

ADJUSTING THE EU'S GEOPOLITICAL POSTURE IN THE EASTERN NEIGHBORHOOD

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How and Why Did the EU Get into the Current Confrontation with Russia?

The conflict in Eastern Ukraine has signaled the end of cooperative security, and the shift to a new stage of evolution of the European system. This new stage seems to be defined by a geopolitical confrontation between the West and Russia, which seems to reshape the relations within today's Europe.

The confrontation between Russia and the West became predictable after president Vladimir Putin stated in April 2005: "Above all, we should acknowledge that the collapse of the Soviet Union was a major geopolitical disaster of the century. As for the Russian nation, it became a genuine drama. Tens of millions of our co-citizens and compatriots found themselves outside Russian territory."¹ The seeds of this confrontation were laid into these words, while alluding to both the goal and the strategy of the new resurgence of Russia. The geopolitical competition between Russia and the West had *de facto* started at that time, even though the Western leaders were formally rejecting it, while pretending that relations with Russia were post-Cold War business as usual.

However, president Putin's statement came after two rounds of NATO enlargement (1997 and 2004), and after the Big Bang enlargement of the European Union (2004-2007). Moreover, it came after the Rose and Orange revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, respectively, which brought into top state positions pro-Western leaders seeking NATO and EU membership for their countries. In response, Russia suspended the implementation of the CFE Agreement from 2007, while in the summer of 2008 it has fought and won the five days' war against Georgia, after it recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The Georgian war actually came up as a Russian warning against NATO's 2008 Bucharest summit decision to recognize Georgia and Ukraine as aspirants for NATO membership.

Both the suspension of the implementation of the CFE Treaty and the recognition of the independence of the Georgian breakaway republics enshrined a very clear geopolitical message from Moscow: Russia was not happy anymore with the current European security arrangements built around the OSCE Decalogue, and it didn't feel itself obliged anymore to fulfil its commitments. In 2009, the Russian president at the time, Dmitry Medvedev, came up with a proposal to discuss a new European Security

¹ V. Putin- Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, April 25, 2005, The Kremlin, Moscow from http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2005/04/25/2031_type70029type82912_87086.shtml

Treaty allegedly aiming to create a common undivided space in the Euro-Atlantic region to finally do away with the Cold War legacy. To that end, Medvedev suggested to formalize in the international law the principle of indivisible security as a legal obligation pursuant to which no nation or international organization operating in the Euro-Atlantic region was entitled to strengthen its own security at the expense of other nations or organizations. Eventually, the West rejected this Russian proposal for it felt it might have prohibited future enlargements of NATO and the EU.

In that very same year, the EU launched the Eastern Partnership aiming to create conditions for accelerating political association and further economic integration of six partner countries from the former Soviet Union: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. This EU initiative has been perceived by the Russians as a geopolitical process because, on the one hand, of the wide-ranging consequences of what the EU thought to be a purely technical, norms setting process of modernization, and, on the other hand, since it saw it as a competitor to the Eurasian integration promoted by Moscow in the former Soviet space.

Western liberal ideologues have generally perceived the rejection of the Western democratic values by the Russian president Vladimir Putin as the main driving force of this confrontation between Russia and the West. However, ideology is just one of the several drivers of the current confrontation. Other major disagreements persist on the structure and operation of the post-Cold War European security architecture (including the interpretation of the OSCE Decalogue, the management of the unresolved conflicts, and the implementation of the arms control agreements- in particular the CFE agreement), as well as on how to solve the dilemma of the post-Soviet states desperately struggling to straddle over their European and Eurasian integration.

Four Empirical Security Scenarios for Western Confrontation with Russia

How could the EU best deal with a revisionist Russia who challenged the post-Cold War European security order, most notably in Ukraine and in Georgia? We should probably start from considering EU's current *strategic options* in its Eastern Neighbourhood. The key question here is what should be the EU's objective in this contested region? Is it to find a compromise solution with Moscow on how to fix the broken security order, and to roll back, to the greatest extent possible, the outcomes of Russian military intrusions in Ukraine and in Georgia? Or is it to defend its shared values in the Eastern Neighbourhood, and to eventually annihilate the Russian power and influence? To that end, one may refer to four empirical security scenarios on how the Western confrontation with Russia might play out in the near future, ranging from creating a buffer zone up to falling into regional chaos and potential war with Russia.

The **Buffer Zone** scenario has been supported by prominent international political strategists. For example, in an interview with the National Interest, Henry Kissinger was arguing for exploring the possibilities of a status of non-military grouping on the territory between Russia and the existing frontiers of NATO. More concretely, he suggested the possibility of some cooperation between the West and Russia in a militarily nonaligned Ukraine is examined.

In an article published in the September/October 2014 issue of Foreign Affairs, professor John Mearsheimer contended that the Ukraine crisis could not be blamed

entirely on Russia. He pointed instead at the triad of Western liberal policies in Ukraine, and more broadly in EU's Eastern neighbourhood, i.e. NATO's enlargement, EU's expansion, and the promotion of democracy. Mearsheimer suggested that the United States and its Allies should consider making Ukraine a neutral buffer between NATO and Russia instead of westernizing it. The goal would be to have a sovereign Ukraine that falls neither in the Russian nor in the Western camp.

This scenario might best fit with the current interests and capabilities of the EU since it might: 1) lead to comprehensive peaceful solutions to the regional conflicts which plagued the European security since the end of the Cold War; 2) maintain EU's influence over the post-Soviet states by adjusting and/or expanding the Association Agreements, and by establishing a broader trade relationship with the Eurasian Economic Union. Critics would warn against the risks of having this scenario turned into the 21st century Munich Agreements of 1938, whereby the Western powers unsuccessfully attempted to appease Nazi Germany by recognizing the annexation of the Sudetenland of Czechoslovakia. However, it shouldn't necessarily turn into a new division of Europe into spheres of influence in case the political and security mechanisms to agree on the main tenets of implementing this scenario would be inclusive, transparent, and aiming at power-sharing in the common neighbourhood rather than racing mutually competitive integration processes.

Few years ago, the scenario of **Western Decline** might have seemed rather drawn from the ongoing Russian propaganda. However, a plethora of events over the last years have seriously questioned the European project and the West European partnership with the United States. A considerable aggravation of fissures and tension, as disputes from the Iraq war to the surveillance affair, have fuelled anti-Americanism in Europe, while the Eurozone crisis, migration, and other policy challenges have given rise to a host of ever more vocal Eurosceptic parties; the complex Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) negotiations seem to have failed, while European leaders might be still upset about the U.S. wiretapping program.

In the wake of BREXIT and of Donald Trump's presidency in the United States, the scenario of Western Decline has become more credible than in the past. The direct impact of BREXIT on the EU might be growing uncertainty and possible turmoil. Populists everywhere –especially right-wing nationalistic ones– might try to exploit BREXIT by arguing that their countries should follow suit. Giovanni Grevi has even seen it in more dramatic terms: “The choice of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union (EU) poses a fundamental question that can no longer be avoided – that of the survival of European integration. [...] beyond this turning point lies the crossroads between a spiral of political and economic disintegration and the very difficult path towards re-asserting the European project.”²

As one recent report by STRATFOR noted: “Perhaps the greatest difference between the Obama and Trump foreign policies lies in what may be Trump's biggest virtue: his unpredictability. [...] This matters immensely for U.S. allies and adversaries alike that have to be kept on their toes in developing their long-term strategy while avoiding the

² Giovanni Grevi- “Europe: A Question of Survival”, The European Policy Centre, June 2016, from http://www.epc.eu/documents/uploads/pub_6753_europe_-_a_question_of_survival.pdf

unexpected with the world's superpower.”³ Consequently, a corrosive EU policy of the Trump administration may, on the one hand, weaken NATO and incentivize the EU to undertake, on the medium and longer term, a much bolder role in European security. On the other hand, it may create new stakes for Russia to attempt geopolitical incursions within some of the Eastern European members of the EU (Hungary, Slovakia, and Bulgaria being the most vulnerable potential targets of Moscow's enticement). Deepening divisions among the newer and older EU members might lead, at best, to a breakdown of the European integration as we know it today, and, at worst, to renewed European geopolitical maps.

A possible follow-up to the Western Decline scenario, the **Intermarium Alliance** is not new. It embodies the geopolitical vision of the Polish general Jozef Pilsudski, who, in the 1920s, envisaged an alliance of the nations between the Baltic and Black Seas built around Poland, and including Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Finland and the Baltic states. He thought that such an alliance would be the best defence of regional countries against a renewed German-Russian *entente* that might divide again the Intermarium upon subjective criteria, as it previously happened in the 19th and the 20th centuries. More recently, George Friedman (STRATFOR's Executive Director) argued that an Intermarium alliance/confederation, joining together a number of small and medium-sized countries having as their primary interest retaining sovereignty in the face of Russian power, may be a key element of an effective strategy to contain an aggressive Russia. Friedman sees this alliance not as an offensive force but rather as a force designed to deter Russian expansion, while he deemed NATO as being dysfunctional, and the EU was completely ignored. By supplying those countries with modern military equipment Washington might strengthen pro-U.S. political forces in each country, and create a wall behind which Western investment could take place.

The scenario of **Regional Chaos** in the wake of a potential turn of the current geopolitical confrontation into a regional war has been little considered by the existing literature so far. However, particularly in the context of Ukrainian requests for the West to help in arming Kiev in view of enabling it to better defend itself against Russian aggression in Eastern Ukraine, the scenario of uncontrolled regional military escalation could not be ruled out.

One essential criteria for determining the likelihood of this scenario is the ability to prevent the current relations between Russia and the West from drifting towards *unmanaged confrontation*. According to the conclusions of the “Riga Dialogue 2016: Building Bridges for Euro-Atlantic Security”⁴: “Confrontation becomes unmanaged when there are no credible mechanisms to prevent it from spiraling out of control. Eroding or antiquated international agreements, a lack of trust and perfunctory dialogue are important markers”. Conversely, *managed confrontation* between Russia and the West, thereby deterrence would go along with dialogue and agreements

³ STRATFOR- “Mapping Out the Trump Era”, downloaded on 02/03/2017 from <https://www.stratfor.com/sites/default/files/mapping-out-the-trump-era-stratfor.pdf>

⁴ Andris Spruds, Diana Potjomkina- “Riga Dialogue Afterthoughts 2016”, Latvian Institute of International Affairs, from <http://liia.lv/.../riga-dialogue-afterthoughts-2016-building-...>

enabling greater transparency to prevent dangerous incidents from resulting in full-scale conflict, might become the last defence against the regional chaos scenario.

What Does Russia Expect from the EU?

Not surprisingly, according to the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation⁵ (approved on 30 November 2016), the “Western powers” would bear the responsibility for the growing instability in international relations, at both global and regional level, because of their attempts to “impose their points of view on global processes, and conduct a policy to contain alternative centres of power”. The document went farther into arguing that “the geopolitical expansion pursued by NATO, and the EU along with their refusal to create a common European security and cooperation framework”, resulted “in a serious crisis in the relations between Russia and the Western States”.

However, the same document stated that “Russia’s long-term Euro-Atlantic policy is aimed at building a common space of peace, security and stability based on the principles of indivisible security, equal cooperation and mutual trust”. It committed Russia to advocate for the legally binding relevance of the indivisibility of security, irrespective of the affiliation with political and military alliances of the regional states.

It further conceded that the EU remained an important trade, economic and foreign policy partner for Russia. Its priorities in relations with the EU would aim at establishing a common economic and humanitarian space from the Atlantic to the Pacific by harmonizing and aligning the interests of European and Eurasian integration processes, with a view to preventing the emergence of dividing lines on the European continent. It would also offer to maintain an intensive and mutually beneficial dialogue with the EU on key items on the foreign policy agenda, and to step up combined efforts for developing practical cooperation on counter-terrorism, controlling illegal migration, as well as on fighting against organized crime.

Critics have labelled this document a “Cold War doctrine” because of its premise of confrontation with the West⁶. They compared it against the previous version describing Russia as “an integral part of Europe,” while noting that such language was replaced with accusations of “geopolitical expansion” by the European Union (EU). They further pointed at “the consolidation of Russia’s position as one of the most influential centers in the modern world” as a hidden claim for a sphere of influence within the former Soviet space. Critics have also erroneously assumed that Russian government’s cooperation with various dictatorships might inevitably lead to increased rows with democratic countries. This was obviously a false assumption since in the real-world democracies did not cooperate exclusively with other democracies, while either ignoring or being at odds with dictatorships. Eventually, the Concept stated the more controversial goal of “strengthening the position of the Russian media in the global information space” that might be interpreted, from the perspective of a media which should be free and independent, as a rationale for turning the Russian media into a

⁵ Downloaded on 03/03/2017 from: http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCkB6BZ29/content/id/2542248

⁶ V. Shtepa- “The Illusion of a Restored Russian Superpower”, in Eurasian Daily Monitor, Vol.13, Issue 193, of 8th December 2016.

mere propaganda tool for the state. From a Western perspective that would be an unacceptable outcome.

However, as it emerges from references in the Concept to the Euro-Atlantic policy, and to the partnership with the EU, Russia seemed to be still open to discuss possible new arrangements of power sharing in the EU's Eastern Neighborhood. Such arrangements might aim at targeting three main baskets: harmonizing values and related governance models; finding ways and means for effective conflict resolution; and maintaining the compatibility of the economic integration models and processes.⁷ Whether new power sharing arrangements between Russia and EU (with the possible participation of other major regional actors- such as the US and Turkey) became subject to diplomatic negotiations or not could make the difference between the whole region falling into the buffer zone, or the regional chaos scenario.

Recommendations for EU's Policies in the Eastern Neighbourhood

1. The EU needs to be realistic about Russia and look forwards, not backwards

The EU might have to understand that being challenged by Russia as "the normative power" in the Eastern Neighborhood is not necessarily bad news for Europe's future. The fact that Russia inspired itself, and tries to replicate the European institutions in line with the actual needs of, and consistent with the different political culture existing in, the republics from the post-Soviet space should be actually hailed by the Europeans as a sort of external validation of the European model for economic integration, which is being currently questioned by many in Europe itself. The Russian proposal for building a Common Economic Space with the EU should be perceived as a cooperative hand extended to Europe in finding the compromises required by the harmonization of the European and the Eurasian normative systems.

On the other hand, current geopolitical realities have shown that Russia turned from a "strategic partner" into a "strategic challenge" for the EU. This has resulted in EU's current policy towards Russia being guided by five principles⁸: 1) Full implementation of the Minsk agreements as a key element for any substantial change in bilateral relations; 2) Strengthening relations with the Eastern Partners and other neighbors, in particular in Central Asia; 3) Strengthening European Union's resilience against potential security risks and threats emanating from Russia, in particular in view of energy security, hybrid threats and strategic communication; 4) The need for "selective engagement" with Russia, both on foreign policy issues, but also in other areas where there is a clear European Union's interest; 5) Support for the Russian civil society and for people-to-people contacts and exchanges and policies that are related to that, with a particular view to the youth.

⁷ M. Terterov, G. Niculescu- "Old Powers Re-Emerging in the Wider Black Sea: Security and Region-Building Strategies in European Eastern Neighborhood", EGF, Brussels, 2013, from http://gpf-europe.com/upload/iblock/c4a/old_powers_re-emerging_final.pdf

⁸ Remarks by HR Federica Mogherini at the press conference following the Foreign Affairs Council on 14 March 2016 - <http://ec.europa.eu/avservices/video/player.cfm?ref=1117867>.

2. The EU Needs to Undertake Geopolitical Responsibilities in its Eastern Neighborhood

Why did the Eastern Partnership exacerbate Russian pressure on EU's Eastern partners aimed to push them into unwanted choices between European and Eurasian integration? And why did Moscow perceive the Eastern Partnership as a path to a zero-sum game with the EU?

What the EU perceived as a purely technical, norms setting process of modernization, it has been seen by others (i.e. Russians, and potentially other regional powers) as a geopolitical process because of its wide-ranging consequences: while standards create legislation, and legislation shapes political and economic interactions, defining common standards eventually becomes an effective means for building geopolitical identities.

A more pragmatic Eastern Partnership focused on key EU regional priorities such as trade, security and energy, may revive EU's relations with all Eastern Partnership states, and may save this EU initiative from potential ineffectiveness or irrelevance. However, those Eastern Partners who strive for democratic development should continue to receive EU support proportional with their needs and proved willingness to reform.

The Eastern Partnership might eventually enable EU-Russia "selective engagement" on harmonizing the European and the Eurasian integration systems in the common neighborhood. In effect, measures to harmonize the European and the Eurasian integration projects might also revitalize regional economic cooperation in the common neighborhood, which would be in the best interest of Turkey and the regional post-Soviet states facing the dilemma of European vs. Eurasian integration. Eventually, the Eastern Partnership might be opening opportunities for further regional integration in highly sensitive areas of the common neighborhood, such as the South Caucasus, where protracted conflicts are still raging.

3. The EU Needs to Take a More Pragmatic Approach towards "Exporting" Shared Values in the Eastern Neighborhood

The current geopolitical competition between Russia and the West has worsened the state of democracy in the Eastern Neighborhood. That was the case, as "Russia's intervention in Ukraine, which amounts to acts of war, openly flaunts the principles on which the post-Cold War order in Europe is based, posing a challenge both to the European Union and the United States. A winner-take-all approach undermines the prospect of establishing functioning liberal democracies around the EU's periphery."⁹ Moreover, "as a consequence of placing security and stability high on the agenda of ENP countries, the Ukraine crisis has also pushed democracy and democratization lower on the list of their priorities."¹⁰

Other factors are also likely to affect democracy in the Eastern Neighborhood. For example, the EU's prolonged economic crisis and preoccupation with its own future

⁹ Michael Leigh- "A Strategy for Europe's Neighborhood", The German Marshall Fund of the United States, Europe Program Policy Brief, Vol.1, No.1, September 2014.

¹⁰ Alina Inayeh, Daniela Schwarzer, and Joerg Forbrig- "Regional Repercussions of the Ukraine Crisis", the German Marshall Fund of the United States, Europe Policy Paper No. 3/2014.

has dimmed its appeal as a model to many in the East European neighborhood. Other external influences, including intolerant forms of religious activism and extreme nationalism fed by the persistence of protracted regional conflicts, are increasingly shaping the policies of regional states. In addition, the Russian propaganda machine emphasizes “the misgivings” of Western societies and the pains and sacrifices a country needs to make in order to join the West.¹¹

Consequently, promoting liberal democratic standards for political rights in the Eastern Neighborhood has become a liability for the West, as it significantly undermined its leverage in shaping regional engagements. To maintain its influence in its Eastern Neighborhood, the EU should probably tone down its criticism of the “undemocratic governance systems”, and replace it with the pragmatic goal of defending its regional economic and security interests. Maintaining a minimal standard for the observation of civil rights may offer a face-saving solution against previous commitments. That would also imply seeking new regional arrangements according to common interests, not necessarily based on the acceptance of common values. For example, enhancing the level of engagement with Azerbaijan may be required to consolidate regional governance in the South Caucasus.

A multipolar approach to broader Eurasian geopolitics might also be needed, as the decline of European influence in the world could weaken the parameters of global stability in the coming years. Promoting the universalism of European values could possibly further accelerate such negative changes. It is quite likely that sharing democratic values would make it possible to preserve the current alliances, while a pragmatic approach to democratic values may attract new allies and break potential anti-Western alliances. The leverage created by sustaining increased regional involvement in Eurasia by Iran, India and China, aside from Russia and Turkey, should be also considered from this perspective.

4. The EU needs to transform the CSDP into a defensive tool fully consistent with, and adjustable to, NATO’s defensive posture towards the East.

In June 2016, the EU Global Strategy suggested that Europeans must be able to protect Europe, respond to external crises, and assist in developing partners’ security and defence capacities. It also referred to European security and defence efforts which should enable the EU to act autonomously, while also contributing to, and undertaking actions in, cooperation with NATO. A sectoral strategy should be agreed to specify the levels of ambition, tasks, requirements and capability priorities stemming from the EU Global Strategy.

Beyond recent US high level re-assurances to European allies on “unwavering commitment” to European security, the claim by president Donald Trump that “NATO was obsolete because it was created to deal with a problem (the Soviet Union) that no longer existed” has got credible geopolitical rationale. In February 2017, both Stephen Walt, and George Friedman have made coherent arguments for “NATO has achieved its original mission, and no agreement exists on what its mission is now”¹². Stephen Walt went even further while admitting that “as long as there is no potential hegemon

¹¹ Ibidem.

¹² George Friedman- “NATO, The Middle East and Eastern Europe”, accessed on 03/03/2017 from <http://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/opinion/nato-the-middle-east-and-eastern-europe/>

in Europe -and Russia doesn't qualify- it is not necessary for the US to defend it¹³". He further explained: "getting Europe to bear more of the burden to its own defence is meaningful only if it allows the US to reduce the resources it devotes to European security so that it can focus more attention on other theatres, such as Asia."¹⁴

The conclusion of those arguments might converge towards Europe having to undertake the heavy-lifting of ensuring its own security, on the medium and longer term, by increasing the capability of the CSDP to gradually share NATO's collective defence tasks. This is an ongoing process that it is likely to spread over the following years pending the political will of the EU governments to further develop European defence and security cooperation, the perceived levels and typology of threats against European security, and the upcoming re-negotiation of burden sharing within NATO.

5. The EU needs to play a leading role in searching viable solutions to the protracted conflicts.

On the one hand, the relevant knowledge of EU institutions about the protracted conflicts in the South Caucasus and in Transnistria should be enhanced, and a more creative thinking on the use of available instruments should be developed. On the other hand, the European External Action Service should be more involved in building up common positions of EU member states against the resolution of protracted conflicts. One may hardly talk of a genuine CFSP in the Eastern Neighborhood in the absence of a more assertive role of the EU in solving protracted conflicts in its neighborhood. Cooperation with other interested actors, such as the US, Russia, and Turkey is critical. The EU can tackle these conflicts more effectively, both in the post-conflict, and in the peace building phases.

6. The EU needs to revitalize its involvement in strengthening regionalism in the Eastern Neighborhood.

The Eastern Partnership was supposed to advance regional cooperation but, so far, it has done little to do so. According to the lessons learned in the Balkans in the first decade of the 2000's, this approach should change on a medium to the long term, as necessary and possible, if the EU was to capitalize on the benefits of regional cooperation through increasing the synergies of its own policies with regional initiatives. A reshaping of existing EU policy instruments with greater concerted emphasis on the Baltic and Black Sea regionalisms will be critical, at that stage. Further, the EU may consider a more active dialogue with regional stakeholders, including an upgrading of the current levels of policy harmonization and coordination of their actions with relevant regional international organizations.

¹³ Stephen M. Walt – "It's Time for Europe's Military to Grow Up", accessed on 03/03/2017 from http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/02/23/its-time-for-europes-militaries-to-grow-up-trump-nato/?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=edpix&utm_term=%2AEditors%20Picks

¹⁴ Ibidem.