From cooperation to confrontation: the impact of bilateral perceptions and interactions on the EU-Russia relations in the context of shared neighbourhood

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Abstract

Relying on the regional security complex theory and statements made by top Russian and EU officials and key decision-makers from the new EU Member States bordering Russia to the East, the article advances three main conclusions. First, that Russia's negative perceptions of the EU's Eastern Partnership initiative explains to a large extent the change of its EU's perception from a strategic ally to a competitor for influence in the shared neighbourhood and the speeding up of the Russian-led Eurasian integration project. Second, that faced with Russia's increasing bullying behaviour in its Eastern neighbourhood in general and Ukraine in particular, the EU has been pushed into a confrontational mode with Russia. Third, that being at the forefront of condemning Russia's aggressive behaviour in Ukraine, the new EU Member States along the Baltic-Black Sea limes have created a new regional security subcomplex within the EU-Europe regional security complex.

Keywords: European Union, Eastern Partnership, Russia, Ukraine, regional security complex theory

1. Introduction

The article underlines the involution of the European Union (EU)-Russia relations in the context of the competition and, eventually, conflict between the two power centres over the shared neighbourhood. Given the interplay between geopolitical moves and their perceptions and their aggregated outcome, the confrontational mode of the current EU-Russia relations, the article builds its arguments on the regional security complex theory (RSCT). RSCT is an appropriate theoretical framework as it takes a regional approach, combining a

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realist emphasis on anarchic structure and balance of power with a post-structuralist emphasis on the social construction of hostile mutual perceptions as reflected at the level of the two actors' official discourses. Thus, from a methodological viewpoint, the article relies on the discourse analysis of various statements issued by high-ranking Russian, EU, and new EU Member States officials.

Firstly, the article briefly sketches out the dynamics of Russia's Eurasian integrationist project raising the following question: What has actually prompted Russia to speed up its integrationist moves? The article argues that Russia's negative reading of the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative was a crucial factor for changing its perception of the EU from a strategic ally to a competitor for influence in the shared neighbourhood as well as for speeding up its Eurasian integrationist project. Secondly, the article claims that Russia's increasing nervous, bullying and aggressive behaviour in the EU-Russia shared neighbourhood, in general, and Ukraine, in particular, led the EU, under the constant pressure of the Member States bordering Russia to the East, to perceive Russia as a direct security threat. Thirdly, the article states that this perception led to the creation of a new security sub-complex along the Baltic-Black Sea *limes,* facilitating both a partial overcome of the EU internal divisions regarding the Member States' positioning vis-à-vis Russia and the gradual process of the EU's and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)'s positions getting closer, thus opening a new era of confrontation between Russia and the West.

2. The theoretical framework

The RSCT offers a useful theoretical tool for analysing the security dynamics and interdependence in the EU-Russia shared neighbourhood as it creatively combines Barry Buzan's realist approach with Ole Wæver's post-structuralism-influenced approach.

The RSCT argues that the penetration from global powers has influenced almost every region's security dynamics and resulted in an increased role of the regional level as compared to the global level. According to Buzan and Wæver (2003, p. 43), the regional or the sub-systemic level "refers to the level where states or other units link together sufficiently closely that their securities cannot be considered separate from each other. The regional level is where the extremes of national and global security interplay, and where most of the action occurs". Whereas at the unit level, the research focuses on the study of the security discourses of individual actors, at the sub-systemic level, the analysis is directed at the entire dynamics of security problems that are fragmented when approached only from different actors' perspectives (Huymans, 1998, pp. 494-495).

According to the Copenhagen School, security is self-referential because it is not necessarily defined by the presence of a real existential threat but by the

presentation of a security problem as a threat – process known as *securitization.* In order to have a successful securitization, the *securitizing move* requires a security problem to be presented by relevant authorities through speech acts as a security threat to a large segment of the population, and this relevant audience to accept it as such, as a security threat requiring exceptional measures to counter it (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998, pp. 24-26).

The definition of a regional security complex (RSC) itself revolves around the concept of securitization: "*a set of units whose major processes of securitization, desecuritization, or both are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analyzed or resolved apart from one another*" (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998, p. 201). The regional security complexes (RSCs) are durable empirical phenomena with historical and geopolitical roots characterised by long-lasting patterns of friendship and hostility taking the form of sub-global patterns of security interdependence. Actually, the units of a RSC are tied together more often than not by negative dynamics, i.e., by being each other's security problem (Buzan and Wæver, 2003, p. 430). A local RSC is usually affected by historical factors as for instance historical antagonism and dispute between states or common cultural, civilisational and historical backgrounds. The presence of a distinct set of intense and inward looking security relationships determines both the existence of a RSC and its exact boundaries as it represents the only available criterion for the inclusion/exclusion of units in that complex (Buzan, 1991, p. 193). Furthermore, "the formation of RSCs derives from the interplay between, on the one hand, the anarchic structure and its balance- of-power consequences, and on the other the pressures of local geographical proximity" (Buzan and Wæver, 2003, p. 45). Thereby, the adjacency of states plays a significant role within security generally creating more security interaction for neighbouring states within the RSC than for states located outside it. In addition to this, RSCs "are socially constructed in the sense that they are contingent on the *security practice* of the actors" (Buzan and Wæver 2003, p. 48). In sum, structurally, RSCs are not necessarily regions in other ways than for security reasons and encompass four variables: boundary; anarchic structure; polarity; and social construction (Buzan and Wæver, 2003, p. 53). Thus, the realist emphasis put on boundary, anarchic structure and polarity as key variables of a RSC is complemented by the post-structuralist stress on the RSC's social construction.

The RSC has its own dynamics, which is distinguishable and analytically separable from the global or the unit level dynamics. As the international security as conceived of by the Copenhagen School is a relational phenomenon, being mostly about how collectivities relate to each other in terms of threats and vulnerabilities (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998, p. 10), the dynamics of security problems are located within the units themselves as well as between them. More precisely, the RSC dynamics is basically a function of four variables:

domestically generated vulnerabilities; state-to-state relations; the interaction with neighbouring regions; and the involvement of global powers in the region.

There are three possible evolutions open to a RSC: *maintenance of the status quo,* when no significant changes occur in its fundamental structure; *internal transformation*, when changes related either to anarchic structure, to polarity or to the amity/enmity patterns occur within the existing boundary; and *external transformation,* when the outer boundary either expands due to a merger between two RSCs, which is a frequent case, or contracts due to a RSC's splitting into two RSCs, which is a less frequent case, either one involving a change in the RSC membership and most likely a change of other features of its essential structure, too (Buzan and Wæver, 2003, p. 51).

The extent to which a unit of a RSC participates in its formation through projecting its own domestic security problems outside its boundaries is called *externalization.* This concept describes the impact of domestically generated vulnerabilities of a RSC unit on the bilateral relations with other units of the RSC and how they influence the overall RSC vulnerability and, implicitly, its dynamics. By contrast, the extent to which external powers outside the RSC form security alliances with units within the RSC is called *penetration.* This concept describes the impact of external powers on the RSC dynamics which, in many cases, is quite significant.

A *standard RSC* is Westphalian in form, blends two or more powers, has a predominantly military-political agenda and includes characteristics such as: security interdependence; geographical proximity/physical adjacency; the existence of durable patterns of amity and enmity, rivalries, balance-of-power and alliance patterns among the main powers within the region; and penetration by outside powers, which, in certain cases, could lead to their security alignments with states or state-like entities within the region. A *centred RSC* is one integrated and dominated either by a superpower such as the USA in North America, a great power such as Russia in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), or a set of institutions such as the EU in Europe. In-between the above mentioned two types stand two hybrid types: *great power RSCs*, when the polarity of a region is defined by more than one global level power being enclosed in it; and regional security supercomplexes or, in short, *supercomplexes*, when the spill-over effect of great power interaction in separate RSCs generates a strong and sustained level of interregional security dynamics between them (Buzan and Wæver, 2003, pp. 59-60). An example of a supercomplex is the all-European one, composed of the EU-Europe RSC, dominated by the EU, and the post-Soviet RSC, dominated by Russia. The RSCT also distinguishes regional security subcomplexes or, in short *subcomplexes (sub-RSCs)*, which "represent distinctive patterns of security interdependence that are nonetheless caught up in a wider pattern that defines the RSC as a whole" (Buzan and Wæver, 2003, p. 51).

3. The dynamics of Russia's Eurasian integrationist project

The neighbourhood area has always been a priority for the Russian foreign policy but relations between Russia and the countries belonging to the EU shared neighbourhood have experienced a new momentum when the Kremlin has started to rebalance its foreign policy, putting more emphasis on post-Soviet Eurasia (Trenin, 2014, p. 1). Although some signs of this shift could be detected as early as February 2007 (Semenij, 2010) in some statements by President Vladimir Putin at the Munich security conference, the real turn in this respect has taken place since 2009. Russia's self-exclusion from the EaP has gradually generated a geopolitical competitive agenda between Brussels and Kremlin, premised on a zero-sum political calculus which has heavily affected the relationship between the two major actors (Gover and Timmins, 2009; Adomeit, 2011). In an attempt to preserve its influence over the "new Eastern Europe" (Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova) and South Caucasus (Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan), areas which it considers of vital importance for its own stability and security, Russia has started to promote its self-styled, informal but well-resourced geopolitical neighbourhood policy (Wilson and Popescu, 2009) based on a four-fold strategy focused on hard power, soft power, a mixture between "hard diplomacy and soft coercion" (Sherr, 2013) and even normative power. As far as hard power is concerned, for instance, Moscow used military force in Georgia, recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and issued Russian passports to its inhabitants, blocking Georgia's efforts to solve its secessionist conflicts as well as its NATO aspirations. Eventually, worried that the new Ukrainian regime would cancel the Russian lease on the naval base in Sevastopol and kick out the Black Sea Fleet (Treisman, 2016; Mearsheimer, 2014), it annexed Crimea, thus putting Ukraine's NATO aspirations on hold. As far as the soft power is concerned, Moscow has attempted to undermine the EaP's initiative influence with EU-like instruments. The Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) has been conceived having in mind the EU model with the aim to become an alternative to the EU. Kremlin has tried to engage the former Soviet republics in agreements which, at first sight, had mutual and/or short-run benefits. For instance, Russia has convinced Ukraine and Armenia to join the Customs Union (CU), underlining the economic advantages brought by the membership, but without mentioning that this would undermine their participation in the EaP, namely the possibility to sign the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with the EU. For its "hard diplomacy and soft coercion" approach, its policies both vis-à-vis the EU and Russia's neighbourhood are particularly relevant. For instance, the bilateral agreements of EU Member States with the Russian energy giant Gazprom has allowed Moscow to use its energy resources as a tool for undermining the EU's ability to act in a coherent, unitary and efficient manner as far as its EU foreign and energy policies are concerned (De Jong and Wouters, 2015; Sherr, 2013, pp.

78-86). In a similar vein, the embargoes imposed by Moscow on Moldovan agricultural products combined with its pressure put on Moldovans living and working in Russia have been instrumental, along with other softer tools, to keep Moldova in an ambiguous position between Brussels and Moscow despite its official pro-European political orientation. Furthermore, by using a typical "sticks and carrots" strategy in order to maintain Ukraine dependent on Moscow, Kremlin pushed hard for signing the Russian-Ukrainian "Fleet for gas" Accord, which should have guaranteed lower prices for the Russian gas in exchange for the extension of the contract of stationing the Russian Black Sea Fleet in the Sevastopol harbour until 2042. Last but not least, on the side of the normative power, the Russian governing elite has engaged itself in a "battle of ideas" with the EU with the aim of promoting and legitimating its own norms and principles of political organization as alternatives to the Western liberal democratic norms in the hope of winning the "hearts and minds" of its neighbours in the "new Eastern Europe." To that effect, the media, the Russian Orthodox Church and a whole range of institutions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) supported by a special Directorate within the Russian Presidential Administration have been instrumental at gaining influence at both governmental and societal levels within the countries of Russia's neighbourhood (Averre, 2009). An intrinsic and crucial role in this "battle of ideas" has been played by the key concept that the integration project led by Russia is compatible with the older one led by the EU. Time and again, the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has emphasized that:

> There are no contradictions between the integration processes in the west and the east of Europe because they both come down to the free movement of goods, capital, services and labour (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation [MFA-RU], 2011a).

Similarly, he stated that:

> We presume that foreign policy has to be multivector. (…) It is absolutely inappropriate to state that the creation of a free trade zone with the European Union excludes any relations with integration processes in the CIS space (MFA-RU, 2013a).

The presumable compatibility, complementarity and interdependence between the European and Eurasian integrative blocs, which would create a common space "stretching from Lisbon to Vladivostok" (MFA-RU, 2014) was presented as a consequence of Russia's compatibility with the EU, namely that Russia is part and parcel of the European continent, culture and civilization (MFA-RU, 2013b).

Eventually, with the sudden launch in June 2009 of its CU with Kazakhstan and Belarus, Kremlin engaged in an integrationist race with Brussels in its "sphere

of privileged interests." Over a five-year period, starting from the nucleus of the Eurasian CU which came into existence on 1 January 2010, and continuing with the Single Economic Space, which was set up two years later, finally, on 1 January 2015, Russia managed to put in place its little replica of the EU, the EEU, which at present comprises, besides the three founding countries, Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan, and which is open to other countries willing to join.

The relatively speedy pace of the Russian-led integrationist project since 2009, and particularly after 2012, when Vladimir Putin returned to take a third term as Russia's President, should be comparatively assessed against its prior relative stagnation. In retrospect, one cannot avoid noticing that the agreement for creating a CU between Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan was signed since 1995, but the project remained on paper for nearly 15 years. Such circumstances naturally beg the question: What has actually prompted Russia to speed up its integrationist moves? The role of bilateral perceptions and interactions in the shared neighbourhood in shaping the conduct of foreign policy of Russia and the EU come up for discussion.

4. EU-Russia perceptions and interactions in the shared neighbourhood

The first key assumption of this article is that Russia's negative reading of the EaP was a crucial factor for changing its perception of the EU from a strategic ally to a competitor for influence in the shared neighbourhood as well as for speeding up its Eurasian integrationist project. This negative perception fed into Russia's post imperial anxieties related to the loss of its former strategic glacis due to NATO and EU expansion (Mankoff, 2009, p. 146). Despite not offering the EU accession perspective, the EaP has been perceived by the Russian leaders as a tool for preparing the EU's Eastern neighbours for a possible future integration into the EU, a competitor for the Russian-led EEU, an apparatus for deeper EU involvement in the security governance of its Eastern neighbourhood (Averre, 2011, p. 4) and even as an instrument for promoting NATO's goals in the region.

The tough statements vis-à-vis the EU immediately before and after the EaP's launch testify for the fact that this European initiative designed for the Eastern neighbours determined Russia to dramatically change its stance vis-à-vis the EU. For the first time since the breakdown of the Soviet Union, Moscow accused the EU of intrusion in Russia's "sphere of privileged interests" and of seeking its own sphere of interests, as well as promoting anti-Russian policies and the U.S. and NATO's interests in Europe (Benes, 2009; Semenij, 2010). The initiative itself was launched in a context of strained relations between the EU and Russia, in the aftermath of the Russian-Georgian War from August 2008 and the gas crisis in Ukraine from January 2009. Symptomatically for the prevailing

Russian elites' mood back then, at the press conference which took place on the occasion of the Russia-EU Permanent Partnership Council in Luxembourg on 26 April 2009, responding to the media question "Does Russia consider the creation of the Eastern Partnership program as an attempt to form a new EU sphere of influence?," Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Lavrov said diplomatically, but nonetheless unequivocally:

> Regarding the Eastern Partnership, we're hearing assurances from Brussels that this is not an attempt to create a new sphere of influence, nor a process directed against Russia. (…) we want to believe what we're hearing from Brussels regarding the Eastern Partnership, although I won't conceal that some comments on this initiative that have come from the EU have made us cautious (MFA-RU, 2009a).

Likewise, interviewed by a journalist shortly after the EaP's launch, Vladimir Chizkov, the then Permanent Representative of Russia to the EU explained that:

> We are against these CIS countries being placed before an artificial dilemma: either forward, into a bright future with the European Union, or back – with Russia. And that such signs did exist at the initial stage of the Eastern Partnership is a fact. We are not against CIS countries' cooperation with the EU. More than that, we are not even against the blue dream that exists in certain countries – that of their eventual EU membership. The chief thing is that this should not create new dividing lines in Europe (MFA-RU, 2009b).

Neither did the launch of the ENP nor the accession to the EU of the three Baltic republics and of the former member states of Warsaw Treaty disturb Russia as much as the EaP. Actually, before the EaP's launch, the main Russian concern was NATO enlargement and the increasing U.S. influence in the ex-Soviet space. In this vein, Moscow accused Washington of being behind the "coloured revolutions" in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan. Moreover, in its attempts to counterbalance the American influence in Europe, Moscow regarded itself as a European power and the EU as a strategic partner which could have helped to counterbalance the influence that the U.S. and NATO exercised in the international arena. The proposal of Russian President Dmitry Medvedev for a European Security Treaty, reiterated on various occasions in 2008-2009, perfectly fits this line of reasoning (Averre, 2011, p. 5). It was premised on "the necessity of ensuring the unity of the entire Euro-Atlantic space" and ascribing to the "effective collaboration" between Russia, the EU and the U.S. the role of a "load-bearing pillar of political unity in the Euro-Atlantic area". It aimed at establishing a pan-European security system counterbalancing the Russian-perceived "NATO-centrism" in Europe "by transforming the OSCE into a full-fledged regional

organization" (MFA-RU 2009c). Although the Draft European Security Treaty received a rather cool reception in the West, it was welcomed in Germany. In fact, soon afterwards, in June 2010, Germany itself proposed a similar initiative at the bilateral meeting between German Chancellor Angela Merkel and President Dmitry Medvedev at the Meseberg Castle near Berlin. The Meseberg Memorandum proposed the creation of a EU-Russia Political and Security Policy Committee, to be chaired by the then EU's High Representative for Foreign Policy Catherine Ashton and Russia's Foreign Affairs Minister Sergey Lavrov, for high-level consultations and decisions on civilian and military crisis management operations and identified Transnistria as the first testing ground for the EU-Russia security cooperation potential (Socor, 2010). Despite receiving the French backing at the German-French-Russian summit in Deauville in October 2010, the Meseberg initiative was not endorsed by the EU, from fear that it would offer Russia a ticket to decision-making on European security.

After the EaP's launch, the Russian negative perceptions of it determined Russia to enter a geopolitical and geo-economic competition with the EU over the "new Eastern Europe" and South Caucasus. Immediately after the launch of the EaP, in November 2009, the Russian President promulgated a significant amendment to the national defence law in accordance with which Moscow was allowed to militarily intervene in other states in order to protect Russian citizens residing abroad. What is more, immediately after the second EaP summit in Warsaw, Russia announced its EEU project. By pushing up on the bilateral agenda, the question of Ukraine and EU expansion, the EaP has reopened the issue of the boundary between the EU and the CIS, which during the 1990s seemed to fall into oblivion, at that time both sides recognizing each other's separate spheres of influence (Buzan and Wæver, 2003, p. 436). Against this background, one of the EaP's unintended consequences was the fact that via the originally soft power-oriented EaP, the EU has been gradually drawn in a rather traditional hard power-oriented geopolitical competition with Russia over the shared neighbourhood, in spite of not having appetite for a strategic game in its Eastern neighbourhood and being rather ill-prepared to handle it. In fact, since 2009, the EU-Russia bilateral relationship has steadily deteriorated in spite of the setting up of the Partnership for Modernization in 2010, the periodic rhetorical official statements reiterating the idea of "further deepening of the strategic partnership with the European Union" (MFA-RU, 2011b), and the fact that the EU supported Russia's accession to the WTO in 2012. In addition, the two major actors have increasingly found themselves interwoven in a typically so-called "Zugzwang situation" – players cannot fully implement their strategies, but successfully block the policies of each other (Semenij, 2010).

Thus, one could say that although the geopolitical and geo-economic aspects of the relations between the EU and Russia have been generally ignored by the four platforms of the EaP, they have gained increased importance in

bilateral relations as it eventually became painfully obvious around the Vilnius summit of the EaP. As a pivotal country in this new geopolitical and geo-economic game, Ukraine has become a battleground between Russia and the West as testified by the EuroMaidan protests, the annexation of Crimea and the hybrid war launched by Russia in Eastern Ukraine.

Another key assumption of this paper is that the EU's negative perceptions of Russia and interaction with it in the shared neighbourhood, especially after 2014, put a heavy mark on the EU's foreign policy conduct. Nonetheless, the EU's negative perceptions have developed more gradually. Before the Russian-Georgian war, convinced that both sides need each other, the EU expressed its hope for an enhanced strategic partnership with Russia (MFA-RU, 2009b) by cooperating with it in promoting the dialogue between them and guaranteeing Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity (EC-PRD, 2008b). At that time, the EU's major concerns were basically related only to specific human rights and fundamental freedoms in Russia (Slovenian Presidency of the EU 2008). The first "serious shadow" (EC-PRD, 2008c) over the EU-Russia relations was brought about by Russia's violation of Georgian territorial integrity and unilateral recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in August 2008. It was then followed by the EU's dissatisfaction with Russia's cut of gas supplies in January 2009 (EC-PRD, 2009a) and the EU's being "held hostage to this dispute between Russia and Ukraine" (EC-PRD. 2009b), by a series of protests related to human rights and rule of law violations in Russia (EC-PRD, 2009c; European Council, 2012b), Russia's ban on EU vegetables imports in June 2011 (EC-PRD, 2011), and differences over how to deal with the crisis in Syria, manifested especially since the beginning of 2012 (European Council, 2012a). Consequently, the EU-Russia relations were already complicated before the Ukrainian conflict. However, the "strategic" feature of the EU-Russia partnership, especially as far as developments on the international stage were concerned, was only marginally affected by these tensions, as testified by the EU's expressed satisfaction with the ratification by the State Duma and Federation Council of the new START Treaty with the U.S. in January 2011 (European Council, 2011) and Russia's WTO accession in August 2012 (European Commission, 2012), as well as the continuation of the EU-Russia cooperation in fighting terrorism and conflict resolution in the context of the Syrian crisis.

By contrast, after the burst of the Ukrainian crisis, while still officially maintaining that the free trade agreements between the EU and partners such as Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine "are fully compatible with Russia's existing trade arrangements with these countries" and "can interact constructively with the Customs Union as long as WTO rules are applied and free decision-making is guaranteed" (European Council, 2014a), the EU was quick to condemn "the escalation of the violence" (EC-PRD, 2014a). Furthermore, after Russia's annexation of Crimea, the EU took a firm stance which included its condemnation

and a non-recognition policy, followed by sanctions against individuals and entities responsible for Russia's authorization of the use of force in Ukraine and for penetrating from abroad in the Eastern Ukraine and undermining the territorial integrity of Ukraine, and individuals or companies who actively benefit from support of the Russian decision makers responsible for the annexation of Crimea or the destabilization of Eastern Ukraine, the condemnation of the unjustified acts of violence in Eastern Ukraine, as well as the suspension of European Investment Bank (EIB) and European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) financing, the restriction of investment and trade with Crimea and Sevastopol and the reassessment of the Russia-EU bilateral cooperation with a view to reducing its level (EC-PRD, 2014b; EC-PRD, 2014c; EC-PRD, 2014d; European External Action Service [EEAS], 2014; European Council, 2014b).

What is more, Russia's aggressive behaviour in the EU-Russia shared neighbourhood in general, and in Ukraine specifically, led the EU as a collective actor, and particularly its Member States bordering Russia to the East, to perceive Russia as a direct threat to their national security. This perceived threat led to the formation by the countries of the Baltic-Black Sea *limes* of a new sub-RSC within the EU-Europe RSC. Throughout the creation process of this subcomplex, the historical and geopolitical roots of the traditional enmity between the countries bordering Russia to the East, particularly the negative memories of the geopolitical consequences of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939, have taken their toll. Eventually, the countries comprising this subcomplex were instrumental in pushing the EU as a whole to take a harder stance vis-à-vis Russia, facilitating both a partial overcome of the EU internal divisions regarding what would be the best response to the Russian annexation of Crimea and war in Eastern Ukraine and the gradual process of the EU's and NATO's positions getting closer.

Various incidents and instances played their role in this heightened perception of an imminent Russian threat along the Baltic-Black Sea *limes*. In Estonia, for instance, there were the abduction of an Estonian security officer from Estonian territory by the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation and his detention on the territory of Russia (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Estonia [MFA-EE], 2015d; MFA-EE, 2015b), the violation of the ceasefire by Russia and the Russian-backed separatists in Ukraine (MFA-EE, 2015a; MFA-EE, 2015c). In Latvia, there were Russia's move of sending a humanitarian aid convoy from Russia into the territory of Ukraine without performance of inspections, without permission granted by the Ukrainian authorities and without supervision of the International Red Cross (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia [MFA-LV], 2014), as well as other forms of support to separatists, and the gradual worsening of the social, economic and human rights situation in Crimea, mainly affecting Crimean Tatars and ethnic Ukrainians (MFA-LV, 2015). In the case of Lithuania, there was no need of a particular event for acknowledging and publicly warning about the potential

military regional threat posed by Russia. It was already there, in Vilnius, by the time of Georgian crisis (MFA-LT, 2008), although, at least at the rhetorical level, the desire for "the development of constructive relations with Russia" was also present (MFA-LT, 2009). Later on, in the context of the Ukrainian crisis, Lithuanian officials were forthright in condemning Russia's invasion of Ukrainian territory and the violations of ceasefire in Eastern Ukraine as well as in supporting President Poroshenko's plan for conflict settlement in Eastern Ukraine and tightening sanctions on Russia (MFA-LT, 2014a; MFA-LT, 2014b; MFALT, 2014c; MFA-LT, 2014d; MFA-LT 2015). Poland and Romania, as pivotal countries at the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea, respectively, and key host countries for the U.S. antiballistic missile system, positioned themselves to a certain extent likewise vis-à-vis the Russian Federation. Before the Ukrainian crisis, for pragmatic reasons, both countries were intent on the whole in a normalization of their basically frosty relationships with Russia. Poland was targeting a historical reconciliation meant to heal painful memories of the past (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Poland [MFA-PL], 2011), wishing to believe, like many other European countries at that time, that the Russian-Georgian conflict "was exceptional in nature" (MFA-PL, 2009). Similarly, Romania was aiming at a largely economic-oriented, normal, modern and pragmatic relationship with Russia (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania [MFA-RO], 2010; MFA-RO, 2012; MFA-RO, 2013). However, in the specific context of the Georgian crisis, the accents of the two countries' messages were somehow different. Romania, as one of the five EU Member States which did not recognize Kosovo's independence, refrained from manifesting extremely vocal regarding Russia's actions in Georgia, interpreting them as just another negative example after Kosovo of putting the so-called "collective" minority rights above a country's integrity (Internet Archive Wayback Machine). By contrast, Poland assumed for itself the role of an ad-hoc early warning system, not only at the level of the EU, but for the transatlantic community as a whole. Underlining that "Poland is the last country on Earth that wants a return of the age of East-West confrontation" because it "would mean that Poland would pay a price," the then Polish foreign minister Radosław Sikorski, added:

> The Russian President stated his doctrine as follows (if I'm summarizing it correctly): Russia will protect its compatriots and infrastructure projects outside its territory, if necessary, by force. That justification has been given in the case of Georgia. (…) Should the Georgian scenario be emulated in Ukraine, we would have a large-scale European crisis. The security of Europe would be shattered. Georgia is a pivotal energy corridor but Ukraine is more than that. Ukraine is a genuine, if messy democracy, but it's also a swing country for the balance of power on the Eurasian landmass. (…) So, here's a doctrine for a doctrine: Any further attempt to re-draw borders in Europe by force or by subversion should be regarded by Europe as a threat

to its security and should entail a proportional response by the whole Atlantic community (MFA-PL, 2008).

After the breakdown of the Ukrainian crisis, Poland seconded by Romania, has taken the lead among the countries of the EU's Eastern flank in trying to coordinate the EU's steps with EU's key partners, especially the U.S. (MFA-PL 2014a). Both Poland and Romania have been active supporters of Ukraine's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity as well as of the imposition and then extension of the EU sanctions' regime on Russia (MFA-PL, 2014b; MFA-PL, 2014c; The Presidency of Romania [P-RO], 2014; MFA-RO, 2014; P-RO, 2015a; P-RO, 2015b; MFA-RO, 2015). Furthermore, referring to such instances as the referendum conducted by the so-called Autonomous Republic of Crimea and Sevastopol in March 2014, and the shooting down of a Malaysian Airlines aircraft in Eastern Ukraine in July 2014, Warsaw has been adamant in emphasizing that "Europe has done too little to influence Russia's conduct" and "Europe has to adopt a more determined attitude towards Russia" (MFA-PL, 2014d; MFA-PL, 2014e; MFA-PL, 2015).

Consequently, a growing militarization has been taking place in the EU Member States which have experienced the geopolitical consequences of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939 in general, and the new EU Member States along the Baltic-Black Sea *limes,* in particular. This process of increased militarization has also spilled over into the Nordic countries, especially those bordering Russia. Finland, which also experienced the geopolitical consequences of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939 strengthened its relations with NATO and contemplated even the idea of abandoning its neutral status, as did its fellow neutral EU Member State, Sweden, both of them following in parallel the example of the key NATO member, Norway, in taking additional measures to strengthen their national and regional defence.

Against this background, as well as its repositioning in accordance with its Asia pivot strategy, the U.S. has consolidated the pro-Western forces involved in the balance of power in Eurasia and strengthened the links and cohesiveness of the transatlantic alliance with the EU in general, and the East European allies neighbouring Russia to the East, in particular. Throughout an approximately two-year period between the NATO summit in Wales (September, 2014) and the NATO summit in Warsaw (July, 2016), among the numerous instances signalling this trend, one could cite: visits of U.S. military vessels in the Black Sea harbours and U.S. navy patrols in the Black Sea and Mediterranean as well as NATO military exercise across Eastern Europe and Turkey as preambles for an increased NATO presence in the Black Sea and a U.S. Navy's presence in the Mediterranean (Shalal, 2016); proposals followed by decisions to increase defence budgets in the EU countries from Scandinavia to the Baltic and from the Baltic to the Black Sea; Western-led military exercises at the EU Eastern borders in the Baltic States, Poland and Romania, particularly under the aegis of the U.S.-led European

Reassurance Initiative (ERI) and NATO's Readiness Action Plan (RAP); the setting up of eight NATO command centres/NATO Force Integration Units on the Alliance's Eastern flank in Romania, Bulgaria, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and the three Baltic states as outposts for NATO's 5,000-man new rapid response force established at the 2014 Wales summit, the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), also known as the Spearhead Force; and the NATO decision to station four battalions –totalling about 4,000 troops – in the Baltic States and Poland, immediately followed by Russia's typical Cold War-type retaliatory move of forming two new divisions in its western military region, which borders the Baltic states (Braw 2016).

The situation is even more complicated by two circumstances, which have apparently heightened Kremlin's sense of encirclement (Trenin, 2014, p. 2) periodically re-emerging in Moscow's relations to the West. On the one hand, one has the two U.S. proposed and inspired free-trade agreements, the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) between the U.S. and the EU and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) between the U.S. and a number of Asian countries, which flank Russia to the West and East. On the other hand, one has the Atlantic Alliance's anti-ballistic missile defence system in East Central Europe, which is perceived by Russia, especially after the official inauguration on 12 May 2016 of the U.S. antimissile defence capability at the military base in Deveselu, Romania, as a serious provocation and threat to its national security and which might trigger its withdrawal from the new START Treaty signed in Prague in April 2010 (Purgaru, 2016; Ivan, 2016). These two rather new geopolitical and strategic circumstances, together with the transformation of the Ukrainian crisis into yet another protracted conflict in the Black Sea region and the differences and risks associated with the clash between Russian and Western strategies for fighting the Islamic State in Syria have inevitably led Moscow and Washington back into some sort of confrontation, erasing the last scattered remnants of the so-called reset policy, which was announced in 2009 and was already in a state of collapse in 2012.

In short, one could pinpoint at least four key points related to the roles of the negative bilateral perceptions and interactions in the shared neighbourhood in shaping the outlook of the EU-Russia relations. First, Russia's negative perceptions of the EaP led to a drastic re-evaluation of its relationship with the EU in the sense of changing the perception of the EU from a strategic partner to a competitor for influence in the shared neighbourhood and speeding up its Eurasian integration project. This starkly contradicts previous assessments of the role of the EaP on the EU-Russia relations as "a non-issue" (Bild, 2015, p. 6). Second, the EU somehow "sleepwalked" into a confrontational mode with Russia for which it had no particular appetite and was rather ill-prepared. To counter its hard power ill-preparedness, there has been a revived discussion on strengthening the EU's energy security and Common Defence and Security Policy (CSDP), which led EU

leaders to consider, among other things, the bold energy union concept proposed by the former Polish Prime Minister and current President of the European Council Donald Tusk (Gawlikowska-Fyk and Nowak 2014) as well as the French-German initiative for deepening the European defence cooperation (Keohane, 2016). Third, not only have the Eastern borders of the EU started to become harder rather than softer as originally envisaged by the EaP initiative, and new buffers have started to be considered at state and regional levels by both EU and Russia, but also, against the background of the crisis in Ukraine, a state and societal militarization have increasingly started to take place all along the European and Euro-Atlantic *limes* bordering Russia, irradiating from the Baltic Sea region towards the Black Sea region and Nordic Sea region, respectively. This led to the articulation of a distinct sub-RSC within the EU-Europe RCS, comprising the countries of the Baltic-Black Sea *limes*, which were instrumental in forging a partial overcome of the EU significant internal divisions regarding what would be the best response to the Russian annexation of Crimea and war in Eastern Ukraine, and a more synergetic action with NATO. Four, a renewed sense of the West's "mission", with a normative foundation, has been established in Brussels and other major European capitals.

5. Conclusions

This article has presented the bilateral perceptions and interactions of the EU and Russia in the shared neighbourhood as critical factors explaining the deterioration of the EU-Russia relations, which moved from partnership to competition and eventually to confrontation. With the help of inter-subjective perceptions and speech acts, a new constituted social reality based on mutual perceptions as strategic competitors rather than strategic partners and which recalls the suspicion and hostility of the bygone Cold War era has gradually enthroned itself in the EU-Russia bilateral relations. The EU and Russia have stopped seeing themselves as in a Lockean culture of anarchy (a liberal culture of borders of interdependence) and moved gradually towards seeing themselves as in a Hobbesian culture of anarchy (a realist culture of borders of exclusion). Accordingly, through mutual negative perceptions and interactions in the common neighbourhood mediated by discursively communicating positions, the conflict has gradually enthroned itself in the EU-Russia bilateral relations.

Being highly penetrated by the two major power centres of the European and Eurasian landmass, respectively, which were competing in getting the allegiance of the six countries of the EaP for their alternative integration projects, the EU-Russia shared neighbourhood in general, and Ukraine, in particular, as a pivotal country for Russia's security and a swing country for the balance of power on the Eurasian landmass, have become the preferred terrain of a geopolitical and geo-economic competition and eventually conflict between Brussels and Moscow.

Probing high-level Russian statements, the article has concluded, on the one hand, that the negative Russian perceptions of the EaP's intentions in the "new Eastern Europe" and South Caucasus have led Russia not only to perceive the EU as a strategic competitor for influence rather than as a strategic partner in the shared neighbourhood, but also to speed up its EU-like integration efforts in the Eurasian space. As Ukraine became the epicentre of a new geopolitical and geo-economic game between Russia and the West, both bold geopolitical moves and perceptions and speech acts played their part in creating and re-creating the outlook of this new reality characterized by growing tensions and mutual suspicions.

Relying also on high-rank statements, but at the level of the EU and its Member States bordering Russia to the East, the article emphasized, on the other hand, the fact that, confronted with Russia's aggressive behaviour in the EU-Russia shared neighbourhood in general, and Ukraine in particular, EU Member States along the Baltic-Black Sea *limes*, having still alive the collective memory of the geopolitical consequences of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, have perceived Russia as a direct threat to their national security and, by generating a new sub-RSC within the EU-Europe RSC, were instrumental in pushing the EU as a collective actor to take a harder stance vis-à-vis Russia and move closer to NATO's position.

Although somehow inadvertently landing in a confrontational mode with Russia, faced with Russia's increasingly bullying behaviour in the common neighbourhood, in general, and Ukraine, in particular, the EU has been forced to adapt to the new situation and address it with power instruments for which it was rather ill-prepared, particularly in the areas of energy security and military security. Instead of becoming softer as originally envisaged by the logic underlining the EaP, the EU's Eastern borders have become harder and an increasing militarization has started to take place all along the European and Euro-Atlantic *limes* bordering Russia. Therefore, a new sense of the West's "mission" has brought the EU and NATO closer together.

Furthermore, one could claim that the periphery of the Eastern neighbourhood in which the EU operates and interacts with Russia has shaped and is likely to continue to shape the identity and external "mission" of "the West" in general, and the EU, in particular. Thus, the case in point highlights the role of the geopolitical space in shaping the foreign policy action of great powers in the periphery areas where their interests are overlaid and the interdependence and entanglement of their actions and mutual perceptions are fully manifested. Furthermore, due to their power projection into adjacent regions, the EU and Russia generated a strong and sustained level of interregional security dynamics, which is indicative for the on-going development and strengthening of the all-European or Greater Europe supercomplex.

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