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The Images of the European Union as a Regional and Global Player in Russian Political Discourse.

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Abstract.

The EU's external images receive less academic attention than they merit despite the fact that the way the EU is seen by others has a direct bearing on efficiency of the European policies and its influence in the international arena. On the other hand, external perceptions help to shape its emerging collective identity and thus its foreign policy roles functioning as a "second mirror" for the EU. The paper purports to find out if the EU's self-perceptions as a regional and global leader coincide with its external images with the special emphasis on if Russia sees the EU as a unitary actor or simply the group of 27 member states and if the EU is perceived as an altruistic or a self-interested entity, that is, if Russia sees the EU as "force for good" or "a normative hegemon", an altruistic advocate of universal norms or an entity that seeks to impose its one-size-fits-all rules under the pretext of promoting universal values. Simultaneously, the research aims to highlight if the image of the EU, whatever it is, is of any effect. The focus of this paper is on the official Russian policy discourse that includes publicly accessible documents concerning the EU – Russian relations, press statements, public speeches and declarations of high-ranking politicians, some of which have not been translated into English.

Keywords: The EU, external images, Russia, discourse.

Introduction.

The European Union is a novel and unprecedented political creation in the international relations that defies easy classification and as such it has sparkled fiery scholarly debates on its identity. One of the few points that the academic opinion seems to agree on is that the EU is definitely a distinctive actor. This distinctiveness thesis is rooted in the EU's own self-representations as a civilian superpower and its aspiration for a leadership status in such matters as promotion of democracy, human rights, climate change, humanitarian aid and peaceful conflict resolution. These self-definitional images abound in various public declarations of the EU leaders, documents and treaties[1]. During the last decade the EU has undertaken a more ambitious role as an international power that is capable of projecting its influence on international affairs and that has a moral obligation to take on responsibilities towards other countries[2]. The Treaty of Lisbon reaffirms the EU's commitment "to develop a special relationship with neighbouring countries, in order to establish an area of prosperity and good neighbourliness, founded on the values of the Union and characterised by close and peaceful relations based on cooperation"[3]. Thus the European Union not only aims to create a distinctive identity based on such values and norms as democracy, the rule of law, human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the principles of equality and solidarity, but also but intends to export those values beyond its borders.

The EU's ever growing assertiveness on the international scene coincided with the rise of reflectivist approaches that unveiled new perspectives for the EU studies and international relations and called attention to the identity and the role of the EU in the world (Bretherton and Vogler 2006; Hill 1993; Marsh and Mackenstein 2005; Laffan 2004). In their analysis of the European identity scholars drew on the *sui generis* premise that viewed the EU as constructed differently from traditional states and international organisations. According to Manners and Whitman (2003, 384) the distinctiveness of the EU lies in combination of its hybrid polity and its international

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[1] Having analysed painstakingly the available data, Manners (2006) singles out nine EU values and principles (constitutive self-images): sustainable peace, social liberty, consensual democracy, human rights, supranational rule of law, equality, solidarity, sustainable development and good governance.

[2] *A Secure Europe in a Better World. European Security Strategy,* European Council Meeting in Brussels, 12 December 2003.

[3] Article 7a.

roles. It is those role representations as a "normative" power (Manners, 2002), "civilian" power (Orbie, 2006), "norm-maker" (Björkdahl 2005), "ethical" power (Aggestam, 2008) that are seen as an integral part of the European distinctive identity.

However, these assumptions about the EU identity need further theoretical elaborations and meticulous empirical scrutiny. Sjursen (2006, 171) points out that the "normative/civilian power" concept seems to be based on the belief that "the EU is doing good". However, what should be investigated is if the EU's self-assumed mission as a "force for good" is considered legitimate by other international actors. This paper makes an attempt to demonstrate that discussion on the alleged distinctiveness of the EU is not able to give us a complete picture of the European identity if it focuses only on the question if "the EU is doing good" and if the EU considers itself to be a global and regional power , rather, it would be interesting to explore if the world also thinks so. However, the debate on the European identity has tended to be self-reflexive and has not taken into account if the image that the EU has shaped of itself converges with its external images, despite the fact that this perspective could be a valuable contribution to the literature on the EU actorness, identity and the EU-Russia relations.

This paper makes an attempt to reveal if Russia sees the EU as a global and regional power whose high-flown and discursively represented self-understandings reverberate in its external images. The focus on the values seems to be an essential component for the research on the EU's external images, because the EU constructs itself as a normative and civilian power based on values and aims to project them beyond its frontiers. So the EU in its aspiration to gain international significance it will find it easier "to get what it wants" if its values are seen as legitimate by other players.

The first part of the paper outlines the research rationale for studying the external images of the EU and then subjects the public declarations of the Russian policy-makers to scrutiny in order to highlight if the EU is seen doing successes on its way towards its consolidation as a global and regional power and if the EU values are accepted in such cases as the EU as a model of regional integration and as a promotor of such values as democracy and respect for human rights.

The influence of the external perceptions on the EU's identity. Why "bother"?

Recent but prominent line of research draws attention to the necessity to approach scientifically the issue of external images. First of all, this theoretical angle can throw light to the question of actorness, which is essential for such a non-traditional actor as the EU that struggles to develop an international identity in its own right. Furthermore, the outsiders' perspective could function as a crucial test on the alleged distinctiveness of the European international identity, that is to say, the EU's self-understandings as altruistic power and guarantor of stability and justice make sense only if the international "audience" views it as such. The failure of the self-referentiality to provide a complete picture of identity has its roots in a wider debates on identity. Taking into account the necessity to incorporate the external perceptions, this paper accepts the Jepperson's et al (1996, 59) definition that identity consists of "the images of individuality and distinctiveness ('selfhood') held and projected by an actor and formed (and modified over time) through relations with significant 'others'". Thus the identity implies "mutually constructed and evolving images of Self and the Other". Identity literature seeks to theorize the presence of the Others, which is quite a logical move, given that international relations is all about interaction between the states. Neither the EU nor any other state functions in a vacuum, every actor needs "audience" to display its identity.

The EU's identity is not an exception as has been and is being constructed as different to its others, be it its own past (Waever 1998, 90) or physical others. The EU is a novel and unprecedented creation that can not draw upon its history and culture for the construction of its identity, as traditional states do, consequently, its others acquire an even greater constitutive force. As Manners and Whitman (2003, 382) point out the EU is more dependent on the outsiders as its identity is clearly "intersubjective" and that's why "its 'visibility' to other actors is a part of co-constituting itself". Images that other actors hold of the EU function as a "second mirror" (Lucarelli and Fioramonti 2011, 4) as they help to shape European identities and roles. It should be kept in mind that the role the EU accepts is by no means automatic, it is the result of interaction with

other actors (Aggestam 2006, 16). The EU needs the others to define its role through foreign policy interaction and negotiation[4].

Knowing others' perceptions is a practical and useful exercise. The international relations literature on perceptions suggests that self-understandings and images of the other states are biased. While the self-perceptions are imbued with affection and actors tend to perceive themselves as inherently good and benevolent, they suppose that others also view them as such (Jervis 1976). However, the external perceptions can turn out to be different. It is crucial for an actor to be aware of its external images because of the subjectivity of self-perceptions and that's why Others' perspective is necessary and can help us understand our identity better and avoid narcissist behaviour. Certainly, negative perceptions of the EU can undermine the EU's self-confidence making it feel as an 'invisible giant' hampering its policies and even disrupting the process of internal integration (Chaban and Holland 2008, 4) but on the other hand, this can prevent the dangers of the famous expectations-capability gap (Hill 1993). In their turn, positive perceptions and high-expectations of the actor exert positive influence on its self-perceptions as they satisfy the strive for recognition. For the EU external images can be a valuable contribution to debates on it's the actorness and the alleged distinctiveness. First, this sort of investigations could reveal if the EU is seen by its counterparts as a consolidated international actor worth listening to. Outsiders' perspective on the EU could also throw light on the extent to which it is seen as a 'distinctive' power and legitimate promoter of its values and principles.

The second reason to engage in this type of research is that the external images are one of the variables in foreign policy formulation and implementation. As Lucarelli and Fioramonti (2010, 2) argue what the world thinks is a crucial factor to predict if the EU-sponsored policies will be accepted or opposed and the perceptions can function as " 'an early warning system' for an actor such as the EU, which is still in the process of establishing itself as a credible international focal point". The EU in its aspiration towards leadership will find it easier to obtain support of other international player if its actions are considered legitimate and altruistic. It is much easier for the EU to 'get what is wants' if its values and principles are seen as universal. On the other hand, the

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[4] The idea of the role of the Others is frequently voiced in the literature. Elgström and Smith (2006, 5) define roles as "patterns of expected or appropriate behaviour determined by both an actor's own conceptions about appropriate behaviour and by the expectations of other actors". Wendt (1999: 227-8) echoes this point of view by asserting that "the role-constructing side of the equation is ultimately shaped by an actor's identity and the others' expectations".

perceptions of the EU can also affect the formulation of the foreign policy of its partners not only at the international but also domestic level. So if the EU is successful or not in promoting its policies has to be seen partially in the light of its legitimacy in the eyes of other actors (Barbé et al. 2010). In their turn, the outcomes of these policies and their reception or rejection and evaluation of the EU's performance by other actors will influence EU's self-conception. Lucarelli (2007, 9) explains this process as "the way we conceive our international role is functional to the way in which we conceive ourselves; at the same time the way we 'perform' our role feeds back into our political identity". And the "performance" depends on if the EU policies are accepted or rejected by its counterparts.

Russia: the Eternal Other.

When studying the external perceptions it is probably justified to start with Russia for several reasons. First of all, in its aspiration for a status as a global and regional power Russia is an indispensable partner as it is an important component in of the European identity formation being the part of the discourse on the European security order, on the expansion of the EU and on the economic development and cooperation (Neumann, 1999). Probably, it would not be an exaggeration to say that understanding Russia's vision of the EU contributes to consolidation of the European Union as an international player[5]. Russia has always been a significant Other for the EU since its inception as one the reasons behind the EU integration has been the Soviet threat (Laffan 2004). However, despite the fact that relations between Russia and the EU can not be defined in enemy terms anymore, Russia has at times been a "difficult partner" for the EU despite the rhetoric declarations about shared values and friendly relations. In fact, scholars have been quite skeptical about Russian and European political discourses, which testify that their relationships are "conflictual, rather that insufficiently cooperative" (Prozorov 2006, 1). Negative attitudes are mirrored in the EU discourse as well, as European leaders tend to be suspicious of Russia's intentions.

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[5] As Lucarelly (2009: 7) suggests: there are three components of the EU´s development as a full-fledged actor: the gradual definition of a process of self-identification by the Europeans with the EU as their political referent (political identity), the EU's actual political performance at "home" and abroad, and the Others's view of the EU as a political actor.

The relationships are bound to be tense due to various factors, different nature of the actors is among them. As the EU is a hybrid polity that combines supranational and intergovernmental elements, while Russia is the traditional state whose foreign policy rests on the assumption of the sovereignty, both actors are bound to face multiple misunderstandings. Another source of the problem might be the lack of communication that contributes to the uncertainly of the both parties (Larivé 2008, 3). Consequently, studying the perceptions of Russia and the EU can be one of the factors that might help to overcome the impediments to constructing the genuine strategic relationship between the actors as the perceptions have a part to play in fostering or inhibiting the cooperation across various dimensions. In such conditions a scrupulous, empirical research of Russian official discourse is crucial to get to know the perceptions, understandings, motives and intentions of the foreign policy makers and simply to be able to comprehend the other's vision of the situation and thus to help the EU avoid the awkward situation of being a "deaf power".

Valuable empirical explorations of the topic have been provided by the work of several researchers who studied perceptions of the EU that prevail in Russian political discourse (Secrieru 2010, Larivé 2008, Popescu 2006). However, the international relations is a fluid and changeable field and new points are constantly being added to the EU- Russia agenda that are bound to change the perceptions. This paper focuses on the Russian political discourse during the fifteen months, from January 2011 until March 2012 encompassing the last months of Medvedev's presidency.

As the perceptions are vulnerable to both domestic and international changes, it is crucial to provide a quick overview of the EU-Russia agenda of that period that reflected both continuity and novelty. Among the old issues that dominated the agenda is economical cooperation. The EU is seen as a major trading partner and an indispensable source of modernization (Medvedev 2011d). Since 2010 the Partnership for Modernization, which aims to bring reforms and innovation in the economic and civil society sectors, has been the main topic of discussion at both the EU summits and the bilateral meetings. During the chosen period the EU crisis remains the key topic of the discussions. Certainly, the energy issue continues to be one of the most crucial and contentious issues as Russia suspended its participation in the Energy Charter because it reflects only the European interests (Medvedev 2011f). Russian decision makers also

go on working towards the elimination a visa regime, which is deemed necessary for establishing a fully fledged cooperation between both actors.

The newly arisen topics of the EU-Russian agenda include conflicts in Syria and Lybia, the EU sanctions against Belarus, the increase in the interest in creation of the Eurasian Union, parliamentary and presidential elections in Russia, the inauguration of the Nord Stream which is declared to be a turning point in the sense that it opens the new page in the EU Russian relations and starts direct deliveries of the Russian gas and that is seen as a contribution to the European security of the EU.

The EU as an international player: a unitary actor or twenty-seven member states?

It is frequently pointed out, that the EU's aspiration for a global power status is undermined by its inability to act as a unitary actor even in economic and trade matters where the EU has seemingly become an uncontested power. In fact, the common perception in Russia is that the EU is just one of the international organisations, such as the Council of Europe, NATO and the UN, in which the governance is carried out by national governments (Bordachev, 2005). In fact, the analysis of the Russian political discourse has revealed that at practically every bilateral meeting with EU member states, Russian decision makers refer to their membership in the European Union, so Russia seems to acknowledge the existence of the EU and its importance for its members. Moreover, Russian politicians acknowledge that the EU is an attractive trading partner and an indispensable source for modernization. However, Russia still continues to see the European Union as a group of countries rather than a unitary actor. Medvedev calls them as "sovereign countries" and even more, he does not see them as equal as, when talking about crisis, he subdivides them as those seen as a "safety harbours" and "weaker partners" (Medvedev 2011f). But it has been noted, that when it comes to the overcoming the financial crisis the EU is doing successes on the way of developing a consolidated line of behavior to help the countries out of the trouble (Medvedev 2011g) and, not surprisingly, EU is ubiquitously considered as an economic power, whose predicament negatively influences other states in the world. So the EU´s image of an economic giant which despite its internal divisiveness and incoherence was

an undisputable power, has been further undermined by the ongoing crisis, which in its turn, deepened its external perceptions of a divided actor.

The emphasis that the member states are sovereign is even more discernible when it comes to the "high politics". As Russian President comments on the EU's criticism of Russian actions in Georgia: "France has its own position, and so does the EU. These positions are just different. We can not do anything about it" (Medvedev 2011 c). And similarly, if Russia seems to be more cooperative in economic matters, it clings more to the concept of sovereignty and the principle of non interference in domestic matters when talking about human rights, democracy and security issues. Consequently, the EU's criticisms are more easily discarded and in fact Medvedev voiced on numerous occasions his unwillingness to listen to the EU. In his comments of the European Parliament's formulation of Russian actions in Georgia as "occupation", he notes that this accusation is absolutely "unfounded" and "we are talking about a foreign parliament and "I do not much care about how they phrase their statements" (Medvedev 2011c). So the response to European criticism is quite harsh and Russia points out that the EU' d better mind its own business as it is not a problem free zone itself. During the December 2011 summit, in response to the claim that there were irregularities during Russian election campaign, the Russian president pointed out that "the European Parliament should be busying itself with European affairs. Just look at the number of problems here in Europe" (Medvedev, 2011h).

The EU's image as an international actor also suffers from its inability to develop a coherent foreign policy and its dependency on other actors for its security. The failure to "speak with one voice" when it comes to the formulation of the foreign policy is a natural consequence of the perceptions of the EU as not a unitary actor. Moreover, Russia perceives the EU as not an independent actor when it comes to its security, but rather as American-dependent and Medvedev numerously mentioned "We have to talk to Americans" when it comes to the European missile shield. All that leads to the perceptions that the EU being "an underdeveloped hard power" and suffering from its own internal problem is "losing its global significance" (Secrieru, 2010: 11)

As Russia perceives the EU as a group of member states and not a unitary actor, in its relations it prefers to pursue bilateral relations, especially developing "special" relations with a number of European countries. As Secrieru (2010, 18) argues Russia divides the

EU countries into three categories: "psychologically compatible partners, utilitarians and neighbours with the 'phantoms of the past illness'". Interestingly, this categorization is reflected in the Russian political discourse. As Medvedev explains, there are countries that are eager to undertake changes even tomorrow, the second group of countries wants to move carefully, and others are unwilling to cooperate because of their mistrust of Russia (Medvedev, 2011e). It is in cooperation with the countries of the first category that Russia intends to promote its interests in Europe and sees them as worth cooperating with. The list of this countries includes Germany, France, Italy and to a lesser extent Spain. Taking Italy as an example, it is seen that cooperation between two countries constitutes a "solid foundation" for the development of the relations with the EU. (Medvedev 2011g). The Russian willingness to develop relations with more influential or bigger countries was not unnoticed by the international relations academia. As Bordachev (2009) argues, the tendency of Russia to purse bilateral relations with the leading states can even intensify as the Lisbon treaty enhances the power of the big states. Russian strategy to pursue bilateral relations also has something to do with perceptions. Barbé et al. (2010) argue that this is due to the fact that the EU lacks legitimacy and bargaining power in the eyes of Russia. Bilateral strategies also serve as an indicator that the EU is seen as an incoherent and not unitary actor that enables Russia to apply divide and rule principle.

Russian attitude to European unity is dual. On the one hand Russia publicly declares that it would like the EU to enhance its position as an actor. As Medvedev states "Russia very much wants to see the European Union remain a powerful economic and political force. This is because we have deep-reaching ties with Europe, civilizational ties, and we both benefit from all of these relations" (Medvedev 2011,h). What is meant by benefits is not only that the EU is an important economic partner and that Russia holds 41% of currency reserves in euro, but also political and military benefits. Moreover, the EU's consolidation as a political actor could decrease the "inconvenient" influence of Americans on the European security structures. However, Russia is not enthusiastic to see the stronger EU either because of the EU-Russian rivalry on the post soviet space.

The EU as a model for regional integration.

If, according to Russian political elite, the European Union's successes as a global actor have been rather modest, the EU as a regional power is another story. Russian politicians widely acknowledge that the EU represents a success story when it comes to the integration that is worth emulating. The extent to which the European Union serves as a model for regional integration, focusing on the Eurasian Union, the brand-new project, initiated by Russian Federation, Belarus and Kazakhstan is a novel and interesting topic for an investigation. This new-fangled initiative will be based on numerous overlapping integration projects on the Post-soviet territory, such as the Customs Union, the Union State, the Eurasian Economic Community, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation and the Commonwealth of Independent States. However, as the political leaders of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan explicitly claim, they are going to draw heavily on the experience of the European Union, both negative and positive.

First of all, it should be mentioned that the EU as a model of regional integration is definitely considered as success. The Eurasian Union, which is expected to come to life by 2015, is seen as the next step towards deeper integration of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan that already launched the Customs Union in 2010 and the Single Economic Space which came in operation in January 1, 2012. The then prime minister Vladimir Putin, who pushes through this project, is willing to model it on the EU's principles such as freedom of movement of goods and people. What is seen as worth emulating is the economic experience of the EU. Putin (2011) voices his aspiration to draw on the Schengen experience, which allows people to move freely within the territory of the member states. As he goes on to explain, they take into consideration the European values such as liberty of movement that allows people to work and study in any country of the agreement, that was beneficial not only for the citizens but also those who visit the EU. Even more, Russian politicians agree to cede a part of their sovereignty by creating a supranational body – the Eurasian Economic Commission (Medvedev, 2011i). Russian politicians also mentioned the possibility to adopt a currency that is like euro. Euro is called a young but "promising" currency and the current predicament of the euro does not unveil the "defects in the idea of the euro itself, but rather, an unfavourable set of circumstances that was ultimately tied to the financial and economic crisis and there should be more universal currencies like this" (Medvedev, 2011b)

Although the idea of the creation of the Eurasian Union was coined already in 1994 by the Kazakhstani President Nursultan Nazarbaev, it appealed to Russian decision makers only in 2011. The newly emerged interest to this project can be partially explained by the Russian perceptions of the European success as a project which is attractive for the former soviet republics coupled with the perceptions of that the Eastern Partnership proposed by Poland and Sweden as an anti-Russian venture (Haukkala, 2009). This duality is reflected in the words of Kosachev, chairman of the foreign affairs committee who states that "the situation is absurd" when post-Soviet states enjoy more benefits from cooperating with Russia and still they want to "enter into the straitjacket of European institutions and to fall under the diktat of Brussels." (cited by Popescu 2006).

So the vision of the EU as an economic power and a model for regional integration is far from being univocal. While Russian political leaders publicly declare that Russia is interested in enhancing the economic power of the EU and emulating its positive experience, Russia does not want to depend completely on the EU as a trading partner and looks for diversification of its economic relations. Though not explicitly announced but Russians view "the unbalanced distribution of trade as a creeping 'soft threat' for its sovereignty …and fears the possibility that the EU imposes elements of the *acquis communitaire* on the country" (Secrieru 2010, 9). This could explain why Russia looks at the East to diminish the inconvenient asymmetry of trade relations. Moreover, this perception of the EU's soft imperialism in the Post Soviet space combined with the attractiveness of this model prompts Russia to propose its own model of integration, which can be seen as a new instrument that Russia uses to promote its interests. However, the questions arise if Russian politicians really mean what they say. Despite Russia's claims that this project will be completely egalitarian, it is often seen as an attempt to restore its influence in the Post Soviet state and using the rhetoric of the EU to present itself as a "benign power in the 'near abroad'" (Secrieru 2010, 10)

The EU as an advocate of democracy and human rights.

As it has already been mentioned, the acceptance or rejection of the EUropean values can be a crucial component of the EU's consolidation as a global and regional actor as the EU frequently links its policies with the promotion of such values as democracy and

human rights among others. In fact, the EU often wanted to democratize Russia and tends to place these values in the center of political dialogue, which might be one of the reasons that contribute to the severing the EU-Russian relations. In is not unusual for the EU to reprimand Russia for its disrespect for the principles of human rights and democracy to the great irritation of the latter. However, the question is if Russia perceives those claims as justified and legitimate. Here again, the analysis of the empirical material reveals certain duality.

On the one hand, the EU institutions are positively evaluated. Medvedev explicitly recognizes the superiority of the European institutions "If we had other government institutions, starting from the president and the government and finishing with municipal agencies, we probably would need no modernisation. If they were in a state like similar institutions in the European Union"(Medvedev, 2011a).   Occasionally, Russia sees the EU as a model when it comes to human rights protection. When talking about protests after the Duma elections Lukin, Russian Human Rights Ombudsman, draws parallels between Russia with the EU as the demonstrations   were carried out in a civilized manner. (Medvedev 2012a).

However, more frequently Russia adopts a critical attitude to the EU that discloses the Russian perception of the EU as not altruistic promoter of the values but rather as an entity that promotes the norms for its own convenience. From time to time, Russian President states, that the EU itself is not in a position to provide an example and lecture Russia. He singles out that the EU, as other countries from the Euro-Atlantic region, "faces many human rights challenges today. They include basic racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and intolerance. They include too, issues regarding national and ethnic minorities, refugees and displaced persons, and migrants. The list goes on" (Medvedev 2012b). Further, he indirectly accuses the EU of imposing these norms upon the sovereign countries in violation of some cultural sensitivity. In his vision the EU is a self-interested actor that applies "a selective approach to assessing the human rights situation which is usually based on double standards and ultimately devalues the basic principles of international relations and of the classic concept of democracy itself, inculcated in us in the schoolroom and in university classes" (Medvedev 2012b). According to this point of view the EU can not consider itself as the "main exporter of democracy" because it imposes itself as a model to be emulated by the countries,

which are governed by completely different norms and traditions. Medvedev states that it is not a democracy at all but the imposition of own interests (2012b).

Thus, the principle of democracy promoted by the EU is not seen as universal. Even more, it is viewed as an interference with the domestic development of every country and a violation of the sacred concept of sovereignty. Russia accepts the EU's criticism of the Duma elections with hostility if not to say indifference, Medvedev "we are talking about a foreign parliament and "I do not much care about how they phrase their statements" (Medvedev 2011c).

Conclusion.

The necessity to listen to each others' view is acknowledged by Russian politicians. In fact, Russian president voiced his discontent on numerous occasions that there is lack of communication between the parties and that the Russian concerns and interests are not taken into account by the European partners. The situation seems to improve as the Europeans also start recognizing the need of understanding Russia's perceptions. As Brown, the former defence minister of the UK, argues, there is a tendency to concentrate on conflictual dimension of the EU –Russian relations and to ignore the way the problem is perceived by Russia, while paying attention to this dimension could mitigate mutual suspicions. (Medvedev 2012b). Certainly, understanding perceptions can not resolve all conflicts between the EU and Russia but can provide valuable insights that can improve the relations especially in disputable issues. On the other hand, Russian views of the EU successfully function as a "second mirror" by helping the Europeans better understand their nascent identity. As the former EU commissioner Peter Mandelson puts it: "No other country reveals our differences as does Russia" (cited by Khrushcheva, 2011).

Russian views of the European Union reflect both positive and negative attitudes as Russia finds itself vacillating between the need to cooperate and to enhance the EU power and drive to compete with the EU in the Post Soviet space. The Eurasian Union, proposed by the Prime Minister Putin, can be interpreted in that way. Russia recognizes the achievements of the EU as an economic project that is able to project its power in

the region but at the same time sees the EU as using high-flown rhetoric as a cloak to cover its interests.

When it comes to the European international actorness, Russia recognises the importance of the EU both for its own members as well as for the world, but it does not view it as a unitary actor which is able to produce a coherent foreign policy, which definitely undermines the EU´s aspirations for a global power status. The Russian perception of the EU can be briefly summarized by the Medvedev's statement that "they are fighting each other, and that there are countries that have not been adapted to the European life" (Medvedev, 2011a).

When it comes to promotion of democracy and respect for human rights Russia does not perceive the EU as altruistic, but rather, as imposing its one-size-fits-all values that infringe on the sovereignty and internal development of other countries. Drawing parallels with the classification of Bretherton and Vogler (2006) it can be said that EU is more associated with the image of a fortress that protects its interests, rather than a civilian and normative power.

So what are the implications of perceptions for the Russian foreign policy formulation and implementation? Unfortunately it is impossible to establish direct causal links between perceptions and the foreign policy behaviour, as the policies can be accepted or rejected due to other factors as well. However, the external images definitely have a part to play and they can explain why Russia opposes several EU policies and prefers to pursue the relations on a bilateral level by developing "special" relations with a number of European countries and disrupting the EU's ability to "speak with one voice".

This paper is subject to several limitations. First of all, it analyses the external images of the EU as a unitary actor, a model for regional integration and the promoter of democracy and human rights as they are represented in discourses of Russian President Medvedev and to a smaller extent, of the Prime Minister Putin. Analysis that would take a wider look on the perceptions held by a broader range of Russian decision-makers on other areas is long overdue to give a more complete picture of the state of affairs.

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