanced. It is in the best interests of the EU to help both members of the EEU and signatories of the Association Agreements to protect this distance according to their own needs and visions. This strategy would be beneficial for maintaining political pluralism in the post-Soviet space and keeping alive alternatives to Russia's domination.