

Beyond the crisis in Ukraine

Russian and EU perceptions of European security and the potential for rapprochement

Pernille Rieker and Kristian Lundby Gjerde



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Visiting address: C.J. Hambros plass 2d
Address: P.O. Box 8159 Dep.
NO-0033 Oslo, Norway
Internet: www.nupi.no
E-mail: post@nupi.no
Fax: [+ 47] 22 99 40 50
Tel: [+ 47] 22 99 40 00

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1. Introduction

Recent developments in European security have shown the growing need for a better understanding of the dynamics that may both threaten and ensure security and stability on the European continent. This paper presents an analysis of differing Russian and European perceptions of European security in general, and more specifically concerning the crisis in Ukraine. As much of the literature on these issues has been normatively driven, we aim to provide an objective presentation and analysis of the dominant Russian and EU discourses. This we see as essential for investigating the potential for constructive dialogue between Russia and the EU.¹

Making a serious effort to understand the other side's point of view does not mean justifying or accepting that position. However, it is crucial to recognize that different actors have different reference frames, and that this in turn may lead them to perceive events very differently. As the US scholar Robert Jervis observed nearly 40 years ago, misperceptions of others' perceptions are a continuous source of conflicts in the international arena. He stressed the importance of trying 'to see the world the way the other sees it' in order to 'avoid the common error of assuming that the way he sees the world is the only possible one' and 'also to avoid the trap of believing that the other sees his actions as he sees them' (Jervis 1976: 409–410).

With the Ukraine crisis, the relevance of the Kremlin's perspective is often dismissed. Certainly, a key aspect of the crisis is that Russian actions are undermining the European security system that has evolved over the last 25 years. Yet this in itself cannot be a reason for not seeking a better understanding of Russian readings of the situation – quite the contrary. The same applies to Russia's increasing authoritarianism and endemic corruption (see Dawisha 2014), and also the Kremlin's propaganda campaigns, which Pomerantsev and Weiss (2014) have dubbed the 'weaponization of information'. In short: All these factors may effectively discredit the Russian regime – but they do not lessen the importance of understanding Russian perspectives on European security.

The crucial issue is the interaction between differing perceptions, so both sides must be studied. As Jervis noted, people not only fail to understand other points of view – too often, they also lack sufficient un-

¹ The analysis is informed by a series of interviews conducted in Brussels and Moscow in May 2015. In addition, we have consulted official documents and statements as well as secondary literature by Russian and Western scholars.

derstanding of ‘the structure of their own belief systems’: ‘[p]articularly dangerous is the tendency to take the most important questions for granted’ (Jervis 1976: 410). That is also the essence of Robert Legvold’s observation that the Ukraine crisis is a clear example of a conflict where perceptions and misperceptions of the other side’s perspectives are of central significance: ‘Each side sees the conflict as a result solely of the actions – or even the nature – of the other. Neither pays attention to the complicated interactions that brought relations to their present low’ (Legvold 2014: 74). Similar concerns have been raised by other commentators (see e.g. Kissinger 2014; Pravda 2014; Charap & Shapiro 2014). Also firm supporters of EU policy tacitly admit that the EU has not sufficiently understood Russia. For instance, some EU officials who otherwise hold EU policy to have been correct have admitted that they underestimated Russian reactions to those policies.² Angela Merkel’s comment that Putin lives in ‘another world’ (*New York Times* 2014) is often interpreted as purely derogatory, but could instead be taken as a call to study Russian perceptions more deeply.

By not seriously engaging with both EU and Russian perceptions, we risk having a poorer basis for policy development – narrowing possible paths, while aggravating Russian dissatisfaction. If simplistic assumptions about the motivations and intentions of other actors take hold in the public debate and policy analyses, the main actors may be drawn into a logic that is ultimately dangerous or counter-productive. With this paper we offer a modest contribution towards discouraging such a development in Russia–EU relations. We begin by presenting an analysis of the different approaches and differing perceptions of European security and the Ukraine crisis. We then discuss the potential for dialogue and diplomatic solutions between such different worldviews, before concluding with reflections on potential implications for European security.

² Interviews, Brussels, May 2015.

2. Colliding perceptions of European security

Informed discussion of possible ways of ensuring European security requires a clear understanding of the underpinnings of Russian as well as EU security thinking. In his recent book about the Ukraine crisis, Richard Sakwa (2015: 26) argues that two opposing visions of Europe have collided. First, the idea of a “*Wider Europe*” with the EU at its heart but increasingly coterminous with the Euro-Atlantic security and political community’. Second, the idea of a ‘*Greater Europe*’, with ‘a vision of a continental Europe, stretching from Lisbon to Vladivostok, that has multiple centres, including Brussels, Moscow and Ankara, but with a common purpose in overcoming the divisions that have traditionally plagued the continent.’ These two visions build on very different worldviews and assumptions about the functioning of international politics, which in turn leads to different perspectives on European security. Clarification is crucial to understanding what happens when these two opposing ideas collide, as they have done and still do with the Ukraine crisis.

2.1 The EU and its security community building process

The main ideas behind the European integration process and the conviction that economic integration and security are closely linked fit well with Sakwa’s ‘Wider Europe’ perspective. In fact, these ideas have been at the core of the integration process that was first initiated in Western Europe after the end of the Second World War. At that time, economic integration was seen as crucial for ensuring peace on the European continent. This peace project has gradually expanded since the end of the Cold War, when the process of including Central and Eastern European countries as well as former Soviet republics was initiated. While the former joined the EU in 2004, the latter were offered a kind of looser association through the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in 2004 and the Eastern Partnership (EaP) in 2009. The initial intention was also to find a way of including Russia in this process.

More recently, the concept of security community or security community building has been used to describe these processes (Rieker, forthcoming). When the concept of ‘security community’ was first developed by Karl Deutsch (1957), it was seen as a form of international cooperation that, under certain circumstances, also could lead to integration. Deutsch himself used the term primarily to describe the development of a transatlantic security community. He argued that a ‘securi-

ty community' was formed by participating actors when their people, and their political elites in particular, shared stable expectations of peace in the present and for the future. Later, Adler and Barnett (1998) investigated the development of such communities in various regions and historical periods. In his contribution to that edited volume, Ole Wæver maintained that Western Europe had developed into a mature security community, through processes of 'desecuritization' (Wæver 1998). There and in later work, Wæver has said surprisingly little about the potential of the EU as an institution for building security communities beyond its borders. In *Regions and Powers* (Buzan and Wæver 2004), however, he argues, together with Barry Buzan, that Europe must be understood as a Regional Security Complex with the integration process at its core. The argument is that security is ensured by the fear of a return to a situation dominated by balance of power.

This perspective can offer useful insights for understanding the EU's policy towards Ukraine. After all, this policy (as well as the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership) has been developed largely on the template of the enlargement process, and the EU's aim has been to expand its security community through comprehensive association agreements (Rieker, forthcoming). Ideas of security community building have also been praised in the West: the EU was even awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for this endeavour in 2012. However, it remains to be seen what will happen to these ideas when they are challenged by colliding Russian ideas about European security.

2.2 Russia and multipolarity

In contrast to the EU-centred security community perspective, Russia has promoted a *multipolar* vision of European security, with 'more than one centre and without a single ideological flavour'. This is what Sakwa calls the 'Greater Europe' perspective – as opposed to an EU- or NATO-dominated type of cooperation (Sakwa 2015: 27). The main principle is that real security must be shared by all; keywords here are 'indivisible security' and 'equal cooperation' (Foreign Policy Concept 2013).

While the EU approach is best understood as a liberal institutionalist (or soft constructivist) approach, Russia's perspective appears to be in line with classical realism and traditional power politics. The Kremlin promotes the idea of a multipolar system – which classical realists have held up as one of the most stable systems or power constellations (Carr 1939; Morgenthau 1973). Critics, however, argue that such a system might very well be inclusive, but inclusive only for the major powers, including Russia; and that this could be seen as a call for a new type of 'concert of great powers'³ (Lo 2015: 180).

³ The 'Concert of Europe' is commonly used to describe the period from after the Napoleonic Wars to the Crimean War, which was an example of peaceful multipolar-

Like the EU, Russia has been quite consistent as to the basic premises of its perspective on European security and the need for an inclusive European security architecture. For example, in a statement in 2000 and repeatedly echoed since then, Putin envisioned that Europe should be ‘a single space of democracy, prosperity and equal security for all its states [...] in line with the multilateral agreements under the OSCE, including the European Security Charter’. He also emphasized the need to move beyond the confrontational postures that had characterized the Cold War period, and underlined that Russia was worried about certain tendencies in Europe:

We are keeping a close eye on the evolution of the European Union, the OSCE, NATO, the Council of Europe and regional organisations [...]. For instance, we cannot but be worried about the attempts to put NATO at the centre of the emerging European security system. That objectively weakens the role of the OSCE, which has the greatest potential for balancing the interests of all European countries (Putin 2000).

The backdrop was – and still is – that, whereas the West views the eastward expansion of the EU and NATO after the end of the Cold War as a great success for stability and democracy in Europe, Russia perceives this as a fundamental mistake that has squandered the unique opportunity to build a truly inclusive security order. In contrast to the dominant Western European narrative, the end of the Cold War is often seen as a shared victory in Russia, with Gorbachev's willingness to search for a ‘common European home’ as the decisive factor. Russia believes that, by disregarding this idea of a ‘Greater Europe’, the EU (or the West more broadly) is creating *new* division lines in Europe. For the Kremlin, the ‘Wider Europe’ expansion is seen as building a bulwark against Russia. Thus, the Ukraine crisis is perceived as a direct result of this Western policy – in much the same way as many in the West see the crisis as confirming the correctness of expanding Western security instruments eastwards.

2.3 Security community building and multipolarity as incompatible logics?

The well-known Russian scholar Sergei Medvedev has summarized the fundamental difference between the European security community perspective and the Russian realist approach as follows:

‘Sovereignty’ and ‘Europeanization’ are two competing bureaucratic strategies of managing globalization, one aimed at *protecting* internal order, and another aimed at *projecting* internal order. Russia is reinforcing domestic stateness as a conservative means of minimizing the ambiguity of global challenges while the EU projects

ity (the great powers of Europe assembled regularly to discuss international and domestic issues).

its domestic structures as a means to manage ambiguity along its periphery (Medvedev 2008: 225).

While Putin's first period was interpreted in the EU as showing willingness to accept the 'Wider Europe' perspective, it soon became clear that this was not the case. In Sergei Karaganov's (2005) words, in the early 2000s 'Europe and Russia drew closer together again only to realize how different they were.' And yet, this mutual recognition of differences has not been accompanied by an understanding of *how* these differences could be managed. While the situation has often been described as a 'competition between a benign, normative power Europe, on the one hand, and a malign Russian "sphere of influence" on the other, it is also possible to underscore how EU's approach in reality left very 'little room for enhanced dialogue' with Russia (Averre 2009: 1708) – to the dismay of Moscow. Fyodor Lukyanov, for example, concisely summarized a view widespread in Moscow:

Western politicians constantly repeat that it is necessary to give up zero-sum thinking and look for win-win models. But at the same time, the European Union is convinced in the historical superiority of its political model... In other words, in the West there is an a priori conviction that what is good for Europe and the US is good for everyone else, because the Western model is the correct one (Lukyanov 2008: 1114).

In 2014 Karaganov also laconically noted that the West 'never missed the chance to expand its own ostensibly non-existent sphere of influence' (Karaganov 2014).

As the EU continued its project of building a security community, bringing it closer to Russia's borders, and Russia started its own Eurasian integration project, geopolitics did emerge at the centre of EU–Russia relations – although it took some time for the EU to realize that. In many ways, the security community building project (operationalized through the EaP) began to compete directly with Russia's own Eurasian integration project (Sakwa 2015: 35). The EU approach has been to insist on the importance of the Eastern Partnership Countries having a free choice, and the need for the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) to respect the rules of the World Trade Organization (WTO) (Council of the EU 2015). Inspired by John Herz's realist idea about the *security dilemma* (Herz 1950), Samuel Charap and Mikhail Troitskiy (2013) have accurately described this situation as 'the integration dilemma'. As they explain, such a dilemma 'can be said to occur when one state perceives as a threat to its own security or prosperity its neighbours' integration into military alliances or economic groupings that are closed to it' (Charap and Troitskiy 2013: 50). They go on to argue that the 'history of post-Cold War European institutional enlargement is fraught with integration dilemmas', starting with NATO enlargement (2013: 51). An important element here is that the EU's foreign policy has increasingly been perceived in Moscow as linked to

NATO, also referred to by Russian scholars as the 'NATO-ization' of the European security system (Arbatova 2014: 12). This has been a key theme in the Kremlin's developing attitude to the EU.⁴ Added to this comes the perception as the EU as internally divided and with decreasing influence in an increasingly multipolar world.

Russia's view can be seen as opposition to unipolarity on several levels. Most obviously, Moscow objects to a security arrangement with one centre (Brussels/Washington). Second, it has increasingly objected to the EU's claim to 'normative hegemony in Europe' (Haukkala 2015: 36). And finally, it does not accept being part of Europe's 'neighbourhood'. Where the West sees progressive and mutually beneficial expansion of stability and democracy, Russia sees hypocrisy, double standards and Western blindness to the viewpoints of others – and outright hostility towards Russia.

Subtle differences have permeated Russian–EU misreadings. For instance, one week before Yanukovich fled Kyiv in February 2014, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov published an article in *Kommer-sant*, criticizing the EU's approach as 'contrary to the logic of the actions aimed at erasing dividing lines in Europe, as formalized in OSCE documents; it looks like another round of attempts to move these lines to the East' (Lavrov 2014a). Five days later a response from the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs, Lady Ashton, was published in the same newspaper. Lavrov's response to her provides a telling illustration of how Russia and the EU may use similar words but do not really speak the same language:

... Catherine Ashton writes that she welcomes my statement that the process of Eurasian integration is aimed at harmonisation *with* the integration processes of the European Union. I did not say that. I said that Russia, members of the Customs Union and the EU should be interested in the *mutual* harmonisation of integration processes. According to Catherine Ashton, things are different: Eurasian integration should harmonise with the integration processes of the European Union first and foremost. There is a difference. I hope that you understand what I mean by that. We are in favour of an equal approach, but the EU still proceeds from European Union logic (Lavrov 2014b, italics added).

EU–Russia relations have reached a high level of tension recently, but this has not always been the case. Before studying the different readings of the crisis in Ukraine more closely, we will briefly examine the main phases in the relationship since the early 1990s.

2.4 Colliding ideas through different phases (1992–2015)

Russia and the EU pursue policies that are based on opposing ideas about how international politics function and should function. Still, it

⁴ Interviews, Moscow, May 2015.

is possible to identify different phases in the relationship where these opposing ideas have been more pronounced, or less so. Over the period 1992–2015, both the EU and Russia have undergone substantial transformations (e.g. the expansion of the EU, and Russia's economic rise and increasing authoritarianism). Perceptions of such developments have played a significant role in EU–Russian interaction.

In distinguishing between the periods, we draw on the work of Hiski Haukkala (2015), who argues that the development of EU–Russia relations after the Cold War can be divided into three phases. The first was a formative phase in the aftermath of the Cold War, characterized by relative optimism and ambitions of setting up cooperative structures of some kind. The next phase, 1994–2000, was characterized by a more difficult relationship; and finally there are the different Putin eras from 2000 onwards. In this section we follow Haukkala's divisions, with one minor adjustment: we operate with three different Putin eras – although not strictly delineated in time. The first was an optimistic period with prospects for developing a genuine partnership with the EU (and the West as such); the second was characterized by growing mutual disappointment; and the third, still ongoing, is characterized by a more explicit confrontational relationship. By comparing the EU's and Russia's perceptions of the developing relationship through these phases, we hope to shed light on the dynamics that have preceded the current situation.

1992–1993: optimism and setting up of cooperative structures

For the newly established European Union in 1992, one of the most urgent challenges was to define an agenda of political rapprochement and economic integration that could ensure an orderly transition to a post-Soviet era. As the 1989 Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) with the Soviet Union was no longer valid, a process of negotiating a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) was launched at the initiative of the EC and continued with the EU. The PCA signed in 1994 had a more ambitious agenda for convergence than the earlier TCA, which was more limited to trade cooperation. It even included obligations and mechanisms of political conditionality (Hillion 2009). In this period the EU seriously believed that a process towards a Europeanization of Russia had been launched. Likewise, in the first years after the break-up of the USSR, Russia's foreign policy was inspired by liberal ideas and Gorbachev's 'New Thinking', and aimed at integration with the West (Thorun 2009: 8).

1994–2000: time of troubles and high hopes

The mood of optimism following the signing of the PCA did not last for long. Instead of swift PCA ratification and implementation, EU–Russia relations were hit by various crises.

From as early as 1993, Russian foreign policy gradually shifted away from the previous idealism. In this period, Moscow increasingly

‘conceived of the international system as competitive, states were thought to strive for spheres of influence, and Russian foreign policy was tasked with establishing Russia as an equal partner vis-a-vis the Western states and as a Eurasian great power’ (Thorun 2009: 9). This thinking led Moscow to perceive ‘NATO enlargement as a zero-sum game directed against Russia’ (ibid.).

The EU also reacted to Russian domestic developments. The Russian handling of Chechnya led to a rupture in the ratification process of the PCA, put on hold by the EU until the hostilities ended in 1996. Although the PCA entered into force in 1997, new problems in the relationship arose – first with the war in Kosovo, and then when a new round of fighting in Chechnya started. These crisis or setbacks in the relationship led the EU to re-examine the nature of its relationship to Russia. A new type of cooperation initiative was launched, which resulted in the development of a Common Strategy on Russia in 1999. While Russia interpreted this as increased EU willingness to adopt a cooperative approach, the EU’s ambition, however, was to develop ties that would bind Russia closer to Europe’s model of development. Despite the setbacks, the long-term objective of the eventual Europeanization of Russia was still very much alive in the EU.

While Haukkala is correct in referring to this period (1994–2000) as ‘the time of troubles’ (2015: 26), the 1990s were also characterized by high hopes and a rather positive view of the EU in Moscow. This was in sharp contrast to the negative Russian view of NATO in the same period (Bordachev 2009: 56–57).

After 2000s: The Putin eras

A certain degree of optimism. Putin’s first years as president were characterized by high hopes for the relationship on both sides. Russia viewed the development of ties with the EU, in particular regarding European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), as ‘a means to counterbalance “NATO-centrism” in Europe’ (Lynch 2004: 108). Some EU member states, such as France, keen to create a European defence more independent of the USA, supported this view. Still, most member states saw the development of an ESDP as a way of strengthening the European dimension within a still US-led NATO. The contrasting visions remained.

Another important example of the contrasting perceptions of the interaction is the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), presented by the EU in March 2003. While the EU invited Russia to take part, and has tended to see this as an example of their persistent readiness to include Russia, things looked very different as seen from Moscow. According to leading Russian expert Nadezhda Arbatova, the EU formulated an invitation it should have known that Moscow was bound to turn down, so Brussels thereby got ‘an argument against including Russia in its regional strategies on the alleged grounds that “Russia

does not want to” take part’ (Arbatova 2014: 12). Initially, Russia was not seriously concerned about the ENP (Gretskiy, Treshchenkov and Golubev 2014; Haukkala 2015). However, it was rather annoyed by the EU's attempt to define the countries bordering on the EU as Europe's *neighbours*, thus equating the EU and Europe as such. EU–Russia relations were instead meant to be dealt with through the creation of the four Common Spaces at the St. Petersburg EU–Russia Summit in May 2003. These spaces, situated within the framework of the PCA, were to be based on ‘common values and shared interests’ (European Commission 2004).

Although Russia and the USA were at odds about the 2003 Iraq war, the US invasion also brought Moscow, Berlin and Paris closer together in joint opposition to the war. Thus, at this point relations with the EU were still rather good. In May 2005 Russia and the EU also agreed on road maps that identified how these common spaces were to be put into effect.⁵

Growing disappointment. After this first period of limited optimism, Brussels observed that Putin was gradually becoming more critical of the EU and the values it promoted, and less willing to cooperate constructively. Moscow was alarmed by the ‘colour revolutions’ in Russia’s and the EU’s neighbourhood, in particular in Ukraine in 2004, and the role seen to be played by the West. As in a mirror, the EU was alarmed by Russia’s reactions to the same events, and also by domestic developments in Russia (including the government takeover of main TV channels and the arrest of YUKOS owner Mikhail Khodorkovsky).

In parallel to this, the EU continued its process of security community building. The 2004 enlargement, which included many of the former Warsaw Pact members, combined with the establishment of the European Neighbourhood Policy, was seen as an important achievement for democracy-building and thereby also peacebuilding in Europe. But, in consequence, EU–Russia relations gradually became more tense. Concrete evidence of a more difficult relationship was the fact that the PCA was not replaced after its expiry in December 2007, and that the initiative for Russian visa-free access to the EU never materialized.

Then came the Russo–Georgian War in August 2008. Both Russia and the EU recognized the war as a clear sign that the relationship was in trouble – but in different ways. The EU and the West as such saw the it as a dangerous deviation from the established norms of international behaviour (although unnecessarily provoked by Georgia's President Saakashvili). Russia saw this war as a dangerous example of the perils of Western expansion that failed to take account of Russian perspectives – and thus also as a warning to the West (Godzimirski, 2015).

⁵ http://eeas.europa.eu/russia/about/index_en.htm

If the EU was disappointed, the disappointment on the Russian side was no less significant. An instructive case was the interaction between the EU and Russia – and their respective visions of European security – following President Medvedev’s European Security Treaty initiative in 2009. In the Russian view, such a treaty was intended to ‘replace Europe’s NATO-dominated security architecture with one that was more inclusive’ (Weitz 2012: 1). In the West, Medvedev’s initiative has been criticized for lack of substance and for adding nothing new to already existing treaties (Lo 2009). There was also deeper resistance to Medvedev’s initiative in the West. First, Western leaders saw no need to build a new security architecture, because they viewed the gradual expansion of Wider Europe as a success (Sakwa 2015: 29). Second, there was deep scepticism as to Moscow’s motives. In Moscow, the Western lack of interest was interpreted as yet another demonstration that the West was not interested in an inclusive security architecture, but rather in expanding the very spheres of influence it claimed no longer had a role in today’s world (Karaganov 2014; Ivanov 2015).

Indeed, it was clear that the relationship suffered from a deep lack of understanding. The differing perceptions of the Eastern Partnership (EaP), created in 2009, are instructive. The EU saw the EaP as a natural next step in the framework of its neighbourhood policy, and an important instrument for achieving the long-term goal of security community building beyond EU borders through integration and interdependence. Surprisingly to many in the EU, the EaP gave rise to serious concerns in Moscow, where it was largely seen as a geopolitical project with an anti-Russian rationale (Glazyev 2013; Yefremenko 2014; Arbatova 2014).

The differences in this period can be summarized thus: While the EU consistently thought it was being inclusive, Russia consistently thought it was being excluded. A solid foundation had been laid for the confrontations to come.

Towards confrontation. Since 2010, EU–Russia relations have been increasingly characterized by conflicts. While Russia’s joining the WTO in 2012 was viewed as an achievement, the EaP summit in Vilnius in December in 2013 represented a severe setback.

A key point in the interaction between Russia and the EU was the Russia-led integration project among former Soviet republics, the Customs Union, which developed into the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) in 2015. In Sakwa’s (2015: 35) view, Russia’s drive towards Eurasian integration was spurred by the perceived failure of ‘Greater European integration’ and increasing frustration with the EU. In turn, Moscow’s initiative was viewed with unease in the West and thus ‘exacerbated the division of Europe’ (ibid.).

In this period, it became increasingly evident for the EU that Russia would not be incorporated into a European security community building with the EU at its core. All the same, the EU has not given up all hope of including the 'common neighbourhood' and promoting policy platforms for dialogue with Russia. The Partnership and Modernization platform (P4M) launched in 2010 was one such initiative, even though it has yielded limited results so far. Russia, on the other hand, wanted progress to be achieved in the relationship by solving several key issues, including negotiations for a new cooperation agreement that was launched in 2008, visa-free regime, and disagreements concerning the EU's third energy package. All these issues were soon to fade in the face of more dramatic developments.

3. The Ukraine crisis – a game-changer?

In this section, we take a closer look at key points of disagreement about the events that led up to the Ukraine crisis, as well as the reactions. While these disagreements must be seen in relation to the differing worldviews outlined above, we also hold that the conflict has challenged these worldviews, ultimately leading to certain changes or adaptation, particularly in the EU's approach – an important point to which we will return.

Unsurprisingly, the causes of the conflict are presented very differently in the EU and in Russia. To the former, in line with the idea of a wider Europe and security community building, the main causes of the conflict are Russian aggression and lack of respect for Ukrainians sovereignty as well as for international law.⁶ Russia, by contrast, considers the crisis to have been provoked by the Western-created 'misbalance in international relations' that has emerged since the end of the Cold War (Putin 2014g), and the West's seeming inability to recognize that it is erecting new division lines in Europe.⁷ These differing views have also had support in academic circles. An instructive example is the debate between John Mearsheimer on the one hand and Michael McFaul and Stephen Sestanovich on the other, in *Foreign Affairs* in 2014 (Mearsheimer 2014; McFaul et al. 2014).

We now turn to EU and Russian views on the interference in Ukraine and the Association Agreement that detonated the crisis, on the annexation of Crimea, and on the sanctions and counter-sanctions.

3.1 Differing views on interference and agency

In the view of the EU, and most of its member states, the Ukraine conflict started in earnest during the period leading up to the EaP summit in Vilnius when Russia put pressure on Yanukovich to make him reject or postpone Ukraine's negotiated AA with the EU. Regarding the popular protests against the decision made by Yanukovich, the EU 'took note of the unprecedented public support in Ukraine for political association and economic integration with the EU' (EEAS 2015). Moreover, the subsequent political crisis in Ukraine, and the ensuing Russian military involvement, is seen by the EU as illegal Russian interference

⁶ Interviews, Brussels, May 2015.

⁷ Interviews, Moscow, May 2015.

in the right of a sovereign country to determine its foreign policy orientation and association.⁸

When it comes to Moscow's view, there is a certain paradox in perceptions of the role of the EU in the Ukraine crisis. On the one hand, the EU's engagement with Ukraine is seen a key catalyst for the crisis. On the other hand, there is the widespread opinion that the EU has become an actor of little – and decreasing – importance. The short answer to this seeming contradiction is that the EU is increasingly seen as the 'civilian wing' of a US-led security community – and that the EU itself is weak and ridden with internal political and economic problems. That the EU seemed to disappear from the stage when events in Ukraine escalated helped to confirm the long-held scepticism against the EU. Russia sees the Ukraine crisis as a systemic crisis, a crisis caused by a system where the USA is the dominant actor.

Embedded in this larger story, Moscow's view is that the EU forced Ukraine to make an impossible choice: either Europe, or Russia (Ivanov 2015). As seen from the Kremlin, Yanukovich, the lawfully elected president of Ukraine, had made some sober calculations about the best interests of his country when he decided to *postpone* the possible signing of the Association Agreement with the EU. It was thus the Western countries that openly interfered in Ukraine's affairs when they came out in support of the Maidan protesters in Kyiv. And similarly when Western countries immediately welcomed the takeover of power in Kyiv (what Moscow has called a coup), when Yanukovich fled the country. In Russia, the West is accused of ignoring the internal complexity of Ukrainian affairs. Russia sees Ukraine as a divided country in terms of geopolitical orientation, where parts of the population seek closer ties to Russia, whereas other parts favour the West. The EU is seen as having 'sleepwalked' into a crisis it did not want and for which it was not prepared.⁹ At the same time the EU is not considered to be an independent 'player': the USA is seen as the leading actor.

Whereas the EU views the Maidan protests as the legitimate expression of the will of the Ukrainian people, Russia does not recognize the Maidan protesters' agency or 'actorness'. In the Russian view, the subsequent events cannot be explained by dissatisfaction on the part of the population or Yanukovich's incompetent rule: it was the people's anger, and the fact that their frustration with a corrupt and dysfunctional government was exploited by external actors.¹⁰

⁸ Interviews, Brussels, May 2015.

⁹ Interview with S. Karaganov, Moscow, May 2015.

¹⁰ The main culprit is the USA, with the EU and European countries as 'satellites', i.e. not independent actors. The USA is blamed for planning and supporting the 'coup', and for giving *carte blanche* to the new Kiev government (interviews, Moscow, May 2015).

3.2 Different interpretations of the AA agreement

Nonetheless, what detonated the crisis were Ukraine's negotiations for an Association Agreement (AA) with the EU. The conflicts surrounding the AA that the EU had negotiated with Ukraine, and which was intended to be signed at the EaP Vilnius summit in November 2013, epitomize the differences between the EU and Russia.

In the EU view, Ukraine could not be part of both the Deep Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) and the Customs Union (CU; from 1 January 2015: the Eurasian Economic Union, EEU). The reason put forward for this is that CU members apply the same tariffs on imports of goods from the outside world and delegate their tariff-negotiating authority to the CU authority. In contrast, 'straightforward' free trade agreements (FTAs) allow member countries to make arrangements with third countries as they see fit, provided basic World Trade Organization guidelines are respected. This means that if Ukraine were to join the CU/EEU, it would have to renounce its free trade arrangement with the EU. Alternatively, the EU's free trade arrangement with Ukraine would need to be transformed into an FTA with the CU/EEU, which appeared highly unlikely – at least at that time.¹¹

The former European Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood explained this incompatibility as follows a few months before the Vilnius summit:

This is not because of ideological differences; this is not about a clash of economic blocs, or a zero-sum game. This is due to legal impossibilities: for instance, you cannot at the same time lower your customs tariffs as per the DCFTA and increase them as a result of the Customs Union membership [...] Let me emphasise that AA/DCFTAs are not conceived at Russia's expense. On the contrary, Russia will also benefit greatly from the integration of the Eastern Partnership countries into the wider European economy. Our vision is that these agreements should contribute in the long term to the eventual creation of a common economic space from Lisbon to Vladivostok, based on WTO rules (Füle 2013).

In the Russian view, however, implementation of the Association Agreement between Ukraine and the EU would carry significant risks for the Russian economy. Ukraine and Russia have extensive trade relations. Until recently, Russia accounted for a third of Ukrainian imports and a quarter of its exports. While Ukraine accounted only for about 5% of Russia's trade, it was still its biggest trading partner in the former USSR area (Borderlex 2014). Part of the reason why the possibility of Ukraine entering DCFTA with the EU was seen as such a crucial issue is because of the lack of correspondence between technical standards in Russia and in Europe. Russia feared that introducing EU regulations in Ukraine would make it impossible for Russia to sell its own machine-building products or any other industrial goods to Ukraine. As a coun-

¹¹ Interviews, Brussels, May 2015.

ter-measure, Moscow warned that if that should happen, Russia could not accept Ukrainian agricultural production goods because of different phytosanitary standards in Russia and in the EU. Putin declared (2014f): 'if we do not achieve any agreements and our concerns are not taken into account, then we will be forced to take measures to protect our economy.'

However, analysts have questioned the validity of the supposed incompatibility, as well as the idea of a zero-sum game between incompatible trade blocs (Krist and Benka 2014; Charap and Troitsky 2013). For instance, Charap and Troitsky argue that that there was nothing about the DCFTA and the Customs Union as such that made them inherently incompatible, as both are based on WTO regulations. While differing tariff levels are problematic, this would merely be a challenge for policy-makers (Charap and Troitsky 2013: 58–59) – a challenge of the kind political leaders are expected to be able to solve. In a document published by the European Commission in January 2014, titled 'Myths about the EU–Ukraine Association Agreement. Setting the facts straight', the EU also made an attempt to counter the arguments from Moscow (European Commission 2014a).

Most attention with regard to the AA has been paid to matters of economy and trade. However, Russia also emphasizes convergence in the area of foreign and security policy since the AA is much more than a trade agreement, and even includes an article stating the parties shall 'promote their gradual convergence in the area of foreign and security policy, including Common Security and Defence Policy' (*Official Journal of the EU* 2014: article 7). While this is particularly provocative for Russia (Sakwa 2015), the EU dismisses it as a minor issue, since it only opens up for a potential contribution from Ukraine to EU's crisis management operations in third countries. In many ways this is standard procedure in EU relations with partner countries.

3.3 Different perspectives on the Crimea crisis

While the different views concerning the implications of the AA are important for understanding the start of the conflict, the Russian annexation of Crimea moved the conflict to a new level. For the EU (and the West as such), the Crimea question was straightforward: this was an unlawful annexation, indeed the first of its kind in Europe since the Second World War, and one that took place at a time when Ukraine was ready to look forward to a more democratic post-Yanukovich era. The annexation can in no way be justified; Russian 'actions are in clear breach of the UN Charter and the OSCE Helsinki Final Act, as well as of Russia's specific commitments to respect Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity under the Budapest Memorandum of 1994 and the bilateral Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership of 1997' (Foreign Affairs Council of the EU 2014a: article 1). In many ways, the Crimea annexation contradicted everything the EU represented.

In Russia, the ‘reunification’ with Crimea was presented in a context of Western betrayal, by referring to the failure to uphold the 21 February agreement between Yanukovich and the opposition that had stipulated early elections within the year. This was combined with a perceived threat from the new (and, to the Kremlin, not legitimate) government in Kyiv to reduce the status of the Russian language, although the provision was never signed into law. Insisting that the Crimea referendum had proceeded in ‘full compliance with democratic procedures and international norms’, Putin made accusations of Western double standards a main theme (thereby making the question of the referendum's legitimacy secondary): ‘They say we are violating norms of international law. Firstly, it’s a good thing that they at least remember that there exists such a thing as international law – better late than never’ (Putin 2014b). Russia has repeatedly accused the West of ‘naming the same phenomenon first white, then black’ (Putin 2015) – protesters in Kyiv were hailed as democratic representatives of the people, while protesters in the East were seen as terrorists. In Russia, the Crimea annexation was, among other justifications, presented as a logical response to the EU’s security community building process and the promotion of ideas of a ‘Wider Europe’.

In its reactions to Russia’s actions in Crimea, the EU discourse also changed from focusing on various ways of including Russia in an EU-centred security community – the main theme up until then – to a discourse of threat. As emphasized in the conclusions from the March 2014 meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council:

In the absence of de-escalating steps by Russia, the EU shall decide about consequences for bilateral relations between the EU and Russia, for instance suspending bilateral talks with Russia on visa matters as well as a New Agreement, and will consider further targeted measures (Foreign Affairs Council of the European Union 2014a: article 4).

This is upheld in the Council Conclusions in April, where the Council ‘demands Russia to call back its troops from the Ukrainian border and immediately withdraw the mandate of the Federation Council to use force on Ukrainian soil’ (Foreign Affairs Council of the EU 2014b). The Council further ‘reiterates its strong condemnation of the illegal annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol to the Russian Federation and will not recognise it’ (ibid.). While, condemnation of Russian actions is dominant in EU statements, the Council meeting in April 2014 also

reiterates the importance of Russia’s and Ukraine’ engagement in a meaningful *dialogue*, including through the establishment of a multilateral mechanism, with a view to find a political solution, based on full respect of Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity [and that the] European Union is ready to participate in such an international mechanism (ibid, italics added).

Still, at this point there were no signs of significant changes in the EU's approach. Rather it 'reiterate[d] the EU's commitment to sign the remaining provisions of the Association Agreement, including the Deep and Comprehensive free Trade Area as soon as possible after the presidential election on 25 of May' (Foreign Affairs Council of the EU 2014b) and reaffirmed its support for political association and economic integration with Georgia and the Republic of Moldova, emphasizing that it was looking forward to early signature of AAs, including DCFTAs, no later than June 2014 (ibid.). As the same Council conclusions declare that 'the European Union is confident that further deepening of EU–Georgia and EU–Republic of Moldova will have a positive impact on stability and socio-economic development, for the benefit of all citizens of the two countries' (ibid.), it is clear that the EU was still a confident believer in the value of its approach, and still considered the expansion of its security community building logic to be appropriate policy.

3.4 The reactions: sanctions and counter-sanctions

The EU's unanimous decision to implement sanctions against Russian came as a surprise to many, Russia not least.¹² Few in Moscow expected that the EU would exhibit such unity, in particular against the interests of the business community.¹³ Already on 17 March 2014, the first sanctions or restrictive measures by the EU were introduced: travel bans and asset freezes against Russian and Ukrainian officials following Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea. Also when these sanctions against Russia were reinforced in July 2014, the President of the European Council at that time, van Rompuy, and the President of the European Commission, Barroso, argued in a common statement that the EU had, since the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis, 'been calling on the Russian leadership to work towards a peaceful resolution [...] We regret to say that despite some mixed messages coming from Moscow, and exchanges in the Normandy and other formats, there has been scarce delivery on commitments' (European Commission 2014b).

In addition to this critical discourse, the EU also opened up for dialogue, arguing that 'the Russian Federation and the European Union have important common interests. We will both benefit from an open and frank dialogue [...] But we cannot pursue this important positive agenda when Crimea is illegally annexed, when Russian Federation supports armed revolt in Eastern Ukraine [...] (European Commission 2014b).

¹² For an overview of EU sanctions, see http://europa.eu/newsroom/highlights/special-coverage/eu_sanctions/index_en.htm. For an overview of US sanctions, see <http://www.state.gov/e/eb/tfs/spi/ukrainerrussia/>

¹³ Interviews, Moscow, May 2015.

The EU has not seen the desired changes from Russia; instead they have observed further Russian involvement in the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. The economic sanctions against Russia continue to be upheld, and have been extended several times. In June 2015, the European Council extended the EU restrictive measures until 23 June 2016; and in September, decided to prolong by 6 months (until 15 March 2016) the asset freeze and travel bans against 149 Russian individuals and 37 Russian entities (ref).¹⁴

In its reactions to the sanctions, the Russian authorities have questioned Western motivations. They have insisted that the sanctions are fully unfounded, and – importantly in our context – have interpreted the sanctions as revealing the West's unwillingness to engage in dialogue. Russia has also indicated the sanctions may contravene WTO rules. Putin has underlined that sanctions will not lead to the intended results: rather, in today's interconnected world, sanctions will be mutually harmful (Putin 2014a, 2014c). When more sanctions were implemented, Putin admitted that they might hurt the economy somewhat, although in a 'not critical way', while also insisting that there were potential positive effects for the Russian economy.¹⁵ An oft-repeated point was that sanctions have revealed that companies like VISA and MasterCard easily give in to political pressure, so Russia should establish its own national payment system (see Putin 2014d): that is, the sanctions were interpreted as showing that more national control was necessary in Russia.

As Western sanctions were not lifted, but on the contrary continued to be introduced, notably after passenger flight MH17 was shot down in July 2014, Russia introduced its own 'counter-sanctions' on 6 August. This included a ban on the import of food produce from most of the countries that, as Putin put it, had imposed 'entirely unfounded and unlawful sanctions' on Russia (Putin 2014e). He claimed that these measures were not retaliatory, but first and foremost intended to support Russian manufacturers in these new conditions, as well as opening Russian markets to nations and manufacturers wishing to cooperate with Russia.

¹⁴ <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions/ukraine-crisis/>

¹⁵ The sanctions do hurt the Russian economy. For an early discussion that distinguishes between the 'impact' and the 'effectiveness' of the sanctions – that is, between the damage the sanctions can inflict on the Russian economy and the likelihood of the sanctions leading to foreign policy changes – see Gaddy and Ickes 2014. See also Oxienstierna and Olsson 2015.

4. Towards greater dialogue and pragmatism?

Throughout the crisis, both the EU and Russia seem to have expected the other side to admit the fundamental misguidedness of its earlier ways. They have certainly waited for the other side to adjust its approach towards Ukraine. While the essence of the conflict remains, and the EU has not lifted any sanctions or made any concessions concerning Crimea, Brussels has also gradually showed a somewhat greater willingness to accommodate Russia – or at least enter into some sort of dialogue with Moscow.

Let us briefly note three instances of interaction between the EU (or its member states) with Russia. First, there are the Normandy consultations, intended to facilitate a solution to the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. The EU as such does not participate in these consultations, but is represented by France and Germany, who make up the ‘Normandy Four’ together with Ukraine and Russia. Second, there are the regular consultations between Russia, Ukraine and the EU on implementation of the AA, including the DCFTA. In the beginning, the EU refused to consult Russia in these matters, seeing them as a bilateral concern involving the EU and Ukraine. However, in view of the circumstances, the EU has adjusted its original position and included Russia in ‘trilateral talks’.¹⁶ These talks have also resulted in postponing the provisional application of the DCFTA until 1 January 2016. Finally, although this remains contested internally in the EU, there are signs that the European Commission also will try to engage in some form of bilateral dialogue with the Eurasian Economic Union once a ceasefire can be fully implemented in Ukraine (Euractive 2015a). To what extent do these attempts at dialogue represent a shift in relations between Russia and the EU?

4.1 The Normandy dialogue

While the trilateral dialogue and the potential dialogue between EU and EEC both include/will include the EU as one of the partners, in the Normandy format the EU as such is not a partner: Germany and France together with Ukraine and Russia attempt to facilitate a solution to the crisis.¹⁷ The Normandy format fits with Russia’s preference for dealing

¹⁶ Similar talks have also been undertaken in relations to gas issues, but these talks will not be covered here.

¹⁷ The Normandy format should not be confused with the ‘trilateral contact group on Ukraine’, composed of representatives from Russia, Ukraine and the OSCE and established on the initiative of the newly elected president of Ukraine, Petro Po-

with the main European countries rather than with the EU. In Moscow, the EU is seen as having disappeared from the scene after February 2014, revealing its lack of common foreign policy clout. The German/French initiative has been interpreted as confirmation that the main European countries rather than the EU are the appropriate interlocutors.¹⁸

The presidents of the 'Normandy Four' have met on several occasions in the course of 2014 and 2015. In addition, they have had telephone conferences, and the foreign ministers of the four countries have met on various occasions. Due to the sensitivity of the issue, the talks have been conducted behind closed doors.

After the first ceasefire agreement (Minsk 1, from September 2014) was violated, the heads of state of the Normandy format countries were instrumental in facilitating the 'Minsk 2' agreement of 11–12 February 2015, which so far – numerous violations notwithstanding – has proved more sustainable. The two Minsk agreements (September 2014 and February 2015) were signed by Russia and Ukraine, as well as representatives of the 'Lugansk People's Republic' and the 'Donetsk People's Republic.'

While all sides repeatedly stress the need for a diplomatic solution and that the Minsk 2 agreement is the only way forward, the limitations of the agreement were apparent from the start (le Gloannec 2015; Trenin 2015). The well-known Russian analyst Dimitri Trenin has summarized the different sides' motivation as follows:

The new Minsk agreement is mainly a product of Europe's fear of war and Ukraine's rapidly deteriorating military, economic and political condition. The Germans and the French were jolted into action by the prospect of the United States arming Kyiv, provoking Moscow to rise to a new level of confrontation. Ukraine's leadership had to choose between the Scylla of making a bad peace and the Charybdis of continuing a losing war. As for the Russians, freezing the conflict along the lines of engagement and making the 'people's republics' safe from enemy fire was the best option available (Trenin 2015).

He concluded that, because of the fundamental differences between the parties, '[t]he Minsk truce will not end confrontation, but rather recognize it. It will not necessarily prevent further escalation, but might postpone it' (Trenin 2015).

In a joint press conference with Angela Merkel held in October 2015, Putin gave his assessment of the Normandy format: '[it] has shown itself to be quite an effective instrument for international facili-

roshenko, in May 2014 as a means of facilitating a diplomatic solution to the war in the Donbass region of Ukraine.

¹⁸ Interviews,, Moscow, May 2015.

tation of a peaceful settlement for the conflict in the Donbass region'. He also spoke of the process more broadly:

Yes, it is true that we differ considerably in our assessment of the events that led to the anti-constitutional coup in the Ukrainian capital in February 2014. But at the same time, I am sure that you will all agree, and the participants in the peace talks say this constantly, that there is no alternative to a peaceful diplomatic solution. To achieve this, we must fully and strictly abide by the Minsk agreements reached on February 12 this year. I remind you that peace settlement measures form a package that ties together all of the key aspects for a settlement: political, military, socio-economic and humanitarian (Putin 2015).

On the other hand, the Kyiv government has been concerned with what it 'sees as an unfair but persistent focus on "Ukraine's obligations"', that Donbass will remain outside of central control, and that the sanctions on Russia may be lifted too soon (see Wilson 2015). Lilia Shevtsova, a prominent scholar and critic of Putin, has even held that the Minsk Agreements are such that 'the Kremlin, in short, won' (Shevtsova 2015).

When the Normandy Four met again in September 2015 (represented by the foreign ministers of the four countries) to assess the current state of the agreement, the ministers hailed the recent near-cessation of hostilities as a ground-breaking first step in the construction of a new sustainable relationship between the Kyiv government and the two eastern regions which are still reluctant to recognize it. However, they also agreed that it was time for the central government and representatives of the two regions to begin direct negotiations to reach agreement on a path for peaceful resolution of the sharp differences which still haunt efforts for peace (Ratcliff 2015).

It has also been argued that progress in implementing Minsk 2 has been possible because the Western powers have agreed to put pressure on Kyiv to pass legislation that would provide greater autonomy to the regions, and to pull back major weapons from the frontlines in the Donetsk region; further, that Russia has insisted that the separatist governments withdraw weapons and accept the Kyiv legislation as a step toward implementation of the agreement (Ratcliff 2015). It seems likely that the Minsk 2 ceasefire would not have held up as well as it has if Moscow had not wanted so, and the separatist movements in Donbass appear to have changed their ambitions significantly (see e.g. Nechepurenko 2015). For example, in October 2015 the separatist leaders planned to hold local elections, in contravention of the Minsk 2 agreement – which might have threatened the whole process. After discussions in the Normandy format, Putin reportedly stepped in and persuaded the separatist leaders to abandon their plans (Sukhov 2015).

At any rate, events indicate that Russia is interested in a negotiated settlement. Even if main views on the crisis and European security may not have changed, Moscow seems to have recognized the dangers of further escalation (see e.g. Pynnöniemi 2014). One problem is that, as we have seen, the differences between the parties remain such that it is not easy to reach a sustainable compromise. Russia's objectives do not correspond to the wishes of the government in Kyiv. Key elements here include devolution of power to the eastern regions in Ukraine, keeping Ukraine outside of NATO, and recognition on behalf of the EU that its policies in regard to the 'neighbourhood' need to be revised.

4.2 The trilateral dialogue on DCFTA

The DCFTA is a highly technical issue. In the context of EU–Russian relations, it is also a highly politicized one – and a fruitful prism for examining the developing interplay between the two sides. From the beginning, the EU insisted on the incompatibility of the DCFTA and the CIS free trade area. Although that is still the case, the EU has opened up for trilateral talks between the EU, Russia and Ukraine in order to deal with concerns about the impact of the DCFTA on the Russian economy. The consultation process at ministerial level was launched on 11 July 2014. As of December 2015 thirteen trilateral meetings, including four at ministerial level, have been held to search for practical solutions to concerns raised by the Russian Federation regarding implementation of the DCFTA between Ukraine and the EU. According to the Commission 'the ministerial level meetings have provided detailed guidance to the work of experts on the areas related to the implementation of the DCFTA' (European Commission 2015).

The Kremlin, which has consistently held that a key reason for the whole crisis is the EU's unwillingness to engage in consultations with Russian and Ukraine on how to mitigate the consequences of the AA for Ukraine's obligations as a member of the CIS free trade area, has welcomed the EU willingness to discuss the DCFTA in a trilateral manner – stating that it is 'better late than never' (see below). At the same time, Russia has voiced concern as to how serious the EU is about these consultations. Moscow has also expressed clear suspicions as to *why* the EU was not interested in any such discussions previously:

The EU's Eastern Partnership Programme was also aimed at eastward expansion of the geopolitical area subjugated to the West. Probably, precisely because that was the true reason for this project, the promises of trilateral talks... never materialised. They attempted to place the CIS countries in front of a harsh and absolutely invented and artificial choice – either with the EU or with Russia. (Lavrov 2014e)

In his March 2014 Crimea speech, Putin stressed his resentment at how he perceived EU–Russian interaction leading up to the crisis: 'They kept telling us the same thing: "Well, this does not concern you"' (Putin 2014b).'

Russia has remained sceptical about the depth of the EU's willingness to engage in genuine discussions. Still, during 2014–2015 Russian officials have emphasized that the EU nonetheless is 'learning'. For example, in May 2015 Foreign Minister Lavrov commented on the trilateral consultations between Russia, Ukraine and the EU about the consequences of the AA for Russia and Russia–Ukraine ties:

It's better late than never. This is a correct and useful step. Had the European Commission adopted this approach in October or November 2013, then perhaps there would have been no Maidan or bloodshed in southeastern Ukraine or the destruction of social and civilian infrastructure. In other words, now we are back at the point where we were a year and a half ago, when we proposed these tripartite consultations, but at that time Brussels categorically rejected them. Today, we are back in the same situation, and our proposal is no longer considered unacceptable, but the difference between the two situations is thousands of people killed, tens of thousands injured, and destruction in southeastern Ukraine (Lavrov 2014d).

According to the EU, the true impact on Ukrainian–Russian trade as regards the whole standards issue is hard to establish. Russia has been modernizing its technical standards, and about half of them are now similar to those applied in the EU. Moreover, product standards for military equipment – a mainstay of Russian–Ukraine industrial trade – are not covered by the EU–Ukraine DCFTA. At an earlier stage, the EU and Ukraine indicated that they were willing to consider longer phase-in periods for Ukraine to adopt EU standards, and also consider an arrangement whereby certain Russian product standards would be recognized as equivalent to the EU ones implemented by Ukraine (Borderlex 2014: 949). This means that a flexible arrangement could be foreseen – one that would allow Ukraine to maximize its trading relationships with both the EU and the EEU. As yet, the main result of these talks has been that implementation of the DCFTA has been postponed, to be provisionally implemented as of 1 January 2016.

This decision has been controversial in the EU, as some see it as a result of the EU's weakness and willingness to compromise on values by accommodating Russia (Speck 2015; Åslund 2015). However, it can also be viewed as a way of conducting pragmatic diplomacy. According to a statement from the European Commission, the results thus far do not imply a major change in the EU's approach. In the view of the Commission, the results are purely clarifications of how to address some of the concerns expressed by Russia. Some of these will be addressed in the context of the existing flexibilities available in the DCFTA. Other concerns will be dealt with at a later stage in the context of bilateral or trilateral and pluri-lateral cooperation frameworks. More importantly, the Commission underscores that the all three participants agrees that any practical solutions will have to respect the relevant WTO provisions (European Commission 2015).

4.3 Towards dialogue between the EU and EEU?

Russia has long desired institutionalized contacts between the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU, formerly the Customs Union). After German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier supported the idea, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov stated that he welcomed increased European readiness to the idea of harmonizing integration processes on the European continent (Lavrov 2014c).

In November 2015, the European Commission was again reported as supporting direct talks between the EU and the EEU, partly to counter-balance the extension of sanctions and the planned introduction of the DCFTA with Ukraine from 1 January 2016 (RFE/RL 2015; Deutsche Welle 2015). The idea was put forward by European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, who wrote a letter to Russian President Vladimir Putin in which he proposed closer trade ties between the EU and the Russian-led Eurasian Union if implementation of the Minsk agreements proceeded as planned (Euractiv 2015b).

While this is clearly an attempt to establish a better working relationship between the EU and Russia, the idea remains controversial with the EU, just as the trilateral talks do. Among the reasons are the fact that EEU members Belarus and Kazakhstan are not WTO members; doubts about potential results; and reluctance to appear to be ‘appeasing’ Russia (see Moshes 2014; also RFE/RL 2015).

This criticism notwithstanding, recent developments in these various dialogue formats clearly indicate that the EU has begun to adopt a more pragmatic approach on Russia. Seen in addition to the recent revision of the Neighbourhood Policy (European Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2015), this might indicate that the EU is gradually moving away from its strictly normative-based approach, and that more weight is accorded to geopolitical considerations (Euractiv 2015b).

5. Potential implications for European security

Given these factors, what kind of implications of the Ukraine crisis can we foresee for European security and stability? At first glance, it seems as if the differences between the EU's security community logic (the 'Wider Europe' perspective) and Russia's balance-of-power emphasis (the 'Greater Europe' perspective), are so fundamental that it is difficult to imagine any solutions unless at least one of the parties makes serious adjustments – perhaps even compromising on its basic ideas or interests. And yet, it might be possible to find a new type of working relationship between the two. As noted above, there are certain tendencies towards a partial 'rapprochement' despite the profound differences between the two parties – not least, certain important adjustments in the EU's approach.

On the Russian side, key foreign policy decisions are increasingly taken within a very narrow circle around President Putin, and the main discourse is to a lesser extent challenged by influential actors domestically (at least in the open). Russian rhetoric has stressed that it is the EU that is adapting. Still, changes in Russian practices and discourse indicate willingness to find a compromise. These include Russia's role in upholding the Minsk Agreement as well as the role played in the ongoing dialogue formats. President Putin's annual address in December 2015 did not include one word about the Ukraine conflict – but there was much about the terrorist threat, and about the economy. Moscow appears to be tired of the Ukraine crisis and the consequences for Russia. However, the extent of changes in the fundamentals of foreign policy thinking is an entirely different matter.

Although the EU's approach towards the ENP partner countries has been debated, the member states have, thus far, shown a high degree of unity, as shown by the unanimous decisions concerning the economic sanctions against Russia. Yet, perspectives can differ within the EU itself and among the member states – and these differences are increasingly coming to the fore. We may broadly distinguish between two schools of thought as to how to deal with Russia. The first, until recently the dominant one, largely represented by the East European member states, argues for containment. These 'normative hardliners' have no wish to compromise on the EU's integrative (or security community building) approach where Europeanization and socialization through mechanisms of conditionality are at the core. They think that there is not much to discuss with Putin; Russia is typically assigned all blame for the crisis. Members of this group do not want the EU's policy to be

altered because of Russia, and they do not trust Russia's ability to honour any agreement.

The second group, which now seems to be gaining increased support also in the EU as such, emphasizes the need to find a compromise solution. While not arguing, in line with Mearsheimer (2014), that Western policies were partly to blame for the crisis, an increasing number of member states – including France and Germany as well as Commission President Juncker – have come out in favour of altering EU's policy for the sake of European stability. Briefly put, they tend to seek ways of adapting the EU's policy by increasingly taking into account the geopolitical realities and 'the neighbour of the neighbours': Russia. If this materializes, the EU will then depart from its long tradition of linking integration to security, at least in its relations with the post-Soviet states. While the change might be less dramatic for the EU – the long-term goal of democracy promotion and promoting good governance in its neighbourhood is likely to be upheld and even be strengthened by other means – it is likely to be viewed by Kyiv as a 'broken promise'. By the EU, this development will be justified in the name of ensuring European stability.

We see examples of this change in the apparently increasing willingness in Brussels to take part in dialogues of various formats, as well as acceptance of the need to find ways of accommodating Russia. With the joint communication on a revised European Neighbourhood Policy that was presented in November 2015 (European Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2015), the EU has also indicated a move away from its external governance logic. Such a revised ENP seems to be less focused on partner-country adaptation to the EU acquis, and more on various types of assistance programmes that take into account the individual needs of the partner countries as they proceed towards democracy and good governance. This means that the ENP will be changed into a specific foreign policy, rather than being part of an integration agenda.

Undoubtedly, many in the West will be disheartened if, as a result of the Ukraine crisis, the EU changes its approach, and perhaps more significantly so than Russia. Ever since the start of the crisis, both the EU and Russia have waited for the other side to 'see the light'. The EU has waited for Russia to act in accordance with EU norms and expectations. Russia has waited for the EU to accept Moscow's view of European security. Neither has happened. But as the situation on the ground has developed, the EU has also acknowledged the need to take into account the consequences – actual and potential – of the actions of a disgruntled Russia.

In parallel, there are signs that Russia and France, but also the EU and the West as such, recognize the need for cooperation in the war against IS in Syria. Although such cooperation will be far from easy in

practice, these recent events further underscore the trend whereby the EU is emphasizing security and stability over traditional normative concerns.

Does this mean that the EU is changing as a security actor? It is still too early to say, but recent changes indicate that the EU is downplaying its attachment to the integration dynamic, while putting more emphasis on geopolitical realities. In this sense, the EU is gradually becoming a more strategic actor in its foreign policy. Spreading European core values will still be an ambition but a key lesson from the Ukraine crisis is that the EU's traditional approach has not succeeded. A key question, of course, remains the true extent of such changes. So far, we see the contours of a more pragmatic EU policy towards Ukraine and other partner countries in the EU's neighbourhood. One lesson learnt from the Ukraine crisis is that there may well be geographical limitations to the traditional perspective of building a security community through the mechanisms of political and economic integration.

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About the Author

Pernille Rieker is a Senior Researcher at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI). She holds a doctoral degree from the University of Oslo from 2004. Her research focuses on different issues related to European integration and European security, including French and the Nordic countries foreign and security policy.

Kristian Lundby Gjerde (MPhil, Oxon) is a Research Fellow at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), specializing in Russian politics. He is co-editor of the Nordic area studies journal *Nordisk Østforum*.

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Norwegian Institute of International Affairs
C.J. Hambros plass 2D
PO Box 8159 Dep. NO-0033 Oslo, Norway
www.nupi.no | info@nupi.no