

## TOWARDS THE SUNSET OF EU-RUSSIA STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP?

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### **Abstract**

This paper analyzes the future of the EU-Russia strategic partnership in order to observe that it is still viable for dealing with the actual regional and global challenges. The recent events in Ukraine have revealed the asymmetries between the two global players and an antagonism regarding the approaches to key political agendas as security, democracy or energy. In this context, the European Union's relation with Russia seems to have reached a defining moment, both of them considering the policies of the other part as threatening its own political and economic interests. As this situation is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future, it is hard to affirm that the official partnership existing between European Union and Russia is also a *de facto* partnership.

Moreover, this paper suggests that the European Union and Russia would further compete for influencing the common neighbourhood, competition that would decline their strategic partnership and would cause a gap in their relation. Even if it is undeniable that Russia will remain a strategic player at the international level, in the current environment, the option of competition between EU and Russia seems to be the most viable for both players, fact that indicates the inoperability of their strategic partnership.

However, the end of this paper provides an overview of the possible evolution of EU-Russia relationship in the future, stating that the interdependence existing between them would avoid a direct confrontation.

### **Keywords**

Antagonisms, asymmetries, complex interdependence, defining moment, European Union, Russia, strategic partnership

## 1. SETTING THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR EU-RUSSIA STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP: COMPLEX INTERDEPENDENCE

Nowadays, we are living in a globalized world, which is defined as networks of interdependence at worldwide distance. The direct implication of globalization does not affect only the economy; the environmental, military, social and political interdependence have also increased as a direct effect of these phenomena (Nye 2004, 201).

In this chapter we wish to explain the existent partnership between the European Union and Russia, out of Nye and Keohane's perspective on complex interdependence. We have chosen this theory because it allows us to have a better understanding of the still existing partnership between these two major players at the regional level, in spite of Russia's latest actions, which may be considered now a revisionist power through its actions in the close proximity, contrary to every democratic principle that EU tries to promote in its partnerships.

The defining word of EU-Russia's relation is interdependence, as it was described by the two authors mentioned above, meaning a situation of reciprocal effects or mutual dependence. It is important to mention that the reciprocal effects are rarely equal on all parties and degrees of dependence are almost always uneven, thus it can become a source of power. The authors consider that these aspects are neither good nor bad, but they are a source of conflict or cooperation (Keohane and Nye 2001, 191-192).

To a better understanding of interdependence, it is important to underline its two major aspects: *sensitivity* and *vulnerability*. By sensitivity, J. Nye refer in its book 'Power in the global information age. From Realism to Globalization' to the "liability to costly effects imposed from outside in a given situation". "Vulnerability means continued liability to costly effects imposed from outside even after efforts have been made to alter or escape the situation. Vulnerability is determined by whether we have reasonable alternatives, but is a matter of degree and varies with the costs and time developing alternatives". Another important characteristic of the new interdependence is that they often undermine the traditional distinction between domestic and foreign policy (Nye 2004, 157).

As we mentioned above, we have decided to analyze the EU-Russia partnership through the framework offered by Joseph Nye and Robert

Keohane's complex interdependence. This concept that was conceived as a critic to realism, describes a globalized world dominated by three characteristics: multiple channels between societies, with multiple actors, not just states; the existence of multiple issues on the agenda which are not arranged in any stable hierarchy; and the irrelevance of the threat or use of force among states linked by a complex interdependence.

The first characteristic, *multiple channels between societies* can be summarized as interstate, trans-governmental (between bureaucracies) and transnational relations (NGOs, multinational firms that can affect both domestic and interstate relations). The authors consider that these actors act "as transmission belts, making government policies in different countries more sensitive to each other". Contact between governmental bureaucracies may not only alter their perspective but lead to trans-governmental coalitions on particular issues. The authors identify that the existence of a trans-governmental policy network leads to a different interpretation of state interest. The ambiguity of national interest raises serious problems for the top political leaders of government, because national interest will be defined differently on different issues at different times and by different governmental units. To sum up, it's important to underline that through this theory of complex interdependence, the authors are trying to relax two main realist premises: the unicity and the unitary character of the states (Keohane and Nye 2001, 30).

"[A]bsence of hierarchy among issues means that military security does not consistently dominate the foreign affairs agenda and the line between domestic and foreign issues is blurred". In the world of complex interdependence, a variety of state goals must be pursued and due to the absence of a stable hierarchy, they will vary by issue and so will the distribution of power and the political process. This process transforms power resources into power as control of the outcomes. Dominant states may try to secure much of the results by using economic power to effect results on other issues but in complex interdependence, economic objectives have political implications and economic linkage, so the strong state is limited by domestic, transnational and trans-governmental actors. Under the effects of complex interdependence we can expect the agenda to be affected by the international and domestic problems created by the economic growth and increasing sensitivity interdependence (Keohane and Nye 2001, 28).

The last characteristic, the *minor role of military force*, refers to the idea that “military force is not used by governments toward other governments within the region or on the issues when complex interdependence prevails. The effects of military force are both costly and uncertain” (Keohane and Nye 2001, 29). This characteristic leads us to expect that states will rely more on other instruments in order to wield power. Following this matrix, less vulnerable states will try to use asymmetrical interdependence in particular groups of issues as a source of power and will try to use international organizations and transnational actors and flows. The authors underline that “mutual awareness of potential gains and losses and the danger of worsening each actor’s position through overly rigorous struggle over the distribution of the gains can limit the use of asymmetrical interdependence” (Keohane and Nye 2001, 27).

The authors believed that the world would be different because the politics of complex interdependence would be one in which levels of economic, environmental and social globalism are high and military globalism is low (Keohane and Nye 2001, 197). It is important to mention that the authors believed that military deterrence is likely to remain a central concern to our foreign policy well into the future, but it has become difficult to apply to many of the new interdependence issues on the agenda, especially for the military states. In other words, we are living in a century in which we are dealing with an erosion of the power to control the outcomes in the international system as a whole, due to its complexity (more issues, more actors, less hierarchy), so it becomes unlikely to choose military action so easily as it was a century ago (Keohane and Nye 2001, 197).

The last aspect we want to underline in this theoretical chapter is the significant role of international organizations under the complex interdependence. In this world of multiple issues imperfectly linked, in which coalition are formed trans-nationally and trans-governmentally, the potential role of international organizations in political bargaining greatly increased. Moreover, they help in setting the international agenda and act as catalysts for coalition-formation and arenas for political initiatives and linkage by weak states (Keohane and Nye 2001, 159-160).

## 2. THE HISTORY OF EU- RUSSIA RELATIONSHIP

### 2.1. Legal basis for cooperation

Over time, even if Russia and EU has identified several common objectives in the fields of energy, freedom, security and justice, external security, research and education, they are “too different to become genuine partners” (Barysch 2004, 61): Russia is a sovereign state meanwhile EU is a *`sui generis`* organization, being, on one hand, an international organization and on the other hand a supranational institution (Ungureanu 2012, 15).

The relationship between them is a dynamic one, experiencing over time a significant number of ups and downs. This year, 2014, ushered in a new phase in their dialogue. The events in Ukraine revealed that the strategic partnership agreed by the two actors is profoundly challenged. This chapter will present the stages in EU-Russia relationship, focusing on the official claim that states they are strategic partners, having a relation focused on broader ends than a bilateral one, especially on issues concerning regional or global aspects. Moreover, in the literature their strategic partnership is described as *`pivotal`* because “they can tip the international balance to the benefit or to the detriment of the EU [or Russia] depending on how we approach them” (Renard 2010, 3-4)

After the collapse of the URSS in 1991, “the framework of EU-Russia relations (... ) has been dominated by geostrategic changes in their relative power” (Hughes, 2006, 1), they becoming geographically, over time, more and more close due to EU enlargement. Initially, the both parties showed interest in developing a strategic partnership, a first step in their cooperation being the entering in force of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement in 1997 (Agreement on partnership and cooperation, 1997). Built on the principles of democratic rules and fundamental freedoms, as well as the commitment to promote the peace and security at the international level, it provided the legal basis for strengthening the political, economic and socio-cultural ties (European Commission 2007, 4). In the early 2000s, the evolution of the EU-Russia relation has been a positive one, the Summit in Paris acknowledging the idea of a strategic partnership between them (Tăbârță and Berbeca 2009, 16). Even if this approach appeared to be an important step in the development of a coherent and cooperative dialogue, the decision of Brussels to use the Western European Union as headquarter for the EU military

capabilities has disappointed Russia because it was a structure closely related to NATO. In this context, to which we add the previous critics about the Chechen wars, a new impetus was needed to revive the bilateral cooperation. In the Summit in Sankt Petersburg in 2003, Russia and EU have defined a common strategic principal aim of their partnership, establishing the Four Common Spaces concept that was launched two years later in Moscow. These four spheres included the cooperation in economic, freedom, security and justice, external security and research and education fields (European Commission 2007, 6). Under this framework of dialogue and cooperation, in 2008 the two parties started to negotiate a new Agreement, for strengthening the previous commitments assumed and in 2010, at the Rostov Summit, they have established the Partnership for Modernization, covering a wide range of issues, from economic modernization to civil society projects and the functioning of the judicial systems. At the moment, the EU-Russia relationship is under a negative change process, a trade and investment ban being in force as a consequence of Crimea crisis (European Union External Action, n.d.).

## 2.2. Oscillation in EU-Russia Relationship

Started with the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, the relation between EU and Russia was marked over time by events and processes that show more a conflictual relation than a cooperative one.

In the years that followed the collapse of communism, the two actors have intensified their dialogue and tried to develop instruments governing their interactions. In this first phase of their cooperation both parties have emphasized on the idea of a strategic partnership, their relation being a cooperative one. Agreements as PCA, the Common Strategy or the Four Common Spaces were meant to improve the coordination of their policies (Hughes 2006, 2). In the early 2000, even if the strategic partnership was established at the theoretical level, EU and Russia have perceived its meaning in different ways. Russia considered that the strategic partners cooperate at the international level when they have similar purposes, without affecting each other's interests, approach that avoided the common values principle, fundamental for the EU. In this context, the EU, in the name of the democratic values that were the base of its development, prioritizes them in the relation of Russia, considering that Russia has to "play by its rules"; on the other hand,

for Russia, “the EU’s approach is to intrusive”, its aim being to become again a strong player, internally and externally (Barysch 2004, 60).

Once with the enlargements in 1995 and 2004, the EU and Russia have literally become neighbours, but this event also has had a negative impact, Poland and the Baltic States traditionally manifesting a critic position towards Moscow (Samokhvalov V. 2007. Relations in the Russia-Ukraine-EU triangle: „zero-sum game” or not? *European Union Institute for Security Studies*, p. 11 *apud* Tăbârță and Berbeca 2009, 17), due to their socialist past.

In this light, the `first blow` (Delcour and Kostanyan 2014, 2) was represented by the creation of the European Neighbourhood Policy in 2004, “intended to contribute to a continuous modernization of neighbouring partner states” (Mocanu 2013, 38), harsh criticized by Russia due to its conditionally provisions. All this was amplified by the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, an example that underlined the divergent vision of EU and Russia regarding the European security (Tăbârță and Berbeca 2009, 17). But the event that has outlined the conflictual relation between them was the launching of the Eastern Partnership, because “for Russia, converging with the *acquis* also means a shift away from what ties these countries [Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine] have with Moscow” (Delcour and Kostanyan 2014, 3). In contrast, in Brussels, the Eastern Partnership is seen as a tool to bring closer these countries to the European democratic values (Eastern Partnership Community 2014). Besides the different approaches related to EaP, Russia being an active `saboteur` (Delcour and Kostanyan 2014, 3) in the region, meanwhile EU attempted to de-escalated the tensions with the Eastern partners, especially after Vilnius Summit in 2013 (Havlik 2014, 23), the frozen conflicts existing in the common neighbourhood represent another points of divergence. Last but not least, the energetic issues are a very intense subject on their agenda, the gas being an instrument used by Russia to maintain its influence in the Eastern Europe region, due to the fact that Russia is the main energy supplier for the EU. The current phase of the EU-Russia relations are marked by a conflictual situation, Federica Mogherini, the new EU High Representative, stated that the EU and Russia are not strategic partners anymore due to the situation in Ukraine (EurActiv 2014). Shortly, the actual situation shows a conflictual situation between the two actors, they failing to make progress in implementing the provisions of the Partnership for Modernization, which stated that both partners are committed to work

together in order to handle the common challenges, on the basis of democracy and of rule of law (Delegation of the European Union to Russia, n.d.).

### 3. EU-RUSSIA RELATIONSHIP: A MODEL OF COMPLEX INTERDEPENDENCE

The aim of this chapter is to analyze the so called `strategic partnership` between European Union and Russia through the lens of a liberalist approach - the complex interdependence theory. In order to fulfil our purpose, we will apply all the characteristics identified in the first chapter and see if we are in fact facing a complex interdependence in this case.

Interdependence exists at both economic and political level between these two major regional players. Economically because Russia needs EU's exports and EU needs Russia energy, and politically because in order to achieve stability in the common neighbourhood, EU needs Russia's help and at the same time Russia needs to avoid isolation.

Moreover, the interdependence between EU and Russia is obvious in the energy area. Here is important to highlight that EU is unable to provide enough energy from its own sources and that the member states have to import oil gas from other sources in the context that most of the supplies come from Russia (almost 54% of the necessary supply). In this case the Union appears to be extremely *vulnerable* and *dependable* and has undertaken a series of well calculated alternatives in order to reduce its energetic dependence on Russia such as: importing gas from the Middle East or Caspian Sea (solution viable only after 2019), the Europe 2020 Strategy, liquefied natural gas, importing energy from the US or reducing consumption. As we can see, there are some alternatives to Russian gas, but in order to make them possible, the EU needs time and financial resources (Eurostat 2012, 29).

It is important to mention that, even though Russia uses the advantage of the energy card as leverage for influence, the EU-Russia relation has a major importance for both players, in fact we could say that in overall terms Russia is more reliant on the EU than vice versa (Grigore, Corduneanu and Muschei 2014, 44-45). Russia's dependence is based on the fact that energy exports are a major part of the country's economic growth and the EU continues to be the

dominant market for its energy exports, mainly raw materials-over 65% (Lenoir 2011, 18-19).

Despite Russia's geostrategic advantage on energy, in terms of commercial trade Russia is weak. According to the European Commission, the Union's exports towards Russia consist of high technological equipments and products (agricultural products: food, chemicals, pharmaceuticals, machinery and transport equipment, telecommunication and electronic data processing equipment automotive products and non-electrical machinery). Moreover, the EU is the most important investor in Russia, it has been estimated that up to 75% of the Foreign Direct Investment stocks in the country come from the EU member states (European Commission official website, Trade Policy, Russia). In other words, a potential closure in the EU-Russia commercial ties could cause a severe collapse for Russia's economy. Following this idea, we can add that the diplomatic and restrictive measures that EU decided to take in order to `punish` Russia for its illegal annexation of Crimea came from this very asymmetrical dependence in terms of trade, hoping to cause a change in Russia's further actions.

The concept of complex interdependence describes a globalized world dominated by three characteristics: multiple channels between societies, with multiple actors, not just states; the existence of multiple issues on the agenda which are not arranged in any hierarchy; and the irrelevance of the threat or use of force among states linked by a complex interdependence.

The first characteristic - *the existence of multiple channels between societies* - can be easily identified in the very construction strategic partnership existing between EU and Russia. Firstly, we have the `interstate` level (presidents of European Council, European Commission and President of Russia), called EU-Russia Summit that takes place twice a year since 1997. Secondly, we have *trans-governmental* relations such as: meeting between the Commission and the Russian Government (biennial), Permanent Partnership Council (PPC - several times per year) and 35 sectorial dialogues (political, human rights, visa-free dialogue, migration, trade and investment, intellectual property rights, financial and macroeconomic policy, public procurement, industrial and enterprise policy, regulatory, environmental, energy, agriculture, customs, science and technology cooperation, space cooperation, information society, regional policy, fisheries and health). The last aspect of this multiple channels refers to *trans-national* actors (NGOs, multinationals, etc.) and the partnership

has also an annual roundtable with business representatives from both sides, called EU-Russia Industrialists' Round Table (European Strategic Partnership Observatory 2013).

The second characteristic of our concept talks about the existence of multiple issues on the agenda and no hierarchy between them. In this respect we must mention that the current partnership between EU and Russia encompasses various issues like: trade and economic cooperation, energy, climate change and environment, freedom, security, justice and human rights, foreign policy cooperation and external security, research, education and culture (European Commission 2007, 7-18). Also, this agenda has not military priority, so the rest of domains cannot be classified in a certain order.

The last characteristic, the irrelevance of the threat or use of force linked by a complex interdependence, can also be discussed in this particular case. We will bring in discussion precisely the position of the EU towards the recent events that took place in Ukraine. Despite the fact that EU publicly condemned "the clear violation of Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity by acts of aggression by the Russian armed forces", the member states believed that "a peaceful solution to the crisis should be found through negotiations between the Governments of Ukraine and the Russian Federation, including through potential multilateral mechanisms". In this sense, even if EU as a whole cannot be military threatened, the member states can easily become a target for Russia's aggressive external politics. In order to respond to this vulnerability, the EU developed the Common and Foreign Security Policy, using diplomatic and economic sanctions in Conflict Prevention and Crisis management (European Union External Action, Common Foreign and Security Policy, n.d.). To conclude, there has not been any reference to any military action and nor will be, due to the fact that if an EU state would be attacked, it would enter under the umbrella of NATO, and such a break will be devastating for both European and Russian economies and neither of them can afford it at this point.

#### 4. CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF EU-RUSSIA RELATIONSHIP

Even if the actual tensions provoked by the Ukrainian crisis suggest a very discouraging image for the future EU-Russia relationship, we consider that the dissonances on long term would not be so huge. Both of them would pay attention to the degree of competitiveness because a cooperation frozen would be a lose-lose situation for both.

In this context, it could be observed that both Russia and EU “have their own interest, values and terms of references” (Trenin, Lipman and Malashenko 2013, 16), but the interdependence existing between them, as we could see above, would make Brussels and Moscow stay away from a complete breakdown. In this case, the energy and economic spheres would be the catalysts of their future framework of interactions.

Moreover, talking about the sunset of the strategic partnership is based on the idea that there was one. But the analysis of the data existing in the sections 2 and 3 reveals that the EU-Russia partnership developed in 2000s “was underpinned by false premises and misperceptions” (Delcour and Kostanyan 2014, 2). Instead of cooperation aimed in the agreements, the two actors have developed their own policies in order to achieve a greater influence in the common neighbourhood. EU has grown its attractiveness with its economic and political agenda, while Russia has “systematically used these ties [with the post-soviet countries] coercively, (...) as a mechanism to block further progress in the integration process with the European Union” (Delcour and Kostanyan 2014, 4). Also, the limit of the strategic partnership is underlined by their asymmetrical relation that is “a considerable obstacle to the emergence of a strategic partnership” (Vahl 2001, 4).

Taking into consideration the differences between EU and Russia in terms of economic, geopolitical relevance and normative foundation, but also the interdependence that characterizes their relationship, we strongly agree that in the future the interactions between them could not be “defined strictly and totally as a symbiosis or as a competition” (Grigore, Corduneanu and Muschei 2014, 14).

Firstly, we state that the main points of divergence cover the ideological issue and the strategies chosen by each of them to develop and influence the common neighbourhood. In a nutshell, integration and geopolitics different approaches make unlikely the option to cooperate. In this context, the EU

policy towards Russia, characterized in the past as a policy of integration (Vahl 2001, 8) is still nowadays orientated through a peaceful approach, even if it imposed economic sanctions to Russia in the Crimea crisis. On the contrary, in its policy toward the EU, Russia uses the primacy of geopolitics (Vahl 2001, 12), because it wants to become “a new geopolitical centre” (Russia Direct, Debates 2014).

Secondly, we strongly believe that the economic and energetic dimensions of their relationship are the main factors that would obstruct a future direct confrontation, making them not strategic partners but maybe strengthening their relations of cooperation. Regarding the current uncertain situation rooted in their rivalry integration projects amplified by the Crimea crisis, the potential of cooperation through a new economic agenda is huge.

Finally, we want to underline that, in our vision, the future relationship between EU and Russia would maintain its specifics, being a competition at the ideological level and cooperation in the economic and energy fields. This means that, even if the EU leaders have declared the strategic partnership invalid, it does not have the self-sufficiency, in terms of energy, to totally break-down the relations with Russia. Also, even if “over the past few months Russia has been creating instability in countries of the common neighbourhood with a view to (re)gaining long-term control over the region, inter alia through Eurasian integration” (Delcour and Kostanyan 2014, 3), its internal situation in the field of economic and, implicitly, the interdependence, would make it to analyze more carefully its way of interaction in the region.

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