

Beyond the crisis in Ukraine

Russian and EU perceptions of European security and potential implications for Europe and Norway

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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 policy brief is based on the analysis made in a recent NUPI working paper (Rieker & Gjerde 2015) where we present in more detail the differing Russian and European perceptions of European security. In addition to providing an overview of the different perceptions, we also study what happens when the two collide like we have been witnessing in Ukraine. As much of the literature on these issues has been normatively driven, our aim has been 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.

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 (Jervis 1976: 409–410).

By not seriously engaging with both EU and Russian perceptions, we risk having a poorer basis for policy development. 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.

Thus, our aim has been to offer a modest contribution towards discouraging such a development in Russia–EU relations. In this policy brief we provide a summary of the main findings of our working paper (Rieker & Gjerde 2015), but also point to some potential implications for European, including Norwegian, security.

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 conceptual frameworks 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.

The EU and its security community building

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 the EU and the integration process (Rieker, forthcoming). 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. Ideas of security community building have also been praised in the West: the EU was even awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for this in 2012. However, we must ask: what happens to these ideas when they are challenged by colliding Russian ideas about European security?

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).

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. At the same time Moscow has been concerned 'about the attempts to put NATO at the centre of the emerging European security system' because that would 'objectively [weaken] the role of the OSCE, which has the greatest potential for balancing the interests of all European countries' (Putin 2000). Moreover, Moscow has increasingly perceived the EU's foreign policy as linked to NATO.

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. The Kremlin believes that, by disregarding this idea of a 'Greater Europe', the EU (or the West more broadly) is creating new division lines in Europe, and 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.

Security community building and multipolarity as incompatible logics?

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"', 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.

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. The security community building project (operationalized through the EaP) began to compete directly with Russia's own integration project.

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, Russian has been 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. 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.

EU–Russia relations have reached a high level of tension recently, but this has not always been the case (for more information about the main phases in the relationship, see Rieker & Gjerde 2015: 11-16).

The crisis in Ukraine – a game changer?

While the disagreements that led up to the crisis in Ukraine 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 (Rieker & Gjerde 2015: 16-23). As we also show in the paper, 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. Russia, by contrast, considers the crisis to have been provoked by the Western-created imbalance in the security system that has emerged since the end of the Cold War, and the West's seeming inability to recognize that *it* is erecting new division lines in Europe. These differing views have also had support in academic circles (see e.g. Mearsheimer 2014; McFaul et al. 2014).

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 Nor-

mandy 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 Association Agreement (AA), including the Deep Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (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'.¹ 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 (Euractiv 2015a).

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 (EU 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.

Implications for European security

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.

¹ In addition to these initiatives, similar talks have also been undertaken in relations to gas issues.

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 that Western policies were 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'. But this development will still 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 (EU 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 (Batora & Rieker 2015). 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 through other means. 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.

Implications for Norway

What does such a change in the Union's approach mean for Norway, an associated member of the Union, an active supporter of EU's integrative approach and with borders to Russia? The Ukraine crisis and the EU's handling of it will have security-policy implications for Norway. Although Norway is not a full member of the EU, it is so closely linked that most third parties (including Russia) see it as an integral part of the EU integration process. This is due to the EEA agreement and other agreements that Norway has with the EU, but also to the fact that Norwegian governments have tended to align with most EU foreign-policy declarations. Also the current Norwegian government has supported the EU's sanctions against Russia and provided additional financial assistance to Ukraine. Indeed, the government is now considering expanding the EEA financial grants to Ukraine,² which may lead to a more direct involvement of Norway in the conflict. It is noteworthy that the Norwegian supported projects are also presented as projects that support the European integration process (Batora & Rieker 2015). Finally, as an important energy provider, Norway is also a competitor to Russia. All these factors indicate that Norwegian security will be highly influenced by decisions taken in Brussels – concerning both Ukraine and Russia.

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² <http://www.nationen.no/eu/regjeringa-koplar-inn-ukraina-i-eos-midlane/>

If the different dialogue formats that recently have been launched between Russia and the EU succeed in developing a new relationship between Russia and the EU (and also between Russia and the West) this will also most likely be beneficial for Norway. In many ways this change in the Union's approach means that its policy will be more in line with the traditional Norwegian policy of having a balanced relationship with Russia.

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