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# Why Did Russia and the EU Clash Over Ukraine in 2014, But Not Over Armenia?

TOM CASIER

## *Abstract*

Drawing on the theory of script formulations, this essay explores why, in 2013–2014, the EU and Russia clashed over Ukraine but not over Armenia by analysing the evolution of discursive dynamics and the attribution of accountability between both actors. It argues that the positions of Russia and the EU were not simply a function of *a priori* defined strategic interests and expectations but were codetermined by and through the events and actions of others. The essay contributes to a better understanding of the non-linear dynamics behind the escalation of tensions between the EU and Russia.

SOMETHING STRANGE HAPPENED IN AUTUMN 2013. In September, Armenia announced, unexpectedly, that it would not sign the Association Agreement that it had negotiated with the EU over a long time. The news largely passed unnoticed. Two months later, the Ukrainian government announced that it had suspended preparations for the signing of its own Association Agreement, also unexpectedly. The latter decision set a chain of events into motion that no one could have imagined: the massive ‘Euromaidan’ protests on the streets of Kyiv, the fall of the Yanukovich regime, Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the war in Eastern Ukraine. These developments led to the deepest crisis in relations between Russia and the EU since the end of the Cold War.

Why did Russia and the EU clash so heavily over Ukraine, but not over Armenia? Though this is a very simple question, it is a difficult one to answer. Historical events are never mono-causal, nor are they linear. They develop as the result of a storm of factors and numerous contingencies. Similarities between the cases of Ukraine and Armenia in 2013–2014 are substantial: both were post-Soviet states, part of the EU’s Eastern Partnership, but had equally close relations with Russia. The differences are also striking: the strategic significance of the two countries, their (subjective) geographic positions, their different degrees of dependence on Russia, the timing of events, domestic factors and the strategies chosen. It is beyond the scope of this essay to examine all these factors. Instead, this

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essay seeks to answer the question of how discursive interaction dynamics between the EU and Russia changed along with the unfolding events in Armenia and Ukraine. Special attention is devoted to the way in which Brussels and Moscow held each other accountable. It further explores how this contributed to the escalation over Ukraine. In studying the evolution of discursive interactions, this essay seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the non-linear dynamics of the escalation of tensions between the EU and Russia. These dynamics help explain why the escalation occurred over Ukraine but not over Armenia, how it developed, and why it happened when it happened. In this sense, to understand these dynamics is to grasp an essential component of the EU–Russia conflict, complementary to understanding its structural reasons.

The argument put forward here is that the positions of Russia and the EU during the unfolding of events were not simply a function of *a priori* defined strategic interests and expectations but were codetermined by and through the events and the actions of each other, which led to a quickly shifting attribution of accountability. This argument will be developed against the background of script formulations theory and an extended discourse analysis. In essence, the theory claims that discourses about new developments and who is accountable for them are not produced against a pre-given script of order but are situational. It is in and through discursive interaction that order is constructed and accountability produced in a non-linear way. The essay's first section sets the context and reflects on the comparability of both cases. The second section introduces the theory of script formulations and briefly discusses methodological issues. Based on this, the third section provides an extended analysis of the Russian and EU discourses on both cases (Armenia, Ukraine). The essay concludes with reflections on the radicalisation of the attribution of accountability in the unfolding of the 2014 crisis over Ukraine.

### *Setting the context*

Rewind to September 2013. Both Armenia and Ukraine negotiated Association Agreements (AA) with the European Union (EU). These were bilateral agreements providing for a high degree of institutionalised cooperation between third countries and the EU. They were concluded in the framework of the Eastern Partnership and represented the first major legal output after ten years of the European Neighbourhood Policy. The agreements provided, amongst other things, for the establishment of a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). Consequently, they were incompatible with membership of the Russia-promoted Eurasian Customs Union (EaCU), which implied common external tariffs for trade.

In 2013, this incompatibility presented Armenia and Ukraine with a difficult choice. The expectation, in particular in Brussels, was for both countries to sign the Association Agreement at the Eastern Partnership summit in Vilnius on 28–29 November 2013. In the case of Armenia, negotiations were finalised in August 2013. In the case of Ukraine, the agreement was initialled on 30 March 2012, but later that year the EU added important conditions to the signing of the agreement, relating to the rule of law. Though time was pressing, few doubted that the conditions for signing the agreement would eventually be met.

Armenia, under President Serzh Sargsyan, was the first to make a 'U-turn' (Terzyan 2020) in September 2013, when it announced it would not sign the agreement with the

EU. The decision passed without much notice. Armenia eventually joined the Eurasian Economic Union (EaEU)<sup>1</sup> with Russia on 2 January 2015 and in place of the Association Agreement, signed the Armenia–EU Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) on 24 November 2017. CEPA provides for cooperation in different areas but leaves out the core elements of DCFTA and foreign policy alignment.

Ukraine abruptly suspended preparations for the signing of the Association Agreement on 21 November 2013, one week before the planned signing in Vilnius. This triggered the Euromaidan protests and the ousting of President Viktor Yanukovich. The Association Agreement was eventually signed by the new government and the EU in 2014. This happened in two stages. The political provisions were signed by the interim government of Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk on 21 March 2014. The economic part was signed by the new President, Petro Poroshenko, on 27 June 2014. A lot had happened in the meantime. Kyiv had witnessed massive protests, harsh repression and violence and, eventually, a change of regime. Russia had taken over the Crimean Peninsula by stealth and formally annexed it on 18 March 2014. Parallel to that, a war had erupted in Eastern Ukraine.

In stark contrast to the Armenian case, the refusal of the Ukrainian government to sign the Association Agreement in November 2014 received a lot of political and media attention and eventually triggered a confrontation between Russia and the EU. While the processes were quite different and the strategic significance of both countries diverged, the very different outcomes remain puzzling. After all, the similarities between both cases are obvious. Both were former Soviet republics, struggling with political and economic reforms. Both had important trade relations with the EU and Russia that were crucially important to their fragile economies. Both had made a European choice and were part of the EU's Eastern Partnership. At the same time, both were exposed to considerable Russian pressure not to sign the Association Agreement with the EU.

Along with the similarities, there were also substantial differences between the two cases. The strategic significance of Ukraine stands out as the most important one: the size and geostrategic location of the country make it seem logical that the Ukraine case caused far bigger waves. Also, more specific factors are important, such as the presence of the naval base in Sevastopol, which was leased to Russia and hosted its Black Sea fleet. Armenia, a much smaller country, with a more peripheral location from an EU perspective, was strategically marginal (Delcour 2019). Moreover, the symbolic significance of both countries differed significantly. Many Russians regarded Ukraine as a country with which they were strongly interwoven, 'an inalienable part of Russia itself' (Hopf 2016, p. 248). President Vladimir Putin stated of Ukraine: 'We are one people' (Putin 2013b). Consequently, from a Russian perspective, the perceived 'loss' of Ukraine in 2014 implied nothing less than 'an existential threat' (Hopf 2016, p. 248). Also, there were important differences domestically. To name but one, Ukraine had gone through the Orange Revolution in 2004 and had a much stronger tradition of civil society protest. Finally, in terms of dependence, there were important differences. While both countries

<sup>1</sup>The Eurasian Economic Union, which started its work on 1 January 2015, was the successor of the Eurasian Customs Union.

depended on Russia in terms of trade and energy, Armenia was also relying on Russia for its security, finding itself in a precarious position due to its acrimonious relations with two of its immediate neighbours, Azerbaijan and Turkey.

These structural factors do not tell the whole story, however. As several authors have emphasised, one needs to understand the dynamics of the process as well (Haukkala 2015; Casier 2016; Hopf 2016). The idea of process dynamics suggests that 'EU–Russia relations have been transformed *in and through their interaction*' resulting in a 'logic of competition' (Casier 2016, p. 377). Likewise, Haukkala considers the Ukraine crisis as 'a culmination of... negative trends' (Haukkala 2015, p. 33). Hopf, in turn, adds a crucial element of contingency to this, speaking of the 'concatenation of events', 'the contingent circumstances of that moment' that can explain the different dynamics in Ukraine and Armenia (Hopf 2016, p. 228). This study seeks to make a contribution to this strand of scholarship. The focus is on discursive dynamics: the basic assumption here is that how EU and Russian representatives framed events and the positions they took were not simply a function of their defined strategic interests and expectations but were at least partially determined by and through the events and the actions of others. This does not mean that discourses appear in a void: they do build on previous narratives (Hopf 2016), but it is at critical junctures that interpretations shift and are reformulated. The cases of Armenia and Ukraine in 2013 and 2014 form an interesting comparison because they triggered very different discourses and attributions of accountability. The next section will develop the role of discursive dynamics and accountability from a theoretical perspective.

#### *Scripts and accountability*

To grasp the role of the non-directional discursive dynamics in the Armenian and Ukrainian cases, this essay turns to a discursive theory from the field of psychology on script formulations (Edwards & Potter 1993). Discursive psychology was formulated by Edwards, Potter and others as a theory that outlines 'how psychological categories and constructions are used by people in everyday and institutional settings' (Potter & te Molder 2005, p. 2). Hereby it rests on the assumption that what is being stated is situationally embedded and that the 'point of view of the interactant is basic to understanding talk-in-interaction' (Potter & te Molder 2005, p. 3).

For the purposes of this analysis, it offers a useful model as it captures how categorisation and accountability are produced through and in discursive interaction rather than on the basis of pre-given categories and expectations, particularly in the case of new developments. The unexpected developments over Armenia and Ukraine in 2013–2014 forced the EU and Russia to qualify the situation, to take new positions and to determine the other's accountability. Discursive psychology helps us in retracing this evolution and its contingency.

A central concept in this theory is the notion of 'scripts'. A script formulation is a set of 'descriptions of actions and events that characterize them as having a recurring, predictable, sequential pattern' (Edwards 1995, p. 319). Classic script theory expects a certain order of scripts. Script-W refers to the 'ordered and orderly features of the world'; Script-PC refers to the 'features of an individual's perception and cognition'; and Script-D refers to the 'way events are described as dis/orderly' (Potter & te Molder 2005, p. 31).

The recurring example is that of a visit to a restaurant. The guests enter with a certain script in mind of the 'orderly', predictable features of a restaurant (Script-W). Script-PC formulates their perception and cognition of the restaurant in a given situation. Script-D then appears as the description of how this restaurant deviated (or not) from Script-W, from what it was supposed to be like in an 'orderly' world. Script-D is thus expected to result from the perceived deviations, from the mismatch between what one expects from a restaurant and what this particular place looked like. In this sense it is merely a by-product of previous scripts, resulting from the gap between what was expected and what was experienced. On this basis, accountability is assumed to be determined.

Edwards (1994, 1995) rejects this frame of analysis. In his approach, scripts are not produced in the order given above, but they 'construct events in particular ways as part of particular actions at particular moments in interaction' (Potter & te Molder 2005, p. 32). Script-D does not result from the discrepancy (or lack thereof) between what is 'orderly' and expected and what is experienced but is 'constructed from an indefinite range of possibilities' (Potter & te Molder 2005, p. 33) In other words, the description in Script-D does not result from 'perceptual anomalies or expectation failures', but 'with regard to interactive and rhetorical contingencies' (Edwards 1994, p. 241). Thus, 'the status of something being an expectation failure is itself discursively produced' (Edwards 1994, p. 241). Order, in other words, is not a pre-given script. Instead, it is through interaction that order is actively shaped and displayed. Scripts are thus 'discursive productions: ways in which people project, reconstruct, and render intelligible ... activities when producing accounts of them' (Edwards 1994, p. 242).

This has important consequences for accountability. Accountability is not attributed on the basis of the discrepancy between the expected, orderly 'reality' and the disorderly experience (the restaurant not living up to one's expectations); it is in the description itself and in the categories used that motive, cause and accountability are constructed (Edwards & Potter 1993, p. 34). It is thus the script formulations themselves that produce accountability. In the example of the restaurant, complaints about the negative experience and the attributed responsibility do not result from expectation failures; the categories of what a 'real' restaurant should be like are themselves constructed in the conversation. Script-D does not follow from the deviations experienced but generates and 'warrants the complaint' (Potter & te Molder 2005, p. 33).

Applying this to the topic of the essay, the theory could be illustrated as follows. Script-W is what key actors (Russia, the EU) expect the European international order to look like and what core interests they expect to be respected. Script-PC is the perception and cognition of events (such as the Euromaidan protests, the annexation of Crimea and the non-signing of the Association Agreement). In a 'conventional' approach, Script-D formulations are the description of how these events deviate from the expected features of the European international order. Those who are perceived as responsible are held accountable for these deviations and expectation failures. In the discursive psychological approach of Edwards adopted in this essay, the scripts do not follow this strict order. It is in the situated description of the events, in interaction, that agents construct the categories of European international order, its features and criteria. It is in the situated description of events that cause is attributed, accountability is generated and other agents are held responsible for deviations and anomalies.

What does this imply for the analysis of the Armenian and Ukrainian cases? It means that, to understand why tensions between Russia and the EU escalated over Ukraine and not over Armenia, it is neither sufficient to explore the structural reasons behind it, nor is it sufficient to study 'static' perceptions. Instead, what we need to understand is how in the course of the interactions, as contingent events unroll, the categories and criteria for order/disorder, compliant/deviating behaviour are constructed. In doing so we can grasp the endogenous dynamics of the process as well as contingency.

In this essay, this approach is operationalised as follows. The empirical analysis traces how the EU and Russia as key 'ordering agents'<sup>2</sup> (Haukkala 2021) in their common neighbourhood shape and change accountability through the embedded description of the situation, generating certain criteria of order, constructing categories of Self and Other, and attributing accountability to the latter. This is done by focusing on the discourse of leading representatives of both actors in public statements around both events: Armenia's decision not to sign the Association Agreement in September 2013 and the developments in Ukraine from the decision under Yanukovich not to sign the Association Agreement in November 2013 until the annexation of Crimea and its immediate aftermath.

The limitations of this approach are obvious. By looking at the discourse of 'key representatives' of the EU and Russia, we only look at the role of one set of actors and not at public debates or media reporting. Moreover, the analysis considers only the script formulations that were stated in public, as there is no access to information on how these formulations developed behind closed doors. This implies that we can only take into account what was publicly stated by key diplomatic actors, possibly for strategic effect. Neither does this method allow us to grasp how different non-governmental actors influenced different positions or how individual EU member states related to the EU's discourse.

The texts analysed in this essay are public statements by key representatives of the Russian Federation (President Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov) and of the EU (President of the European Commission José Manuel Barroso, European Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy Štefan Füle, President of the European Council Herman Van Rompuy and High Representative Catherine Ashton). Statements were selected in the following time period: from 10 July 2013 (the visit of Commissioner Füle to Armenia to take stock of the country's progress in the final stage of negotiations over the Association Agreement) until 17 April 2014 (the joint Geneva statement of Russia, Ukraine, the US and the EU on initial steps to de-escalate the conflict in Eastern Ukraine). This time period covers the decision of Armenia not to sign the Association Agreement (3 September 2013), Ukraine's decision under Yanukovich to suspend preparations for the signing of the Association Agreement (21 November 2013), the Euromaidan protests, the fall of Yanukovich (22 February 2014) and the annexation of Crimea (18 March 2014), as key events that rewrote the script

<sup>2</sup>Ordering agents are great powers that have 'the capacity, ability and willingness to establish, uphold and project (sub-)systemwide ordering structures and practices—institutions, norms, values and principles—and as a consequence, to have intended/desired ordering effects' (Haukkala 2021, pp. 3–4).



formulations and the attribution of accountability. Texts were selected on the basis of their reference to Armenia and Ukraine and relevance in terms of accountability (leading, for example, to the exclusion of purely technical statements). In total 108 primary sources were selected.

The analysis of the primary sources consisted of several steps. In line with script theory, the analysis first explored how the situation was defined and which criteria of order were invoked to do so. Second, it assessed how the actors (Self and Other) were categorised and what attributes were assigned. Third, the analysis determined to what extent and how those actors were held accountable. The latter included revealing who was held responsible and for what, how was it phrased, which intentions were ascribed to the Other and how this related to the Self. The central method applied was to analyse accountability based on semantic oppositions that were generated in relevant speech acts. Revealing how texts create semantic oppositions to generate meaning is a basic technique of discourse analysis (Ruquoy 1990).

### *The case of Armenia*

This section first outlines the background to Armenia's choice in September 2013 not to sign the Association Agreement with the EU. This is followed by an analysis of the EU's and Russia's script formulations and attribution of accountability for this decision, employing the methods described in the previous section.

### *Explaining Armenia's choice*

Armenia's unexpected decision in September 2013 not to sign the Association Agreement with the EU was the result of a complex mixture of domestic and international factors. According to Terzyan (2020, p. 44), Armenia's pro-European, civilisational choice had formed the 'core rationale' behind its pro-European policy for many years. Yet, this ambition collided with the structural constraints following from 'Russia's adamant resistance to large-scale Europeanization in the sphere of its "privileged interests"' (Terzyan 2020, p. 49). This pressure could not easily be resisted because of Armenia's dependence on Russia. This dependence occurred in three different fields. First, Armenia imports most of its natural gas from Russia. Moscow played the energy card in the run-up to Yerevan's decision and increased the price of gas transmitted to Armenia by 50% (Terzyan 2020, p. 52). Second, over two million Armenians live and work in Russia (Terzyan 2019, p. 30). Remittances and seasonal labour are of crucial importance to the country.<sup>3</sup> Third, Armenia is heavily dependent on Russia for its security. The first war over Nagorno-Karabakh, which started in 1988, was ended by a ceasefire in 1994, but no peace treaty was signed. Tensions with Azerbaijan remained high and border incidents were common. This 'security vulnerability' strongly determined Armenia's foreign policy

<sup>3</sup>According to the World Bank, remittances in 2013 made up 19.7% of the Armenian GDP ('Personal Remittances, Received (% of GDP)—Armenia', World Bank, available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS?locations=AM>, accessed 27 May 2021).

(Delcour 2019, p. 447). In a context of rising military spending whereby Azerbaijan's expenditure in 2013 was more than seven times higher than that of Armenia (Vasilyan 2017, p. 34), Yerevan saw Russia as 'its major security guarantee' (Delcour 2019, p. 447). Furthermore, Armenia is a member of the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). Russia has a military base in Gyumri and guards the border with the Azeri exclave of Nakhichevan. This attests to the important role that Russia plays as Armenia's security provider.<sup>4</sup>

In its foreign policy doctrine of 2007 Armenia considered itself to be 'in a strategic partnership with Russia' but having chosen 'a European model of development' (Vasilyan 2017, p. 33). Delcour (2019, p. 447) speaks in this respect of 'a disconnect between, on the one hand, the country's cultural, civilizational identification with Europe and, on the other hand, its security vulnerability'. Armenia's foreign policy thus could be described as a flexible policy of 'complementarity', seeking equal cooperation with Russia and the EU (Vasilyan 2017, p. 33). However, the clash of EU and Russian integration processes pushed Yerevan to a foreign policy of 'supplementarity' rather than 'complementarity', prioritising relations with Russia while continuing (a lower level of) cooperation with the EU (Vasilyan 2017, p. 33). In this context, it is noteworthy that the Armenian leadership had already started changing its position before the decision not to sign the Association Agreement with the EU. Yerevan criticised the EU for double standards, combining democracy promotion with an 'intensifying energy partnership with Azerbaijan', and for its incapacity to tone down Baku's 'belligerence towards Armenia' (Aberg & Terzyan 2018, p. 166).

#### *Accountability in EU and Russian scripts*

How then was Armenia's decision not to sign the Association Agreement framed in Russian and EU discourses? Who was held accountable and how was the issue categorised?

EU statements prior to Armenia's decision not to sign the Association Agreement date back to July 2013. They have to be seen in a context whereby EU representatives believed they were in the last phase of negotiations and that Yerevan would sign the agreement later that year (European Commission 2013a). When referring to Armenia, the emphasis was on 'inclusive partnership' (Füle 2013a). Russia was either not mentioned or only by allusion, with reference to a 'win-win for all' (Füle 2013a). Conversely, Russian statements regarding Armenia before the decision hardly referred to the EU. Foreign Minister Lavrov (2013a) referred to relations with Armenia as 'strategic relations of allies'. In short, prior to September, the discourses on both sides hardly referred to the Other and did not anticipate the failure of negotiations; thus, there was no attribution of accountability.

This changed with Armenian President Sargsyan's surprise announcement on 3 September 2013 that his country intended to join the Eurasian Customs Union (EaCU), a move incompatible with the deep free trade provisions of the

<sup>4</sup>On the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, see Seçkin Köstem's contribution to this special issue.

Association Agreement (AA). In a brief memo the day after, the European Commission stated:

We take note of Armenia's apparent wish to join the Customs Union. We look forward to understanding better from Armenia what their intentions are and how they wish to ensure compatibility between these and the commitments undertaken through the Association Agreement and DCFTA. ... We want to underline once again that AA/DCFTA is a blueprint for reforms beneficial for all and not a zero-sum game. (European Commission 2013b)

A few things stand out, not least the surprise and confusion over Armenia's announcement, despite its having concluded negotiations with the EU. There are two references to the compatibility of the AA/DCFTA with Armenia's choice to sign up to the EaCU. This stands in sharp contrast with statements after Ukraine took a similar decision, as discussed below. The assertion that the situation is not a 'zero-sum game' could be seen as indirect and mild attribution of accountability to Russia. In a lecture in St Petersburg, two days after Armenia's announcement, President of the European Council Van Rompuy spoke positively about Europeans and Russians being part of a 'European family' (Van Rompuy 2013) and Russia as a key economic and security partner. The only indirect reference to Armenia's decision earlier that month was about the right of common neighbours to choose their own path, while also emphasising that an Association Agreement would not damage their relations with Russia.

A statement by Commissioner Füle of 11 September is the only text that went a step further in the attribution of accountability. While repeating that 'the Eastern Partnership is not against them [Russia], against their interests' (Füle 2013c), Füle now recognised that the AA/DCFTA and EaCU were incompatible for legal reasons. Accountability sneaked into the discourse, suggesting that the EU and Russia were playing different games without stating this explicitly. Binary semantic oppositions were created between the intentions and behaviour of both actors, whereby the EU's good intentions were underlined, without explicitly stating (but suggesting) that Russia represented the exact opposite. The EU was said to be in the business of value promotion and not playing 'a strategic game'. Similarly, Füle described himself as 'a believer in win-win games' and stated that he was 'not in the business of creating new walls'. Second, Russia was accused of having used diverse forms of pressure, such as 'misuse of energy pricing', 'artificial trade obstacles', 'military cooperation and security guarantees' and 'instrumentalization of protracted conflict' (Füle 2013c). He added: 'Any threats from Russia linked to the possible signing of agreements with the European Union are unacceptable. ... This is not how international relations should function on our continent in the twenty-first century. Such actions clearly breach the principles to which all European states have subscribed'. Füle also emphasised that partners of the EU 'must enjoy full sovereignty over their own trade policies' and suggested that Russia bore the main responsibility for the incompatibility of both projects because it had created the Eurasian Customs Union after the launching of the Eastern Partnership (Füle 2013c).

Despite the accountability generated, Füle still referred to 'our Russian friends' and emphasised the readiness of the EU to 'work with our neighbours to find ways of maximising the compatibility between the EU and Eurasian structures in a way that can

facilitate trade and economic integration. To the benefit of our neighbour but also to the benefit of the neighbour of our neighbours' (Füle 2013c). In sum, the discourse started generating accountability, suggesting Russia was playing a different, strategic, zero-sum game, while the EU was only engaged in value promotion to the benefit of both its EaP neighbours and Russia. Yet, the accusations were still mild and left open the option of overcoming differences and improving compatibility between both initiatives.

Let us now turn to the Russian discourse after Armenia's announcement of 3 September 2013. Lavrov, in a speech on the occasion of the negotiations on Armenia's accession to the EaCU in November 2013, made no reference to the EU but simply confirmed the partnership with Yerevan: 'Russia always believes in the allied nature of its partnership in its relations with the Republic of Armenia' (Lavrov 2013d). Talking to the Valdai Club earlier, on 19 September 2013, Putin defended Russia's position *vis-à-vis* post-Soviet states who sought to sign the AA in a pragmatic way, referring to Russia's concern about the rules of origin:

We suspect that we'll receive products from third countries disguised as Moldovan or Ukrainian goods. That's what worries us. This has nothing to do with trying to put pressure on a sovereign right to make decisions. ... There is nothing unusual or selfish here. We have to think about our own national economic interests. (Putin 2013b).

He added: 'We have no desire or aspiration to revive the Soviet empire with respect to politics or [infringements of] sovereignty. This is obvious, do you understand? It's not advantageous for us, and it is also both impossible and unnecessary' (Putin 2013b). Both points seem a defensive reaction against EU allegations. However, in both Russian and EU statements, Armenia quickly faded into the background. As of November 2013, the attention shifted entirely to Ukraine.

### *The case of Ukraine*

In contrast to the Armenian case, the attribution of accountability over Ukraine cannot be seen independently from a longer, volatile process full of abrupt turns. The focus of accountability changed over time. It was not solely related to decisions concerning the signing of the Association Agreement, but also to the escalation and regime change in Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea, war in Eastern Ukraine and sanctions. Moreover, the perception of who was in the 'winning position' shifted between Russia and the EU and—with it—changed scripts of accountability. After retracing the key steps in the unfolding of the Ukraine crisis, this section analyses the evolution of statements by key EU and Russian actors and how they attributed accountability.

### *How the Ukraine crisis unfolded*

The initialling of the Association Agreement between the EU and Ukraine happened as early as 2012. On the EU's side, however, there were serious concerns about the state of democracy and the rule of law under the presidency of Yanukovich. The EU made the signing of the Association Agreement, scheduled for the Eastern Partnership summit in Vilnius in November 2013, conditional on improvement in these two areas. In particular,

the release of former prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko from jail became a *de facto* requirement. The conditions were repeated at the EU–Ukraine summit meeting of 25 February 2013. All signs pointed in the direction of a strong willingness of Ukraine’s leadership to sign the Association Agreement at the Vilnius summit. The Ukrainian government adopted a ‘Plan on Priority Measures for European Integration of Ukraine’ to pave the way for the signing. On 18 September, the Ukrainian government approved the draft Association Agreement and the expectation was that the *Verkhovna Rada*, Ukraine’s parliament, would pass the necessary laws ahead of the Vilnius summit. Overall, there was optimism about the outcome, both in Kyiv and in Brussels. Yet, one week before the Vilnius summit, on 21 November 2013, the Ukrainian government unexpectedly suspended preparations for the signing. This came after ongoing pressure by Russia (Haukkala 2015; Terzyan 2020).

People took to the streets in a reaction to the decision to suspend the signing of the Association Agreement, in large-scale demonstrations that became known as the Euromaidan protests. They were not so much a defence of the highly technical Association Agreement but a call for reform and a protest against the authoritarian practices and corruption of the Yanukovich regime. Choosing the EU was seen as choosing reform and modernisation. Sticking with Russia was regarded as choosing stagnation. After attempts at violent repression by the regime, the initially peaceful protests resulted in riots and escalated in the course of December through February. This was a time of great confusion, as the government in Kyiv sent mixed signals regarding its willingness to continue negotiating the Association Agreement with the EU, while simultaneously concluding agreements with Russia. Russia seemed to have won over Ukraine, but the EU still maintained some hope of saving the Association Agreement. Gradually, as shown below, the focus in both discourses shifted to the Euromaidan protests and their violent repression, and both parties held each other accountable for the escalation.

On 21 February 2014, a compromise deal was struck between Yanukovich and the opposition leaders, providing for early elections and a return to the 2004 constitution. The deal was signed off as witnesses by the French, German and Polish foreign ministers, but not by Russia.<sup>5</sup> One day later, President Yanukovich’s position had become untenable; he fled and the interim government of Yatsenyuk assumed power. A few days later, Russia seized control of Crimea by stealth. After a controversial and hastily organised referendum, the peninsula was formally integrated into the Russian Federation on 18 March 2014. In the following months, protests in the Donbas region in eastern Ukraine spilled over into a full-scale war and the new government in Kyiv lost control over the area.

Unlike the case of Armenia, the choice of Ukraine to sign the AA was the subject of deep domestic political polarisation, interwoven with differing views on the quasi-authoritarian nature of Yanukovich’s regime and the need for democratisation. It was this domestic entanglement, more than anything else, that pushed the events in the direction of escalation, which, in turn, radicalised the discourse of Russia and the EU concerning each other’s responsibility.

<sup>5</sup>Russia’s special envoy to Ukraine, Vladimir Lukin, participated, but did not sign.

In contrast to the case of Armenia, radically different explanations have been given for the confrontation between Russia and the EU over Ukraine. A large part of the scholarly literature has focused on the structural reasons of the confrontation. Some have referred to opposing views of the post-Cold War order in Moscow and Brussels, whereby Russia preferred a multipolar order and the West an extension of the Euro-Atlantic order (Sakwa 2015a). Others have referred to clashing integration projects and the integration dilemma that followed from it (Charap & Troitskiy 2013). Still others have pointed to colliding spheres of influence (Malyarenko & Wolff 2018). In some cases, the EU and the West more generally were blamed for the confrontation. Sakwa (2015b), for example, wrote about the death of Europe's peace project in its failure to create a secure Europe without dividing lines. He claimed that the EU had turned into a competitive geopolitical actor. Mearsheimer (2014), from a different perspective, argued that the overly hegemonic and expansionist attitude of the West was a key factor. Others, such as Wilson (2014), put the blame predominantly on Russia. Despite their differences, what almost all of these analyses have in common is that they focus on structural factors. A fairly limited amount of literature has looked beyond the structural reasons of the Ukraine crisis into the endogenous dynamics of EU–Russia relations (Haukkala 2015; Casier 2016; Hopf 2016). The subsequent section will do exactly this and analyse the rapidly changing discursive dynamics between the EU and Russia over Ukraine. In that way, this essay also contributes to the special issue's overall purpose, which is to integrate structural factors and agency as well as ideas and material factors in explanations of Russian foreign policy (see the introduction to the special issue).

#### *Accountability in EU and Russian scripts*

As the attribution of accountability in EU and Russian discourses changed with the course of events, the analysis of primary sources is divided into four stages. This division is based on key events and on the ruptures that arose from the primary sources themselves.

##### *Stage 1: before Ukraine's suspension of preparations for the signing of the Association Agreement (21 November 2013)*

Prior to 21 November 2013, when Kyiv still seemed determined to sign the Association Agreement, Russia's discourse emphasised the negative economic impact of Ukraine engaging in a DCFTA with the EU. This was mainly linked to the impact that abolishing tariffs and copying EU standards and technical regulations might have on Ukraine's trade with Russia and on concerns about the rules of origin. This, according to Lavrov (2013b), would force Russia to take 'protection measures envisaged under the CIS Free Trade Zone Treaty'.

Overall, the discourse was rather pragmatic. It put a strong emphasis on two elements. First, while Putin stressed that Russia and Ukraine were 'one nation' (Putin 2013a), the sovereignty of Ukraine was stated clearly on several occasions: 'Today, Ukraine is an independent state, and we respect that fact. Naturally, selecting priorities and selecting allies is the national, sovereign right of the Ukrainian people and the legitimate Ukrainian government' (Putin 2013b). Furthermore, Ukraine's choice regarding the direction of

integration would be respected: ‘We’ll see what the Ukrainian leadership will choose. No matter what choice is made, we will treat it with respect’ (Putin 2013a). The gap between these statements and Russia’s actions in early 2014 is obvious.

A second central element was the emphasis on the need for continued dialogue with the EU, which ideally would result in ‘a common economic and humanitarian space from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean’ (Lavrov 2013b). This common space would allow Ukraine to join the EaCU and to have free trade with the EU, thus overcoming the problem of incompatibility. At the same time, the EU was held accountable for the lack of success of this dialogue. Accountability was assigned in two ways. A semantic opposition was created between ‘valuable’ consultations, offering ‘the opportunity to consider the positions of all interested parties before reaching decisions’ in place of ‘post-factum consultations’, ‘without the opportunity of changing the format ... and without considering the concerns and interests of the Russian party’ (Lavrov 2013b). Moreover, the stalling of negotiations between Russia and the EU was attributed to the latter’s ‘excessive demands’ (Putin 2013b). Finally, the EU was held accountable for not respecting the neutrality of Ukraine: ‘We show respect for the out-of-bloc status of Ukraine. We expect our partners to continue following this status, and its out-of-bloc priorities’ (Lavrov 2013c).<sup>6</sup>

The EU’s discourse, in turn, was characterised by optimism about Ukraine’s progress (Füle 2013d). The emphasis was on making the Russian and EU integration initiatives compatible: ‘It is crucial to define a vision for the coexistence and mutual enrichment of the regional projects’ (Füle 2013b).

After Armenia’s decision to scrap the Association Agreement with the EU, the tone became both conciliatory and accusing. The idea that this was not a zero-sum game was regularly repeated:

We have always tried to make clear that the Association Agreement brings benefits not only to the European Union and Ukraine, but also to others, and Russia is going to be definitely among them. We made it very clear that this is not a choice between Moscow and Brussels. We want our partners to have good relations and cooperation with Russia. ... And the issue of incompatibility is not a geopolitical game, it is a practical issue. (Füle 2013d)

At the same time, Russia was accused of playing a strategic game and exerting pressure on neighbours (Füle 2013c). An interesting new discursive opposition was created: a party would either give away part of its sovereignty by joining the EaCU or maintain its sovereignty when signing an Association Agreement with the EU. Füle also seemed to make authoritative claims based on the experience of European integration as a much older process and suggested that Russia was responsible for creating new dividing lines, referring to ‘two integration projects—one tested by decades and the other one just in the making. We have a sincere intention to do anything possible—whether we talk about tariffs or regulatory framework—to prevent new walls in Europe. We cannot afford them, Russia cannot afford them’ (Füle 2013d).

<sup>6</sup>The Russian term used by Lavrov for ‘out-of-bloc’ is ‘vneblokovi’ and could also be translated as non-aligned.

It is striking that, at this stage, both the EU and Russia apparently still believed the two regional projects could be made compatible within a free trade area from Lisbon to Vladivostok.

*Stage 2: the aftermath of Ukraine's decision and Euromaidan (21 November 2013–17 February 2014)*

Ukraine's decision to suspend preparations for the AA was, as Ashton (2013) noted, 'a disappointment not just for the EU but, we believe, for the people of Ukraine'. This disappointment was clearly articulated at the Eastern Partnership summit in Vilnius on 28–29 November 2013. Commission President Barroso stated that the days of 'limited sovereignty' were over and that the EU could not accept a 'veto of a third country'. He added, 'we will not give in to external pressure, not the least from Russia'.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, the hope that Ukraine could be convinced to sign the Association Agreement was still alive; Kyiv had indeed expressed its intention to do so, but only after trilateral talks between the EU, Ukraine and Russia. These hopes were reinforced by the popular protests on the streets of Kyiv in favour of the agreement. As these protests grew and faced increased police brutality, the emphasis in December 2013 shifted to support for the 'freedom-loving' Ukrainians who had chosen the path of European integration:

[A] large part of the population has made up its mind about where Ukraine should go. ... Their voice has been heard. I firmly believe that Ukraine and the European Union have been bound in association—unprecedented by its depth, breadth, and strength—not only by the letter, but by the spirit of this Association Agreement, which is maybe worth a million times more than a simple stroke of the pen. I admire the Ukrainian nation's love for freedom and the maturity of its European spirit. It is not the European Union's compensation [benefits] that they seek; it is a chance to live by European values. (Füle 2013e)

Füle added: 'The people of Ukraine, its independence and sovereignty should not become victims of geopolitical zero-sum games or secret agreements' (Füle 2013e). Here, accountability is clearly attributed to Russia. Yet, at the same time, EU leaders repeatedly expressed the belief that dialogue with Russia could help to clarify that the Association Agreement would not harm Russian interests (Füle 2013e). At the end of January 2014, Barroso (2014a) stated: 'We need to change the perception that one region's gain is another region's pain. We in the European Union are against the mentality of block against block [*sic*]'. References to the need for dialogue continued to appear until early February (Barroso 2014a; Füle 2014a).

The Russian discourse, on the other hand, remained predominantly pragmatic and mild until February 2014. Putin described the EU–Russia summit of 28 January 2014 as having happened in a 'very open and constructive atmosphere' (Putin 2014a). Here, it is again important to highlight context. First, the likelihood that an Association Agreement would be signed between Ukraine and the EU was low at that point; hence, Russia was in

<sup>7</sup>'EU Rejects Russia "Veto" on Ukraine Agreement', *BBC News*, 29 November 2013, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-25154618>, accessed 27 May 2021.



a stronger position, despite concerns about the escalating Euromaidan protests. Second, the Olympic winter games in Sochi were scheduled for 7–23 February 2014. On the eve of the games, Russia pursued goodwill diplomacy, which was visible in, amongst other things, the release of imprisoned oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky on 20 December 2013 and of two members of Pussy Riot on 23 December 2013.

In a press conference on 19 December 2013, Putin kept on emphasising Russia's need to take economic measures if Ukraine signed the Association Agreement: 'We are not against association but are simply saying that we will have to protect our own economy because we have a free trade zone with Ukraine. ... We will have no choice but to close our doors' (Putin 2013c). He specified that this would only involve the cancellation of trade preferences and not discrimination against Ukrainian goods.

Putin also reproached the EU. First, mirroring EU complaints against Russia, he implicitly suggested that the EU was dividing Europe, stating that it was 'unacceptable to create new, dividing lines. On the contrary, we need to work together on building a new, unified Europe' (Putin 2014a). Second, he accused the EU of intervening and not respecting the sovereign choice of the Ukrainian people: 'I think the Ukrainian people are quite capable of deciding this for themselves. In any case, Russia has no intention of ever intervening' (Putin 2014a).

Lavrov echoed this idea in a speech on 1 February 2014. He added an interesting semantic opposition between the words and deeds of the EU:

It is counterproductive to use fine words, sign under high principles, but act otherwise in practice. Russia, Ukraine and the EU are strategic partners. We do not want any 'behind-the-scene[s]' manoeuvres either, to play the old card 'with us or against us'. This is thinking from the last epoch which should be relegated to history or, even better, disappear. (Lavrov 2014a)

Along similar lines, he accused the EU of hypocrisy: 'We are hearing slightly different, earlier statements, that Ukraine must make a choice, and this choice should be in favour of the EU. It is evident that there is a mismatch between reality and what is supposed to be reality' (Lavrov 2014a). These statements are a harbinger of a much sharper rhetoric that would gain the upper hand a fortnight later, amidst the events of 18–22 February, when the Euromaidan protests took a revolutionary turn, eventually leading to the fall of Yanukovych.

### *Stage 3: the events of 18–22 February 2014*

The events of 18–22 February triggered the radicalisation of the Russian discourse. This became very clear in several statements by Foreign Minister Lavrov. The idea of a *coup d'état* entered the discursive scene: 'We cannot describe this otherwise than as an attempt at a *coup d'état* and to seize power by force. Certainly, the extremists are guilty, they have been attempting to bring the situation to a force scenario for weeks and months' (Lavrov 2014b). A few weeks after the fall of Yanukovych, Putin spoke of 'an anti-constitutional takeover, an armed seizure of power' (Putin 2014b). Moreover, the West was held responsible for the 'anarchy' and 'chaos' in Ukraine (Putin 2014b). Lavrov likewise claimed:

I cannot leave aside the responsibility of the West (at least many Western countries), who attempted to interfere with these events in all possible ways, supported [the] actions of the opposition outside the legal framework ... and generally, supported provocative actions. At the same time, they insistently and consistently shied away from any principled assessments of the extremists' actions, including neo-Nazi and anti-Semitic manifestations. ... Now they are attempting to unfairly shift the blame on us. We hear accusations from some Western political actors that Russia is attempting to 're-Sovietize' the post-Soviet space, is guilty of everything. (Lavrov 2014b)

Further, the West was accused of 'double standards', blaming the Ukrainian authorities instead of the 'extremists', and of polarising the situation (Lavrov 2014c). In Lavrov's words, 'it is time to stop using Ukraine as token money in geopolitical games, to express different appeals to Ukrainian leaders formulated on a "with us or against us" basis' (Lavrov 2014c). Finally, the West was again accused of interference. Here, it is interesting to note that the accountability shifted to the West rather than the EU alone, indicating that Russia read the events no longer as a collision of regional projects but as a global confrontation.

The possibility of a Russian intervention popped up. Putin stated:

If we see such uncontrolled crime spreading to the eastern regions of the country, and if the people ask us for help, while we already have the official request from the legitimate president, we retain the right to use all available means to protect those people. We believe this would be absolutely legitimate. This is our last resort.

However, he added: 'I proceed from the idea that we will not have to do anything of the kind in eastern Ukraine' (Putin 2014b).

Putin compared the legitimacy of Russia's actions to the illegitimacy of actions by the West, referring to US actions in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya: 'Our approach is different. We proceed from the conviction that we always act legitimately. I have personally always been an advocate of acting in compliance with international law' (Putin 2014b). The semantic oppositions created were clear: Russia was acting reasonably and legitimately, in compliance with international law, on a humanitarian mission, while the West was intervening illegitimately, acting for its own geopolitical interests and creating new dividing lines.

The rhetorical reactions of the EU reflected the fact that the chances (of success) had been reversed. There was a somewhat victorious tone, with references to 'the winds of change' and the will of the people prevailing (Füle 2014b). Now that Yanukovich had been ousted from power, the issue of Russian accountability was no longer a central rhetorical theme. The EU's discourse effectively sent both a stern warning to respect the sovereign right of the Ukrainian people and left room for cooperation with Russia:

Russia has a chance to become part of the efforts to bring stability and prosperity back to Ukraine. ... This will require recognition of the sovereign right of the Ukrainian people to make their own choices about their future. ... Russia can only gain from Ukraine's success; and it risks losing heavily if Ukraine fails. We are ready to work very closely with Russia, the neighbour of our

neighbour, to ensure it plays a constructive role in Ukraine's future—the future of a neighbour with whom Russia has traditional ties which we support. (Füle 2014b)

*Stage 4: the annexation of Crimea (23 February–17 April 2014)*

On 27 February 2014, 'little green men', Russian special forces without insignia, occupied the Crimean parliament building. The peninsula soon found itself cut off from the rest of Ukraine. Despite Putin's denial of annexation plans, events unfolded very rapidly. On 16 March, a referendum was organised, seen as illegitimate by most of the international community. Two days later, on 18 March, the treaty marking Crimea's accession to the Russian Federation was signed. This was another unexpected turn of events, which had a big impact on the discourse on both sides.

The EU Foreign Affairs Council condemned 'the clear violation of Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity by acts of aggression by the Russian armed forces as well as the authorisation given by the Federation Council of Russia on 1 March for the use of the armed forces on the territory of Ukraine' (Council of the EU 2014). Despite this condemnation, the EU maintained a tone of willingness to de-escalate the situation and to find a peaceful solution.<sup>8</sup> Semantic oppositions were created whereby the EU stood for the rule of law and Russia for the 'rule of force'; the EU for 'the logic of cooperation' and Russia for 'the logic of confrontation'. The EU respected full sovereignty and Russia opted for limited sovereignty; the EU was building bridges while Russia built fences:

Russia needs to accept fully the right of these [neighbouring] countries to decide their own future and the nature of relations they chose to have with Russia. The page of last century's history should be turned and not rewritten. I believe in a European continent where the rule of law prevails over the rule of force, where sovereignty is shared and not limited, where the logic of cooperation replaces the logic of confrontation. We don't need new cold wars. And we certainly do not want them. Security does not come from segregation, separating communities, building fences, but by embracing differences and diversity. (Barroso 2014b)

The conciliatory element and call for dialogue disappeared when the referendum in Crimea was held. In two joint statements, one on the day of the referendum and one on the day of the formal annexation, Van Rompuy and Barroso condemned the referendum as 'illegal and illegitimate' and reiterated their 'strong condemnation of the unprovoked violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity'.<sup>9</sup> Two days later, the two leaders confirmed: 'The European Union does not and will not recognise the annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol to the Russian Federation'.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup>See Van Rompuy (2014).

<sup>9</sup>Joint Statement by President of the European Council Herman Van Rompuy and President of the European Commission José Manuel Barroso on Crimea', STATEMENT/14/71, 16 March 2014, available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/STATEMENT\\_14\\_71](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/STATEMENT_14_71), accessed 27 May 2021.

<sup>10</sup>Joint Statement on Crimea by the President of the European Council, Herman Van Rompuy, and the President of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso', STATEMENT/14/74, 18 March 2014, available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/STATEMENT\\_14\\_74](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/STATEMENT_14_74), accessed 27 May 2021.

The Russian discourse reversed the blame for what had happened, holding the West accountable: ‘Russia was not culpable in this crisis’, Lavrov said. ‘We issued many warnings—and to our European partners, primarily—that we should not make a false choice out of Ukraine’ (Lavrov 2014d). He added, ‘I repeat that the main thing is that we do not need any international structure to review Russian–Ukrainian relations, because they have never [ended]. We started to have some problems after the events in Kiev [*sic*], when the lawfully elected president was removed’ (Lavrov 2014d). Here, Lavrov referred explicitly to the violation of the agreement of 21 February. Further, he defended the right of self-determination and reproached the West for being uncooperative: ‘We never avoid diplomatic cooperation. If our partners do not wish it, we cannot make them to do it’ (Lavrov 2014d).

Several of these elements appeared in Putin’s milestone speech of 18 March 2014 as well. The speech, held on the occasion of the formal integration of Crimea into the Russian Federation, arguably contained the strongest formulations of accountability. The finger was pointed again at ‘the West’, with the US often mentioned specifically. The speech built on one central semantic opposition: the West accusing Russia of being a violator of international law but being the biggest violator itself, while Russia was actually respecting international law and defending the right to self-determination. The West was said to be driven by the use of force to protect its interests, Russia by international law. Several discursive oppositions accomplished this: a conflictual, aggressive West *versus* a cooperative Russia; Western double standards, hypocrisy and cynicism *versus* a consistent and honest Russian approach; Western domination *versus* an independent Russia; Western exclusivity and exceptionalism *versus* a fair and inclusive Russian policy. Putin stated, ‘they say we are violating norms of international law. Firstly, it’s a good thing that they at least remember that there exists such a thing as international law—better late than never’ (Putin 2014c). He also referred to ‘the well-known Kosovo precedent’ and rejected Western claims that this was a special case: ‘This is not even double standards; this is amazing, primitive, blunt cynicism. One should not try so crudely to make everything suit their interests, calling the same thing white today and black tomorrow’ (Putin 2014c).

This paved the way for Russia to characterise the post-Cold War system as being dominated by the West’s power politics. Thus, Russia’s reaction appeared as a legitimate, unavoidable and reasonable reaction:

Like a mirror, the situation in Ukraine reflects what is going on and what has been happening in the world over the past several decades. ... Our Western partners, led by the United States of America, prefer not to be guided by international law in their practical policies, but by the rule of the gun. They have come to believe in their exclusivity and exceptionalism, that they can decide the destinies of the world, that only they can ever be right. They act as they please: here and there, they use force against sovereign states, building coalitions based on the principle ‘If you are not with us, you are against us’. (Putin 2014c)

Putin illustrated this with references to the intervention against Yugoslavia in 1999, the (supposedly) ‘controlled’ colour revolutions, the Arab Spring and the 2004 events in Ukraine. He concluded that Western action was aimed against Russia:

We understand what is happening; we understand that these actions were aimed against Ukraine and Russia and against Eurasian integration. And all this while Russia strived to engage in dialogue with our colleagues in the West. We are constantly proposing cooperation on all key issues; we want to strengthen our level of trust and for our relations to be equal, open and fair. But we saw no reciprocal steps. On the contrary, they have lied to us many times, made decisions behind our backs, placed before us an accomplished fact. (Putin 2014c)

Putin added references to NATO expansion, the deployment of a missile defence system, ‘foot-dragging’ over visa issues and access to markets (Putin 2014c). The overall conclusion was that the West was still driven by Cold War thinking and anti-Russian policies because Moscow was unwilling to accept a subjugated position and maintained its independence. The West was held accountable and seen as reaping what it had sown itself:

In short, we have every reason to assume that the infamous policy of containment, [followed] in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries, continues today. They are constantly trying to sweep us into a corner because we have an independent position, because we maintain it and because we call things as they are and do not engage in hypocrisy. 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. (Putin 2014c)

Finally, the West was accused of interference in Russian affairs, instigating unrest against the regime. For example, Putin referred to ‘action by a fifth column, this disparate bunch of “national traitors”’ (Putin 2014c).

In the weeks after the annexation of Crimea and up to the Geneva statement of 17 April 2014, the standpoints outlined were repeated on both sides. This was done against the background of the seizure of public buildings in several cities in eastern Ukraine, a prelude to the escalation into a *de facto* war. While the EU condemned Russia for contravening international law (Ashton 2014a), it emphasised de-escalating the situation (Ashton 2014b) and confirmed its commitment to dialogue (Füle 2014c). At the same time, the EU stressed its resolute commitment to support Ukraine. Füle stated:

I do believe that it is time to show an even stronger, more determined, and resolute commitment to the Eastern Partnership. The people of Ukraine, its independence and sovereignty should not become victims of geopolitical zero-sum games. We will always support and stand by those who are subject to undue pressures. (Füle 2014d)

Here, Russia’s disinformation campaign entered the discourse. Its propaganda was described as ‘more aggressive than at the time of the Cold War and ... also more dangerous because it is not contained any more by the Iron Curtain of the Cold War’ (Füle 2014d). On the Russian side, the responsibility of the West for the escalation in Ukraine was restated (Lavrov 2014e). Also, the theme of Putin’s Crimea speech, that Russia could not continue making concessions, reappeared in different words: ‘We want our relations to be good, but we simply cannot afford to have someone always presume that we will give up our interests and move the line all the time in exchange for someone agreeing to be friendly with us’ (Putin 2014d).

*Reflections on the attribution of accountability*

Against the background of the theoretical framework of script formulations, the empirical sections above have shown how the attribution of accountability over Armenia and Ukraine changed radically in EU and Russian discourses between September 2013 and April 2014. The attribution has thereby shifted as a function of the (reading of) events—even if the latter were mostly domestic events, beyond the control of either Russia or the EU—and through the interaction of both discourses. The attribution of accountability was most pronounced when an actor perceived events as implying a loss.

Over a period of just seven months, the script formulations of the EU and Russia changed drastically. The definition of the situation changed from one of complementary regional projects that needed to be made compatible, to one of (dis)respect for sovereignty and free choice, and ultimately to one of destabilisation and geopolitical confrontation. Accountability shifted in parallel. In the EU's discourse, Russia developed from a strategic partner misreading the situation to a country choosing the logic of confrontation, force and violating sovereignty. In Russia's discourse, the EU developed from a partner that had failed to take Russian concerns into account to an aggressive, interventionist and hypocritical actor, seeking to thwart Russia's independence through a policy of neo-containment.

It is striking that, while the script formulations cannot be separated from the domestic developments in Ukraine and Armenia, it was predominantly the Other (Russia or the EU) that was held responsible. For example, when 'extremists' were accused of destabilising Ukraine, Moscow framed this as the outcome of the support they had received from the West. The escalation was explained as the result of the malicious intentions of the other party. In other words, we witnessed a rapid discursive geopoliticisation of colliding regional projects on the basis of dichotomies that Russia and the EU constructed about each other as fundamentally different actors with clashing intentions. It was, to a great extent, domestic events in Armenia and Ukraine that led to the reformulation of scripts, but the new scripts themselves moved far beyond these domestic developments. The scripts shaped categories of order/disorder of compliant/deviating behaviour and generated accountability for the events. They held the Other accountable by depicting their intentions as malicious and radicalising a negative image of the Other. In doing so, the script formulations not only provided novel interpretations of EU–Russia relations but also legitimised actions taken on the basis of these interpretations. In other words, the scripts and their version of accountability rendered more radical action possible.

*Conclusion*

Why did the EU and Russia clash over Ukraine but not over Armenia? As the attribution of accountability on the eve of the Ukraine crisis did not differ fundamentally from that over Armenia, structural differences can only provide part of the answer. These differences arise from Armenia's higher dependence on Russia and the strategic and symbolic importance of Ukraine, as well as from different domestic circumstances. Yet, these structural reasons do not suffice to explain why events unfolded in such a different way over Ukraine. The analysis of script formulations presented above contributes to a better

understanding of the non-linear dynamics behind the escalation of tensions, showing that the positions of Russia and the EU were not simply a function of *a priori* defined strategic interests and expectations but were codetermined by and through the events and the actions of others.

Events in Ukraine were triggered by the legal incompatibility that arose from two separate regional projects, Eurasian integration and the Eastern Partnership, but—as the case of Armenia demonstrated—this incompatibility did not have to lead to a major confrontation, violence, regime change, annexation and a major war in eastern Ukraine. To understand how events derailed, we also need to understand the dynamics of shaping and changing accountability. The rapid rewriting of Russian and EU script formulations as the Ukraine crisis developed gives us an insight into this. The scripts changed the discursive interpretation of an issue of incompatibility between two regional projects from an accidental, technical and legal issue into a geopolitical issue of vital importance, for which the other party was held fully accountable. The escalation of events and the confrontation between Russia and the EU were explained as the inevitable result of the other's bad intentions instead of the accidental outcome of two independent integration processes. This does not mean that the discursive attribution of accountability is the sole cause of this escalation. Definitely not; there were many factors at play. But it does mean that the construction of the situation in the respective scripts made uncontrollable escalation possible, because the radicalising interpretation of the Other's accountability legitimised new action as radical as the annexation of Crimea, which within the Russian script appeared reasonable in light of the threats posed by the Other. In other words, the dynamics of script formulations do not explain why the confrontation happened, but they help to explain how 'ridiculous' events led to the deepest crisis between Russia and the EU.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Contemplating how events had completely derailed since the November decision of the Ukrainian government, Putin said: 'Today, this seems like nonsense; it is ridiculous to even talk about' (Putin 2014b).

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