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## **The Construction of Crisis: The ‘internal-identitarian’ nexus in Russian-European relations and its significance beyond the Ukraine crisis**

*Moritz Pieper*

**Abstract:** *Since 2012 and with Putin’s return to the presidency, Russian politics underwent a process of securitization of domestic politics. This laid the groundwork for the crisis in European-Russian relations that culminated in the ‘Ukraine crisis’ from late 2013. This article will trace the domestic determinants of Russian foreign policy choices and narratives since 2012 that help explain the political deadlock between ‘the West’ and Russia over the European Union’s ‘Eastern Partnership’. It will thereby also analyse the effects for the Russian perception of agency between the US and the EU as well as path dependencies that European Union sanctions have created. Not only Russia’s relationship with the West is at stake in this stand-off. The ‘Ukraine crisis’ has developed into a fundamental systemic crisis of the Putinite regime. Only if Putin’s ‘social contract’ that had guaranteed economic well-being in exchange for political inactivity was to be eroded by sanctions imposed on Russia, the ‘civilizational’ narrative of Russian exclusivity would be endangered. A new social contract will be a generational task and will have to take stock of the nexus between internal determinants and identitarian foreign policy choices. It will also be a first step in recalibrating European-Russian relations.*

**Keywords:** *Ukraine crisis, Russian-European relations, domestic factors in identity projection, Russia sanctions, Putin’s ‘social contract’*

### **Introduction**

The Cold War ended without a formal treaty, agreement or declaration outlining the future relationship between Russia and ‘the West’. The guarantees allegedly given to Mikhail Gorbachev, the last General Secretary of the disintegrating Soviet Union, that NATO would not enlarge beyond its existing Eastern borders, were never given in writing.<sup>1</sup> The Cold War ended asymmetrically. Two decades later, the West and Russia face each other in the most fundamental post-Cold War crisis with two diametrically opposite narratives. In both narratives, references to initial missteps in the post-Cold War order are made. But as this article will attempt to show, the international dimension of Russian-Western misunderstandings often was a surface layer to cover deeper, and more fundamental inabilities to find common identitarian arrangements. I define ‘identitarian’ here as identity politics projected onto foreign policy. These identitarian predicaments were simmering as long as both sides agreed on issue areas where ‘selective cooperation’ was possible.<sup>2</sup> With an unprecedented domestic protest movement emerging in late 2011, however, Russia’s leadership was faced with a dilemma: The simmering identity question needed to be instrumentalised for regime consolidation purposes, or the Putinite regime would gradually erode. With Prime Minister Putin’s planned return to the presidency in May 2012, the Kremlin was determined to prevent the latter scenario. The path was thus set for a deliberate policy choice that externalised Russian domestic deficiencies at the cost of disconnecting Russian society from Europe. The Ukraine crisis in late 2013 hit these deliberations like a bomb shell and acted as a catalyst for Russia’s alienation from Europe. Its occurrence can thus be analysed as an illustrative case for the working of narratives in shaping governmental policy.<sup>3</sup> Before the article explores the consequences thereof, two foundational aspects require elaboration: The nature and power of narratives before the crisis, and internal determinants of Russian foreign policy.

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<sup>1</sup> The assurance in 1990 that NATO would not move westwards (given both to Gorbachev and foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze) only referred to the former German Democratic Republic. In a Western reading, no promises have been broken. And with the GDR’s dissolution and German reunification, the guarantee of non-membership for ‘East Germany’ was obsolete.

<sup>2</sup> Examples are the ‘New START’ disarmament talks between Moscow and Washington, the coordination of non-proliferation policies or constructive cooperation on the Iranian nuclear file.

<sup>3</sup> The theoretical angle chosen is therefore sympathetic to a moderate constructivism (cf. Kowert & Legro 1996; Sørensen 2008).

## **Discourse and Narratives as Makers of Foreign Policy**

The Ukraine crisis has become a catalyst for two clashing narratives about international order after the end of the Cold War. The Russian narrative is woven around the centrality of the perception of encirclement of Russia by the West and Western neglect of Russian security interests after the US had implicitly declared itself the ‘winner’ of the Cold War. NATO enlargement was seen as a precursor to EU enlargement, contributing to an overall perception of ‘encirclement’ and humiliation of Russia by the ‘transatlantic community’. The second major line of argumentation related to the relativity of legality claims: When charged with the accusation that Russian foreign policy moves were a breach of international law, Moscow was quick to respond that the US was leading the list of international law-breaches. Irrespective of structural differences, the ‘Kosovo precedent’ kept being cited by Russian officials in defense of Russia’s logic for the ‘integration’ of Crimea into the Russian Federation. Russian reactions are understood as purely defensive. The West, so the overall reading since the 1990s, had failed to initiate a dialogue with Russia to include her into the wider European, and possibly, Eurasian, security architecture. The ‘common European house’ that Mikhail Gorbachev dreamt about was built without a room for Russia, as former State Secretary Madeleine Albright is said to have remarked. The Cold war ended without a formal political arrangement that would define rules and roles for the Russian-Western relationship.

The Western narrative focuses on Russia’s interests in keeping strategic influence in its wider neighborhood in order to hold clout and ‘buffer zones’ between its borders and that of ‘Europe’. ‘Frozen conflicts’ in Moldova, Georgia, and possibly Eastern Ukraine, in this thinking, serve to uphold a Russian meddling hand in unstable regions so as to ‘freeze’, short of solving, conflicts that could easily be turned into hot ones, should this be to Russia’s strategic convenience. Against the backdrop of the difficulty of defining European space – both geographically and in terms of identity projections – this narrative has always contained a sub-debate about the role of Russia in the international system and its relation with the ‘Euro-Atlantic community’. The Ukraine crisis has seen a shift from qualified to overt disagreements over Euro-Atlantic politico-economic arrangements that were always seen as exclusionary and ‘identitarian’ by Russia. The ‘common neighborhood’ has become a ‘contested neighborhood’ (Sakwa 2015: 26-49).

Russian activities in Eastern Ukraine, first denied, then tactically admitted by the presidential administration, are seen as a legitimate response to long-standing attempts of the West to promote Western interests in the ‘common neighborhood’. Not only had the latter been done without consulting Russia, so the Russian thinking, but as a deliberately planned policy to check Russian influence in the region (Aliboni 2005; Casier 2007).

To understand how we got there, we need to look beyond narratives, and turn to internal determinants that drive Russian foreign policy.<sup>4</sup>

## **Internal determinants of Russian foreign policy**

On 10 December 2011, I was on Bolotnaya Square in central Moscow. I saw the masses of people of all ages and of various political convictions. What united them was a feeling of not only a growing alienation from the ruling elite, but of having seen another manipulation of the Duma elections on 4 December 2011. A long-standing Soviet and post-Soviet practice, these forged elections were one too many and unleashed the biggest protest movement since the disintegration of the Soviet Union. With the prospect of Vladimir Putin returning to the presidency half

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<sup>4</sup> For analytical purposes of this article, internal determinants of European Russia policies are not discussed here. It will be analyzed in the remainder of this article, however, how structural determinants of Russian foreign policy, in turn, can or cannot condition changes in European Russia policies.

a year later, these protests – while limited in geographical scope – did entail an alarming message for the Kremlin administration that demanded a reaction.

Putin's reaction was a violent crack-down of the protests, the stifling of civil society, tight restrictions on the right to free assembly and to free speech, and the externalization of threats. The 2011 protests have forced an identitarian choice onto Putin's reign: By the compelling logic of the strengthening of a powerful state vertical (cf. Gel'man and Ryzhenkov 2011), the identity question (hitherto deliberately left vague) now demanded an uncompromising answer, and it was telling that some government-sponsored anti-demonstrations were labeled 'anti-Orange protests' in reference to Ukraine's 'Orange Revolution' of 2004 (Hill and Gaddy 2015: 245). This set Russian conceptions about 'Europe' onto an inevitable collision course with the EU's liberal integration project.

In Putin's first and second presidential terms, his rhetoric did not draw such a sharp in-group/out-group distinction between Western liberalism and Russia's allegedly unique identity yet. This now started to change as he was preparing for his return to the presidency. In his stream of articles published in newspapers in 2011 and 2012, Putin made references to the concept of 'state civilization' (Putin 2012). As peculiar as this conflation of terms appears, it underlined the crucial importance of the strong state and his understanding of a unique character of Russian *statist* identity (anchored in Orthodox spiritual values). This emphasis of a strong state was gradually paralleled by the externalization of everything that is ailing Russia: Liberalism now explicitly belonged to another cultural code that was not applicable to Russia anymore. It was in this context that new NGO laws ('foreign agents law'), anti-gay laws, or the crack-down on 'Pussy Riot' had to be seen. While the consequences were still domestic at this stage, this new thinking was a combination of an externalization of domestic deficiencies and a securitization of identity conceptions. Liberalism was now defined as an explicit threat to Russia's civilizational identity. 'The West', including the European Union, had to become the hostile 'Other'. Olga Malinova (2014; cf also her contribution in this issue) thus observes that a discursive shift took place in Russia's anti-Westernism from *ad hoc* measures to becoming a consistent pattern and a defining feature of the new ideology.<sup>5</sup> This ideology, in Morozov's (2015) analysis, is a shallow one: While presented as a conservative project to return to 'Russian values', this 'dialectic of the subaltern' is nothing but a negation of Western hegemony, so his withering conclusion. In a similar reading, Vladislav Inozemtsev (2015) finds strong words when he asserts that "Russia's transition from a promising Westernized nation into an aggressive authoritarian regional power is nearing completion" (1).

The Ukraine crisis thus entered this equation not as its root causes, but as the culmination of a systemic problem in Russian-Western relations. Russia's message of force here has a twofold audience effect: To the outside world, Russia's reaction to Yanukovich's flight on 21 February 2014 demonstrates that attempts to override 'Russian interests' will be met with a determined response (however flimsy Russia's legal standing and argumentation). To the domestic audience, the message served to consolidate the 'conservative' worldview propagated by the Kremlin administration since late 2011 that 'the West' will not be allowed to undermine Russian values – neither at home nor in its 'spheres of influence'. The practical consequence is a transnational discourse that is explosive in its implications for the post-WWII international order. The question whether the annexation of Crimea was planned as a long-term scenario or was an improvised tactical move will be a critical one for historians to answer. The crucial ramification for Russian-European relations, however, is this: The prospect of a regime weakening in 2011 propelled the Kremlin to impose an identity model onto the domestic plane that conveyed civilizational exclusivity.

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<sup>5</sup> The governmental embrace of this approach effectively sidelines a traditionally more varied domestic debate about Russian foreign policy and identity (for an overview thereof, cf. Kuchins & Zevelev 2012: 181-209).

This model externalized threats, securitized relations with Europe, and therewith ‘built itself a discursive cage’, as Fischer (2014: 3) puts it. Any policy compromise between Russia and the EU is complicated by the perception that finding common ground with a hostile actor is a sign of weakness and will be seen as receding to outdated positions, according to the compelling logic of Russia’s narrative. Russian structural identitarian causes, coupled with domestic deficiencies, then met Europe’s response to the unfolding Ukraine crisis: sanctions.

### **European Union responses and path dependencies**

Against the backdrop of the imposition of European Union sanctions on Russia and the downgrading of Russian creditworthiness by rating agencies such as Moody’s, Fitch, and Standard & Poor’s, the attractiveness of Russia as an investment target has decreased.<sup>6</sup> The Russian economy has experienced an intensified capital flight. While Russia dismisses such downgrading and economic pressure as a ‘political decision’, and especially so since the imposition of ‘phase II’ sanctions after the downing of the civilian airliner MH17, the decision to adopt these sanctions had been taken before. It was only the momentum that intensified with the shooting of the airplane.<sup>7</sup> But the economic alienation is mutual: The Russian government has shown a tendency of economic alienation from US-inspired financial and economic instruments – in addition to the level of political resentment, and in addition and reaction to Western attempts to isolate Russia economically. Examples are the Putin administration’s announcement to substitute embargoed manufactured goods from the West by domestic produces; indirect taxes and direct product bans; and relevant changes in the customs legislation (Libman 2014). The European Union is Russia’s largest trading partner, and its most important provider of much-needed technology. The EU-28 accounts for over 70 % of foreign direct investment into Russia. Not only are Western economic isolation attempts detrimental for Russia’s economy. Russian reactions to Western pressure have also been counter-intuitive from a purely economic perspective. Economic considerations alone thus cannot explain Russian policy planning here. Instead, it was the construction of exclusive identities and the externalization of domestic deficiencies as highlighted above that forced a compelling path dependency onto the Russian administration. If anything, Western sanctions seemingly only confirmed the view held in Moscow that the West was long already working to undermine the Russian ‘regime’.

Yet, this path dependency holds the potential to endanger the foundations of the very regime Putin and his entourage is seeking to protect. Russia’s economic isolation has set in motion a dangerous downward spiral that only intensifies already existing structural economic deficiencies. Russia’s state budget is dangerously dependent on revenues from oil and gas exports (over 50 %, if exploration, sale and export duties are included; cf. Inosemzew 2014). For the last two decades, Russia has failed to invest in infrastructure, technology, and research. Russia is importing almost all its manufactured goods from Europe. This situation now creates a predicament for Putin’s ‘social contract’ on the basis of which his regime is functioning. This social contract guaranteed a relative economic well-being for Russia’s citizens in exchange for political inactivity.<sup>8</sup> The wider dimension of the Ukraine crisis for Russia’s political and societal development is this: Putin’s social contract risks running out if Western sanctions are upheld (or even toughened), and oil prices continue to be at a historic low. If relative economic stability cannot be guaranteed in the mid- to long-term, new forms of engagement between the Kremlin and its

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<sup>6</sup> In the wake of Russia’s annexation of Crimea, Russia has been downgraded to one notch above ‘junk’ status first. In January 2015, Standard & Poor’s downgraded Russia’s foreign currency credit rating to junk status, thereby placing it below investment grade (BBC 2014b; Andrianovna & Galouchko 2015).

<sup>7</sup> On two different readings of the event, cf. Sakwa (2015: 168-171) and Wilson (2014: 140-142).

<sup>8</sup> The establishment of this social contract went hand in hand with the strengthening of the ‘power vertical’, and the vigour of this new arrangement had to be experienced the hard way by prominent oligarchs (‘from equidistance to subordination’, cf. Sakwa 2014: 24-46).

populace will have to be found. Putin has navigated himself into a deadlock where a consistent alienation from the West can only be the logical consequence. At the same time, Europe is Russia's most 'significant Other'. Russia needs Europe economically, and Russian identity conceptions always included Europe – even if only to distinguish oneself from the other.

### **Post-modern complications**

So the parameters were set. What intensified over the course of the Ukraine crisis was the shrillness of rhetoric as well as the perfection of conveying exclusive narratives. The latter quickly obtained a label of its own: Information warfare. In support of the civilizational narrative outlined above, a whole 'information industry' was beefed up (it had already existed before (cf. Politkovskaya 2004), but was now magnified to its best).

Already before the Ukraine crisis reached a new level with the fights in and over Eastern Ukraine, Russia and 'the West' had proxy arguments about the promotion of 'values'. Narratives were not only at the basis of conflict, they also violently translated into an operational warfare scenario. In Moscow's rhetoric, reference here was often made to US-instigated coups and campaigns to undermine Russian neighboring countries (Putin 2014). Ukraine and Georgia ranked high as battle grounds in this arena, and the prospect of NATO membership for these countries, alluded to at the 2008 Bucharest summit, rang all alarm bells in Moscow. While Europe is Russia's most significant identity and trading partner, as highlighted above, accusations of unlawful interference in Eastern Europe were mostly charged against the United States. At root lay an extended Cold War understanding that NATO, and the US by implication, was the security provider of Europe. Sakwa (2015) thus connects the security threat that NATO constituted in Russian thinking with the crisis implications for Europe: "This fateful geopolitical paradox – that NATO exists to manage the risks created by its existence – provoked a number of conflicts. The Russo-Georgian war of August 2008 acted as a forewarning tremor of the major earthquake that has engulfed Europe in 2013-14" (5).

Western perceptions of Russia instigating unrest in neighboring regions were juxtaposed by the Russian narrative of a legitimate promotion of Russian 'conservative' values and worldviews in the post-Soviet space. This is done via NGOs and media to counter the Western 'infiltration' of these countries. The promotion of the Russian 'worldview', and the 'unique civilizational character' of Russia was supported by influential (Eurasian) ideologues like Alexander Dugin who was instrumental in detecting a domestic 'fifth column' of alien elements that undermined Russia's value system (Fiona and Gaddy 2015: 347-48). This witch hunt for domestic political enemies bears a striking resemblance to Soviet practices. The reference to a distinct Russian civilizational identity harks back to 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophers Nikolai Danilevsky and Konstantin Leontiev and 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher and publicist Ivan Ilyin, but acquires a politically activist connotation in this context. History becomes politicised, and Putin's distortionary use of historical references in justifying why Crimea is as holy to Russia as the Temple Mount is to Jerusalem was but the most appalling of examples in political discourse (Arkhipov and Kravchenko 2014).

The practice of such 'political technology' has been aptly demonstrated elsewhere (Wilson 2014: 20-24). Next to the implication for domestic constituencies, the audience effects internationally are as significant. 'Information warfare' has long already entered the vocabulary of 21<sup>st</sup> century conflicts. This has far-reaching consequences not only for the conduct of future conflicts, but for their mediated interpretations and 'truth-telling'. In situations like in Eastern Ukraine where factual verification is complicated by on-the-ground fighting, opposing narratives will continue to compete for believers, dispel alternative speculations and nurture conspiracy theories on all sides.

Intelligence and shrewd manipulation are used in astonishing new ways for domestic and international audience effects. This opens up the postmodern Pandora's box where 'nothing is true and everything is possible' (Pomerantsev 2014a). Postmodernity becomes a zone of permissiveness. In a similar vein, information becomes 'weaponized' (Pomerantsev 2014b; Burkhardt 2015).

And even with segments in Western societies, it works well because it meets a general (perceived or actual) dissatisfaction with poor reporting in Western media. "Abroad, organization like the Russia Today TV channel are successful because the Kremlin line is buried in a post-modern mélange of 'alternative' views", Wilson (2014) writes (22). If information is relative, 'values' and 'norms' have to stay contested by design. And if norm contestation means the leveling of power hierarchies, it also levels the power of attraction for certain norms. This ultimately could be the nail in the coffin of the EU's liberal 'norm promotion' project. Arguably, Joseph Nye's 'soft power' concept (2004) emerged from a Western political thinking that never found much resonance in Russian policy thinking. 'Soft' and 'hard' power are now enmeshed in a way that will define the 'hybrid' nature of geopolitical contestation in conflicts to come.

The relativity of truth claims bodes well for Putin's rejection of Western liberalism and thus bolsters his emphasis on a unique Russian statist civilizational character as outlined in the sections above. The wider political implication, however, is catastrophic: It sets Russia on an inevitable collision course with any pan-European identity. If Russia is unique, so the logic, it also cannot be judged by the same standards. This is an exclusivity claim that is dangerous in terms of political accountability. Putin admitted as much in his September 2013 *New York Times* article, then referring, however, to the United States: "It is extremely dangerous to encourage people to see themselves as exceptional, whatever their motivation" (Putin 2013).

### **The intersection between trade and identitarian integration projects**

Against the backdrop of this ideational and informational stand-off, the nexus between inter-regional trade initiatives and identity conceptions has to be understood as a major bone of contention. The EU's Eastern Neighborhood Programme (ENP) that was born in 2004 lumped together the Southern and the Eastern neighborhood and was quickly criticized for taking a too country-unspecific and generic approach. This programme was then refined with a more differentiated approach that separated 'the South' from 'the East'. The 2008 Eastern Partnership now sought to formulate more integrative approaches to the EU's Eastern neighbors (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine). The means of achieving gradual regional integration was by way of closer market harmonization. Interregional trade projects, however, have become the stumbling bloc in EU-Russian relations, as it had become clear that Russia had its own ideas about market integration in this region. The reason therefor lay in the intersection between trade and identitarian integration. Bringing markets closer together would, so the hope in Brussels and the fear in Moscow, would also align governance models and societies over time. This ambition fundamentally clashed with the Russian perception of legitimate 'spheres of interests' that Russia held in the post-Soviet space. With the announcement of the EaP at the latest, the role of regional rival, in the Kremlin's eyes, was taken over by the European Union (Fischer 2014). This was a role that hitherto had been played by the US. Accusations against illegitimate interference in the post-Soviet space had been charged against perceived or actual pro-US actors, media, and foundations. The 2004 Orange Revolution in Kiev was a prime example of the 'classic' post-Cold War stand-off between 'Russian

interests' and 'US interests'. The EU had been seen as a complacent follower of US policy priorities at best.<sup>9</sup> What changed with the Eastern partnership programme was the perception of agency. With the European Commission now in the driver's seat to shape a regional policy agenda that was inimical to Russian conceptions of regional order, threat perception changed as well (cf. Baunov 2015).

Sakwa (2015) contrasts the 'Wider Europe' idea emanating from Brussels of expanding a liberal integration model based on the principle of EU conditionality with that of a Russian-favored 'Greater Europe' that conceived of a continental Europe ('from Lisbon to Vladivostok') and that, in theory, would be able to accommodate multiple centers of power. Although both the 'Wider' and the 'Greater' Europe agenda contained a certain conceptual fuzziness as to scope, methods, and goals, the narratives of two competing Europes served to cement the dividing lines. Yet, it was the particular combination of neoliberal market integration with the security dimension of the Atlantic community ("NATO enlargement and the aggressive promotion of Western democracy", Sakwa 2015: 27) that the EU's new approach to Eastern Europe met Russian resistance.

When Russia proposed and initiated its own integration projects for the post-Soviet space, the implication thus was of conflicting ideas of regional order. The Eurasian Economic Union that formally was launched in January 2015 to succeed the Eurasian Customs Union of 2010 and the 'Single Economic Space' that had come into effect in 2012 (consisting of Belarus, Russia, Kazakhstan) was an explicit counter-model to the EU's Eastern neighborhood projects. Ukraine happened to become the *casus belli* between these two integration models. What gave the crisis a wider and more contagious dimension was the readiness to resort to military means to reverse the decline of Russian influence in Ukraine. A root cause was the politically wanted connection between trade and identitarian integration models: Deliberately conceived as an alternative integration project, the EEU was left with an ideationally vague underbelly. For Russian nationalists and Eurasianists, it was one step closer to the fulfillment of a Russian-led (re-)unification of Eurasia (cf. Weiss 2015). With this, the Kremlin may have been waking some demons it may not have wanted in the first place. However, with a conscious anti-liberal and anti-Western 'civilizational' rhetoric as from 2011-12, as laid out above, this rhetoric now conveniently coincided with perceptions of the EEU as an alternative model of transnational governance.

The proposal to start discussions about possible areas of cooperation between the EEU and the EU, in this context, was a first recognition of structural deficiencies in the crafting of regional order that had led to the crisis over Ukraine's future. Economic interconnection between these two trading blocs would not only be welcomed by those in favor of (a somewhat fanciful) common economic space between Lisbon and Vladivostok. It could also be an important long-term precondition for talks about joint security arrangements. Economic, security, and identity perceptions, as this episode has forcefully shown, are closely intertwined. The insistence of some European leaders in response to Russian 'aggression' in Ukraine that Ukraine was never 'forced to choose' between one over the other regional model thus only explains half of the story. The identitarian and political implications for any conception of a Common European House with Russia were largely ignored. Yet, the task of solving both the structural dimension of interregional trade connections with appropriate regime and security guarantees for all actors involved and the more immediate politico-military crisis over Ukraine is not an easy one. As so often in conflict management, the crisis has developed a dynamic of its own that is spiraling out of control of those actors that could have prevented its occurrence in the first place. And on an ideational level, the depiction of the EEU as a rival regional order is politically explosive in combination with Russia's governmental discourse about a unique

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<sup>9</sup> At times, this assumption is even upheld with regard to the EU's own sanctions, where it is argued that Washington convinced the EU to pursue policies that are not in Europe's best interest (Fischer 2015: 4).



civilizational identity. This combination of factors will complicate any inter-regional discussions between EU and EEU.

### **Recalibrating the transatlantic character in EU-Russian relations?**

Scholarly research on Russian foreign policy following the break-up of the Soviet Union has divided Russia's post-Soviet relations with the West into distinct phases of foreign policy re-orientation, ranging from assimilationist (under President Yeltsin) to more pragmatic and accommodating (with foreign minister Primakov and during Putin's first term) through to more assertive and independent foreign policies (under President Putin in his second and third term) that bespeak Russia's quest for a post-imperial foreign policy identity.<sup>10</sup> The deterioration in relations between Russia and the West and the character of Putin's leadership has also sparked a range of studies analyzing causes and consequences thereof.<sup>11</sup> Underlying many analyses of post-Soviet Russian foreign policy is the unidirectional focus of *change* in Russia's approach towards the West. It is at this juncture that the stand-off over Ukraine has disclosed a much deeper-seated malaise in Russian-Western relations that is born of identitarian clash narratives. With this crisis, Russian foreign policy experienced a shift from qualified to overt confrontation with the West, as the previous sections have traced. Second, a subsumption of European foreign policy under the wider umbrella of 'Western' approaches has taken place. This has brought a perception of European agency in co-determining models of regional order in the European-Russian 'common neighborhood' to the fore. Hitherto, (actual and perceived) US policies in the region were seen as the most destabilizing factor in the region. The 'Ukraine crisis' thus has become an 'actorness' test for the European Union. European Union policies have contributed their share to the crisis, and European mediation was expected at its outbreak. The underperformance in this role as crisis manager led to disillusion not only in Ukraine, where the initial motivation behind the 'Maidan' revolts had been to step up for a closer association with the EU. The EU's inability to find a common language on Russian policies in Ukraine was received with scorn and ridicule on the part of Moscow, but also Washington. The leaked remarks by US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian affairs Victoria Nuland to "fuck the EU" have become emblematic for a puzzlement on the part of the US about the EU's internal divisions about the appropriate approach to the Ukraine crisis and to European-Russian relations (cf. BBC 2014a).

The question thus has to be asked whether this most severe post-Cold War crisis between Russia and the EU has the power to affect change in European Russia policies and in the crafting of new identity and security arrangements between Russia, Europe, and the United States. A recasting of European-Russian relations on equitable terms will require re-defining Europe's role in the Euro-Atlantic community and a re-balancing of EU-US relations to dispel the impression in Moscow of interchangeability of policy agendas between Brussels and Washington. Investigating re-definitions of EU role perceptions in Central and Eastern Europe not only in relation to Russia but in relation to the US in reaction to the Ukraine crisis would reverse the directionality of most studies of EU-Russia relations, and more scholarly analysis will be needed to reflect on these policy options.

However, for credibility reasons, the EU is in no position to lift its sanctions against Russia without any tangible change in Russian positions. Not only do sanctions, once imposed, develop a dynamic of their own. They also

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<sup>10</sup> Belopolsky (2009: 14-28); Casier (2006); MacFarlane (2006: 44f.); Sakwa (2002); Trenin (2006); Tsygankov (2007); Mendras (2012); Nizameddin (2013: 52f.); Shakleina (2013: 166-174).

<sup>11</sup> Sakwa (2008a; 2008b; 2014); Stürmer (2008); Mendras (2012).

narrow down the policy instrumentarium at the disposal of those adopting them. The political momentum will largely determine EU Russia policies in the short- to mid-term. And these mid-term policy decisions are likely to complicate broader strategic planning of EU relations with Russia beyond the sanctions debate. Moreover, the coupling of the lifting of EU sanctions with the implementation of the Minsk (II) agreement is politically intricate, if Europe sticks to its position that the annexation of Crimea is the gravest breach of international law since the end of the second World War. If Crimea-related sanctions are exempt from this coupling, Crimea will stay with Russia, while Europe tacitly returns to 'business as usual' with Russia.

However, the previous sections have shown how Russian identitarian choices have set any rapprochement with 'the West' onto a dead-end street for some time to come. Internal choices in Moscow have become conflated with an identitarian agenda that should have been shaped jointly by Europe and Russia in the first place.

### **Conclusion**

Talk of cooperation between the EU's regional integration projects and the EEU, while a useful step towards dialogue, cannot tackle the fundamental inherent determinants of Putin's new identity course. Dragneva-Lewers and Wolczuk (2015) caution that such an inter-regional discussion could be a useful starting point, but should acknowledge different assumptions about its rationale and possibilities. If Russia's government is set to exclude European values from Russia's cultural code, political dialogue does not address root causes of the crisis. Reaching out to Russian society and conveying the message that sanctions are not directed against the people but the administration is complicated by at least three reasons. First, it will be water on the mills for Russian rhetoric that 'the West' is seeking to undermine Russia's regime and governance model and would smell of the 'democratization' talk of the 1990s in 'transition economies'. "This is not because Russia's leaders are congenitally opposed to the West," Richard Sakwa (2015) puts it in rather stark terms, "but Russia's whole history militates against simply adapting to an alternative 'imperial' project, in this case succumbing to the West's ideological expansionism in the form of democratism" (254). President Putin's speech on the occasion of the victory parade on 9 May 2015 forcefully underlined the end of a fragile post-Cold War order (Trenin 2015).

Second, the level of information warfare in 'postmodern' European conflict situations creates a Russian audience that is unlikely to be receptive to European outreaches. If information is weaponized, history politicized and democracy 'managed', the framework conditions for societal rapprochements that otherwise exist in open societies are absent. And third, EU sanctions are increasingly seen as hurting Russian society as a whole, and not as being targeted at the Russian elite only, as polls indicate (Kredler 2014). This is perhaps not surprising given Russian official disinformation about Russia's non-engagement in the conflict in Ukraine. This creates a communication gap that the EU will find difficult to bridge. The high approval rates for Putin's policy course are a stark point in case. Only if a protracted economic crisis endangers Putin's social contract defined in his first and second presidencies, the edifice might start to shake. As this article has shown, such a development would need to address the nexus between internal determinants of Russian foreign policy discourse and its ensuing identity choices that affect relations with the West at large and Europe in particular. It will be a generational task to deconstruct exclusionary narratives.

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