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Cooperation through a common framework of bilateral relations

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Introduction

This paper argues that although the EU is yet to develop a common policy towards Russia, “cooperation” with the latter stems from a pattern of enhanced bilateral relations with Moscow that most member states have sought to develop. These enhanced relations have been characterized by strong economic and energy security ties modelled on the approaches of big EU players like Germany or France. Moreover, such approaches have impeded any solid practical promotion of the EU’s norms and values both in Russia and its Eastern Neighbourhood – or any coherent CSDP actions for that matter. This has happened although rhetorically states like France or Germany present a highly normative discourse about the EU’s role in its Eastern Neighbourhood. A second goal of the paper is to evaluate the way this pattern of “cooperation” impacts on the EU’s policy over its Eastern Neighbourhood and on the geopolitics of the region. Consequently, the paper suggests that the practice of developing enhanced relations with Russia opens the way for Moscow to be viewed by the Eastern neighbours of the Union as a power that

can give short term solutions to pressing problems. At the same time, the shared framework for “cooperation”, that seems to inform the behaviour of most EU member states, *de facto* legitimates Russia’s bid for having the Eastern Neighbourhood under its *sphere of influence*.

The first section of the paper highlights the nature of the enhanced bilateral relations that most EU member states have sought to construct with Russia. Germany and France are considered to have developed the blueprint that other member states have applied in their enhanced relations. Nonetheless, Russia has not viewed its ties with Germany or France as being more important than those with other countries, applying an instrumental approach that has permitted it to advance its political and economical interests. The next section of the paper highlights the fact Russia has been more attractive in Eastern Neighbourhood of the EU due to the Union’s incapacity to articulate a unified and coherent policy that could deliver practical solutions for the post soviet states. Conversely, the paper concludes by exploring the consequences that the framework of enhanced bilateral relations has had on the European Union’s approach towards its Eastern Neighbourhood. Many states from the region have criticized the EU for the dissonance between its rhetorical and practical commitment: this attitude is captured in the words of a Transnistrian commentator: „the EU is doing nothing to make itself liked here, (...) even a micro-project, such as an EU-funded scheme to take care of the many stray dogs in Bender, could make a difference’¹.

A common framework of enhanced bilateral relations?

EU-Russia relations have been characterized by the dichotomy between conflict and cooperation (Averre 2009; Ganzle 2007; Lynch 2005) translated in the fact that although as a whole the European Union is inclined to accept and establish common rules and norms with Russia, at the national level, leaders are more prone to seek individualistic solutions – enhanced relations - involving Moscow. This, in the end seriously undermines the EU’s normative endeavour. The main cause of the conflict between the EU and Russia lies in the incompatibilities which arise

¹ <http://euobserver.com/9/31684>, accessed on 15.02.2011.

from clash of the two identities. Incompatibility is here the *leitmotif* found in the studies concerning EU-Russia relations: „like two galaxies, Russia and Europe are invariably bound to orbit on mutually diverging or converging paths’ (Kononenko 2008, p.199). Russia’s international actions point to an internal desire towards regaining its old great power posture (Medvedev 2008). For this reason both scholars and politicians have been inclined to argue that Russia’s foreign policy is conducted still in a realist paradigm driven by a zero-sum thinking, which opposes the normative approach of the EU (Hogenauer & Friedel 2008; Haukkala 2010; Light 2008; Lukyanov 2008; Nichol 2009).

Cooperation here stems from the convergence of Moscow’s economic interests with those of the important EU member states. The big EU member states and Russia see their relation as a strategic partnership (Leonard & Popescu 2008; Leonard & Grant 2007; Timmins 2005; Tardieu 2009). Contrary to Lukyanov’s (2008, p.1118) views, politics doesn’t dominate over economics in these enhanced relations. It is more that a high level of political credibility ensured by states like Germany and France complement their strong economic ties Russia. Moscow’s preference for engaging in bilateral with individual EU member states is not an expression of a *divide and rule* approach towards them. Although that might have been the overruling logic in Yelstin’s leadership (Rahr 2005), Putin or Medvedev’s close ties with other European leaders are more an expression of a rational, economically focused way of projecting Russia’s interests. For example, Germany became, during Putin’s leadership, Russia’s most important trade partner and a close supported of its energy policy. At the same time, Spain, France or Italy have developed similar strong ties with Russia in such areas as trade, energy or tourism.

At EU level, the European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction have been engaged in financing controversial energy and transport infrastructure in Russia². This policy has had backing from big member states, like France or Germany who have been keen in blocking in any effort on the part of the Commission to withdraw support for the project due to Russia’s stagnating human rights situations. Nonetheless, the official EU rhetoric has underlined that its contribution has helped to increase public accountability, participation and transparency in Russia. According to High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine

² <http://euobserver.com/24/31920>, accessed on 17.07.2011

Ashton, such issue based approaches where the EU abstains from publicly criticizing Russia enhance Brussels' leverage to drive incremental progress on human rights³.

The big EU states have focused more on economic cooperation and *Big Power* bilateral relations towards Russia. France, Germany, Italy or more recently Spain (Simão 2011) have shaped their policy towards Russia over the last years in order to construct a special relationship with Moscow. Moreover, such approaches have impeded any solid practical promotion of the EU's norms and values both in Russia and its Eastern Neighbourhood. This has happened although rhetorically states like France or Germany still present a highly normative discourse about the EU's role in its Eastern Neighbourhood (Rahr 2007, p.141). In practice, they were successful in undermining the EU's possible stabilizing actions in countries like Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova. Timmins (Timmins 2005, p.6) has suggested that because of the competition within the EU members for possessing a special relationship with Moscow no coherent EU policy towards Russia was achieved, division being the best term to characterize the EU's approach toward Russia on issues as democracy promotion, rule of law or human rights. At the same time, a bilateral framework of developing enhanced relations with Russia has become the single similar rationale that the big EU players seem to approach in their interactions with Moscow. According to Weaver (2010, p.67), the Union as a whole has suffered in consistency and coherence as most member states have developed their bilateral relations without consulting or having mind their partners in the EU. Individual member states are thus more prone to seek their own agenda in their ties with Russia, leaving the institutions crippled and unable to put in practice any of their more ambitious policies in the eastern neighbourhood that would conflict with Moscow's interests. The Commission or the European Parliament are only left with the power of responding rhetorically to Russia. Even though they have found in some occasions support for their initiatives policies from states like Sweden, – in the case of inserting a membership perspective within the Eastern Partnership – Germany and France decisively opposed.

Germany's relationship with Russia is arguably the most complex and special. Berlin is Russia's most important trading partner with an impressive total figure of almost 70 billion US dollars in

³ <http://euobserver.com/9/31442>, accessed on 10.12.2010

2009. The strongest partnership between the two countries is in the energy sector where Russia supplies 42% of Germany's gas needs⁴. Former Chancellor Schroeder's involvement in the development of the North pushed the competition for a special relation with Russia at a higher stake. When completed, the pipeline will make Germany the chief distributor of Russian gas in Europe. Besides the German energy companies that have fostered the special energy ties with Gazprom, other German businesses have extensively invested in Russia over the last years, the total amount going up to almost 5\$ billion in 2005 (Leonard & Popescu 2008).

The special relation was coupled with a strong political partnership that awarded international credibility to the regime in Moscow (Timmins 2011). Germany pushed within the EU a *Russia - first policy* when dealing with the Eastern Neighbourhood. Simultaneously, France often has persuaded other member states more critical of Moscow's intentions and international behaviour not to disrupt the EU's Russia first policy. This translated in practice by stopping all practical normative expressions of EU foreign policy towards the states in the region. Chancellor Merkel rightly feared that an ambitious normative agenda towards the former soviet states would impede not just Germany's economical cooperation with Russia, but more broadly Moscow's support of Western attitudes towards Afghanistan, Iran or the Middle East. Germany's special relation with Russia spells the recipe for the ties that other EU members have constructed with Russia. Be it energy, trade or tourism almost all the big EU players (France, Germany, Italy or Spain) have sought a place in the sun alongside Russia. None of them engaged in applying such an instrumentalist approach through supporting the EU's possible normative actions, although all were overtly outspoken in favour of promoting the Union's norms and values in Russia and its Eastern neighbours.

It should be understood that Russia encourages special relations with all the EU countries because it is in its self-interest. Although, Germany has the closest bilateral relation with Russia, it is no more special than Moscow's ties with other EU member states. France follows suit as it has recently reinforced its enhanced relation with Moscow by selling it two warships and acquiring stakes in the North Stream gas project⁵. Moreover, the accession of the CEE countries has toned down Germany's assumed leadership in framing the EU's normative policy towards

⁴ http://tonto.eia.doe.gov/country/country_energy_data.cfm?fips=GM, accessed on 15.08.2011

⁵ <http://euobserver.com/891/31941>, accessed on 14.08.2011.

Russia as Chancellor Merkel has shown reluctance in acting over the heads of those countries in the Eastern neighbourhood.

However, Germany's enhanced relation with Russia has experienced throughout the last 10 years various ups and downs. The climax of their partnership was marked by former Chancellor's Schroeder involvement in the North Stream pipeline. The 2005 elections announced a more balanced and less enthusiastic approach to Moscow, as the new Chancellor Angela Merkel envisaged relations between the countries as being part of a larger German strategy for the future. A strategy which implied at least in the first year after election an increasing concern towards human rights violations in Russia (Agh 2010). Nonetheless, Merkel soon returned to an updated version of the enhanced relation with Russia which still withstands despite the pragmatic approach advocated by the Free Democratic Party in the new coalition created by the chancellor after the 2009 elections (Timmins 2011). Even such a discourse – one of the prices for keeping the coalition together – has not proven to be powerful enough to surpass Germany's increasing dependence on Russian energy, heightened by the decisions to shutdown⁶ nuclear reactors by 2022. But dependency goes both ways in their partnership, president Medvedev recently pointed out that the 140 million internal market of Russia will welcome until the end of the year 60-70 billion dollars, a „record post-crisis turnover'⁷.

Italy's cooperation with Russia has mostly involved Russian investments in the energy sector. In June 2008 a 1.4 billion euro oil deal was struck between ERG the largest Italian oil refiner and LUKOIL⁸. In additional 2010 sparked a lively debate which still continues on whether the ENEL should consider Russian investment and cooperation in nuclear energy⁹. Spain has also been striving for a closer partnership with Russia (Simão 2011). In 2010 there were also talks of a possible Russian investment in Spanish railways which were suffering high economic losses¹⁰.

⁶ <http://www.economist.com/node/18988840>, accessed on 10.08.2011

⁷ <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/07/19/us-germany-russia-trade-idUSTRE76I4O120110719>, accessed on 21.07.2011

⁸ http://www.esteri.it/MAE/EN/Politica_Estera/Aree_Geografiche/Europa/I_nuovi_rapporti.htm?LANG=EN, accessed on 10.05.2011

⁹ <http://news.sciencemag.org/scienceinsider/2010/04/italy-and-russia-fuse-to-build-n.html>, accessed on 14.01.2011

¹⁰ http://www.uic.org/com/article/spain-russia-russia-is-interested?page=thickbox_eneews, accessed on 15.07.2011.

The last two years have seen an increase in French-Russian economic ties. In 2010 France acquired a share in the North stream pipeline through which it sought to increase its gas purchase from Moscow and „contribute to the energy security of Europe’¹¹. At this year’s G8 summit in Deauville French and Russian Presidents Nicolas Sarkozy and Dmitry Medvedev started talks involving an ambitious deal that would deliver four powerful warships¹². This move has elevated their enhanced relation to higher level, where cooperation also taken into account the two countries’ military interests. The price for this deal seem to imply even less focus on practical actions in the Eastern Neighbourhood, where leaders in Paris are keeping a blind eye to the Georgian complaints of breaches to ceasefire to the August 2008 ceasefire. Transnistria has been another been another issue on which France has supported Russian interests, making this cooperation a model for the future activity of the planned EU-Russia Political and Security Committee.

The framework of developing enhanced relations which Russia has also been present to certain degree in the policy of the new member states. After their accession, the new Central and Eastern European were very vociferous in articulation and promoting their national interest in opposition to Moscow. At the time, in 2005, the Commission encouraged the new member states to engage into the eastern neighbourhood in ways that would not unsettle the region (Pavliuk 2005, p.203). Since their accession the CEE member’s states have drawn on the Commission’s advice and on the approach towards of the big EU players, with important consequences. If initially the acceded CEE countries shared highly antagonistic views on Russia and an unwillingness to moderate their national preferences towards the East, adopting a framework of enhanced relations with Moscow not only toned down the CEE countries’ preference for strong practical measures in the region but also transformed their highly antagonistic discourse into one of mutual normative cooperation in the lines that the commission was proposing in 2005. French President Sarkozy has praised Warsaw and other CEE new member states for moderating their critical attitude towards Russia and proposing more feasible initiatives, Karol Karski Law and Justice MP

¹¹ <http://euobserver.com/24/29587>, accessed on 18.07.2010.

¹² <http://www.dawn.com/2011/05/26/france-and-russia-agree-unprecedented-warship-deal.html>

observing that it looks like although „France, Germany and Russia make deals among themselves and Poland’ (and others) are „now being allowed in to the group”¹³.

The furthering of the economic crisis with its sovereign debt variant has shifted the way Germany, France or Italy envisage competition with other member states in their bilateral cooperation with Russia. It was noted, that before 2010 the big member states seemed to favour, and even more support the new member states from Central and Eastern Europe to develop enhanced relations with Russia. This made the new CEE states tone down their antagonist rhetoric toward Moscow and refrain from proposing practical initiatives that would collide with its interests in the Eastern neighbourhood. The new member states are now at a disadvantage, as incentives to normalize their policy towards have diminished due to the more competitive nature of the system of bilateral relations with Russia. In states like Poland, Romania, or the Czech Republic governments are turning to populist strategies that could transfer public attention from the social consequences of the tough budget cuts enforced as solutions for the debt crisis. The historical grudge and popular feeling of mistrust towards Russia have occupied the public debate in these countries. Unlike the period after accession such discourses now ignored by the European Commission. One possible explanation for this would be that the big member states seem now to have given up their previous support for CEE member states to develop enhanced relations with Moscow, as their share of Russian investments has diminished with the economic crisis.

Within the framework of enhanced bilateral relations the Russian-Georgian war of 2008 represents a crucial moment (Rynning & Jensen 2010, p.142; Agh 2010; Baun & Marek 2010; Christou 2010; Biscop 2010; Cichocki 2010; Haukkala 2010; Haukkala 2009; Najšlová 2010; Sammut 2010; Wolczuk 2010; Weaver 2010; Vasilyan 2010). Firstly, it relinquished all doubts about Russia’s desires to become a hegemon in the post soviet space. It showed that in times of crisis it was willing to deal a swift and deadly blow with its military power in order to protect its interests. The presence of Russians in all of the countries of the Eastern Neighbourhood has made their safety a national interest for Moscow. Although the 2008 August war was a public display of Russian *hard power* might, Moscow was also engaged in a more silent attack in the

¹³ <http://www.europeanvoice.com/article/2011/february/russia-eu-relations-what-s-new-/70375>, Accessed on 23.06.2011

background. Since 2004 many non-Russian nationals from ENP countries have been awarded Russian passports, giving Moscow the legitimate right to protect them – it is estimated that at the time of the war around 170.000 people in Georgia held Russian passports (Popescu & Wilson 2009, p.42). Nonetheless, Russia gave the West an important signal and managed to put its bid for leadership across to the EU (Sammut 2010, p.84). Conversely, France, Germany and Italy were instrumental in tempering the EU's official reaction to Russia's 2008 intervention in Georgia. Their views were backed up by almost all other member states, excluding the Baltics and the United Kingdom who proposed suspending any form of cooperation with Russia and issuing hostile public statements¹⁴. Consequently the EU's joint response to the 2008 war was more the concerted action of the big EU member states – excluding Britain – who building on their enhanced relations with Moscow pushed for a more Russia friendly settlement. „

EU-Russia relations in perspective: Impact on the EU's policy towards the Eastern Neighborhood

Since Putin came to power in the early 2000s, Russia has tried to assert itself as a leader in the post soviet space and rebuild its sphere of influence (Popescu & Wilson 2009; Pavliuk 2005; Nichol 2009; Najšlová 2010). Moscow has successfully resisted the Union's attempts of incorporating it into the European Neighbourhood Policy. More than once Russian leaders have pointed out that the Union's approach towards its neighbours is a scheme intended to promote by force a certain type of democracy in attempt to globalize the region (Haukkala 2010, p.162). This type of Russian rhetoric has added legitimacy to its claims of leadership in this area (Cichocki 2010, p.12). Nonetheless, its discourse has also been translated into practice, as it has served as a pole of attraction for the states in the region by delivering quietly and continuously various incentives. It has offered to its neighbours cheap gas and energy deals in exchange for control of energy infrastructure or other political or symbolical advantages – like placing individuals with Russian sympathies in high level positions (Agh 2010; Delcour 2010; Haukkala 2009; Sammut

¹⁴ <http://euobserver.com/9/31400>, accessed on 10.02.2011

2010). Nonetheless, Russian carrots have not come cheap, most times states having to sign off their resources, making them highly dependent to Russian influence¹⁵.

Not at all surpassingly this approach stems from the fact Russia tends to view the Eastern Neighbourhood in competitive terms. Such a view is also prevalent in the post soviet space, Transnistrian leader Igor Smirnov arguing that „people understand that the EU and Russia are competing here, so if you choose Russia as a strategic partner, you perceive the EU as a threat’¹⁶. According to Christou (2010, p.424) this behaviour can be explained by Moscow’s attachment to a narrow Westphalian interpretation of sovereignty, where discourses about governance and multilateralism have no place. In the case of multilateralism, Russians have argued that cooperation can be effective only if states and international organizations respect a positive interpretation of international law, in which the interests of the nation state - powerful ones – come first. Although in dealing with Russia most countries in the eastern neighbourhood acknowledge its fairly one sided approach, recent years – after the global economic crisis – have shown that they are willing to overcome their doubts in order to benefit from Moscow’s short term solutions. At a smaller scale their attitude resembles that of many African countries towards the Chinese power horse. This might prove in the end very dangerous for such countries, as Russia has showed its readiness to reconfigure political stability at its own will in the region (Popescu & Wilson 2009, p.17; Rahr 2007; Delcour 2010; Kononenko 2008; Kux 2005; Leonard & Grant 2007; Leonard & Popescu 2008). Moscow’s campaign against Georgia is a prime example where it disregarded the interest of a whole array of states in the eastern neighbourhood: for example it disrupted the energy security of states like Azerbaijan or Armenia that were highly depended on the infrastructure in Georgia, and it used the Black Sea fleet on Ukraine’s territory without consent.

Russian attractiveness in the Eastern Neighbourhood has also derived from the existence of a historical and cultural identity based on the pervasiveness of the Russian language, the high number of Russian minorities living in the area and the coagulating character of the Orthodox Church. However, these same identity components have historically separated it from the West. The clash with Western values has led Russian leaders to argue that the EU is only a self-

¹⁵ <http://euobserver.com/9/31406>, accessed on 05.03.2011

¹⁶ <http://euobserver.com/9/31684>, accessed on 15.07.2011

asserting normative, postmodern power whose intentions are more than questionable (Haukkala 2010, p.167; Haukkala 2009; Averre 2009; Aalto 2011; Leonard & Popescu 2008; Tardieu 2009; Wolczuk 2010; Cichocki 2010; Christou 2010). Various opinion polls in Russian speaking communities all around the ENP countries have shown that only small minority desire integration with the West, thus reinforcing these claims (Popescu & Wilson 2009). Conversely, the intrusion of western modes of governance has often been securitized in Russian discourse as a threat against the common identity of the post soviet space.

On the other hand, the European Union continuously has tried to persuade Russia that their relations are not a competition and must not be viewed as one. Statements from the European Commission and other EU institutions have underscored that not only do Europe and Russia share a common set of values and a historical experiences, but also many economical and security concerns that make their cooperation within the present context of the international scene imperious (Krok-Paszowska & Zielonka 2005, p.163; Averre 2009; Baun & Marek 2010; Biscop 2010; Cichocki 2010; Clement-Noguier 2005; Sammut 2010). This study takes on board the official EU view that it shares a common past with Russia, and posits that the relations between them and their identities have to be seen as historically constructed by their interactions. Identities have a dynamic character and have been shaped by the various instances of divergence or cooperation that have characterized the interactions between the European Union and Russia. An important example of the track record of cooperation between the two actors is the EU's support for Russia's WTO in exchange for Moscow ratifying the Kyoto treaty. The Union's concern in cooperation with Russia stems from its acknowledgement that Moscow cannot be in any way bypassed when trying to promote democracy in the post soviet space (Rynning & Jensen 2010, p.146). Thus, in dealing with its Eastern Neighbourhood the Union has developed a Russia first policy (Biscop 2010, p.84). This has meant that EU had to keep a low profile where Russia had overt interests, in order to maintain good relations flowing. Simultaneously, the EU's cooperation with Moscow has been tailored so as not to upset the latter's domestic order.

In literature the EU has been labelled as a postmodern actor that in opposition to Russia doesn't rely on hard politics in its international relations (Emerson 2006; Emerson 2001; Haukkala 2007; Ganzle 2007; Light 2008; Christou 2010; Weaver 2010; Tonra 2010; Manners 2010). Such behaviour has created a degree of conflict in relation to the types of governance promoted in the

eastern neighbourhood. But Russia also prefers a weak *hard power* EU that does not have the capabilities to intervene in security issues: „Russia is stronger and faster... In every conflict situation, it comes out better’ (Popescu & Wilson 2009, p.39). Each time the Union has seemed to be flexing its muscles and taught about CSDP missions in the Eastern neighbourhood, Russia overtly expressed its criticism (Rahr 2005, p.223; Biscop 2010; Emerson 2001; Delcour 2010; Haukkala 2010). Consequently Russia uneasily accepts the Union’s *sui generis* identity as long as it gives it a free hand to exert its hard power.

In practice Russia has not hesitated in using its hard power in the eastern neighbourhood. The presence of its troops in many of these countries has put a lot of strain on their decision makers. For example, Ukraine harbours around 15.000 troops, Armenia 5.000, while Azerbaijan and Moldova around 1000 (Popescu & Wilson 2009). On its part the EU has managed to set up monitoring and border missions, which have been highly constrained by the limitation of the CSDP budget – 300 million in comparison to over ten billion spend by Russia on defence (Vasilyan 2010, p.89). Moscow has also made use of differentiated energy prices, and gas and oil embargoes to project its hard power, while the EU has only managed to impose travel bans in cases where ENP countries were steering in the wrong direction (Cichocki 2010; Biscop 2010; Hogenauer & Friedel 2008).

Although the EU seems to be champion of soft power, Russia’s lure should not be underestimated. In a comparative assessment of the soft approach of Russia and the Union, Popescu & Wilson (2009, p.3) show that both actors display similar degrees of attractiveness in relations to the Eastern Neighbourhood countries. Russia’s investments in such strategic areas as energy infrastructure seem to weigh more than the EU’s effort of promoting trade liberalization and democracy. Nonetheless, while Russian appeals to a common identity can spur considerable support, it is the promise of EU membership that drives the policy approaches of the states in the area – although the Eastern Partnership has considerably dimmed the possibility of future accession. The carrot of membership still remains important as countries from the eastern neighbourhood tend to accept the Union’s conditionality even though Russia offers the possibility of economic benefits without asking for any political reforms and providing bureaucracy free agreements.

The perspective of transatlanticism has always loomed over EU-Russia relations. Moscow has tried to play Europe and the US against each in order to assert itself as a hegemon in the post soviet space (Rahr 2007, p.178; Rahr 2005; Pavliuk 2005; Nichol 2009; Najšlová 2010; Trenin 2005; Kux 2005; Kononenko 2008). Nonetheless, in the EU-US-Russia security triangle, Moscow has tried to woo Europeans in various arrangements that would marginalize the Americans (Rynning & Jensen 2010, p.142). This approach has its roots in the Iraq war when France and Germany were backed up by Russia in their opposition to the intervention of the US led coalition. With its war in Georgia, Russia showed that it was keener than the US to recognize the European Union as a major international actor. Russia felt that all the major leaders in the EU (the president of the European Commission, the high representative on security and foreign policy, and the president of that time of the Council of the EU) had to be present in order to legitimate the important decision that was to come for the European Union¹⁷. Russian attitudes towards the EU as a global actor have been contrasted with US perceptions of the Union. Although the foreign policy of the EU may be tagged as being normative it does not fit into the more or less Machiavellic or missionary power framework developed by the US in its foreign policy. From this standpoint, Brussels brings an overt challenge to the American way of dealing in world politics. Over the last two decades, since the fall of Communist regimes in Europe, US leaderships have perceived this radical engagement of the EU with world politics as being based on soft power, a type of power which has no real influence if it is not backed up by strong military capabilities. Behind the American discourses hinders the threat that the new normative path that the EU has adopted might become prevalent in the near future. On the other hand, the Russian leaders see the EU's stance in world politics as being both compliant and conflictual with their values and interests. Actually, all the relations between Moscow and Brussels have been influenced by the dichotomy conflict/collaboration. Rhetorically, Russian portrayal of world politics attributes an important role to the European Union.

¹⁷ http://www.messenger.com.ge/issues/1682_september_3_2008/1682_summit.html, accessed 10.05 2011.

Conclusions

Cooperation between the European Union and Russia has been over the last decade a priority for both actors. Nonetheless, their views on how cooperation should be carried out have been based on slightly different assumptions. Russian discourse has often stressed the need for relations between EU and Moscow to be developed having in mind a „viable balance between cooperation and competition”¹⁸. It has recognized that Europe is a space which can offer Russia a myriad of both political and economical opportunities, making cooperation with the big member states a priority. The EU’s view on cooperation has been shaped by the interaction between the common goal of engaging Russia in multilateralism and the more individualistic approach of most member states which have sought to develop enhanced bilateral relations with Moscow (David et al. 2011). The EU’s *Russia first policy* seems also to be strengthened by the educational background of two of its Commissioners. Štefan Füle the Czech Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy and Maroš Šefcovic, the Slovak Commissioner for inter-institutional relations and administration, two crucial chains in the development of EU policy are both graduates of the illustrious Moscow State Institute of International Relations¹⁹. According to the former, relations with Moscow can be developed only if Russia is to be persuaded to adopt a multilateral approach to international politics binding itself to the international legal order, „because transparency and predictability are the key to good economic and political relations.”²⁰ Simultaneously, the Commission has tried to link Russian progress on human right or multilateralism with the visa regime, highlighting that poor technical standards concerning visa and border security could be overlooked if Moscow were to improve its human rights track and engaged in multilateral agreements.

On the other hand, the paper has underscored that most member states have tried to construct enhanced bilateral relations with Moscow based on close economic and energy ties. Germany, France or Italy have over the years competed for forging more developed such relations with Russia. The logic of this competition was the single practical approach towards Moscow that the EU members shared. Of course, on an ideational level they were outspoken in expressing their

¹⁸ <http://www.europeanvoice.com/article/2011/february/russia-eu-relations-what-s-new-/70375>, accessed on 20.05.2011.

¹⁹ <http://www.europeanvoice.com/article/imported/from-russia-with-love-/68958.aspx>, accessed on 10.02.2011.

²⁰ <http://euobserver.com/9/31442>, accessed on 10.12.2010.

commitment to a normative Europe that would include Russia. Yet, their discourses were not backed by practical EU engagements in Russia or its Eastern Neighbourhood. Moreover, they were instrumental in several occasions in undermining the Commission's practical initiatives in the region. The dissonance between the Union's approach to Russia and the member states' tendency to forge enhanced bilateral relations with Moscow impeded the European Neighbourhood policy from being a success story. Consequently, it leads to the conclusion that in terms of the foreign policy narrative constructed by the EU towards its Eastern neighbourhood, the Union's normative goal of promoting various norms imposes an asymmetric set of relations with its neighbours. Correlated with the practice of developing special relations with Russia the normative narrative opens the way for Moscow to be viewed by the Eastern neighbours of the Union as a power that can give short term solutions to pressing problems. At the same time this pattern of practices, that seems to inform the behaviour of most EU member states, *de facto* legitimates Russia's bid for having the Eastern Neighbourhood under its *sphere of influence*.

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