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## From logic of competition to conflict: understanding the dynamics of EU–Russia relations

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## From logic of competition to conflict: understanding the dynamics of EU–Russia relations

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### ABSTRACT

To understand the gradual worsening of EU–Russia relations in the decade preceding the Ukraine crisis, it is essential to understand the dynamics of their interaction. This article divides EU–Russia relations into three stages on the basis of changing intergroup dynamics: asymmetrical cooperation (1992–2003), pragmatic but increasing competition (2004–2013) and conflict (2013–present). It draws on the concept of ‘attributional bias’ to explain the escalating logic of competition during the second stage. The EU and Russia started to attribute each other negative geopolitical intentions up to the point where these images became so dominant that they interpreted each other’s behaviour almost exclusively in terms of these images, rather than on the basis of their actual behaviour. With the Ukraine crisis, EU–Russia relations changed from competition over institutional arrangements in the neighbourhood and over normative hegemony to conflict over direct control.

### KEYWORDS

Russia; EU; perception; process; attributional bias

When the EU and Russia entered into a Strategic Partnership and agreed on cooperation in four Common Spaces in 2003, they did so with fairly good intentions and strong ambitions on both sides. A good decade later, EU–Russia relations are in the deepest crisis since the end of the Cold War. This did not happen abruptly. The Ukraine conflict is the ‘culmination of a long-term crisis of EU–Russia relations’ (Haukкала, 2015, p. 25). Most analysts have explained the ‘gradual deterioration’ (Sakwa, 2014, p. 31) of relations as the result of exogenous factors: shifts in international power relations, elite changes, security concerns, disagreement about the post-Cold War order, domestic power concentration, etc. All of these explanations have contributed significantly to our understanding of the conflict. But there is more to it. To understand how we evolved from cooperation to competition and ultimately to conflict, we additionally need to understand the *endogenous* dynamics of EU–Russia interaction. In other words, to understand how relations derailed, we also need to understand how the interaction evolved, how mutual negative images developed, how distrust came to dominate the relationship. The word *also* is important in this sentence. The analysis

this article seeks to offer is not so much a rivalling explanation, but a complementary one.

To do so, this article goes to the heart of the diametrically opposed perceptions of events on both sides. Grasping the dynamics behind the evolution of EU–Russia relations may help us to understand better how we ended up with such widely diverging perceptions and narratives of the current crisis on either side. In this sense, this article goes against the idea that the conflict can be reduced to structurally incompatible interests (Mearsheimer, 2014) or clashing norms (see my critique, Casier, 2013). Even if the current tensions could be reduced to these deeper structural issues, it still needs to be explained why they occurred when they did. Why was there a great deal of optimism in 2003, when the Common Spaces were agreed, and in 2005, when the Roadmaps were designed – a time when Russia had already grown considerably stronger, NATO had gone through its second eastern enlargement and Putin had been president for six years? Why have deep mistrust and hostile feelings come to replace this relatively positive attitude?

The argument of this article is that EU–Russia relations have been transformed *in and through their interaction*. A logic of competition has developed, which has grown stronger and eventually escalated over Ukraine, implying a shift from competition to a fundamentally new stage of conflict. Borrowing from insights in social psychology, the way the EU and Russia understand each other's behaviour is approached in this article as driven by the images they have formed of the intentions of their counterpart, rather than by the latter's actual behaviour. Understanding the process dynamics helps to understand how images radicalised, how geopolitical readings started to dominate foreign policy, how relations were understood increasingly in terms of a zero-sum game and so on. Again, this is not to discard structural causes of the crisis in East–West relations. Rather it is to highlight that these structural factors do not simply 'present' themselves to the actors, but come to them through the complex images they hold of each other and of the context in which they operate.

The article will first present the theoretical approach, which draws on intergroup dynamics and the notion of 'attributional bias'. It will then use those concepts to explain how EU–Russia relations have evolved from cooperative, over competitive to conflictual.

## Theoretical approach

### *Intergroup dynamics and attributional bias*

To capture the dynamics of EU–Russia interaction, this article relies on theories from social psychology. They help to explain the evolution from fairly cooperative relations, over competitive but pragmatic relations to the recent conflict over Ukraine. The emphasis is on intergroup dynamics, the attribution of negative intentions to outgroups and the conditions under which respectively competition and conflict emerge. My approach rests on two pillars: Kowert's concept of 'attributional bias' and Gries's four-stage model explaining the conditions of intergroup competition and conflict.

The theoretical approach is closely connected to Social Constructivism, but goes one step beyond it. Constructivists have strongly focused on identities as 'images of

individuality and distinctiveness (“selfhood”) held and projected by an actor and formed (and modified over time) through relations with significant “others”. Thus the term (by convention) references mutually constructed and evolving images of self and other’ (Jepperson, Wendt, & Katzenstein, 1996, p. 59). It is through a process of social interaction that identities are produced and reproduced, slowly changing over time. Though structure and agency are seen as inseparable, Constructivism tends to focus strongly on the inter-subjective nature and shared understanding that underpin structure, less on agency (Kowert, 1998). This is where social psychology offers additional value. First, it offers more suitable tools for understanding the role of agents within a process of social interaction. Second, it is better equipped to explain change within this interaction. While Wendt expects that embedded identities are ‘resistant to change’ (Wendt, 1992, p. 418), the concepts of social psychology employed here will exactly help us to understand how the images the EU and Russia held of each other changed, in this case rather rapidly.

Social psychology states that ‘the ordinary function of human cognition cleaves the social world into “self” and “other” categories of agency’ (Kowert, 1998, p. 106). Simple divisions between the groups are enough to create categories of ingroup and outgroup, which are linked to diverging identities. As ‘political categories become more salient’ (Kowert, 1998, p. 110), the parties will exaggerate the identities of the both ingroup and outgroup. Kowert (1998, pp. 108–109) states that there is a tendency ‘to exaggerate differences between political groups and to underestimate differences within these groups’. In other words, the coherence of the ingroup is overrated, as well as the differences with the outgroup. Moreover, there is a tendency

to attribute the behaviour of political outgroups to the intent or desire of those groups; ingroup behaviour, however, will more often be attributed to the influence of environmental constraints. Perceived increases in the power of outgroups will strengthen the tendency to assume intent (attributional bias). (Kowert, 1998, p. 109)

At the heart of the ‘attributional bias’ is thus the notion that an ingroup, as it perceives growing differences with an outgroup, tends to understand the behaviour of the outgroup predominantly in terms of its perceived negative intentions, while it sees its own behaviour as reasonable, given the constraints in which it is forced to operate. The bias occurs because the interpretation of the actions of the outgroup is not based on the latter’s actual behaviour, but on the basis of the image that has been formed that its behaviour is driven by bad intentions. This theoretically underpins the core argument of the article: the escalating logic of competition was driven by a process in which the EU and Russia started to attribute each other negative geopolitical intentions up to the point where these images became so dominant that they interpreted each other’s behaviour almost exclusively in terms of these images. In other words, their policies were determined by the image of what the other had become, rather than what it was actually doing. This is the essence of the endogenous dynamics which this article seeks to capture.

A second element I borrow from social psychology theories on in and outgroups is how intergroup relations move from pure social comparison to competition and to conflict. Gries presents a four-stage model to capture the link between in group positivity and hostility vis-à-vis outgroups (2005). The evolution from positive identification with the ingroup to conflict with outgroups is not inevitable. It is a process that is dependent on the conditions and driven by certain agents. The model of Gries should thus be read as a

progressive model, where the evolution from one stage to another is not automatic. The four stages are:

- (1) Ingroup identification,
- (2) Ingroup positivity,
- (3) Intergroup competition and
- (4) Intergroup conflict.

Ingroup positivity 'does not inexorably lead to intergroup competition, let alone conflict' (Gries, 2005, p. 239). The transition to competition (from stage 2 to 3) will only occur if groups (in our case Russia and the EU) engage into 'salient', 'consequential' and 'zero-sum' social comparisons (Gries, 2005, p. 240). This may be the case, according to Gries (2005, p. 257), 'when the goodness or honor of our nations is challenged'. The notion of attributional bias comes in as the distortion in the social comparison with the outgroup, where the latter is ascribed negative intentions and its behaviour is interpreted in this context. Agents play an active and determining role, engaging in zero-sum social comparisons and promoting biased images of intergroup relations.<sup>1</sup>

It is important to note here that for Gries all three conditions – salient, consequential *and* zero-sum comparison with the outgroup – need to be fulfilled in order to move to intergroup competition. This is all but inevitable. Groups may opt for alternative strategies, such as social mobility or social creativity (Gries, 2005, p. 240). In the case of social competition, the ingroup seeks to displace the outgroup with higher status. In the case of social mobility, on the other hand, it seeks to imitate the outgroup rather than compete with it. In the case of social creativity, it seeks to gain status in new areas (Larson & Shevchenko, 2014). The choice of strategy will depend on agents and circumstances.

Finally, Gries explains the transition from intergroup competition to conflict (from stage 3 to 4) on the basis of anger over an injustice that needs to be rectified or the reassertion of status (2005, p. 257). Agents here may be active mobilisers of feelings of injustice or humiliation.

The question may be raised to what extent these theories from social psychology can be applied to states or state-like entities. Of course it should be recognised that the EU and Russia are not homogenous ingroups. There may be diverging views within the elites and between them and the public opinion. There are different interest groups within the elites, with their own agendas. The EU itself consists of 28 member states with their own policies and of different institutions with their own logics. Yet, those theories presented have been applied to states.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, several authors have analysed EU and Russian discourses as containing a sufficient degree of coherence (see, e.g. Averre, 2009; Browning & Christou, 2010; Clunan, 2009; DeBardeleben, 2012; Klinke, 2012; Morozov, 2015; Simão, 2011). Narratives of policy-making elites are seen in these studies as having enough unity to be considered as a representative discourse. The coherence appears even more strongly if we approach the intergroup relations through the lenses of foreign policy-makers and their formal statements, as will be done here.

Self-evidently we have to recognise this model cannot fully grasp the complexity of the process of EU–Russia interactions at all levels and in all dimensions. But ultimately, the same argument holds for interest-based explanations. None of them can grasp the

complexity of interest formation in all member states, in all domestic spheres, in all institutions either.

### *Dynamics*

The term 'dynamics' is used here to refer to a continuous process of action and reaction, whereby a certain logic of action develops. In other words, the action of actor A is based on what it perceives the behaviour of actor B to be. In turn, actor B will decide on its action on the basis of the image it has created of A's behaviour. The dynamics become to a degree autonomous as they develop predominantly on the basis of the images, not of actual behaviour. The images created tend to be confirmed by what is seen as 'actual' behaviour, while it is actually an image of behaviour. As a result the (re)action gets further detached from 'reality' and gets fuelled by its own images. For example, it will be demonstrated in our case how Moscow and Brussels started to interpret each other's regional integration initiatives exclusively as attempts to maximise influence, rather than a form of political and economic cooperation. The concept of 'attributional bias' thus helps to explain why rival integration projects – as such not per se problematic – were seen as mutually threatening. The 'integration dilemma' of Charap and Troitskiy (2013) demonstrates the same development against a different theoretical background. In analogy with the security dilemma, the exclusivity of well-intended integration initiatives (the Eastern Partnership (EaP) and Eurasian Customs Union (ECU)) is interpreted by the other side as a threat to its security and thus gets seen as a zero-sum game (Charap & Troitskiy, 2013, p. 50). This risks to result in an 'escalatory spiral' (Charap & Troitskiy, 2013, p. 60). States start

making worst-case assumptions about the motives of other states. Such assumptions can lead to recurrent rounds of escalation – a costly spiral of action and reaction in the context of little or no communication between the rival parties. Under the conditions of the integration dilemma, the leaders of rival blocs both escalate their attempts to induce or compel a country to join their respective groupings and increasingly lash out at one another, diminishing trust between them. The negative impact of this rivalry increases as competition continues to spiral. (Charap & Troitskiy, 2013, p. 51)

The driver of the dynamics of action and reaction is that – as competition spirals – the action of the other can easily be interpreted as a confirmation of the negative (biased) image held. This perceived confirmation solidifies the negative image and enhances its credibility. Luke March, for example, notes: 'Western policies have certainly created an environment where the Russian elite can readily portray the nation as isolated, victimised and threatened, even if the Kremlin exploits this environment opportunistically' (2012, p. 421). As they seem to be confirmed by actual behaviour, these views radicalise and zero-sum geopolitical frames become dominant.

The rest of the article studies the process of EU–Russia relations over three stages, arguing that intergroup dynamics generated an evolution from cooperation to competition and ultimately to conflict. A first stage is one of asymmetrical cooperation and roughly coincides with the 1990s. The second stage is one of formally symmetrical relations, based on pragmatic, but increasing competition. The contours of this stage are clearly dominant between 2004 and late 2013. To study the gradual deterioration of EU–Russia relations, I will systematically analyse EU and Russian images of Self and

Other, substantiating the process dynamics and attributional bias through quotes of leading policy-makers. Finally, there is the current stage of confrontation over Ukraine, starting in late 2013. The latter two stages coincide with what Gries labels intergroup competition and intergroup conflict and will be the main focus of the analysis.

### **Stage 1: the dynamics of the master and the pupil (1992–2003)**

EU–Russia relations in the 1990s were clearly characterised by asymmetrical relations. The EU was the dominant agenda setter and relations strongly reflected its preferences. The EU's policy vis-à-vis the former communist countries in general was aimed at exporting its rules and norms, seeking to foster reforms and redesign institutional structures in East-European countries. Institutionally, this stage is built around the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA). It was signed in 1994 and entered into force in 1997. It came at a moment, where both the EU and Russia appeared on the international scene in a novel form. The Treaty of Maastricht had established the EU as a new organisation, with a foreign policy agenda and the ambition to play a more important international role in a new post-Cold War context. Russia had appeared as the post-communist successor of the USSR. It adopted a liberal-democratic constitution and sought recognition in the (Western dominated) international community of states. The early 1990s have been referred to as the 'honeymoon' between Russia and the West (Pushkov, 1993). It was a time when Russia was willing to collaborate with the West. While the emphasis in the early years was on an America first policy, this slowly shifted towards a Europe first policy. This change was reflected in the 'Medium-term strategy' of the Russian government in 1999, declaring the EU its most important partner (Medium-Term Strategy, 1999).

The dynamics of this era could be described as follows. Relations were based on a strong will to cooperate, but they were very asymmetrical. The agenda was predominantly EU-centric. Vis-à-vis all former communist countries Brussels took on a role as helper (providing assistance in such diverse fields as economic reconversion, democratisation and disarmament) and guide (promoting democratic and neo-liberal norms and transferring its rules and legal principles). The relations with Russia had strong master–pupil features, even if Russia was not always seen as the most complacent pupil in the class (see also Neumann, 1998).

The asymmetry of relations is understandable against the background of the political instability, deep economic recession and chaos in the 1990s, with the financial crisis of 1998 as an absolute low point, confirming Russia's relative weakness. Russia was a country struggling with internal reforms. It aspired to reoccupy a prominent place on the international scene and hoped to return to a position of greatness. At the same time, Russia realised all too well that the main obstacles for this were of an internal nature. This is illustrated well by the National Security Concept of the Russian Federation of 2000 (Kontseptsiya, 2000). Most of the challenges mentioned were of an internal nature.

Russia's self-image was thus one of a country that had to solve its internal problems first. In terms of intergroup dynamics, a gap was perceived between the ingroup and outgroup, but this gap was primarily seen as the result of domestic problems. The responsibility to close the gap was with the ingroup (Russia) helped by the outgroup (the EU). One could argue that the positive self-identification in Russia was fairly low throughout the 1990s. As a result, Russia was willing to accept guidance by the EU and asymmetrical



relations. Generally no negative intentions were attributed to the EU. In the Medium-Term Strategy, it is described as an important and evident partner. To solve internal problems, domestic economic recovery and a predictable, cooperative international environment were essential. Concerns over NATO and its enlargement, however, would increase towards the end of the 1990s (Light, Löwenhardt, & White, 2000).

In this context of highly asymmetrical relations, Russia's power strategy could be described as one of 'social mobility' (Larson & Shevchenko, 2014). Russia's ambition was to reform itself along the (neo-)liberal norms of its Western counterparts and thus to be recognised as a 'normal' power (Tsygankov, 2005) and acceptable partner. It would thus climb on the status ladder in international relations. In short, it was a non-confrontational strategy where the levels of competition remained low.

The EU, from its side, identified itself with the role as guide or teacher. The Maastricht Treaty had reinforced the organisation and substantially enhanced its international ambitions. It had more autonomy for designing its own foreign and security policy, now that the Cold War was over and US protection was no longer required. At the same time, it was confronted with the challenge of developing policies towards Eastern Europe, now that the continent was no longer divided by an Iron Curtain. The EU adopted a self-image of guide/teacher promoting and supporting structural reforms in former communist countries. Their foreign policy towards their eastern neighbours was a clear instance of 'structural diplomacy' (Keukeleire & MacNaughtan, 2008). The EU was promoting structural reforms in the longer term, by transferring rules, norms and institutional practices. Relying on the policy instrument of conditionality, the EU aimed at profoundly reshaping domestic political and economic structures in post-communist countries, modelled on those of the EU and its member states.

Towards the former satellite states of the Soviet Union and the Baltic states, it developed a strategy of enlargement, based on strong conditionality. It was a strategy based on the extension of its model of integration. Towards the (other) former Soviet states, the policy was one of 'exporting' rules and norms, as well as steering the domestic transformation. It was fairly monolithic in its approach towards the Newly Independent States (NIS). This policy had similar objectives and rested on similar financial (Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS))<sup>3</sup> and legal instruments (PCAs) for all target countries. However, while the policy towards former Soviet states had also strong structural features, it was based on weaker conditionality, as the 'big' reward of accession was lacking.

## **Stage 2: towards a logic of competition (2004–2013)**

### ***Pragmatic but increasing competition***

The cooperative relations of the 1990s came under increasing strain towards the end of the decade. Undoubtedly there are multiple reasons for this. Many centred around the increasing disappointment about the lack of recognition of post-communist Russia as an acceptable power and neglect for Russia's concerns (Sakwa, 2014). Bringing in the elements of contingency, a couple of cumulative events in 1999 created a turning point. Together these events would produce a national consensus among Russian elites that the West was unwilling to grant Russia a place in the international community of states, but was instead exploiting Russia's weakness by acting against its interests (Light

et al., 2000). These events were: the Kosovo military intervention (without UN mandate and without consulting Russia), the first Eastern enlargement of NATO (when former satellite states of the USSR acceded to the alliance) and NATO's Washington Strategic Concept (which made it possible to operate outside NATO territory). This was later further reinforced by the colour revolutions, most importantly the Orange Revolution of 2004 in Ukraine (De Haas, 2010, p. 157), which Russian elites perceived as masterminded by the West. The change equally resulted from domestic power changes. As new Russian president, Putin initially managed to recentralise power – at the expense of oligarchs and regional leaders. Stepwise power got more concentrated under his rule. His foreign policy became more assertive, as showcased in his speech at the Munich conference in 2007. Rising energy prices and the resulting economic growth gave Russia a stronger material basis for this more vocal foreign policy (Macfarlane, 2006).

This second stage is characterised by Russia's rejection of EU normative hegemony, which is increasingly labelled as interference into domestic affairs. Russia displays a reluctance to play the game according to the rules the EU is imposing in its view. Russia's ambition is to be recognised as equal partner of the EU, instead of following in its slipstream. As a result the partnership lost its EU-centric focus and became a continuous balancing exercise between the preferences of the EU and Russia, with sometimes mixed outcomes, but often no significant results. Eventually, the dynamics of relations changed from master-pupil relations to competition, with the behaviour of the other often interpreted as strategic moves to gain power and influence.

Despite the psychological effect of the events of 1999, the transition to a new stage would not be abrupt. It roughly took until 2004 before the contours of the new stage became really clear.<sup>4</sup> The new stage of EU–Russia relations was characterised by images of competition, which would evolve from the margin to the centre of the agenda and set into motion a logic of competition. The transition became visible when the Feira European Council of 2000 opted for a more pragmatic policy vis-à-vis Russia (Haukkala, 2010, pp. 122–125; Timmins, 2002, p. 88). The EU started to abandon its structural and normative policy and chose a strategy of 'constructive engagement', based on a policy 'of engaging Russia in mutually beneficial cooperation based on common interests, while continuing to criticize Russia for the lack of common values' (Haukkala, 2010, p. 123). The emphasis rapidly shifted towards the former.

Russia's decision not to join the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) constituted the clearest break with the first stage of (relative) cooperation. Russia, a country five times the size of the EU, did not want to be regarded as just one of the EU's neighbours. Seeking symbolic recognition as a major power, equal to the EU, it rejected EU steered reforms as interference. Instead Brussels and Moscow engaged into a so-called Strategic Partnership. The term had started popping up already in 1999.<sup>5</sup> It was sealed when Russia and the EU agreed in St. Petersburg in 2003 on Four Common Spaces of cooperation (economic; freedom, security and justice; external security; research, education and culture). Brussels and Moscow symbolically recognised each other's significance, stating they were 'part of each other's neighbourhood' (Commission of the European Communities, 2004, p. 6). Russia thus got recognition as 'key partner of the EU' (Commission of the European Communities, 2004, p. 4), rather than just a neighbour.

While the Strategic Partnership was agreed in an atmosphere of cooperation and engagement, it would soon turn into a continuous balancing exercise between the two

giants, where symbolism mattered greatly. Competition took the overhand and it became increasingly difficult to make any real progress. For example, it was decided in 2008 at the Khanty-Mansiysk summit to launch negotiations on a New Agreement, to replace the outdated PCA. Little progress was made. Partnership for Modernisation, agreed in 2010 under President Medvedev, was an attempt at relaunching EU–Russia relations but never took really off. Instead tensions increased over energy, market access, visa regulations, regional cooperation, etc. Competition, however, was constrained by a pragmatic approach: despite the difficulties to make real progress, there was a continuous willingness to talk.

Tensions particularly escalated over the EU's new EaP policy, launched in 2009, and the Russian initiative to create an ECU with Belarus and Kazakhstan in 2010.<sup>6</sup> The EaP was a new dimension of the ENP, with a stronger bilateral focus, a foreign policy dimension and more explicit on interests. It envisaged a new generation of Association Agreements, including a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). Three of those have been signed in 2014 with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. The ECU, launched one year after the EaP, signalled a change of Russia's course. While Moscow for a long time chose to develop integration among former Soviet states in the framework of the Commonwealth of Independent States, it now opted to develop deeper forms of integration with 'coalitions of the willing'. The co-existence of both 'rivaling' regional projects forced the countries in between to make a choice, as both forms of cooperation were legally incompatible. From the very beginning Brussels and Moscow saw each other's initiatives very negatively and as geopolitical manoeuvres. How this happened will be investigated in the following sections. First, I look at the images the EU and Russia held of themselves and each other, noticing the gap constantly grew wider. Second, I reflect on the dynamics behind this widening gap. Self-evidently this evolution should be seen against the background of deeper, competing visions for post-Cold War Europe between Russia and the Euro-Atlantic community. The Euro-Atlantic project of 'wider Europe' was a Brussels-centric vision, based on the extension of the EU and NATO. The Russian project of 'greater Europe' envisaged fundamentally new multipolar structures, built around centres of gravity in Moscow, Brussels and Ankara (Sakwa, 2014, p. 27).

In terms of Gries's model, EU–Russia relations evolved during this stage towards intergroup competition. For Gries, the transition from ingroup positivity to intergroup competition is determined by social comparison, that is, comparison with the outgroup. The conditions for the transition is that this comparison is salient, consequential *and* zero-sum (Gries, 2005, p. 240).

### **EU images**

The EU's interpretation of relations with Russia was strongly based on a 'postmodern-modern binary', which reflects assumptions of higher developments and backwardness. As Klinke (2012, p. 929) puts it,

whereas Russia is seen as caught up in a modern spatial framework of fixed territory, national identity and traditional geopolitics, the European Union embodies a postmodern spatial mindset that simultaneously reflects and drives the dissolution of sovereign territory, the formation of multi-layered identities and the disappearance of geopolitics.

Klinke (2012, p. 936) detects this binary not only within EU institutions but argues that it extends to experts and journalists as well. He illustrates how the modern-postmodern

binary, essentially an analytical and academic concept, became part of the rhetoric of EU policy-makers as well.

The identity of what Manners would later on call a 'normative power' (Manners, 2002), also became part of the self-image of the EU (see also Klinke, 2012). The asymmetrical relations which 'normative power' presupposes (Diez, 2013) were not questioned. The flip-side of the coin is the unquestioned character of the norms, the EU was promoting. This resulted in what Haukkala (2008, 2010) has described as 'normative hegemony'. The norms and rules promoted by the EU were seen as evident, to be followed by its post-communist neighbours. This solidified asymmetrical relations. It placed the EU in the position of 'natural' leader, with all the comparative advantages this would generate.

When it comes to 'its geopolitics, the EU is in denial' (Klinke, 2012, p. 936). The sharp delineation between the perceived norm driven foreign policy of the EU and the perceived *Realpolitik* of Russia seems to lead EU policy-makers to believe that its policies have neither a geopolitical motivation nor geopolitical consequences (Casier, 2013). The EU perceived Russia as an important, but unwilling partner. Its own behaviour was seen as reasonable. As a result, it underestimated the negative impact of its ENP and later the EaP. The latter was presented as nothing but an open choice and not an anti-Russian move (see different testimonies of European External Action Service (EEAS) officials in the inquiry by the House of Lords, 2015). However, it was clear that signing Association Agreements was not a power neutral operation. It inevitably affected trade flows, political relations and ultimately Russia's capacity to exert influence in the former Soviet space – where Russia claimed it had key interests.

### **Russian images**

Russia's self-image was very different. Feklyunina (2008, p. 612) concludes that the images used most frequently under Putin's presidency are of Russia as a great power, an energy superpower, and as 'non-imperial' in the post-Soviet space. Reinforcing the great power image, Russia presented itself as 'an independent centre of power in a multi-polar world' (Feklyunina, 2008, p. 614). In 2005, Putin referred to Russia's 'civilising mission on the Eurasian continent' (Putin quoted in Feklyunina, 2008, p. 619), while President Medvedev spoke in 2008 of Russia's 'privileged interests' in the post-Soviet space (Medvedev, quoted in Reynolds, 2008). In summary, during this stage Russia tried to promote an image of 'a country without imperial ambitions but with legitimate interests in the neighbouring states' (Feklyunina, 2008, p. 620), a distinction which was hard to get across.

Relations with the West in general turned increasingly negative. What dominated was a 'sense of disappointment and disillusionment, even betrayal by "the West"' (House of Lords, 2015, p. 20). Sergei Karaganov accused the West of failing 'to give up the "velvet-gloved Versailles" policy towards Russia, i.e. to abandon its policy of systemic encroachment on spheres of Russia's vital interests' (Karaganov quoted in Sakwa, 2014, p. 212). While the USA and NATO are the first to be blamed, this also affects relations with the EU, which developed to a degree in the shadow of NATO–Russia relations. Moreover Russia looked very negatively at the EU's policy towards the countries 'in between'. Haukkala notes that the ENP and EaP, as well as EU rule transfer, were seen in Moscow as nothing but a geopolitical strategy (2008, p. 43). Foreign Minister Lavrov called the EaP,

at the time of its launch in 2009, an attempt by the EU to build 'a sphere of influence' (quoted in EU Observer, 2009).

### ***Understanding the dynamics***

A logic of competition developed in EU–Russia relations during this stage. Behaviour of the Other was readily seen as an attempt to obstruct the power and influence of the Self. We can speak of a 'logic' of competition because of its autonomous dynamics: the negative attribution of competitive behaviour became abstracted and detached from reality and had the capacity of self-reinforcement.

How negative images of each other's intentions became mutually reinforcing is clearly visible from the interaction over the two integration projects EaP and ECU. As such, these are predominantly forms of economic integration. Seldom are these forms of regional cooperation seen as a problem. On the contrary, the EU has traditionally been a supporter of regional integration initiatives elsewhere in the world, such as Mercosur or ASEAN. In this case, however, Moscow and Brussels regarded each other's integration projects as rivaling. The ECU was seen as reflecting Russia's bigger regional power ambitions, posing a potential threat.

Russia, in turn, emphasised that its actions were driven by economic, rather than geopolitical reasons. As noted, the interpretation on the EU's side was fundamentally different. A recurring image of Russia was based on the quote by Putin, which – largely taken out of context – became strongly determining for the perception of his foreign policy motivations. In his 2005 Annual Address to the Federal Assembly, Putin called the collapse of the Soviet Union 'a major geopolitical disaster of the century' (2005). While the speech only refers to the drama for the Russian nation and citizens and does not mention any need to reinstate the old Soviet Union, the quote has been regularly used as an indication of Russia's neo-imperialist geopolitical agenda. Attempts to counter this perception were not very successful. Putin stated, for example, that 'Russia was one of the main initiators of the break-up of the Soviet Union. ... And to say or to hint that Russia wishes to regain the greatness of a superpower is simply nonsense' (Putin quoted in Feklyunina, 2008, p. 619).

In 2005, Ferrero-Waldner, then External Relations Commissioner, referred to 'Russia's drift to a bloc mentality' and a 'zero-sum attitude to cooperation with the European Union in the New Neighbourhood countries' (2005). The negative intentions perceived in Russian foreign policy pushed the EU in the direction of a different policy towards its Eastern neighbours. The EaP added a security dimension to the ENP. Under Polish impulse and fostered by the Russian military intervention in Georgia in 2008, the policy obtained an 'anti-Russian' dimension, which was not present in the original ENP (Sakwa, 2014, pp. 39–40).

When Putin presented his plans for a Eurasian Union in an interview in *Izvestiya* (Putin, 2011), this was broadly understood as a geopolitical project. The establishment of the ECU was largely coined in the EU and the West in general as a regional geopolitical project aimed at reinstating control. Hillary Clinton, then US Secretary of State, for example, stated in 2012 that labels like 'customs union' could not conceal Russia's regional power ambitions (Clinton quoted in Wolczuk & Dagneva, 2013, p. 4). Yet the founding documents of the ECU as such give little reason to understand the project geopolitically. They display striking resemblances with the EU institutions and procedures and do not

really deviate from similar initiatives elsewhere in the world. Moreover, the ECU was an old idea of Kazakh President Nazarbayev dating back to the 1990s, so it could hardly be seen as purely inspired by Russian geopolitical thinking.

Yet, Russian actions and reactions helped to reinforce these geopolitical images. In an inquiry by the House of Lords, Denis Volkov of the Levada Centre points out that ‘successive Russian governments had exploited “the situation if not of conflict then of controversy between Russia and the West” and that it had been part of official policy to “exploit the idea of Russia as some sort of besieged castle”’ (Volkov quoted in House of Lords, 2015, p. 21). In Russia, we witnessed a further concentration of power, a worsening reputation in the field of human rights and more coercive actions vis-à-vis neighbours. The latter fuelled images of Russia as neo-imperialist, seeking control over post-Soviet countries. This made it easier to read their actions as malicious.

Along similar lines, it can be illustrated how EU actions in the neighbourhood were understood in Moscow as a confirmation that they were geopolitically motivated. The evolution towards a more anti-Russian and security-based approach of the EU to its eastern neighbours was seen as a result of its 2004 enlargement. Sergei Yastrzhembsky, for example, claimed their accession ‘brought the spirit of primitive Russophobia’ to the EU (Yastrzhembsky quoted in Sakwa, 2014, p. 21). The theme of Russophobia slowly gained a visible position in the Russian discourse.

The EU’s unwillingness to enter into a formal dialogue with the ECU was seen as a confirmation of its geopolitical ambition to build a sphere of influence at the expense of Russia. For example, at the EU–Russia summit of June 2012, the EU refused to start direct negotiations with the ECU, as Russia had demanded. While there may have been other practical concerns on the EU’s side (such as entering into negotiations with President Lukashenka, at a time when sanctions against Belarus were in place), this was read by Moscow as a refusal to recognise Russia’s regional leadership role. This, in turn, reinforced Moscow’s negative image of the EU refusing to recognise Russia as equal partner and great power.

The consolidation of these Russian images of the EU’s intentions was helped by an inherent tension in Brussels policies towards Eastern Europe that had developed after its ENP programme and its Russia policy got decoupled (Wolczuk, 2009). The ENP/EaP continued to be characterised by structural diplomacy, based on conditionality and aiming at long-term structural reforms along the EU ‘model’ and privileged relations. The Association Agreements aimed at associating neighbouring countries economically, approximating their regulation to that of the EU and aligning their foreign policies with Brussels. The strategic diplomacy vis-à-vis Russia, on the other hand, was built on the premise that Russia was an equal partner and a frank recognition of its interests was at the heart of the Strategic Partnership (Allen & Smith, 2012). It is clear that the two policies were incompatible: the EU could not create such a far-reaching association with exactly those countries, where Russia claimed to have ‘privileged interests’. This inevitably undermined the EU’s credibility as a genuine, well-meaning partner of Russia. It fed the negative images in Moscow about its intentions.

Mutual suspicion reached an unknown height as a result of increasing tensions over Ukraine in 2013. Kyiv had to make a choice between joining the ECU or signing an Association Agreement with the EU. This choice was understood on both sides as ultimately a geopolitical choice. Furthermore, Moscow and Russia accused each other of coercing

Ukraine to choose their camp. Lavrov, for example, stated that 'Brussels told Ukraine to choose between the West and Russia' and 'Kiev was forced into signing arrangements with the European Union' (Lavrov quoted in Haukkala, 2015, p. 34). The EU, for its part, kept on stressing that they were not imposing any choice upon Ukraine and accused Russia of doing so through its restrictive trade measures. Sakwa argues that 'Russia's Greater European initiatives were typically seen in the West as being little more than a cover for the establishment of a "Greater Russia" by stealth' (Sakwa, 2014, p. 30).

In summary, endogenous dynamics help to explain how we moved from cooperation to competition. This process was driven by an attributional bias, where action of the Other was increasingly understood in terms of its assumed negative intentions, namely maximising influence at the expense of the Self. Their own behaviour, on the other hand, was seen as the result of environmental constraints: a competitive strategic context for which they hold the other responsible, not themselves. This is how the logic of competition follows its own dynamics: reading everything through a prism of competition and rivalry, each negative action is understood as necessitating a counter reaction. This leads to a negative spiral. As images grow more negative, they provoke a counter reaction, which in turn only seems to confirm the negative images held. However, while we faced an accelerating logic of competition during that decade, inhibiting progress in EU–Russia relations, it did not spiral out of control. The pragmatic attitude on both sides stopped both sides from taking extreme action.

These dynamics also help us to situate Russia's refusal to accept the EU's normative hegemony. As noted above, Russia decided at a late stage that it would not join the ENP, claiming its right to be treated as an equal power. Gradually it started actively challenging the EU's hegemony by setting up its own normative counter-hegemony (Haukkala, 2008). Moscow started challenging unipolarity and Eurocentrism and put a strong emphasis on alternatives, such as multipolarity, sovereignty and non-interference. Refusing to accept the domination of Western views and narrow interpretations, it rejected the imposition of liberal democracy, the criteria of which are defined by the EU. Instead it emphasised Russia's right to choose its own path to democracy and launched the concept of 'sovereign democracy'. Moreover, as a driver of the BRICS consultation, it profiled itself as a 'neo-revisionist' power, challenging the lack of representativeness of international structures of governance (Sakwa, 2012, p. 453). Finally, in a neo-traditional ideology (Sakwa, 2014, p. 75), it embarked on a course where it presented itself as the true protector of Europe's 'traditional' values – a crystal clear challenge of the EU's implicit claim that it can speak for 'European civilisation' and thus of its normative hegemony.

### **Stage 3: the confrontation over Ukraine – from competition to conflict (2013–present)**

The situation on the eve of the Ukraine crisis was thus one where the EU and Russia were entangled in a logic of competition, the dynamics of which had been formed by an attribution of negative intentions. In a continuous process of action and reaction, mutual images grew more and more negative and the strategic context was increasingly defined as competitive. Yet, the competition, up to that point, was somehow contained. It did not spill over into a direct confrontation.

This has changed radically with the crisis over Ukraine. Competition between Russia and the EU is no longer perceived as one over institutional arrangements in the neighbourhood, normative hegemony and identities. This is the point where negative intentions of direct, coercive control got attributed to the Other. Clearly, this is also the point where the narratives on the rapid developments of late 2013 and early 2014 radicalised and diverged more than ever since the end of the Cold War. The developments are in line with the logic of geopolitical competition, which had developed over the years, but enters a fundamentally new stage, where competition turns into conflict. In short, it marked the beginning of a third stage in EU–Russia relations.

It is definitely not the ambition of this section to retrace the sequence of events. Rather the objective is to demonstrate how existing images of negative intentions were radicalised and how this resulted in a new level of power struggle, transcending disagreements on institutional arrangements in the overlapping neighbourhoods and involving issues of direct control.

As mentioned above, the Russian view was that the EU was seeking to force Ukraine into the signing of an Association Agreement in order to reinforce and extend its normative hegemony and enhance the influence of the Euro-Atlantic Community in the region. When the Euromaidan protests erupted, after Ukrainian President Yanukovich refused to sign the Association Agreement, this was seen by Moscow as ‘staged’ by the West (the words of Lavrov quoted in Haukkala, 2015, p. 34). The fall of Yanukovich was for Russia nothing else than a coup. Within the strong zero-sum geopolitical reading of international relations, that had become dominant in the Kremlin, this was seen as Russia ‘losing’ Ukraine to the West. In a Bzrezinski-like interpretation, this was a dramatic loss, undermining Russia’s chance to be a great global power and thus affecting its most vital interests (Bzrezinski, 1997). The West was clearly held responsible for the escalation and was seen as trying to get direct control over Ukraine and expanding its sphere of influence, at the expense of Russia. Moscow reacted with a radical shift in strategy. In a surprise act, it took control over Crimea, violating both the territorial integrity of Ukraine (of which it was one of the guarantors in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum) and the European border regime (according to which borders are inviolable and can only be changed through negotiated agreements).

Arguably, this radical shift of strategy was driven by Russia’s feeling that it had lost the competition over institutional arrangements in the neighbourhood. The change of regime in Kyiv was seen as a defeat in this power struggle. The new government would sign the Association Agreement and a further move towards the Euro-Atlantic community would be the result. This triggered a new strategy based on two pillars: active Russian control and preventing ‘Western’ control. First, fearing the loss of the strategically important harbour of Sevastopol and the Russian Black Sea fleet, Moscow obtained direct control over Crimea. Secondly, it tried to prevent the West from getting real control over Ukraine, with an active policy of destabilisation and polarising Ukraine. Russia’s role in the conflict in Eastern Ukraine should be seen predominantly in this light (Götz, 2015). Putin summarises the Russian perception as follows in his speech after the annexation of Crimea:

In short, we have every reason to assume that the infamous policy of containment, led in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, continues today. ... But there is a limit to everything. And with



Ukraine, our western partners have crossed the line, playing the bear and acting irresponsibly and unprofessionally. ... Russia found itself in a position it could not retreat from. If you compress the spring all the way to its limit, it will snap back hard. You must always remember this. (2014)

From an EU perspective, the annexation of Crimea was seen as a further confirmation of the bad intentions of Russia. Many regarded this as proof that Russia's ultimate ambition was to restore control over former Soviet states. The EU and the US imposed sanctions on Russia, trying to force it to change its course of action. This 'confirmation' of Moscow's bad intentions also provided the perfect opportunity for the EU to regard its own actions as legitimate and reasonable. In doing so it stubbornly ignored the – not necessarily intended – geopolitical impact of its EaP policy. The statement of Pierre Vimont (Executive Secretary-General of the EEAS) in an inquiry by the House of Lords is quite telling in this respect. He claimed that the EU 'never had any clear warning' from Russia that a DCFTA with Ukraine 'was unacceptable to them' (Vimont quoted in House of Lords, 2015, p. 53).

The significance of all this is that EU–Russia relations moved to a fundamentally new stage in several respects. First, the power struggle between the EU and Russia was no longer about institutional arrangements in the neighbourhood, nor about normative hegemony and identity production. Instead it was one of direct control, forceful and direct interaction. Second, the negative images both parties held of each other radicalised at this stage, with intentions seen as inimical and geopolitically driven. Finally, in terms of Gries's model, we moved from intergroup competition to intergroup conflict. The confrontation was not a direct military confrontation, but there was considerable military build-up and the war in Ukraine can be considered as 'a proxy conflict between the EU and Russia' (Haukkala, 2015, p. 37).

In relation to this shift from competition to conflict, it is important to reiterate Gries's point that the development from competition to conflict is contingent on many variables, and in no way automatic. Gries suggests that 'emotion lies at the juncture between intergroup competition and conflict' (2005, p. 256). Emotions of anger, humiliation and vengeance over injustice may be the central factors determining the shift from competition to conflict. For this to happen, however, agency is essential. Russia's desire to restore its great power status and its perception that these ambitions are actively thwarted by the West have no doubt generated latent feelings of humiliation. However, for humiliation to become manifest and active, it takes political forces to mobilise people. Undoubtedly this process preceded the crisis over Ukraine, but it radicalised considerably when the conflict erupted. Humiliation and anti-Westernism gained a much more prominent place in official discourse (see, for example, Putin's speech after annexation of Crimea; 2014). The discourse has also become much more exclusionary, as appears from Putin's reference to 'a fifth column' in his speech after the annexation of Crimea:

Some Western politicians are already threatening us with not just sanctions but also the prospect of increasingly serious problems on the domestic front. I would like to know what it is they have in mind exactly: action by a fifth column, this disparate bunch of 'national traitors', or are they hoping to put us in a worsening social and economic situation so as to provoke public discontent? (2014)

This quote exemplifies how in the aftermath of the crisis, dissident voices got increasingly labelled as unpatriotic. As a result they were delegitimised and excluded from acceptable discourse.

## Conclusion

The drastic evolution of EU–Russia relations is a very complex process driven by various factors. To understand this process, we need to understand not only exogenous factors, but also the endogenous dynamics of EU–Russia interaction. What drove their relations in the direction of polarisation? What made things happen when they happened? Could relations have developed in a different direction, for example, more cooperative relations between Moscow and Brussels or Russia firmly anchored in a pan-European structures?

To grasp the dynamics of EU–Russia relations, I relied on insights from social psychology. Kowert’s concept of ‘attributional bias’ helped us to understand how Russia and the EU ended up in dynamics of attributing each other negative intentions and reading each other’s behaviour in function of the images they had formed, rather than on the basis of their actual behaviour. The four-stage model of Gries helped us to understand the transition from cooperation to competition and conflict.

Three stages were distinguished in post-Cold War relations between the EU and Russia. The 1990s roughly represented a stage of cooperation, but characterised by strongly asymmetrical relations. The dynamics of EU–Russia interaction were characterised by master–pupil relations. Russia’s choice for a strategy of social mobility – a result of its frank recognition of internal problems – explains why it was prepared to accept an EU-centric agenda.

The transition to a stage of competition – of which the shape became clear between 2004 and late 2013 – occurred because the interaction got increasingly affected by a consequential comparison between Russia and the EU. The dynamics changed into a logic of competition, where zero-sum, geopolitical thinking gained the upper hand. The behaviour of the Other was attributed to its intrinsically negative intentions, while the behaviour of the Self was seen as a legitimate reaction, following from the constraints of a competitive environment. During this stage, however, competition was constrained by a pragmatic approach. It was essentially a power struggle over institutional arrangements: competing integration projects in the overlapping neighbourhoods and normative hegemony.

The conflict in Ukraine is the point where the constraints on this logic of competition disappeared. It is the point where competition transforms into conflict. This resulted from Moscow’s reading of events in Kyiv as a major geostrategic loss for Russia – in line with the logic of competition. Moscow understood the developments as ‘losing’ Ukraine to the West and as a humiliating defeat in the struggle over institutional arrangements in the neighbourhood. It opted for a drastic new coercive and confrontational strategy of gaining direct control (the annexation of Crimea) and of preventing the West from gaining real control over Ukraine (by destabilising and dividing the country). While this transition can only be understood on the basis of an escalating logic of competition, it constitutes a fundamentally new stage of direct conflict. The way out will no doubt be long and winding. It will require a stepwise change of images the EU and Russia hold of each other, so that trust can slowly be rebuilt.

## Notes

1. Agents are an integral part of the endogenous dynamics. From a Social Constructivist perspective they cannot be seen as bringing in their own ‘exogenous’ interests. Their interests are imbued with the meaning given through the social process of producing and reproducing interests.

2. Kowert (1998) applies attributional bias to the interaction between the UK and Egypt leading up to the Suez crisis. Gries (2005) applies his model to US–China relations.
3. As major funding programme for the NIS, TACIS ran from 1991 to 2006 and was aimed at promoting democracy, the rule of law and the transition to a market economy.
4. Feklyunina also mentions 2004 as the start of a new Russian PR campaign, seeking to create a more favourable image, and also increasingly presenting critique from the West as ‘a coordinated campaign’ (Feklyunina, 2008, p. 606).
5. Solana spoke of the ‘EU–Russia Strategic Partnership’ in October 1999 (Solana, 1999). In the same year, the term was used in the EU’s Common Strategy on Russia (European Council, 1999).
6. In 2015, it was renamed the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and Armenia and Kyrgyzstan joined the organisation.

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