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Increasingly Geopolitical? The EU's Approach Towards the Post-Soviet Space*

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Abstract: Throughout the past decade the policy of the European Union (EU) towards its eastern neighbours has avoided focusing on security issues. However, the Ukraine crisis had had a deep impact on the EU's foreign policy and its approach towards post-Soviet space. It has highlighted that the EU's eastern neighbourhood is characterised by intense geopolitical competition with Russia. The crisis also underscored the weakness of the EU's low politics approach towards the post-Soviet space and Russia. On the other hand, Russia's actions in Ukraine have made the member states more willing to act together and recognise Russia as a security threat. In this context, the article argues that while the EU has not always viewed its relations with Russia and the post-Soviet space in traditional geopolitical terms, the shape of the regional geopolitical structure has always influenced its policy towards the region. Moreover, the article shows how the EU has gradually embraced geopolitical competition for influence in the post-Soviet space with Russia and even confrontation with Moscow.

Keywords: European Union, Russia, geopolitics, post-Soviet space, Ukraine

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Introduction

Throughout the past decade the policy of the European Union (EU) towards its eastern neighbours has avoided focusing on security issues.¹ However, the Ukraine crisis had a deep impact on the EU's foreign policy and its approach towards post-Soviet space. It highlighted that the EU's eastern neighbourhood is characterised by intense geopolitical competition with Russia. The crisis has also underscored the weakness of the EU's low politics approach in its relations with Russia and post-Soviet space. On the other hand, Russia's actions in Ukraine have made the member states more willing to act together and recognise Russia as a security threat.² In turn, EU-Russia relations in the post-Soviet space have entered a period of stalemate.

In this context, the article aims to explore the way geopolitics has influenced the EU's approach towards the post-Soviet space and how it has developed during the past 15 years. The article argues that while the EU has not always viewed its relationship with Russia or the post-Soviet space in traditional geopolitical terms, the shape of the regional geopolitical structure has always influenced its policy towards the region. The article also shows how the EU has gradually embraced geopolitical competition for influence in the post-Soviet space with Russia and even confrontation with Moscow. This shift is increasingly making its way into literature dealing with the EU's foreign policy. For example, Korolev highlights that the EU has moved towards promoting its interests in a more direct manner since it acknowledged the shift towards assertiveness in Russian foreign policy. He adds that 'both democracies and nondemocracies, when interacting with Russia, tend to let geopolitical considerations overpower other foreign policy motives.'³ Nonetheless, Auer argues that EU leaders (especially German ones) have neglected geopolitical concerns, which has created 'a power vacuum within the borderlands of the EU and Russia which has been skilfully exploited by the Russian leadership.'⁴

Classical geopolitical thinking that emphasises the development and use of hard power (e.g. military capabilities) has not been on the EU's agenda due to its focus on the development of soft power tools.⁵ However, geopolitics also refers to the promotion of interests and sensitivity to developments in the regional and global arenas. Since it started seriously engaging with the post-Soviet space in the beginning of the 2000s the EU has primarily sought to promote a values based agenda focused on fostering democratisation and economic development in the region. The EU considered that building democratic institutions would help ease tensions in the region and thus bring more stability. Soft security threats have been the primary focus of EU policy: e.g. trafficking, migration,

1 Nilsson and Silander 2016.

2 Jones and Whitworth 2014.

3 Korolev 2015, 299.

4 Auer 2015, 960.

5 Johnson and Derrick 2012.

cross-border, pandemics or terrorism.⁶ However, in this background the EU has also promoted its energy and trade interests in the region, by pushing post-Soviet states to adopt regulations that would make their economies easier for European business to operate in.⁷

Up until the push for Ukraine to sign the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), the EU had pursued a *Russia first policy* whereby it did not push for initiatives in the post-Soviet which space conflicted with Moscow's interests. While focusing on the regional geopolitical structure has always been the salient aspect of the EU's foreign policy towards the post-Soviet space the Ukraine crisis has underlined a shift towards a more interest driven approach, where the EU is not 'ashamed' anymore in putting forward its security and economic interests – and entering into geopolitical competition and confrontation with Russia. This trend is a response to Russia's increasing assertiveness, but also to the criticism coming from the post-Soviet states which have frequently highlighted the hypocrisy behind the EU's asymmetric promotion of values. Moreover, these states constantly called for the EU to take more decisive actions in engaging with the frozen conflicts in the eastern neighbourhood.

The first part of this article⁸ discusses three staple concepts of geopolitics: competition, confrontation and the regional geopolitical structure. In the second part the article presents a general outline of the EU's approach towards the post-Soviet space. The following sections explore five periods in charting the move towards a more geopolitical EU approach towards Russian and the post-Soviet space: Putin's first term; the coloured revolutions; the lead-up to and the Georgian Russian war of 2008; Medvedev's presidency; and Putin's third term, together with the Ukraine crisis.

Geopolitics and EU Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Space

Geopolitics traditionally refers to the way perceptions of a country's geographical position in relation to other states influences its power (and ability to project its power) in the international arena.⁹ Balances of power and particularly differentiations between core and periphery together with notions such as buffer zones or spheres of interests are integral to classical interpretations of geopolitics.¹⁰ In this thinking, relations between international actors are seen principally in a binary manner, more specifically within the friend/enemy dichotomy. Isolation in the international arena makes states prone to adopt

6 Whitman and Wolff 2010.

7 Schmidt-Felzmann 2011.

8 Empirically, the article relies on official documents and statements, secondary data from media and academic reports, together with general background information from participant observations from interviews conducted with experts and policymakers between 2011 and 2016 in Moscow, Brussels and a series of other EU capitals.

9 Auer 2015.

10 Flint 2012.

geopolitical rationales. Moreover, the shift towards a more geopolitical mind-set might also be influenced by a lack of knowledge of other actors in the international arena or increased domestic pressure to promote more clearly one's interests in foreign policy.

Due to the absence of material capabilities and hard power on the part of the EU, applying traditional geopolitical theories based on hard power and military capabilities to understand the Union's behaviour is rather problematic. However, a competing and more nuanced understanding of geopolitics posits that it can be based on both a *Realpolitik* view of power and also on more post-modern ones that put emphasis on values and identities.¹¹ Hence, it can be a driver for civilisational and ideological conflict, which makes both the West and Russia compete with one other. For some, the European project has always been geopolitical, i.e. intent on creating a new type of universality that spreads across borders.¹² Moreover, in this understanding of geopolitical security concerns go beyond traditional areas and spread to the promotion of norms or values and the decentralisation of regional and global economy. In turn, this article employs a threefold approach in highlighting the role of geopolitics in the EU's policy towards the post-Soviet space, focusing on: the regional geopolitical structure, competition and confrontation.

Firstly, it contends that the EU's policy in the Soviet space has been deeply shaped by the regional geopolitical structure, and the way European policymakers understood it. More broadly, 'geopolitical structures are formed by the interaction of geographical and political forces and the developmental processes which take place within those structures.'¹³ While the EU has only recently acknowledged the fact that states in the neighbourhood or other more global powers embrace geopolitical thinking in foreign policy, the EU's approach in the post-Soviet space has been more reactive to external developments than based on a coherent long-term strategy.

Secondly, the article focuses on the way the EU has sought to enhance and project its power in the post-Soviet space, as a way of not only promoting a series of universal values and norms but also prevailing in the geopolitical competition for influence with Russia. Geopolitical competition is fuelled by the quest to gain increased room for manoeuvre in a specific geographical area, without engaging in conflict with other (competing) actors.¹⁴ Even though EU official discourse continuously highlighted in the past 15 years that it does not seek to alter the geopolitical status quo, underlying the promotion of values, norms and regulations was always a deep desire to transform the region.¹⁵ Democratic and prosperous countries in the eastern neighbourhood would not only provide more

11 Kelly 2016.

12 Zielonka 2008; Diez 2005; Hyde-Price 2008.

13 Cohen 2014, 37.

14 Kubicek 2013.

15 Beauguitte, Richard, and Guérin-Pace 2015.

security to the EU's borders, but also allow the EU greater influence on the economic and security architecture of the region.¹⁶

Thirdly, the article analyses the way the EU managed its relations with Russia, seeking to avoid geopolitical confrontation – the direct zero-sum clash over influence in the post-Soviet space.¹⁷ In this sense, the EU aimed to integrate and make Russia an integral part of the global liberal multilateral order as a way of avoiding geopolitical confrontation. The rationale was that a more liberal Russia entrenched in the multilateral system would provide the Kremlin less incentives to pursue a geopolitical agenda of confrontation with the EU (and the West).

While the EU has always been sensitive to the regional geopolitical structure when devising its policies in the post-Soviet space, the role of competition and confrontation has become more salient with the Ukraine crisis. In this reading, relations with Russia and the post-Soviet states are increasingly being set within a conflictual logic where chaos rather than order is the primary dynamic. The Ukraine crisis is testimony to the increasing weight that traditional power and interest based geopolitical considerations have in the mindset of EU policymakers, where the EU seeks to come ahead in the competition and confrontation with Russia. In what follows the article distinguishes five periods since Putin's first term of president (2000) in order to show how geopolitical competition and confrontation became, with the Ukraine crisis, a key aspect of the EU's discourse and policy towards the post-Soviet space. Before proceeding with the discussion of the five stages the article outlines the key characteristics of the EU's policy towards the eastern neighbourhood.

EU Foreign Policy towards the post-Soviet Space

The EU's integration model has contributed to peace and made military issues obsolete between the EU member states. Focusing on economic interdependence and cooperation has been a successful strategy in getting armed conflict off the agenda in relations between EU member states.¹⁸ The same logic of liberal integration functioned in the case of challenges to human security on the continent: such as migration, trafficking or cross border crime. The EU has developed a series of instruments for promoting its integration model in the post-Soviet states: such as the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), Black Sea Synergy and the Eastern Partnership (EaP). Even though these instruments have been primarily aimed at promoting economic development and democratic reforms in the eastern neighbourhood, their success on the ground has been influenced by the security order of the region.¹⁹ Moreover, in devising and putting into practice these initiatives the

16 Füle 2010.

17 Kelly 2016.

18 Diez 2005.

19 Cadier 2014.

EU has been criticised for its one-sided and asymmetrical approach.²⁰ The EU asked the post-Soviet states to incorporate its norms and values wholesale largely without taking into account the peculiarities of its counterparts. In the absence of the membership perspective the EU's overall power of attraction and influence in the region has varied across policy areas and countries.²¹

In the post-Soviet space the most salient security challenge for the EU has been the issue of frozen conflicts and their potential to unsettle the already precarious regional order. For the EU these conflicts have been a source of concern but also taboo.²² This has happened because in the post-Soviet space sovereignty, minority rights or the nature of states' political systems have been contested and therefore subject to change. The nature of frozen conflicts has also left the EU at times puzzled as to how best to approach them in order to contribute to their resolution without creating instability in the countries in the region and endangering their path to democratic development.²³ Hence, the EU's approach has been ambiguous at best. It tried to avoid getting involved in military aspects, only seeking to address soft security challenges stemming from the conflicts; such as border control, trafficking or minority protection. This approach has been fuelled by the hope that more democratic and stable countries would be able to deal on their own with security challenges and prevent their potential spill-over to the EU.²⁴ Consequently, the EU's influence has been undermined by the fact that it has not taken a decisive approach towards the issue of frozen conflict, where the post-Soviet states had expected the EU to act.²⁵ Maintaining a cautious approach made most states disillusioned with the EU, but has kept most (at least to some degree) on the path towards integration with the EU.

The EU's policy in the post-Soviet space led to competition and confrontation with Russia, but also occasional instances of cooperation. This fits into the broader dynamic of EU-Russia relations characterised by the dichotomy between conflict and cooperation.²⁶ Conflict has generally tended to be rather inevitable due to the diverging interests, values and worldviews that the two possess. Nevertheless, cooperation has appeared in cases where the two were able to identify common challenges and opportunities: e.g. trade, energy relations, or the fight against terrorism. While on some occasions the EU and Russia have managed to identify common interests on which to base their cooperation, this has seldom happened in relation to values and interpretations of the international system. Consequently, in the post-Soviet space there is a clash of values and worldviews between Brussels and Moscow, the countries in the region being asked to choose one over

20 Korosteleva, Naturski, and Simão 2013.

21 Schimmelfennig and Scholtz 2008.

22 Delcour 2010.

23 Tudoroiu 2012.

24 Biscop 2010.

25 Kirova and Freizer 2015.

26 Averre 2009.

the other.²⁷ For the Kremlin, the post-Soviet space represents its primary sphere of interest, where Russian policymakers argue that their country has special responsibilities.²⁸ These involve the protection of the rights of Russian minorities, securing Russia's economic interests or maintaining a buffer zone between North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and Russia.²⁹ The legacy of the Soviet Union with the great power status it possessed is still part of the memory of most Russians.³⁰ Consequently, ensuring that the post-Soviet states have a friendly attitude towards Russia and do not engage in activities that endanger Moscow's security or economic interests is one of the key priorities for the Kremlin.³¹

A series of other actors besides Russia and the EU have aimed in the past two decades to shape the regional geopolitical structure of the post-Soviet space. During the 1990s and early 2000s, the United States (US) was the most important external actor in the region pursuing an agenda based on democracy promotion and institution building. In order to achieve this goal it invested substantial funds in the development of civil society. Helping the post-Soviet states democratise served a dual purpose for the US.³² Firstly, it would make the region more secure and provide a positive regional context for the border goal of democratising Russia. Secondly, assuring a stable security environment was seen as a way for the NATO to reinvent itself in the post-Cold War period, but also prerequisite for safeguarding the US investments in the energy sector. Furthermore, Turkey has been interested in preserving stability in the Black Sea and establishing itself as a leader in the region. As part of NATO it plays an important role in the alliance's policy in the Black Sea region. Energy is a key area of interest for Turkey as it wishes to insulate the transit routes that cross its territory from conflict. Ankara has been active in supporting Azerbaijan in its conflict with Armenia in Nagorno Karabakh, however it has avoided supplying weapons to Baku so as not to antagonise Russia. China has recently shown interest in the region especially in the energy sector and in helping the post-Soviet states develop their own infrastructure.

Putin's First Term (2000–2003)

During Putin's first term the EU was preparing the accession of the former communist states from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). At this time, the EU also started to develop a strategy towards the post-Soviet space, as with the next wave of enlargement it would have bordered the region. The rationale for this was twofold and focused primarily on shaping and adapting to the regional geopolitical structure of the post-Soviet space. Firstly, the EU

27 Headley 2012.

28 Lavrov 2008.

29 Putin 2016.

30 Gvosdev and Marsh 2013.

31 Berryman 2012.

32 Babayan 2015.

sought to create a secure neighbourhood that would facilitate the integration of the new CEE member states and would insulate them from the conflicts and security concerns that plagued the post-Soviet space.³³ Secondly, there was an overarching perception in Brussels and other European capitals that if the EU would not be able to construct a successful foreign policy towards its neighbours it would be highly unlikely that it could achieve this at the global level.³⁴ The emphasis in this period was on the promotion of values, democratic institution building and support for the development of civil society in the post-Soviet states. The EU anticipated that such a policy would contribute to a more secure neighbourhood.³⁵

The strategy also recognised the primacy of soft security challenges, as at the time Europe experienced the most secure period in its history, hard security challenges being absent. Hence, the inception of the EU's approach to the security of the post-Soviet space then drew on the assumption that the EU can and should become a specialist in dealing with soft security threats. This not only made the EU a distinct international actor (e.g. normative, cosmopolitan or ethical), but also served as a basis for the EU's goal to diffuse its norms, values and regulations to its neighbours.³⁶ Hence, EU leaders had no intention of engaging the EU in the hard security issues of the region or in having a significant contribution to the solving of frozen conflicts.³⁷ This approach was influenced by the lack of resources and capabilities on the part of the EU, but also by the desire not to antagonise Russia. Putin's first term fed the hopes in the EU that Russia was progressing on the path to democracy, as he frequently highlighted that Russia was part of Europe and that it wished to be integrated in the international community.³⁸ Hence, the EU opted for a cautious approach towards regional security as not to unsettle its relationship with Moscow, and avoid engaging in both geopolitical confrontation and competition.

The Coloured Revolutions (2003–2005)

The ease and success of the 2004 expansion to CEE made the EU think that it could extend its mode of integration to the post-Soviet space. However, the EU failed to recognise that the regional geopolitical structure in the post-Soviet space was very different from that of CEE. To that extent the EU's policy in the eastern neighbourhood became influenced by a very inward-looking understanding of the regional geopolitical structure. The Union stepped up its support for democracy development in the eastern neighbourhood and sought to formalise its relationship with the countries in the region through the ENP,

33 Haukkala 2007.

34 Council of the European Union 2003.

35 European Commission 2003.

36 Biscop and Andersson 2007.

37 Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2003.

38 Averre 2005.

which established a template for partnerships with its southern and eastern neighbours.³⁹ The initiative was seen at the time as a ground-breaking step in affirming the EU's presence in the international arena which laid the foundations for the development of strategic thinking in foreign policy. For example former Commissioner External Relations and European Neighbourhood policy, Benita Ferrero-Waldner argued that:

The ENP is a key priority for EU external relations. It is a virtuous circle, based on the premise that by helping our neighbours we help ourselves. By investing in our neighbours and by helping to create prosperous, stable and secure conditions around us, we extend the prosperity, stability and security of our citizens. The ENP is, in short, a win-win policy, based on shared interest and values. Ranging from Eastern Europe through the Caucasus and the Middle East to the Maghreb, it is a certainly a "Pan-European" policy.⁴⁰

Values were still at the forefront of the EU's approach, but the EU became increasingly concerned with the potential for the instability stemming from frozen conflicts and authoritarian regimes to spill-over to its own territory.⁴¹ Hence, while engaging in the resolution of frozen conflicts still seemed like a farfetched idea, transforming authoritarian political systems in the region became more feasible in the wake of the coloured revolutions.⁴²

Having the EU on their horizon, people in Ukraine and Georgia rose up against authoritarianism. In supporting the coloured revolutions the EU was oblivious to the fact that Russia viewed these developments as a threat to its vital security interests. It also failed to notice that it was slipping in an intense geopolitical competition with Moscow. However, the Kremlin felt that it was too weak at the time to mount a full-scale response to the EU's 'intrusion' in the post-Soviet space.⁴³ This in turn set the stage for the geopolitisation of the regional geopolitical structure. On the one hand, the EU perceived Russia to be a weaker international actor and proposed a similar type of partnership as in the case of the post-Soviet states – this caused outrage in Moscow.⁴⁴ On the other hand, the Kremlin understood that if Russia did not take the initiative it would stand to lose permanently its sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space and the on-going geopolitical competition with the EU.⁴⁵ Russia became increasingly weary of cooperating with the EU (and the West) complaining that is not being treated as an equal.⁴⁶ During the same period, the country experienced a relative economic boom due to the rising price of oil. This allowed Putin to strengthen and modernising the Russian military and pursue more

39 Ferrero-Waldner 2005b.

40 Ferrero-Waldner 2005c.

41 Ferrero-Waldner 2005a.

42 Ambrosio 2008.

43 Putin 2005a.

44 Allison, Light, and White 2006.

45 Putin 2005b.

46 Ambrosio 2007.

assertive foreign policy intent on winning the geopolitical competition (and possible confrontation with the West). The ultimate goal of this shift has been to regain Russia's great power status and gain recognition from the West.⁴⁷

The Georgian-Russian War of 2008 and Its Build-up

The coloured revolutions brought about a deep shift in Russian policy which became more assertive in trying to preserve its grip on the post-Soviet space. Russian leaders also realised that the EU had no intention of treating Moscow as an equal great power, a realisation which made them decide to display the country's power in practice.⁴⁸ The EU continued to have an inward-looking understanding of both Russian and the regional geopolitical structure of the post-Soviet space, which made it oblivious to the shift in Russian policy foreign policy; and from 2005 to 2008 became increasingly ambitious in pushing for its integration agenda in the eastern neighbourhood. Moreover, in Brussels there were also talk of sending Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions in the region in order to contribute to solving the existing frozen conflicts.⁴⁹ The new CEE members states also advocated an enhanced EU presence in the post-Soviet.⁵⁰ They shared traditional ties with the eastern neighbours but also an antagonistic approach towards Russia – which made them push for greater EU involvement in the post-Soviet space. Above all, they viewed the eastern neighbourhood as a space for geopolitical competition for influence, and argued that confrontation with Russia never stopped after the end of the Cold War.⁵¹ For them the post-Soviet space represents a buffer zone with Russia and a potential source of instability due to migration from the region and the existence of frozen conflicts.⁵² The CEE states have argued that the EU should offer the membership perspective to its eastern neighbours, as this would maintain their European aspirations at a high level.⁵³ Involving in the frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet states together with standing up to Russia's 'aggressive' actions in the region was also one of the demands made by the CEE member states.

Out of the EU's eastern neighbours Georgia showed the highest level of commitment towards the adoption of EU values, rules and regulations. Leaders in Tbilisi felt encouraged as they thought that the EU and the US would support them up. The 2008 Georgian-Russian war was thus caused by a combination of an increase in EU ambitions in the post-Soviet space, Georgian wishful thinking and growing assertiveness in Russian foreign

47 Forsberg 2014.

48 Putin 2007.

49 deVasconcelos 2009.

50 Copsey and Pomorska 2013.

51 Kacprzyk 2014.

52 Blaj 2013.

53 Copsey and Pomorska 2013.

policy.⁵⁴ Among these, Georgia's ambition to become part of NATO and the support of the US arguably played the most salient role. Russia's great power status became evident to the EU in the wake of the war which encouraged Brussels to develop a dual approach towards Russia and post-Soviet space, separating the two.⁵⁵ This led to a more pragmatic approach from the EU. Hence, starting with the cease-fire agreement, which put an end to Russian-Georgian conflict, ambitions for enhanced involvement in frozen conflicts and subsequent CSDP missions were shelved, while the EU's overall discourse retreated from the emphasis on interests to the promotion of values and norms.⁵⁶ After the war concepts of sovereignty, responsibility for citizens living abroad or self-determination became increasingly contested in the post-Soviet space.⁵⁷ More importantly, the Georgian-Russian war of 2008 signalled that Moscow was willing to go to great lengths in order to put into practice its new assertive stance. It also showed Russian leaders that the EU (but also the US and NATO) is not willing to act militarily in the post-Soviet space and seeks to avoid open geopolitical confrontation, and that Moscow could have a virtual free hand in the region if it decided to use force.⁵⁸

Medvedev's Presidency (2008–2012)

During Medvedev's presidency the emphasis in EU-Russia relations was on modernisation and developing a more equal strategic partnership.⁵⁹ In order to avoid geopolitical confrontation and mitigate the increasingly obvious competition for influence in the post-Soviet space, the EU focused on making economic cooperation the backbone of negotiations between the Moscow and Brussels, with the latter abandoning plans of becoming more involved in the hard security issues of the post-Soviet space.⁶⁰ Moreover, there was no illusion anymore that the EU would involve militarily in resolving frozen conflicts.⁶¹ At the same time, the EU continued to pursue its integration project in the post-Soviet space, however it adopted a *Russia first approach* whereby initiatives towards the region were adopted only if they did not conflict with Moscow's interests.⁶² In the wake of the 2008 Russian-Georgian war, the EU was convinced that Moscow's main interests resided in the area of security and that Russia would not feel threatened by a series of enhanced EU economic partnerships with the eastern neighbours.⁶³ This reasoning

54 Asmus 2010.

55 European Commission 2008.

56 Presidency of the Council of the European Union 2008.

57 Snetkov 2014.

58 Cornell and Starr 2009.

59 Moshes 2012.

60 European Commission 2009.

61 EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2010.

62 Krózser 2012.

63 European External Action Service 2011.

together with the entrepreneurship of Poland⁶⁴ (and the concerns of the CEE member states towards Russian assertiveness in the post-Soviet space) resulted in the EaP, which sought to integrate the eastern neighbourhood even closer with the EU.⁶⁵

From the perspective of Russia, Medvedev's presidency was an experiment meant to gauge whether the EU was ready to accept cooperation on equal terms and mitigate the geopolitical competition for influence in the post-Soviet space.⁶⁶ However, the EU did not live up to the Kremlin's expectations and still failed to perceive Moscow as an equal partner. Medvedev's proposal for a comprehensive and equal security architecture in Europe⁶⁷ was summarily dismissed by the EU leaders, which treated it as wishful thinking.⁶⁸ This set the stage for Russian foreign policy to become even more assertive and aimed at creating a clearly defined competing pole to the EU in Eurasia, i.e. the future Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). Moreover, the Kremlin increasingly understood that the EU would not engage its Eurasian integration project unless Russia would start confronting the West more openly.⁶⁹

Putin's Third Term and the Ukraine crisis (2012 –)

In Putin's third term, Russia experienced a radicalisation in its foreign policy and an appetite for greater geopolitical competition and confrontation with the EU in the post-Soviet space. Due to the increasing domestic contestation Putin turned to foreign policy in order to legitimise his leadership.⁷⁰ The Kremlin used the threat of the West encroaching upon Russia's vital interests in the post-Soviet space as a way to rally the country around the assertive foreign policy.⁷¹ Moreover, since 2012 conservative ideas and nationalism have flooded the Russian public sphere, with the West being portrayed as a decadent and an existential threat to the 'Russian way of life'.⁷²

In the post-Soviet space, besides the threat of military intervention Russia has also invested in a series of soft power tools in order to cement its influence. These include, the use of energy as a political tool to put pressure on the corrupt leaders in the region, bribery and

64 Poland has had the most noticeable impact on EU foreign policy towards the region proposing the EaP together with Sweden and constantly advocating for a supportive approach towards the eastern neighbours. The EaP has made Warsaw one of the key actors in the region and helped raising the overall profile of the country in the EU (Kaminska 2013).

65 Tardieu 2009.

66 Rogoza 2011.

67 Putin 2009.

68 de Haas 2011.

69 Halbach 2012.

70 Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2013.

71 Laruelle 2015a.

72 Laruelle 2015b.

blackmail, investing in Russian civil society and media institutions, or fostering separatist feelings among Russians living abroad.⁷³ The use of these tools was accelerated, however, by the protests in the Russian public sphere against Putin re-election for the third time as president in 2012. These events caused the Kremlin to seek to rally the population around the flag in the quest to safeguard the country from the threats posed by the West and to protect Russians leaving in the post-Soviet space.⁷⁴

The creation of the EEU during this period is an expression of Moscow's aspiration to be recognised as a great power, but also proof for Russian people that Russia has in fact achieved this status in world politics.⁷⁵ The EEU⁷⁶ signals that Russia viewed maintaining its spheres of economic relations in the post-Soviet space as part of its vital security interests, but should be also understood as the Kremlin's most organised attempt at winning the geopolitical competition for influence in the post-Soviet space. Eurasianism has been present in the Russian political landscape since the mid-XVIII century, however in the last five years it has been adopted by the Kremlin as an official ideology that puts Russia at the centre of a unique Eurasian culture.⁷⁷ It also implies that Russia has to assure the security of the Eurasian space from outside interference. In this sense the primary threats to the Russian led Eurasian order are the spread of Western type of democracy and terrorism fuelled by Islamic extremism. Russia's alternative to Western democracy is the concept of sovereign democracy, which argues that states should be free from any type of external influences.⁷⁸

During Putin's current term as president, the EU again embraced an inward looking understanding of the post-Soviet space, and still calculated that Russia was mainly interested in preserving the status quo of the region in terms of hard security.⁷⁹ The competition for influence was made more acute when the EU's push for Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova to sign the Association Agreements (which were designed in a manner that excludes equal cooperation with Russia or the Eurasian Union) forced them to make a clear choice between Brussels and Moscow. In acting in this way the EU did not factor in the idea that, besides the presence of Russia, the eastern neighbourhood differs from the southern one in that the security architecture of the region draws its problems from the break-up of the Soviet Union, and the various territorial and ethnic issues that were left unresolved. Nationalism and patriotism have been linked in the region with the need to construct ethnically homogenous countries, which would be secure from Russian

73 Sherr 2013.

74 Lankina and Niemczyk 2015.

75 Larson and Shevchenko 2014.

76 The development of the EEU has been facilitated by the Soviet business links and culture which still remain active throughout the post-Soviet space.

77 White and Feklyunina 2014.

78 Averre 2007.

79 Drageva and Wolczuk 2012.

actions.⁸⁰ Moreover, this state of affairs often led post-Soviet leaders to adopt multi-vector foreign policy in order to promote their countries' security interests and assure stability in the region.⁸¹ They have had to engage in a fine-tuned balancing act in order not to antagonise both Russia and the EU by siding entirely with one or the other.

In this context the Ukraine crisis led the EU to understand that its integration efforts in the post-Soviet states had been perceived by Russia as a geopolitical threat and competition.⁸² This realisation had multiple effects on EU policy towards Russia and the eastern neighbourhood. Firstly, it caused the EU to be less ambitious and more cautious in proposing new initiatives towards the region and even in implementing existing ones – e.g. it halted the implementation of the economic part of the DCFTA with Ukraine and it consulted Russia on this process.⁸³ Secondly, EU leaders have realised that geopolitical concerns are becoming increasingly salient in the regional and global arenas – most importantly the EU realised that its integration project in the post-Soviet space was seen as a geopolitical challenge by Russia.⁸⁴ The revision of the ENP published in the autumn of 2015 argues, for the first time in official EU documents, that the EU will provide support and assistance in the area of conflict resolution to the countries in the eastern neighbourhood.⁸⁵ The revision also acknowledges the fact that the southern and eastern neighbourhoods are very different and require tailor made approaches. It focuses on differentiation among the neighbours, allowing each of them to adopt the EU's values norms and regulations at their pace. Moreover, the 2016 Security Strategy recognises that fact that the EU's neighbourhood (but also more broadly the international arena) has become more disordered and dominated by geopolitical thinking.⁸⁶ Thirdly, the EU has shifted its approach from low-level technocratic cooperation to high-level diplomatic negotiations with Russia, acknowledging that its previous approach had partly led to the Ukraine crisis⁸⁷ – and did not allow the EU to perceive Russia's concerns. Finally, EU member states have turned towards the US and NATO for assuring their security needs and confronting Russian actions in Ukraine and the post-Soviet space, adopting a cold war rhetoric influenced by what Sakwa termed as renewed neo-Atlanticism.⁸⁸

80 Tolstrup 2015.

81 Freire and Kanet 2012.

82 Kyiv Post 2015.

83 European Commission 2015b.

84 Barroso 2014.

85 European Commission 2015a.

86 European External Action Service 2016.

87 European Commission 2015a.

88 Sakwa 2014.

Conclusions

This article has explored the way geopolitics has influenced the EU's approach towards the post-Soviet space by focusing on concepts: the geopolitical structure of the region, geopolitical competition and geopolitical confrontation. While for the most part of the past 15 years the EU did not view the eastern neighbourhood through the lens of geopolitical competition or confrontation, its foreign policy has been highly sensitive to the regional geopolitical structure. The EU engaged in region building in eastern and southern neighbourhoods in order to foster stability on its borders. Nevertheless, the EU's foreign policy in the eastern neighbourhood was based on a very inward-looking understanding of the regional geopolitical structure as inherently benign. Up until the Ukraine crisis, the EU viewed the region as a *ring of friends*, which offered opportunities for promoting the EU's values and interests as a way to ensure stability, but also proving that it can play a major role in world politics.⁸⁹

Competition with Russia for influence in the post-Soviet space started influencing EU foreign policy following the coloured revolutions in Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004). The EU did not recognise that these events, coupled with the adoption of the ENP in 2005, were perceived to start geopolitical competition for influence in the post-Soviet space. The Georgian-Russia war of 2008 made clear for European policymakers the rivalry with Moscow in the eastern neighbourhood. As a result, the EaP a year later formalised the geopolitical competition by offering enhanced and exclusive trade partnerships to the countries in the region which would not have allowed them to sign similar deals with Russia. At the same time, as a way of mitigating (and possibly) winning the geopolitical competition for influence in the post-Soviet space the EU offered Russia the prospect of a more or less equal strategic partnership and sought to integrate Moscow in the liberal multilateral system – i.e. supporting Russian membership in the WTO.

Since the end of the Cold War one of the key priorities for the EU (and the West for that matter) in relations with Russia has been avoiding geopolitical confrontation. Hence, throughout the past 15 years the EU has aimed to ensure that initiatives and policies in the post-Soviet space did not pose a direct threat to what it perceived as Russia's interests. However, starting with Putin's second term as president, the EU missed several warning signs which pointed to the fact that Moscow was willing to enter into direct confrontation if it felt that its vital interests were under threat – e.g. the Georgian-Russian war of 2008. Nevertheless, some of the new CEE member states highlighted that geopolitical confrontation with (an illiberal) Russia in the post-Soviet had become by 2008 increasingly inevitable, and that the EU should prepare for this. The Ukraine crisis saw the unfolding of the geopolitical competition between the EU and Russia into direct confrontation. The common sanctions regime imposed by the member states on Russia is testimony to the fact that the EU has stopped trying to avoid confrontation at all cost. Nevertheless, the EU has tried to contain the geopolitical confrontation to the Ukraine crisis and has kept

89 Prodi 2002.

the door open for dialogue with Moscow – e.g. the Minsk peace talks,⁹⁰ or the discussions between EU and EEU officials.⁹¹

The EU has started to come to grips with the idea that the international arena is becoming increasingly multipolar, and security challenges are more complex and widespread than ever in its history. In comparison to the 2003 Security Strategy which stressed that Europe was experiencing its most peaceful period since the second world war, the 2016 review of the strategy recognises that the EU has to deal with complex security threats both in its neighbourhood but also globally. The conflict in Ukraine and Russia's assertive foreign policy have without a doubt contributed to the shift in the EU's perception of security threats. However, the EU does not seem to be ready to develop hard power tools that would allow it to navigate this increasingly complex and geopolitical international setting. Finally, the turn towards geopolitical competition and confrontation in the EU's foreign policy towards Russia and the post-Soviet space begs the question whose interests will the Union actually be defending – will the member states' various (sometimes diverging) individual interests prevail or the shared interest embodied by the EU?

90 European Parliament 2015.

91 Gotev 2015.

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