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A CRITIQUE TO EU'S (LACK OF) STRATEGY TOWARDS RUSSIA

Loredana Maria Simionov – Gabriela Carmen Pascariu*

ABSTRACT

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the failure to break “Russia's black box” led the EU to misinterpret Russia's weakness for a willingness to transform into a Western model of development. Therefore, EU's ability to predict political events in Russia has not been great of late, resulting into failing soft-power strategies that weight heavily on European security. The current paper seeks to provide a critique to EU's approach and attitude towards Russia over the past decades by analysing its specific agenda, policies, actions and discourse; subsequently, the paper aims at identifying the main inconsistencies in the European goals and actions, as well as at highlighting the major challenges that hinder the consolidation of a long-term strategy towards EU's most important neighbour. Hence, the conducted analysis finds that in order to enhance its security and especially that of its eastern members, the EU should redefine its strategy towards Russia by going beyond the personalistic (“leader fixation”) and missionary (change Russia to its own image) approach by perceiving Russia for what it is, not for what it should be. The findings suggest that a proper strategy towards Russia can only be based on a long-term vision coupled with a thorough understanding of the partner's motivations and interests.

Key words: personalistic approach, missionary approach, threat perception

Introduction

The current policy of EU towards its biggest neighbour has suffered considerable transformations over the past decade, especially after the Crimean episode; perceptions of Russia have drastically shifted from a “strategic partner” (EC PCA, 1997) to a “key strategic challenge” (EU Global Strategy, 2016)

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bringing back chills from the Cold War era. Although the Ukraine crisis has proven a great incentive to unify EU's Member States voices, the solidarity is still frail and lacks leadership (Gulina 2017; Shagina, 2017; Buras et al, 2014), with overall long-term - mainstream attitudes and approaches towards Russia that tend to fall into the classical East-West division of the member states (Erlanger and MacFarquhar, 2017; Emmott, 2017). Nevertheless, the member states division in regards to Russia is not the only factor that weighs heavily on building and enhancing efficient cooperation (Simionov and Pascariu, 2017). As such, apart from it and from Russia's recent assertiveness in the common neighbourhood, the EU, on its own, presents several inconsistencies in its approach towards Russia even before the Ukraine crisis started. In this regard, there are voices that dwell upon EU's foreign policy weaknesses and argue that the situation in Ukraine is not the cause, but the consequence of previous mistakes in relations with the Kremlin (Sakwa, 2015; Sanders, 2014, Mearsheimer, 2014a, 2014b, Arbatova, 2016).

Moreover, the recent tensions between Russia and the West have been thoroughly discussed and analysed by experts, analysts, and academia. The majority of studies tend to unilaterally blame the Russian leader for the deadlock, without focusing on the deeper structural causes and issues of the current EU-Russia crisis (Cassier et al., 2016; Sanders, 2014). The current paper offers a threefold critique to EU's approach towards Russia, by analysing its policy orientation, as well as its declared goals/agenda/strategy. Furthermore, this paper does not focus on Russia's role and actions in straining the relations, but will rather revolve around identifying the main shortcomings of EU's approach towards Russia, starting from when the Soviet Union collapsed until present.

The paper focuses on answering *Does the EU's approach towards Russia hinder cooperation and fails in building a strategic vision?* In answering this question, the research will mainly be based on critical discourse analysis and it is structured in 3 sections, which are as follows: an outline of the past and current legal basis of cooperation between the EU and Russia (1); a critical analysis of EU's approach consisting of three main arguments: European missionarism, a lack of long-term strategic vision and the "Putin fixation" phenomenon; (2) followed by a set of recommendations for EU on how to move forward with Russia (3).

The current paper represents a case study, based on critical analysis of official texts and textual interpretations. As well as discourse analysis, it is using

various sets as data, as follows: Official documents of EU Policy/strategy towards Russia (EU official policy/agenda documents on Russia), statements/speeches of EU and Russian officials (Media reports and speeches in the EU Press release Database and Kremlin Database), and the latest policy recommendations of experts regarding EU-Russia future and way forward. For quantifying the Putin fixation phenomenon, supplementary data was obtained from NATO, UN and EEAS databases. Discourse analysis of official documents and statements represents the most frequently used method in international relations and diplomacy studies and even more so in the case of the European Union, considering its uniqueness and specific features as a global actor. As such, the EU has been created and further developed through numerous linguistic and textual representations (i.e. treaties, summits, councils, institutions, bureaucracies, etc.). As **Haukkala** and **Medvedev** (2001) point out, “in addition to the *acquis communautaire* and the *acquis politique*, the third pillar of the European edifice is certainly the *acquis linguistique*”, which is particularly relevant for the EU’s external affairs, “where the development of foreign policy documents in the European Union can therefore match the actual policy towards relevant regions – or even amount to such a policy”. As such, prior to the actual critical analysis, it is necessary to outline the institutional framework of cooperation between EU and Russia, before and after the Ukraine crisis.

1 Institutional Framework in EU-Russia relations: EU’s declared goals and guiding principles towards Russia

Russia is officially a member of institutions and bodies representing Europe and European values, being a member of the Council of Europe since 1996 and a signatory of the European Convention on Human Rights since 1998. In its European path, the EU has firmly supported Russia’s ascension to, and participation in different international organisations and fora, such as the G8, the G20, and the WTO. Nevertheless, the recent events in the shared neighbourhood have drastically estranged Russia from European structures and has marked the end of the *post-Cold War European order* (Krastev and Leonard, 2015). Considering that the events in Ukraine have undoubtedly represented a game changer in EU-Russia relations, when outlining the institutional framework of cooperation between the EU and Russia, it is relevant to glance at it before and after the Ukraine crisis, having as a starting point the inception of the Russian Federation in 1991.

1.1 Before Ukraine Crisis

The Ukraine crisis has profoundly altered cooperation between EU and Russia, leading to what has been defined "a new Cold War" or "a Cold Peace" (Sakwa, 2015). In order to grasp the current state of affairs of EU-Russia crisis and tensions, it is necessary to take a step back, to the moment when the USSR collapsed. By glancing at the post-Cold War immediate context, with all the involved interests and motivations, it becomes obvious that the clash of interests in the shared neighbourhood was simply a matter of time. Moreover, as **Sarotte** (2017) pointed out, the post-Cold War security order has failed to create a new world order, it has not instituted a new Pan-European security order, nor it has defined a clear place for Russia in it. Furthermore, "the entire post-Cold War European political and security architecture was built on the foundation of two institutions — the EU and NATO — which did not include Russia" (Menon and Rumer, 2015). Subsequently, by excluding Russia and perpetuating pre-existing Cold War structures, the Western strategy perpetuated old tensions, as well (Sarotte, 2017, p. 8). Within this context, Russia's relations with the EU throughout the last two decades mostly constituted an extension of Russia's relations with the US, whereas the "new" European security was never accepted by Russia, as it was never a part of it. Overall, before the Ukraine crisis the institutional framework of cooperation was mainly outlined and set by EU's rules. The goals revolved around transforming Russia, a *long-term* objective, but without considering the federation's capability and willingness to do so and especially without having a long-term strategy and action plan.

As such, despite few signed agreements and joint councils between EU and Russia within different structures (please see the section European Union Documents in References), there was never consolidated a consistent institutional framework between them, nor is there a strategy that EU has in the region on the long run on how to deal with Russia, especially a framework that would take into account Russia's own capabilities, interests and motivations. For instance, the current legal basis for EU-Russia cooperation consists of an over two-decades old agreement, namely the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) which came into force in 1997. It established a political framework for regular consultation between the EU and Russia, based on the EU's model and "principles of respect for democracy and human rights, political and economic freedom, and commitment to international peace and security" (EC PCA, 1997). Furthermore, the PCA was complemented by sectorial

agreements covering a wide range of policy areas, grouped in four common spaces: economy and the environment; freedom, security and justice (all negotiations and high-level dialogues are suspended, except technical level meetings); external security; research and education, including cultural aspects. Nevertheless, following the annexation of Crimea, some of these dialogues and consultations have been suspended.

The first coherent official document to express EU's long-term vision towards its biggest neighbour with clear and coherent long-term goals is yet another decades-long paper, namely the COMMON STRATEGY OF THE EUROPEAN UNION of 4 June 1999 on Russia (1999/414/CFSP). The strategy envisaged "a stable, open and pluralistic democracy in Russia", governed by the EU's model and values of "rule of law" "prosperous market economy" benefiting alike all the people of Russia and of the European Union and maintaining *European stability* [...] The Union remains firmly committed to working with Russia [...] to support a successful political and economic *transformation in Russia*" (Common Strategy on Russia, 1999). Similar to the PCA text, the common strategy revolves around transformation in Russia, emphasising the importance of *European stability*. In analysing the common strategy, back in 2001, **Haukkala** and **Medvedev** (2001) concluded by defining it as "very much a work in progress with an as yet limited impact", although it displays a fairly coherent approach. The overall shortcoming is that it lacks a long-term vision, despite having solely long-term goals. Moreover, following the Common Strategy, EU has no longer an official strategy dedicated to Russia alone. Issues related to its relation with Russia are included in the European security strategy (2009) and the Global Strategy (2016), both outlining values and principles and lacking the "how".

Governed by the PCA framework, relations between Russia and the EU had met both ups and downs until the Ukrainian crisis, with tensions revolving around geopolitical rivalries and achievements when it came down to more pragmatic means of cooperation. For instance, the EU-Russia relations hit rock bottom in 2008, during and after the conflict in Georgia, whereas the peak of their cooperation happened in 2012, when, with the constant support of the EU, Russia has been granted WTO membership. Within this timeframe, EU-Russia relations could be described as pragmatic but stagnating relations, revolving around Russia's transformation into a European model of democracy. Overall, the key goal of EU towards Russia, visible not only in these key EU documents, but also on all the European Council meetings (EC, 1999, 2000, 2007), is clearly to transform Russia in accordance to EU's model. Nevertheless, in

setting up this goal, the EU did not focus on Russia's needs, willingness and capabilities to adapt to its model.

1.2 After Ukraine Crisis

The events in Ukraine have not only deteriorated EU-Russia institutional framework and shifted considerably EU's approach in the region, but has also highlighted Russia's rejection of European security order as it has raised fundamental questions about its principles (Buras et al., 2014). What is particular about the period following the Ukraine crisis is that despite reaching an absolute lowest point in its relations to Russia since the Cold War, the EU has not outlined yet a clear and coherent long-term strategy towards this actor. Although, there is a short subsection dedicated to this "strategic challenge" in its global strategy paper, the EU has not designed a proper strategy that could go beyond principles.

The official discourse of EU following the annexation of Crimea has switched from transforming Russia to containing/isolating it. First, within EU Council (October, 2016) there were outlined five guiding principles on Russia: "full implementation of the Minsk agreements; closer ties with Russia's former Soviet neighbours; strengthening EU resilience to Russian threats; selective engagement with Russia on certain issues such as counter-terrorism; and support for people-to-people contacts" which emphasise how the approach has clearly changed from "cooperation" (PCA, 1997) to "selective engagement" (EC, 2016). As it can be noted, the only form of cooperation encouraged remain the people-to-people contacts, although practically there has been little progress on that front.

Second, the EU council following Aleppo (October 2016) has expressed the necessity to deal with Russia's role in Syria (no military solution), to "remain united against Russia regarding Ukraine crisis", "to reduce energy dependency" and to "counter propaganda". All these means to deal with Russia express a defensive stance, without a coherent action plan. The foreseeable solution envisaged by the council is the need to intensify cooperation with the Russian civil society, although following EU's sanctions towards Russia, these links and people-to-people contacts have been severely affected (European Parliament, 2016). EU has failed in reaching the Russian civil society, thus failing to get its message across to the society and although it has envisaged and declared the people to people contacts as the main mean to transform Russia, there was

little progress in this regard. “European institutions should establish channels to talk to the pro-European part of Russian society in order to maintain dialogue with those who will be shaping the future of Russia” (Europe-Russia: People to people dialogue, 2017). It is important for the EU to create more effective and accessible tools to support civil society in Russia, as current forms of support are unreachable for many small civil society actors in Russia. For instance, instead of building cooperation and trust with the academia as a means to enhance people to people cooperation, following the Ukraine crisis, Russia was temporarily excluded from the Horizon 2020 Programme, an action which has strained the links between Russian academia and EU, rather than affecting the decision-makers.

Third, within the same year of 2016, the EU has launched its 60-pages global strategy (Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy, 2016) which builds upon the European Council’s conclusions, revolving around ‘selective engagement’ [...] ‘if and when our interests overlap’. Although the strategy is quite broad and general in its content, when it comes to Russia (subsection The European Security Order), it becomes coherent and specific: to maintain unity and consistent approach towards this “key security challenge”. Moreover, Russia is mentioned seven times in the entire document, compared to other challenges, such as Libya and Syria (each mentioned three times) or Ukraine (mentioned only 2 times). The Global Strategy 2016 urges “principled pragmatism” in all EU actions and initiatives with “no time for uncertainty”, as Federica Mogherini has put it and that there is a need to bring clarity to foreign and security policy (Gulina, 2017).

In general, by comparing the official documents of EU regarding its approach/strategy towards Russia, there can be captured a drastic shift of tone and keywords before and after the Ukraine crisis. As such, before the crisis, the discourse revolved around *transformation through cooperation*, although this partnership did not assume a focus on dialogue between equal positioned actors. For instance, the keyword “cooperation” was mentioned 182 times in the EU-Russia PCA (1997), while “communication” appeared 517 times. In the European Commission’s report “The European Union and Russia: Close Neighbours, Global Players and Strategic Partners” (European Commission, 2007), “cooperation” is mentioned 93 times. Moreover, in the European Security Strategy. A secure Europe in a better world (E.C. 2009), “partnership”, associated with “strategic” or “balanced” is mentioned ten times in relation to

Russia (out of 17 times in total). Although the report was elaborated after the Georgia War, when EU-Russia have reached a historical low of their cooperation (E.C., 2009), the tone towards Russia does not modify from the Common Strategy on Russia (1999). As such, although it is highlighted that relations between EU-Russia have deteriorated, Russia is not specifically condemned for the “conflict between Russia and Georgia” (E.C., 2009, p. 17). On a completely different note, in the European Council’s Report from December 2014 to April 2016 (European Council, 2016), Russia is most frequently mentioned in relation to “aggression”, “illegal annexation of Crimea”, “full implementation of Minsk agreement”, and “sanctions”, whereas in EUGS (2016), it is openly called “a strategic challenge” to the “European security order at its core”. This shift in paradigm is obvious, considering the events in the shared neighbourhood, as obvious as the fact that EU has not yet found a unitary vision nor a common strategy, apart from conditional cooperation, a defensive, responsive stance and “condemning Russia”.

The Ukraine crisis is a major game-changer, paradigm shifter in EU-Russia relations. The approach and discourse changed from transformation through cooperation to isolation/containment through sanctions and “selective engagement”. In general lines, fruitful cooperation between EU and Russia seems no longer possible in the near future except for few exceptions, and particularly these exceptions might be links that could bring the two actors together. For instance, despite associated mistrust, tensions and problems, Russian-EU cross-border cooperation never completely ceased, with Russia and Finland agreeing to create the Saimaa Free Economic Zone in 2015. Moreover, there are various joint think tanks or forums of cooperation between Russia and some European Member States, which have proven consistent in their activities no matter the political environment in their home countries. Such examples of successful implementation of joint programs, even if relatively small, could contribute to improving the general relations between Russians and Europeans, even during a time of ongoing turmoil in “high politics” (PONARS Eurasia, 2017).

2 EU’s approach towards Russia – a threefold critique

The critical analysis of EU’s approach towards Russia is based on three main pillars, as follows: EU’s *missionarism* (1), the lack of *long-term vision and commitment* towards Russia (2), as well as the *Putin fixation* phenomenon (3).

2.1 A missionary approach

The role of Russia as a constitutive “Other” in European identity formation has been thoroughly analysed by Neumann (1999) who identified two categories of European discourses: Russia is either a “barbarian at the gate” or “an eternal apprentice” (Neumann, 1999, pp. 65-112). The latter suggests that Europe is the instructor, the “master” that constantly changes the rules of evaluation, thus making Russia a perpetual trainee. The European missionaryism towards Russia has been touched upon in various papers, although most of them have treated this aspect marginally without paying specific attention to its impact on Russia’s behaviour (Prozorov, 2016; Diesen, 2016). The concept of Russia as an “eternal apprentice” has recently gained more attention. An elaborated stance of Europe’s missionaryism was done by Sanders (2014), as well as **Krastev** and **Leonard** (2014) who acknowledge it as the *sine qua non* of European Union’s existence as a global actor. Starting from EU–Russia PCA (1997) (it established a political framework based on the European model and “principles of respect for democracy and human rights”), the Common Strategy (1999) (“to support political and economic transformation”), and culminating with EU’s latest Global Strategy (2016) (“full respect for international law and the principles underpinning the European security order”), the EU’s key aim in relation to Russia is to transform it in its own image. Moreover, Russia is defined as unpredictable, not because of its actions – if its actions were to be associated with its national interests, Russia could become quite predictable – but because it did not transform to our model: “[...] this partner (Russia) is also an unpredictable one because it goes through an uncertain era of political, economic, demographic, social and geopolitical transformation, thus deviating from the model proposed by European democracies” (IRRI-KIIB, 2006). Subsequently, the EU institutions were lacking some of the ‘bigger picture’, as the EU has learned “the hard way” that it might have drawn the wrong conclusions about Russia, its trust in the EU and the power of ‘Europeanisation’ through its classical formula of cooperation and integration (Felzmann, 2014).

The EU’s failure to both anticipate and respond effectively to the Russian government’s domestic and foreign policy have some of its roots in EU’s missionaryism. As such, the EU should grasp Russia beyond its universalism coupled with a stringent need to understand how Russia sees itself, the EU and the world. More fundamentally, Russia’s view of its place in Europe and the world could help explain why the EU’s approach of engagement and close

cooperation with Russia did not yield the desired results. A recent report of two leading Russian foreign policy experts **Miller** and **Lukyanov** (2016) captures at length the idea of Russia the “eternal apprentice”, from a *Russian perspective*, additionally arguing for a radical reassessment of Moscow’s way of engaging with the West by “detachment”. They track the concept back to 19th century, when **Karamzin** who referred to Russia as Europe’s apprentice in his *Letters of a Russian Traveler*, without any frustrations entailed, but with adoration and gratitude, for as long as the student is given the opportunity to graduate. Still not graduating, a century later, Dostoyevsky accumulates on the frustrations of this perpetual apprenticeship, regarding Russia’s European fixation as a “mental disorder” that involved high cost, both spiritual and material by having “unsuccessful policies in Europe [...] in order to prove that we were Europeans, and not Asians” (Miller and Lukyanov, 2016, p.16). In present times, EU’s declared intentions of sharing with Russia “everything but institutions” (Romani Prodi, 2002) added to the apprentice’s frustrations, as Moscow has to accept all EU’s rules and norms without having any means of influencing them, thus never graduating. The Ukraine crisis has not only shifted EU’s approach and paradigm towards Russia, but it has also drastically changed Russia’s approach. As **Dimitri Trenin** (Director of the Carnegie Moscow Center) has postulated, Russia needs its own path and national project, “a nationalism of enlightened action focused on Russia’s development” (Trenin, 2015, p.92), as it is a great power, “not because it is capable of controlling others or making them accept its norms, rules and solutions, but because it has a high level of self-sufficiency and innate resistibility to external effects.” (Trenin, 2015, p. 94 in Miller and Lukyanov, p. 22). This self-sufficiency is an important trait of Russian discourse and the danger of Europe’s missionaryism is alienating Russia even further.

In general, the *roots* of EU’s missionary approach date back to centuries ago. As **Krastev** and **Leonard** (2014) rightly point out, “for the past 300 years, Europe was at the centre of global affairs. In 1914, European order was world order, shaped by the interests, ambitions, and rivalries of the European empires”. Although after the world wars the US became the centre of global affairs (together with the USSR), at present EU’s missionary vision has not diminished, it has further been alimented by the successful transformation of the newest European member-states, following EU’s Eastern enlargement. The utter gratitude and openness of these Eastern members towards the European project has further encouraged the EU in its endeavour, making it difficult to understand that it might be perceived as a threat. Opposed to the countries that

had direct support and involvement of the West in overcoming the harsh transition, Russia found its way out on its own. The trick was that the EU mistook Russia's weakness during that period for a desire to convert to its model and subsequently for a tacit acceptance of the new European security order, which were not the case. Instead of confronting this reality, the EU gets often stuck in its own model, failing to see Russia for what it is, not for what it should be; fixated on changing Russia, the EU does not focus on answering the obvious and most important questions, necessary to build a proper strategy: What does Russia want? How does Russia see itself and its place in the world?

When it comes to Russia's perception of its instructor, the latest opinion polls (according to Levada Centre, Russian population approval rates towards the EU went from 65% in 2012 to 28% in 2017). Together with Kremlin official discourse, this suggests that Russia does not aspire anymore to EU model, and not because "the apprentice has mastered all skills" but for the reason that "there is no apprentice as he no longer wants to be a member of the guild and achieve the guild's recognition" (Miller and Lukyanov, 2016, p. 23). We have come a long way in shaping this attitude, considering that only a decade ago, the adherence to European model was Russia's own "principled" choice: "I strongly believe the full unity of our continent can never be achieved until Russia, as the largest European state, becomes an integral part of the European process. (...). Today, building a sovereign democratic state, we share the values and principles of the vast majority of Europeans. (...) A stable, prosperous and united Europe is in our interest. (...). The development of multifaceted ties with the EU is Russia's principled choice." (Russian President Vladimir Putin's in a letter to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the European Union, 25 March 2007).

Since the fall of the Iron Curtain, Europeans seem to be "intoxicated" by their own model, automatically assuming its universal nature, thus the failure of being perceived by others as threat (Krastev and Leonard, 2014). As such, the EU is missing the common values based synergies, namely a co-habitation perspective of accepting different system of values within a partnership, which nuances once more a rather unbalanced dominant position. In better assessing the outcomes of future incentives and policies regarding Russia, the West should perceive Russia for what it is, not through relativistic and paternalistic glasses of what it should be, so that it could go beyond the missionary approach that predates the Tsarist times (Sanders, 2014). Russia is not as unpredictable, for as long as it is analysed outside the European universalism, whilst there are considered Russian national interests and sensibilities.

2.2 Lacking the long-term vision

The fact that the concept of 'Common Strategies' introduced by the treaty of Amsterdam (1997) has practically disappeared from EU's external agenda, it generally makes the EU even less effective in defining clear strategic visions for its external political relations (IRRI-KIIB, 2006). Moreover, up to the Lisbon Treaty (2007/2009) EU's foreign relations were built and based upon intergovernmental forms of cooperation, pushing member states to seek their own strategies and interests when it came to dealing with other regional/international players. As such, the EU did not specifically have clear foreign policy agenda or objectives. When it comes to its biggest and most important neighbour, Russia, the lack of strategic vision has been identified and emphasised long ago, ever since the Common Strategy towards Russia was launched. Over a decade ago, **Haukkala** and **Medvedev** (2001) have brought a detailed critique to EU's lack of strategic vision in EU's Common Strategy. Although there are many events and years that have passed since then, the critique still stands today, despite the terrible events at EU's Eastern borders. As such, the conclusions of the strategy analysis outline three general setbacks: the fact that the European Union is indeed suffering from a strategic deficit vis-à-vis Russia, which the authors call "a strategy of non-strategy on Russia" (1); the fact that member states are more interested in protecting their own interest vis-à-vis Russia rather than developing an operationally strong strategy document (2); as well as that rather than having a full-fledged and coherent strategy, which would allow for a flexible response to the evolving events in Russia, the European Union has instead been forced into reaction, improvisation and a reliance on ad hoc arrangements (3) (Haukkala and Medvedev, 2001, pp. 65-67). Following **Haukkala** and **Medvedev's** relevant and up-to-date critique, in the report "Assessment of the cooperation between the EU and Russia" (IRRI-KIIB, 2006) it has also been emphasised the dire need of a long-term vision regarding relations with Russia. Moreover, the report identifies the lack of long-term vision as "the main factor that prevents Moscow and Brussels from overcoming the ambiguity and the crisis of confidence in their mutual relations."

Nearly two decades have passed since the Common Strategy was launched and the EU has still not elaborated a coherent document dedicated exclusively to shaping a long-term vision/strategy on Russia. The latest official form of EU's "strategy" on Russia consists of a one-page subchapter entitled "European

Security order” that is incorporated into EU’s Global Strategy (2016). Although this “chapter” is quite detailed in terms of “principles”, it does not add up any specific actions or means that EU should take to further engage or mend things with Russia. The chosen formula for dealing with Russia is built upon ‘selective engagement’ [...] ‘if and when our interests overlap’ which suggests a short-sighted vision based on improvising rather than planning. The only long-term mention of the text is the declarative statement of strengthening cooperation with civil society through “deeper societal ties through facilitated travel for students, civil society and business”; however, it is only mentioned the “what” and not the “how”.

Similar to policy towards Russia, in terms of lacking a long-term vision, is the European Neighbourhood Policy (2004), which was basically built on EU’s enlargement policy. Initially, Russia was invited to take part in this policy and when it refused, it was harshly criticised by decision-makers and analysts alike. Its attitude was associated with pride and imperialism, rather than technical details of how to deal with such different countries through the same instruments. For instance, was it realistic to have Moldova and Russia under the same framework of cooperation, considering that Republic of Moldova (33,846 km) is smaller than the size of Moscow oblast (45,900 km²)? Not only has the size of the two countries differed, but also their agendas, capabilities and resources. In general, there is no common recipe for success in dealing with external partners, as none of EU’s current cooperation frameworks (EU-US, ‘New Neighbourhood’, ‘Swiss’ or ‘Norwegian’ model, etc.) can be fully applied to the case of Russia. Each of these frameworks is built upon a unique historical, economic, political and cultural platform and cannot simply be transferred and applied elsewhere (IRRI-KIIB, 2006).

Considering the recent events from the common neighbourhood, EU’s current actions and response to Russia – the economic sanctions have failed so far to influence Kremlin’s agenda. Although there is an ongoing debate regarding the efficiency of the sanctions, no matter the outcome, they are not a long-term solution. In assessing the real outcome of EU’s actions, the long-term consequences must be taken into account. As such, in judging the sanctions, the EU should not only look at short-term goals of harming Russia’s economy. There are side effects on the long run that might be opposite to West’s overall interests - Russia’s isolationism and the “fortress” concept will be a dangerous slope that will most likely not lead to Russia’s transformation.

There is no clear strategy on how to deal with or engage Russia and very often EU's actions are merely a response to Russia's actions. The long term-dimension is missing from both strategy (having a long-term objective – to transform Russia, but missing the “how”) and in assessing consequences of its actions (for instance, in the case of sanctions “trap”, the EU judges their efficiency in terms of harming Russian economy, which is an immediate effect, without considering the challenges that entail an isolated, “fortress” Russia). The EU will not be able to overcome this deadlock and bring coherence to its approach towards Russia unless it goes beyond the current state of affairs “to develop a clearer vision of the political order that it seeks to uphold on the contested fringes of its own post-modern space” (Krastev and Leonard, 2015, p. 6). Instead of focusing on changing Russia on our terms as a main objective, we should set intermediate goals of making Russia want to transform on its own, which, of course it is a very complex and long-term process.

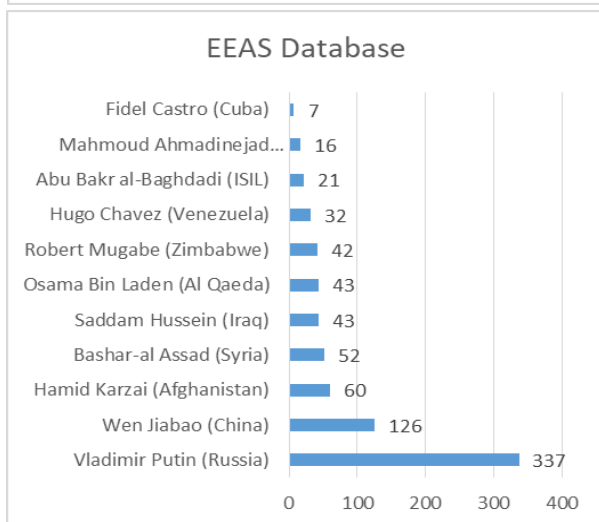
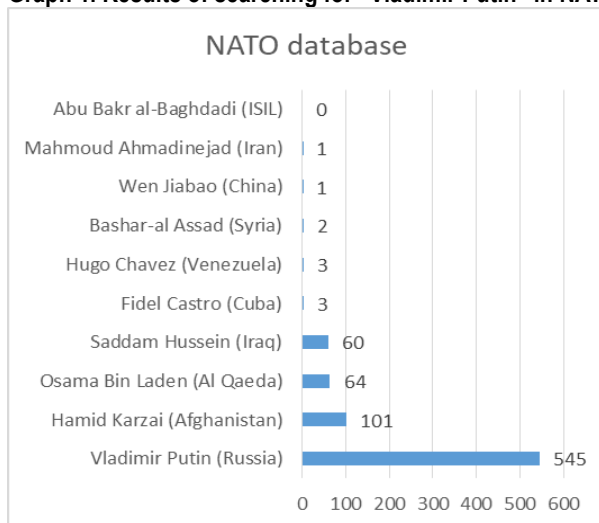
2.3 A personalist approach

Especially after the Ukraine crisis, although the recommendations and scenarios of the EU-Russia relations vary greatly among scholars, when it comes to the root cause of tensions, the majority of studies tend to blame the Russian leader for the existing bad relations (Sanders, 2014). Nevertheless, the EU's lack of vision and political imagination, consisting of a “**Putin** fixation phenomenon”, coupled with the failure to deeply understand the Russian mind-set are equally to blame for the current crisis. As **Krastev** noted, paradoxically, during Stalin's time, George Kennan mentioned Stalin three times in America's containment policy, whereas, at present, Putin's name is found on a myriad of memos and papers when analysing Russia's strategic behaviour (Krastev, 2015). The Western approach regarding the understanding of the Russian mind-set seems to be fixating on understanding the Russian leader. Thus, the assumption “to understand Putin is to understand Russia” is limited at best, a major simplification of the stakes (Sanders, 2015).

For instance, a word search in NATO and EEAS databases of various world leaders (past and present) who were or are competing or challenging the West (particularly those two institutions), shows that Vladimir Putin is, by far, the most mentioned leader in both databases (Graph 1). There were taken into account all the official documents and statements on the both institution's databases and the search took into account the most representative “rival” leaders or those

considered as such by the West. Although this search is not particularly substantial as evidence goes, it is still relevant, especially since official threats as Saddam Hussein or Osama bin Laden showed up nearly ten times less than Vladimir Putin.

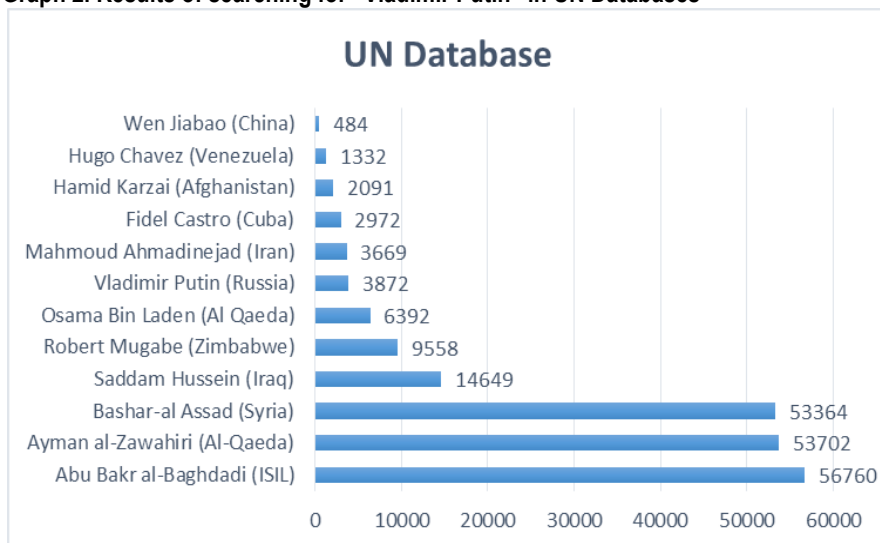
Graph 1. Results of searching for “Vladimir Putin” in NATO and EEAS Databases



Source: Author's own representation based on data retrieved from NATO and EEAS

Opposed to these two institutions, within the United Nations database, where Russia has a permanent sit, Vladimir Putin is barely mentioned, compared to terrorist leaders like Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (ISIL) or Ayman al-Zawahiri (Al-Qaeda) (Graph 2), emphasising UN’s focus on terrorism.

Graph 2. Results of searching for “Vladimir Putin” in UN Databases



Source: Author’s own representation based on data retrieved from UN database

Although it is not enough to assess Putin fixation phenomenon with a simple word search, it is quite obvious that the EU has had a top-down approach towards its biggest neighbour, revolving around Russia’s leader. Moreover, there is a great body of literature on West’s personalist approach towards Russia, classified as a “Putin fixation” phenomenon (Krastev and Leonard, 2014; Sakwa, 2016) or an emergence of ‘Putinology’ (Monaghan, 2016) as since the mid-2000s, the mainstream Western discussion of Russia has progressively focused on Vladimir Putin as the means by which to understand Russia. Putin is indeed the main figure of Russian political life, wielding substantial political power at the heart of the leadership team, and enjoying considerable popularity. However, Putin fixation has served as an alibi for the absence of a policy towards Russia (Yaffa, 2012), and disguised the lack of wider knowledge about Russia and understanding of how it works. Not only are the “micro-assessments of Putin and ‘what he is thinking or really wants’ often

misleading, but Putin is not synonymous with Russia, nor is he all-powerful” (Monaghan, 2016). Such personalist approach has harmful long-term consequences, as societies’ needs and expectation are often set aside when building and implementing policies on Russia.

It is necessary for the EU to re-orient from Kremlin to society; as such, personalist tendency hinders the consolidation of a society-oriented policy stemming from a lack of understanding of the Russian mind-set. For instance, the strong support for President Putin among the Russian society is mainly due to his actions on foreign policy. Speaking of internal affairs, there is considerably more negative reaction to the authorities’ actions, even against the President. Such nuance is often not taken into account by the West. In a recent briefing from European Parliamentary Research Service (October, 2016), Martin Russell rightly points out the essential need to support Russian civil society and to promote people-to people contacts, especially in the context of Russia’s 2012 Foreign Agents Law, or the 2015 law on undesirable international organisations, as EU’s support to Russia’s increasingly isolated NGO’s is one of the foreseeable long-term solutions to addressing directly the civil society.

Conclusions

This paper has analysed whether EU’s approach towards Russia hinders cooperation and fails in building a strategic vision. The scientific approach has focused on investigating the three main inconsistencies in EU’s policy and actions towards Russia by critically assessing their role in shaping relations between the two actors. The findings suggest that all the three analysed inconsistencies (EU’s missionarism, the lack of long-term vision and commitment towards Russia, as well as the Putin fixation phenomenon) weight heavily on enhancing cooperation with Russia, as well as on forging EU’s coherent strategy towards its biggest neighbour. Overall, after analysing and arguing at length each existing limit it can be noted that EU has a reactive, rather than pro-active approach towards Russia. Stemming from this concluding remark and considering the three inconsistencies, two additional recommendations to overcome the current deadlock could be drawn.

First, EU’s missionarism often interferes with consolidating its coherent long-term vision towards Russia as it is preventing EU from understanding that democratisation is a bottom-up long-term process. Therefore, in pursuing this main goal, EU’s long-term strategy should be based on society (not on the

leader) and *mutual values*, goals and interests. In the meantime, the key question to have in mind in dealing with and engaging Russia should be as follows: *How can we encourage the development of a Russia the EU can live with instead of trying to re-shape it in our image?*

Second, European Union should acknowledge that it has failed to understand post-Soviet Russia and whatever the context, it must co-exist with its powerful neighbour. As such, diplomacy and communication should be at the core of any issues to EU-Russia cooperation. In such critical moments, it is desirable to enhance dialogue, not exclusion, respectively isolation. Although it looks like containing and isolating Russia has immediate results, on the long run it might bring about exactly the opposite of EU's main goals in the region.

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