

"A BRIDGE TOO FAR" - EXAMINING A POSSIBLE OUTCOME OF THE UKRAINE CRISIS

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Abstract

The article examines the proposal, advanced by a number of Realist authors (Mearsheimer, Kissinger, Walt) that a lasting solution to the current crisis in Ukraine can be reached by a "grand bargain" between the West (defined as comprising the EU and US) and Russia. This settlement would mean that Ukraine gains the status of "a bridge between Russia and Europe", pursuing equivalent relationships with both sides without formally becoming part of any competing arrangements (NATO, EU or Customs Union / Eurasian Economic Union).

The analysis focuses on three main issues: the arrangement's sustainability, its enforceability and its possible role in a broader Eurasian security architecture. It takes into account the ongoing dynamics of the Ukrainian society, regional evolutions, as well as the wider international environment. It also factors in the interests, perceptions and strategy of the current Russian leadership. In context, a brief comparison is made with the Finnish model, which is often invoked by the proponents of the "bridge" solution.

The conclusions reached are that, in the current circumstances, a "50%-50%" type of arrangement could not be sustained with reasonable political, economic and military costs. Its enforceability would also be problematic, given the parties' very different commitment to use the capabilities at their disposal. Taking into account the extremely high difficulty of reaching a mutually satisfactory settlement in Ukrainian case, which must be one of the linchpins of any Eurasian security architecture, it can be concluded that such a broad agreement is also extremely unlikely at this time. A more probable outcome for the near future would be a policy of "complex containment", where economic and political interaction continues at some levels, but is restricted in others and where Russia is no longer perceived as a genuine partner of the West. This would not be a permanent situation, but only a temporary "point of balance", highly dependent on political evolutions, especially those within Russia.

Keywords

Balance, enforceability, identity, security architecture, sustainability

1. INTRODUCTION

The crisis in Ukraine is, quite probably, the key geopolitical challenge of the post-Cold War order in Europe. Its settlement will define, to a great extent, a number of key parameters of the international order: Russia's role in the continental security dynamic, as well as its profile on the world stage, the EU's position *vis-à-vis* its Eastern Neighbourhood, NATO's role, as well as the US's involvement in European security, the weight of international norms and principles and many more.

Understandably, there is no shortage of proposals for solutions to this crisis, both from the states involved and from the academic community. As many have heralded the events in Ukraine as a triumphant return of 'hard' Realism to the European continent, authors belonging to this current have been particularly active. Among these authors, one can distinguish a set of 'heavyweights' - by virtue of their experience in the field of international relations and their academic or policy-making credentials - such as John Mearsheimer, Henry Kissinger or Stephen Walt, who have articulated their own analyses and prescriptions in this case.

1.1. The Realist perspective

John Mearsheimer assigns all "the blame" for the current crisis to Western actors and their "misguided attempts" to "move Ukraine out of Russia's orbit and integrate it into the West" (Mearsheimer 2014). NATO enlargement, coupled with the EU's eastward drive, has provoked, in his opinion, an entirely justified and expected Russian reaction. The third cardinal sin committed by the West is identified as "democracy promotion", which caused the Kremlin leadership to fear that it too might find its legitimacy challenged soon. While Vladimir Putin earns Mearsheimer's praise for being a brilliant practitioner of Realism 101, the West is collectively lambasted for clinging to "liberal delusions" such as "rule of law, economic interdependence, and democracy" as the bases for a European order. Consequently, the "way out" he advocates is also from the Realist playbook, derived from the lessons of the Cold War: "The United States and its allies should abandon their plan to westernize Ukraine and instead aim to make it a neutral buffer between NATO and Russia [...]. Western leaders should acknowledge that Ukraine matters so

much to Putin that they cannot support an anti-Russian regime there. [...] The goal should be a sovereign Ukraine that falls in neither the Russian nor the Western camp" (Mearsheimer 2014). The ways to achieve this desired end state would be: a public statement by NATO ruling out membership for Ukraine (and Georgia), an economic rescue plan jointly funded by the EU, US, IMF and Russia, as well as a sharp reduction in Western support for democracy in Ukraine. The hard Realist approach is further underscored by the admission that Ukrainians themselves would have little to no say in their country's future and should be heartily discouraged from trying to.

Out of his list of "Top Ten Questions about the World's Biggest Problems" (2014), Stephen Walt puts "Will there be a deal on Ukraine?" squarely at number 1. In shaping his answers, he too lays most of the responsibility for the current "colossal failure of analysis and diplomacy" on the US and the West. Again, the solution, an "offer [Vladimir Putin] is unlikely to refuse" is "a deal that guarantees Ukraine's status as an independent and neutral buffer state", supported by "an iron-clad declaration that Ukraine will not be part of NATO". This last issue is viewed as the essential ingredient of any such proposal. Again, the historical precedents are found in the Cold War era: "A Finlandized Ukraine might not be an ideal outcome, but it is better than watching the country get destroyed" (Walt 2014d).

One of the foremost practitioners of Realism in foreign policy, Henry Kissinger, presents a more balanced analysis of the crisis, identifying its causes in the actions of both Russia and the West (Kissinger 2014). He accurately pinpoints the risks inherent to the Kremlin's actions: Trying to "force Ukraine into a satellite status, and thereby move Russia's borders again, would doom Moscow to repeat its history of self-fulfilling cycles of reciprocal pressures with Europe and the United States" (Kissinger 2014). He also, in stark contrast to many American scholars in the field, examines the role of the European Union, postulating that its main weakness in external action - "subordination of the strategic element to domestic politics" - has contributed to "turning a negotiation into a crisis". Crucially, Kissinger identifies Ukrainians themselves as "the decisive element", dedicating more space than most to fleshing out the numerous complexities and fault lines of Ukrainian society. His prescription is, while largely similar to other Realist solutions ("If Ukraine is to survive and thrive, it must not be either side's outpost against the other - it should function as a bridge between them") also takes this last issue into account.

While excluding NATO membership from the start, he argues that Ukraine “should have the right to choose freely its economic and political associations, including with Europe” and that it “should be free to create any government compatible with the expressed will of its people”. However, he cautions that “wise Ukrainian leaders would then opt for a policy of reconciliation” and recommends that the country “pursue a posture comparable to that of Finland, cooperate with the West in most fields but carefully avoid institutional hostility toward Russia” (Kissinger 2014).

1.2. The ‘bridge’ solution

These, as well as many other Realist works seem to converge on a particular set of conclusions. The first is that a lasting solution to the current crisis in Ukraine can be reached by a ‘grand bargain’ between the ‘West’¹ and the Russian Federation. The second is that the best settlement for the crisis would be one where Ukraine gains the status of ‘a bridge between Russia and Europe’, pursuing equivalent relationships with both sides, without challenging the strategic interests of either (what might be called, in mathematical terms, the ‘50/50 solution’). This includes remaining outside any bodies or organisations viewed as ‘strategic competition’ by either side (NATO, EU or the Customs Union / Eurasian Economic Union).

1.3. Realist analytical errors

In defining the parameters of such a settlement, however, structural Realist thinkers seem to commit two significant errors. One is the excessive emphasis put on purely military / ‘hard security’ aspects. Virtually, all of them insist on the exclusion of NATO membership from the equation, a normal stance when pursuing the goal of neutrality. Even if not stated, one presumes that this would be balanced out by the exclusion of membership in any Russia-led collective defence arrangements. By contrast, when approaching the issue of economic and political integration, many analysts tend to downplay or

¹ The ‘West’, in this case, is shorthand meant to represent a group comprised of EU Member States and the United States. In keeping with this convention, it will be used as such in this article.

outright ignore the issue. One practical reason for this can be, of course, that the vanguard of Realist thought is largely comprised of American scholars, who tend to view the issue in terms of Russo-American relations and, as previously shown, draw heavily on the experience of the Cold War.

However, looking back on more recent history, namely the past two years, we must remember that it was not just NATO that 'spurred' Russia into action. In fact, the roots of the current crisis lie in Ukraine's choice between two different integration projects that are political and economical in nature, not military alliances – the EU and the Customs Union. To be even more precise, it was mainly economic reasons that pro-Russian Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovych invoked for not signing the Association Agreement / Deep and Comprehensive Trade Agreement (AA/DCFTA) with the EU in November 2013, an act which led to his own downfall and subsequent confrontations. The same economic issues were repeatedly raised by Moscow as the main reason for its opposition to all such Agreements (with a focus on those with Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova) and repeated requests that they be renegotiated to accommodate its interests. This attitude demonstrates that Russia has a more complex view of what 'neutrality' would entail, which exceeds simple military non-alignment. Joining the EU, or an EU-centred free trade area that excludes Russia, will be seen by Moscow as a breach of neutrality and a move against its own interests. It has quite clearly indicated this view in its own interpretation of the September 12 agreement to postpone AA/DCFTA implementation until December 2015, stating that it will regard any attempts by Ukraine to align its national legislation to the EU *acquis* as breaching the terms of the deal. Considering the complexities and interdependences in today's economic landscape, as well as the massive disparities between the EU and CU economies, the difficulty of maintaining neutrality in this area will be an order of magnitude higher than staying out of NATO.

The second major error, endemic to most hard Realist lines of argument is downplaying (or dismissing altogether) the influence exercised by evolutions inside Ukraine, by the meanders of its complex political landscape. Kissinger appears to be one of the very few who does not fall into this trap, but even he coyly advises "wise" Ukrainian leaders to pursue a conciliatory policy, implicitly admitting that they would have a very narrow margin of manoeuvre. Other authors tend to gloss over internal political trends, assume Ukrainians will go along with any deal reached by the major actors or, as is

Mearsheimer's case, cynically state that they will be given no other choice. This line of reasoning conveniently ignores the fact that it was Ukrainian internal dynamics that toppled president Yanukovich and differences in the domestic political landscape that facilitated the Russian takeover of Crimea, but frustrated similar attempts in Odessa. The size and shape of their respective constituencies define the avenues of action for all major Ukrainian leaders, including president Poroshenko, at least as much as external forces do.

2. ANALYSIS OF THE 'BRIDGE' SOLUTION

A large number of factors need to be adequately managed in order to obtain the much-desired 'bridge' settlement. For the purpose of this analysis, they have been aggregated into two major parameters: (1) enforceability and (2) sustainability of the solution. These can be considered essential prerequisites of any feasible settlement and correspond to the two types of dynamics acting on any such system – external and internal. 'Enforceability' pertains to the parties' ability to ensure that the deal made is respected by all sides. It includes the possible dispute-settlement mechanisms established (be they legal or informal), as well as, crucially, the capabilities to enforce one's interests and the ability to mobilise them. 'Sustainability' covers the interaction between internal dynamics in Ukraine and the external guarantors of the agreement. The term itself represents, in a simplified definition, the ability of a system to maintain its functionality without the costs needed to keep it working exceeding the benefits derived (experience clearly shows that no political system benefits from 'absolute inertia'). In the case examined, a satisfactory sustainability factor can be reached only if internal trends in Ukraine largely go towards supporting a '50/50' solution or can be made, with tolerable costs, to converge in that direction.

2.1. Enforceability

2.1.1 *Possible legal framework of the agreement*

In assessing the question of enforceability, one should first take into account the formal shape such an agreement would have. It is difficult to envisage a full-fledged international treaty, considering the numerous legal and political

issues that would arise. A completely informal 'gentlemen's agreement' would also be considered unsatisfactory, particularly taking into account Russian assertion that such a deal existed with regard to NATO's eastward enlargement and was subsequently breached by the Alliance. A type of protocol or memorandum could be a solution, indeed, we already have both a Minsk Protocol (5th of September 2014) and a Minsk Memorandum (19th of September 2014) as steps towards what is hoped to be a lasting settlement. However, historical precedent, namely the Budapest Memorandum of 1994, drawn up precisely to guarantee Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity, is dismal. The Memorandum's terms were breached by one of its signatories and the document itself did not foresee any measures besides consultations "in the event a situation arises which raises a question concerning these commitments" (Budapest Memorandum, 1994).

It is hard to imagine a new Memorandum containing stronger penalties for a transgressor. Firstly, because the Russian Federation, which would again be a signatory and guarantor of the document, would oppose their inclusion (and it may not be the only state that does so). Secondly, because it would be almost impossible to define the conditions in which the agreed terms can be considered breached. An act of military aggression would clearly be the most serious transgression, but its definition was shown to be extremely diffuse by the very events in Eastern Ukraine. Hybrid warfare, involving 'self-defence units', 'volunteers' or the infamous 'little green men', has made traditional methods of reaction unfeasible and facilitated deniability. Not necessarily plausible deniability, but, for many actors, accepted deniability nonetheless. Other forms of coercion are even more difficult to identify and address. Reverting to the ill-fated Budapest Memorandum, it too had provisions in this regard. Its signatories agree to "refrain from economic coercion designed to subordinate to their own interest the exercise by Ukraine of the rights inherent in its sovereignty and thus to secure advantages of any kind" (Budapest Memorandum, 1994). A narrow interpretation of these terms could have led to the assertion that they had been breached long before 2014. However, such a narrow interpretation would also have had to answer such intractable questions as when does a particular contract become "economic coercion"? Other aspects are simply impossible to clarify. Does the election of an overwhelmingly pro-European (or pro-Russian) government in Kiev threaten the agreed status-quo? If so, what 'balancing measures' should be taken? One

cannot help but be reminded of the 'Brezhnev doctrine' of limited sovereignty when asking such questions. It is clear that defining, monitoring and (micro) managing the numerous political and economic parameters of such a hypothetical deal is simply impossible.

2.1.2. *Prerequisites of effective enforcement*

As history has consistently shown, an agreement's formal enforcement provisions are critically dependant on two factors: capabilities - the necessary resources to enforce the treaty - and political will to use the aforementioned resources. This is precisely the point where the enforceability of a potential 'bridge' agreement would meet the greatest difficulties. As far as capabilities go, the numbers are overwhelmingly on the West's side. On paper, the combined economic, political and military resources of the NATO and EU Member States dwarf Russian ones. This does not, unfortunately, translate into an overwhelming advantage in the field, for a rather simple reason: Russia has used its resources to develop and hold a position of strength where it matters. This applies to all types of resources: military, economic or otherwise. The positioning of its military assets, coupled with the geopolitical characteristics of the area, gives it the possibility to conduct military operations (both conventional and non-conventional) against Ukraine with relative ease. Its role as Europe's main energy supplier and source of much-needed business (especially in the aftermath of the economic crisis) reduces the EU's leverage. In addition, state-controlled Russian companies have a dominating presence in many Ukrainian economic sectors. Russia has shown it is perfectly willing to absorb economic shocks in exchange for strategic gains and has displayed quite remarkable resilience in the past. In any case, its sheer size and abundant natural resources make isolation impossible. To summarise, the West has vastly superior capabilities, but it would take a long time and require considerable costs to deploy them where they are needed and use them to their fullest extent.

Political will poses an even bigger problem. This arises from the parties' substantially different perspectives on the situation and, consequently, the attention, political capital and resources they are willing to commit to ensure a favourable state of play. For Russia, Ukraine is a core interest, a key national security issue, a central cultural symbol which generates strong emotions.

Kissinger himself underlines this: “To Russia, Ukraine can never be just a foreign country. Russian history began in what was called Kievan-Rus. The Russian religion spread from there. Ukraine has been part of Russia for centuries, and their histories were intertwined before then” (Kissinger 2014). Moscow has every incentive to dedicate its full attention, together with considerable resources to keeping Ukraine in its own geopolitical orbit and firmly out of the West’s influence. The Kremlin has no problem mobilising the Russian public in its favour or of convincing it that sacrifices made in achieving the desired result are worth it. At the same time, Russia holds a decisive advantage in terms of speed and manoeuvrability, as applied to the processes of political mobilisation and decision making. It is a unitary state actor, with clearly defined priorities and interests. The characteristics of its political structure (highly hierarchic, significant executive power, single dominant political force, no substantial opposition) and tight control of the media are additional facilitators.

By contrast, the EU and NATO states offer a much more fragmented image. This, of course, stems from a dramatically different perception of the issue. While Member States on the EU’s Eastern flank rightly perceive the situation in Ukraine as a major security issue, the threat perception diminishes as one moves towards the West and the South. This is logical, considering the geographical distance from Russia and the prevalence of other security concerns, such as those related to the North African region. There are countries that see it as ‘just another crisis’ which should be stabilised as swiftly as possible, enabling ‘normal’ relations with Russia to be restored (especially in their economic dimension). Under these circumstances, decision-making becomes a cumbersome process, the results most often embodying the ‘lowest common denominator’.

This significant disparity in the political, economic and military resources that each side is willing to commit to the protection of its interests with regard to Ukraine, stemming from substantially different assessments of said interests, makes it practically impossible to maintain the internationally-balanced position that a ‘bridge’-type solution would entail. The West currently appears unwilling to extend any ‘hard’ security guarantees to Ukraine and Russia looks undeterred by anything else. Such a situation naturally creates a dilemma for any responsible (or “wise”) Kiev government, which, in order to ensure national security, as well as its own survival, would have to

increasingly accommodate Russian interests. As the option to balance them with Western help is limited, the logical consequence would be that Ukraine would end up once again in its pre-2014 state, i.e. in the Russian sphere of influence. However, this result is not necessarily unavoidable and it depends significantly on another key factor of any settlement: sustainability.

2.2. Sustainability

The Ukrainian settlement must adequately satisfy the interests of all sides in such a way that a stable 'point of balance' is achieved, a state which does not require constant intervention or outside micromanagement (the difficulties of which were already underlined). From a general perspective, there are three major dimensions that need to be examined: security, economic and political. They are, of course, intertwined, but each highlights a particular set of issues.

2.2.1. *Security aspects*

The security dimension is twofold. Firstly, a 'non-aligned' Ukraine would need credible guarantees for its national security. This is generally what differentiates between a successful neutral country and a much less desirable 'grey area' and is dependent on factors such as the country's own capabilities, geographical factors and, the main point of this analysis, international security arrangements. Secondly, the other two parties to the arrangement (Russia and the West) would need to satisfy their own security interests. On the most basic level, this means ensuring that Ukraine cannot become a base, corridor or facilitator for military action. From a comprehensive perspective, one needs to factor in issues such as energy security or migration.

The first problem encountered is that Russia's actions, particularly those undertaken in the course of the past year, have severely, if not completely, compromised the chances of a mutually advantageous security settlement in the region. The unlawful seizure of the Crimean peninsula (along with a substantial quantity of Ukrainian military assets), the occupation of areas in Eastern Ukraine by Moscow-aligned forces, as well as Russian military presence in the Transdniestrian region, make Ukraine's security situation extremely difficult, to say the least. Even if a large-scale military build-up programme were to be started by the government in Kiev – already a

politically and economically unviable decision – it would not be able to effectively bridge the massive capabilities gap or mitigate geographical vulnerabilities. This means that Ukrainian national security is primarily dependent on a broader international security arrangement between Russia and the West. In this case, the logical counterpart would be NATO. Other arrangements could be envisaged, but, taking into account current capabilities, political reasons and historical precedent (the Budapest Memorandum again), it is unlikely that any states would be willing to assume the role of individual guarantors.

Currently, the chances of such an agreement are slim. NATO can, of course, extend “iron-clad” guarantees that it will not grant Ukraine full membership of the Alliance. But this is far from being Russia’s only point of contention. Moscow regards NATO’s entire eastward enlargement policy as an encroachment on its ‘strategic neighbourhood’ and the presence of Allied (NATO or US) military assets in East European states as a direct threat to its security (see also Rogozin 2009; Zevelev 2009). Conversely, neighbouring countries are unlikely to feel reassured by Russia’s recent actions and statements, which include a significant increase of its military presence in occupied Crimea – “proper and self-sufficient forces”, according to the Russian Defence minister in a statement made on September 16 (Russia Today - 16 September 2014) – , large scale military exercises on NATO’s Eastern borders and near-constant violations of Allied states’ airspace.

The issue of perception comes into play again at this point. For Russian strategists, Ukraine is their country’s ‘soft underbelly’, an easily exploited potential invasion route towards Moscow. World War II was only the most recent example that supports this line of argument. Militarily securing this space is, therefore, seen as a core national security interest. On the other side, Eastern European states are acutely aware that the Ukrainian plain can be traversed in both directions and, stimulated by their own historical experiences, tend to plan accordingly. Neither party feels that it can afford to give way on this issue and there is very little mutual trust, especially after this year’s events. Under these circumstances, a mutually-agreed strategic arrangement seems like a distant possibility.

2.2.2. *Economic aspects*

The economic dimension revolves around the two distinct integration projects. The one promoted by the EU, in the framework of its Eastern Partnership policy, whose main legal instrument is the AA/DCFTA and the one championed by Moscow, under the aegis of the Customs Union.

There is, of course, talk about the so-called 'common economic space from Lisbon to Vladivostok' and, indeed, the aspiration towards this goal is explicitly stated in official EU documents. Germany, a largely export-driven economy and Russia's main trading partner in the EU is the idea's chief promoter. However, this project has yet to move beyond the conceptual / declarative phase. The difficulties are massive and obvious and the time to a potential completion is numbered in years, if not decades. By contrast, a project like the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) has a real chance of materialising in a much-nearer future, further consolidating Transatlantic economic ties and, by extension, the EU's economic weight.

As the two economic spaces being defined have little chance of merging in the near future (and simultaneous membership in two different free-trade areas is out of the question) it is quite obvious that Ukraine must either choose one of them or remain outside both. The last option can be considered completely unfeasible, considering Ukraine's economic weight relative to the two blocs, as well as the volume of trade with each. The question of which one to choose is both complex and complicated, but any comparison of figures shows the EU having a decisive advantage. As the most illustrative example, the EU's nominal GDP exceeds 13 trillion Euros compared to Russia's 1.6 trillion. To put it plainly, EU's economy dwarfs Russia's. Of course, the state of the economy cannot be accurately described just by a series of GDP or trade numbers. Factors such as resilience and dynamism also come into play and, once again, Russia is far from offering an encouraging picture. In 2012, the oil and gas sector accounted for 70% of the country's total exports, contributing with 52% of federal budget revenues and accounting for 16% of state GDP. This sector, along with a sizeable part of the entire Russian economy is dominated by large state-controlled enterprises. Problems relating to corruption and excessive regulation are pervasive. In its 2013 corruption perception index, Transparency International ranked Russia in the 127th place, on a par with Pakistan and Mali. Government attempts to address these aspects appear to draw heavily on

Soviet tradition with senior officials (the president included) directly intervening and micromanaging issues (a practice informally known as “switching to manual control”). The small- and medium-sized enterprises sector is underdeveloped. Private property rights lack necessary protection and are frequently infringed upon by the state. The IMF report of April 2014 draws some less-than-encouraging conclusions: “The Russian economy, already slowing because of pre-existing structural bottlenecks, has been further affected by geopolitical uncertainties arising from conflict between Russia and Ukraine [...]. After almost 15 years of growth based on rising oil prices, successful macroeconomic stabilization policies, and increasing use of spare resources, this growth framework has reached its limits. A new growth model needs to emerge to realize the full potential of the economy” (IMF Report 2014, Concluding Statement). Western sanctions imposed after Moscow’s destabilising actions in Ukraine are also taking their toll. Expected growth rates range from 0.5% (OECD estimate), 0.2% (IMF) down to 0% (EBRD). By comparison, the rate was 1.3% in 2013, considered the second-worst out of Vladimir Putin’s fifteen years in power, comparing favourably only with 2009, when the global financial crisis was in full swing. Badly needed capital is also leaving Russia with outflow in the first half of 2014 standing at almost 60 billion Euros, compared with 46.8 billion over the entire span of 2013. Sanctions have also cut off Russia’s access to needed Western technology, especially important in the hydrocarbon extraction sector. It has also transformed the occupation of Crimea into a significant financial liability for the Federation’s budget.

European economy is incomparably more diverse and offers opportunities that are an order of magnitude above what the Russian market can. This is reflected in the current trend of Ukraine’s foreign trade. In 2012, the EU was still Ukraine’s second largest trading partner, with 24.9% of exports and 30.9% of imports, trailing Russia very closely (25.7% of exports and 32.4% of imports). The projected data for 2013 puts EU in the top trading spot with 28.7% of exports and 39.1% of imports, compared to Russia’s 25.6% and 32.4%, respectively. The EU’s lead is likely to widen in the context of the current conflict and associated sanctions regimes (including the one imposed by Russia on Ukrainian goods), as well as the extension of EU autonomous trade measures (into force since the 23rd of April 2014) until the entry into force of the DCFTA in December 2015. One must also keep in mind that hydrocarbon

(mainly natural gas) imports from Russia account for most of Ukraine structural trade deficit, a stimulus for seeking diversification of supply rather than continued dependence, whose drawbacks are abundantly clear. In fact, Moscow's behaviour in the three party (Russia-Ukraine-EU) gas supply negotiations has galvanised both Brussels and Kiev to reduce their dependency on Russian gas as much as possible, rather than consolidate its image as a reliable supplier.

Other Russian current actions have, likewise, done little to constructively address this issue but quite a lot to aggravate it. The Donbas region, Ukraine's industrial heartland and responsible for a high percentage of the Russia-Ukraine trade volume, has been severely affected by the conflict and is unlikely to recover anytime soon. Infrastructure has been destroyed, a significant part of the labour force has fled, resource chains and funding have been disrupted and much of the region is no longer under the control of the country's legitimate government, effectively removing it from the normal economic flux. Recent reports of the relocation of economic assets from this region to the territory of the Russian Federation appear to deepen the problem. Moscow's behaviour has weakened its hand in the long term. Compared to the EU, it is left with remarkably fewer positive incentives. So far, its own economic integration project, the Customs Union, appears to have taken quite a few pages out of the old COMECON (Council for Mutual Economic Assistance) manual. Russia attempts to create and control entire production cycles throughout the former Soviet space, locking other states' major economic actors to its own. The defence industry is a preeminent example, particularly relevant in the case of Ukraine. This has multiple negative effects, one of which is that an industry's evolution becomes far more dependent on political decisions rather than genuine market forces. Any decrease in profitability will thus have to be compensated, directly or indirectly, by state intervention. Plainly speaking, the Russian budget will have to cover the losses. One of the main reasons for the collapse of the USSR-centred COMECON system was that, at some point, the Soviet Union could simply no longer afford the subsidies needed to keep it running. This is a lesson dangerously ignored in Russia's hydrocarbon export policy where price is leveraged as a political instrument and is dependent on regime attitude towards Moscow. The Customs Union is clearly aiming for a 'closed' regional cooperation model, with tariff and non-tariff barriers erected around it. Such a

system is self-limiting and, to a large extent, self-handicapping. Hydrocarbon sales can and do provide good revenue, but an economy excessively focused on this is extremely vulnerable to price fluctuations.

This overall picture provides a wealth of reasons for the Ukrainian public and policy makers to lean decisively towards economic association with the EU. One particularly important 'economic constituency' is the one represented by the so-called 'oligarchs' – figures familiar to any observer of post-Communist transitions in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet space. Their interests appear to align more and more with a pro-European orientation. This happens both for purely financial reasons ('greener pastures'), but also for the opportunity to legitimise their wealth and protect themselves from potential predatory actions by Russian and Russian-backed business interests. The economic (and, sometimes, personal) safety and stability provided by the EU are increasingly valuable commodities and Ukrainian oligarchs have no desire to share the experiences of some of their most famous Russian counterparts.

2.2.3. Political aspects

The political dimension of a '50/50' agreement is probably the most difficult to address. This difficulty stems, in part, from the fact that this issue is increasingly framed not just in terms of national interest, but in terms of national identity.

There are two key national identities in examining the issue: Ukrainian and Russian. In the current context, these should not be taken as separate items, but as a closely interconnected tandem, where choices with regard to one heavily influence the other. It would be a mistake to relegate them to secondary status: from a certain point of view, one of the main causes of the Ukrainian conflict lies in this twin 'identity crisis' and the different attempts to address it.

In the aftermath of the Cold War, Russia found itself in the unenviable position of having to rebuild both its geopolitical position and its national project. The course set by Mikhail Gorbachev and carried on by his successor, Boris Yeltsin, largely focused on Russia becoming a 'normal' (i.e. Western-type) country, embracing democracy, free-market capitalism and largely (but not entirely) abandoning 'imperial' ambitions. The staggering difficulty of this course and its inevitable accompanying phenomena (chaos, corruption,

poverty) lead to the moral bankruptcy of the 'Western model' in the eyes of a large part of the Russian public. This created a fertile environment for the rise of Vladimir Putin and, subsequently, the creation of a new identity. In fact, Putin had telegraphed some of the key characteristics of the new Russian model he was planning to pursue in his 1999 inaugural speech as Prime Minister (BBC News 28 March 2014): "Russia has been a great power for centuries, and remains so [...]. Russia's territorial integrity is not subject to negotiation". The last reference was to the then-ongoing conflict in Chechnya which he later would bring to a decisive end, further boosting his popularity. He further added that his government would not "drop our guard [...] nor allow our opinion to be ignored" when Russia's "legitimate zones of interest" would be affected. Ironically, the speech itself went largely ignored, as few expected the new Prime Minister to outlast his predecessors. Putin's subsequent speech in 2000, when he assumed his new post as President, drew more attention, but, again, his ideas failed to register the appropriate impact abroad. He promised that the new administration would "defend Russian citizens everywhere, including both inside and outside our country". Russian citizens "must not forget anything. We must know our history, know it as it really is, draw lessons from it and always remember those who created the Russian state, championed its dignity and made it a great, powerful and mighty state" (BBC News 7 May 2000).

Fifteen years from that moment, the 'Putin paradigm' is quite substantially fleshed out and enjoys, at least for the moment, broad domestic approval. The core of this ideology can be described as 'Russian exceptionalism', a belief shared, with various nuances, by all major powers throughout history. This belief implies that, more than most other nations, Russia has the right, ability and even duty to shape world affairs. The moral bedrock that underscores and justifies this belief has been drawn from multiple sources, both pre-Soviet (conservatism, orthodox spirituality, Slavic 'brotherhood') and from the ages of World War II (the fight against Nazi Germany) and the Cold War (based on the positive re-evaluation of the USSR's accomplishments). The dominant narrative is that Russia has always been 'on the right side of history'. Imperial-type expansion, be it Czarist or Soviet, is thus cast in a predominantly positive light. However, in contrast with Soviet (official) propaganda, Russian nationalism holds a preeminent place in this new doctrine. This nationalism is defined not just in its ethnic dimension, but also in its broader linguistic one,

instrumentalised in the assumed right to 'protect' Russian speakers outside the Federation's borders. To summarise, Russia has the right to an 'empire' and, beyond reasons of 'hard' national interest, it also has the ethical justification to pursue one. The main catalyst in the 'weaponisation' of this ideology is the 'historical humiliation' narrative. This postulates that, in the aftermath of the Cold War, Russia suffered a long series of indignities at the hands of the West, being exploited, deceived and ignored in most major international affairs. Eastward NATO enlargement is a particular pet peeve of the current Russian establishment, frequently used as an example of the West's supposed duplicitous attitude. The logical consequence of this discourse is that the West, especially the US and its NATO allies, cannot be trusted and are Russia's adversaries rather than its potential partners. Moscow's national security strategic documents adequately mirror this antagonism with the West (Giles 2009; Dimitrakopoulou and Liaropoulos 2010), as does the evolution of the Kremlin's foreign policy discourse (Trenin 2009; Rumer and Stent 2009; Tsygankov 2010). No examination of this doctrine can overlook one of the core tenets of Russian foreign policy, which can be easily traced back to the times of Peter the Great. It was first stated by Thucydides, the father of political realism, in the 5th century BC – "The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must". This was further completed by famed diplomat and Sovietologist George Kennan in the earliest days of the Cold War: "The jealous and intolerant eye of the Kremlin can distinguish, in the end, only vassals and enemies, and the neighbours of Russia, if they do not wish to be one, must reconcile themselves to being the other" (Kennan 2014, 54).

These ideological elements have been intensely used in the current Ukrainian crisis. They have helped shape an overarching image, flanked by two major narratives, corresponding to the two possible Russian alternatives for Ukraine: the 'vassal' and the 'enemy'. The first one emphasises the ethno-linguistic, cultural and historical connections between Russia and Ukraine, described in 'brotherly' terms. In this context, Ukraine is Russia's natural ally and (junior) partner, a position it must undoubtedly resume after the crisis. The second one, by contrast, describes the modern Ukrainian state as an artificial construction, denying it any form of historical legitimacy and ethno-linguistic cohesion. Consequently, Russia has the moral and historical right to reclaim its 'ancestral territory'. This claim is not limited to the Crimean Peninsula, but includes practically all of South-eastern Ukraine, aggregated into an entity

called 'Novorossiya' (a name itself resurrected from Czarist times). This line of argument has the inconvenient twin drawbacks of blatantly breaching international law and grossly misrepresenting realities on the ground. However, it has proven both a popular propaganda tool and a useful instrument of pressure. In fact, in the current case, the lines between ideological debate and negotiation tactics are blurred. These two narratives can be construed as part of Moscow's own 'carrot and stick' approach. The 'Novorossiya' narrative is clearly not designed to win hearts and minds, but rather to threaten Ukrainians into submission and provide Western interlocutors with an unpalatable alternative to major concessions for Russia.

A common key trait of Russia-originated narratives is that they offer distinctly 'non-Western', or even 'anti-Western' resolutions to the crisis - in the first case, the whole of Ukraine would gravitate again towards Moscow's orbit and abandon Western integration processes (EU as well as NATO), in the second, much of today's Ukraine would be incorporated into Russia (or a Russian puppet state). The ideological basis for either of these solutions involves an attempt - from the Russian point of view and using Russia as the reference point - to define Ukrainian identity. Framing Ukraine's Western orientation as temporary and undertaken as the result of outside interference serves a dual purpose. On the one hand, it consolidates pan-Slavic, 'Russian brotherhood' rhetoric, giving additional legitimacy to its associated imperial ambitions. On the other, it attempts to defuse any danger of pro-Western 'colour revolutions' spreading in Russia. This last point is clearly a crucial one for the current Kremlin leadership and was all but recognised as one of the factors that stimulated Russian intervention in Ukraine. A substantial problem that Moscow faces is that it needs more than just generating a positive impression or 'brotherly sentiment' in Ukraine. It needs a certain political system to function there. From the Kremlin's point of view, a Russia-friendly Ukraine which is also an example of functional, prosperous democracy would be considered a headache rather than a success. Besides the 'undesirable' example it would set, genuine, accountable democracy would make it far more difficult for Moscow to exert the leverage it had until 2014 on Ukrainian political and economic life. For a settlement to be acceptable to Russia, Ukrainians would have not just to forego their Western aspirations, but also accept quite a few limitations on their political and economic freedom as well.

The question of how Ukrainians perceive themselves and their future is thus not a perfunctory one. A 'bridge' type solution would need to balance things quite carefully if it is to avoid either a repeat of the Maidan demonstrations or further separatist provocations. The complex equation of maintaining this balance can be simplified into a 'push-pull' system, using resources to draw public opinion towards your position and keep it from sliding towards your opponent's. Baring the purely mathematical example of a society perfectly split down the middle, it's quite clear that one of the sides – either Russia or the West – would have to 'row against the current', that is, against the dominant tendencies in Ukrainian society.

2.2.4. *Relevant statistics*

Current data does not favour Moscow. The most recent indicator is, obviously, the result of the 26th of October legislative elections in Ukraine, with the pro-European parties winning by a landslide over their pro-Russian opponents, who remained in the single digits. Likewise, extreme right-wing parties, long used by Moscow as a propaganda *bête noire*, have registered very modest scores, disproving the fabricated image of the 'Nazi junta' in Kiev.

These results tend to reflect the general trends in Ukrainian society registered by virtually all opinion polls. Most Ukrainians display a "warm" (46%) or "neutral" (31%) attitude towards the EU, in contrast with feelings towards Russia which are dominantly "cold" (45%). Even the US overtakes Russia in favourability ratings - 37% vs. 35% "warm" attitude. Poland is the best-scoring foreign country - 50% "warm" and 34% "neutral" (IRI poll, March 2014). When asked to choose the one "international economic union" that their country should join, Ukrainians have generally favoured the EU over the Customs Union (2012 was the only year that the CU gained a small lead over the EU). Support for European integration reached 52% in March 2014, compared with the CU's 27%, the largest margin to date (Pew poll, May 2014). These numbers were likely stimulated by Russia's actions, actions which were, unsurprisingly, viewed in an overwhelmingly negative light. One must also take into account that they do not reflect an even situation across the entire Ukrainian territory. In Western districts, support for European integration can reach 91%, while people in Eastern Ukraine tend to have more favourable views of Russia. However, an overwhelming majority (77%) agree that

Ukraine should remain a unified state (Pew poll, May 2014). This includes inhabitants of Eastern regions (70%) and even the Russian speaking population (58% of them support a united Ukraine). The only region where all numbers appear reversed is Crimea, but that is arguably a very distinct case.

Illustrative for the potential viability of a 'bridge' solution, the numbers show that, in March 2014, a plurality of Ukrainians (43%) considered it more important to have strong ties with the EU rather than Russia (which polled at just 18%). 27% of respondents said it was important for Ukraine to have strong ties with both (Pew poll, May 2014). Again, these numbers fluctuate between Western and Eastern Ukraine, but support for the EU never goes below 21% and that for Russia does not rise above 30%. A September 2014 IFES poll showed the numbers being at 59% for closer ties with the EU, compared with 8% for Russia. Due to the situation on the ground, this latest poll excluded the Donbas region. A frozen conflict that would effectively place these areas outside the Ukrainian political dynamic would, in fact, guarantee a solid pro-European majority in the rest of the country. This is supported by several other poll indicators: 70% percent of Ukrainians outside Donbas have a positive opinion of the EU's leadership, as opposite the 12% for Russia.

The question of foreign influence shows Ukrainians sharply critical of Russia, with 67% considering that country's influence "bad" or "very bad". Just 22% view it as positive. Even in the East, opinions on Russia are predominantly negative (58%), rather than favourable (26%). Russian speakers themselves give Moscow the thumbs-down (44% "bad" to "41% "good") The EU (45% "good" / 33% "bad") and the US (38% / 38%) present far more balanced images (Pew poll, May 2014).

Two other aspects are essential for future projection. The first is that support for stronger ties with the EU is highest among young Ukrainians (ages 18-29). The second is the possible correlation between unfavourable views of Russian influence and the desire for a democratic system at home. 60% of Ukrainians believe that "Russia does not respect the personal freedoms of its own citizens" (Pew polls, May and July 2014). This is about the same number (64%) that consider democracy preferable to any other form of government with a clear majority across all age groups (IFES poll, September 2014). When asked to pick up to five statements they associate most with democracy, a majority picks protecting human rights (59%), followed by consistent enforcement of the law (53%), and no official corruption (48%).

One of the conclusions drawn from these figures is that most Ukrainians would like their country to pursue a democratic development path and will look to other European countries (rather than Russia) for inspiration. This does not, of course, mean the emulation of all specific characteristics of what could be generally called 'the European model'. As events have shown, there is still plenty of distrust and misunderstanding of some aspects - those pertaining to minority rights for instance. It does mean however, that the main characteristics of the model - democracy, human rights and political freedoms, prosperity rooted in a free market economy - are likely those envisaged by most Ukrainians when they think about the future of their country. This is amplified by the fact that they have a number of 'success stories' literally on their doorstep. These are the EU's Eastern members, ranging from the Baltic States - formerly part of the Soviet Union, just like Ukraine - to a belt of former Warsaw Pact countries stretching from Poland, through Hungary and Slovakia, all the way to Romania. In 1989-1990, these states started, in many respects, from similar positions. They had all been Communist one-party states with centralised economies. Their standards of living were similar. In fact, Ukraine was better off than many. But the paths they pursued diverged more and more as time passed and, consequently, the differences became stark. A comparison with Poland, closest to Ukraine in terms of size and population and with strong cultural and historical ties to its Eastern neighbour, is emblematic. In 1990, Ukraine had a GDP of 81.46 billion USD. In 2012, that figure had little more than doubled, to 176.3 billion. By comparison, Poland started out in 1990 with 20 billion less (a GDP of 64.55 billion USD), but reached 489.8 billion in 2012. *Per capita* distribution is 12.707 USD for Poland, compared to Ukraine's 3.866 USD. Even allowing for differences in population size, the disparity is enormous, considering the point of departure. This is the kind of contrast that generates frustration, disappointment and revolt. It is safe to assume that when the people of Kiev took to the streets in the winter of 2013 their gesture was not purely out of affection for Brussels' Byzantine bureaucracy, but in support of a future that seemed to offer the best choice for their country.

One of the ultimate caveats of opinion polls (and elections) is that they only reflect the state of play at a given moment in time. As a matter of fact, the history of Ukraine's last three elections is one of alternation between pro-Russian and pro-Western forces. It could be argued that a reversal of the

current trend is not impossible, considering the staggering difficulties that the current pro-Western government faces and the correspondingly high possibility of disappointment. However, as already shown, there is one factor that has severely affected the position of pro-Russian forces – Moscow’s very actions over the past year. The unlawful military seizure of Crimea, the support for armed separatists in the East, its embargo on Ukrainian goods and (not unprecedented) threats to cut off the gas supply in the coldest months of the year have done little to endear it to the Ukrainian population, even the Russian-speaking one. Consequently, this has discredited its political supporters in the Rada, leading to the dismal election results. This was also compounded by the fact that the population in Crimea and the Donbas, the traditional constituencies of the pro-Russian parties, has been almost completely removed from the voters’ pool. These negative effects are unlikely to be erased in the course of a single election cycle. Added to this is the fact that the very process of moving towards a genuinely accountable democracy is viewed by the current Kremlin leadership as a potential liability, multiplying the efforts required to maintain a ‘favourable’ status-quo. The sustainability of such a status-quo would not be impossible but, presuming that current trends in Ukrainian society continue, even at a moderate level, may prove far too costly for Moscow. The problem of enforceability would also strike back with a vengeance. What would happen should Ukrainians consistently elect Western-leaning governments, which will implement measures designed to move the country closer to Europe (even if full EU membership would be off the table)? This would certainly alter the 50/50 equilibrium and it is very hard to envisage an efficient mechanism that can be constructed to compensate for this.

2.3. The ‘Finlandisation’ myth

A thorough analysis would not be complete without a brief examination of the model quite often invoked: Finland, a country which has given its name to a particular concept in political science – ‘Finlandisation’. A number of voices, including Kissinger and Walt have suggested that this can be a viable option for Ukraine. However, many arguments in favour of this arrangement use an extremely simplified model, often overlooking some of the key aspects of Finland’s experience during the Cold War.

The policy known as 'Finlandisation' was legally based on the "Agreement of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance", signed between Finland and the Soviet Union in 1948. Through this act, Finland assumed the obligation to actively resist any attempted armed attacks "by Germany and its Allies", against the USSR through its territory, requesting Soviet military assistance if needed. In exchange, it was allowed to maintain a certain degree of neutrality during the Cold War. This did not come without costs, both in the country's foreign relations and in its internal political life. Finland had to refuse all Marshall Plan aid and strike a balance between commercial agreements with the European Economic Community and those with the USSR. Cooperation with the other Nordic states was also reduced. There were Finnish proposals in the 1960s for 'Scandinavian neutrality', which would have allowed for closer regional ties. These proposals included Norway leaving NATO (signing instead a defence agreement with the UK and US). No such ideas were adopted, or even seriously taken into consideration by the other Scandinavian states. However, one can see the amount of effort needed to preserve Finland's limited degree of autonomy, as well as the impact of the surrounding security architecture. Internally, the efforts made and compromises needed were even higher. Moscow held a virtual veto on the composition of the Helsinki government and the general behaviour of all major Finnish political parties. An unprecedented degree of self-censorship was required from Finnish society, which included the banning of all books and movies that depicted the USSR in a negative light (more than 1700 book titles were banned and catalogues of banned books existed in all public libraries). School textbooks were adjusted to reflect pro-Soviet views. The Finns themselves internalised this attitude, convinced that only neutrality could provide genuine security and that no Western states were willing or able to challenge the USSR over Finland (one must remember that, at the Yalta conference, the country had been assigned to the Soviet sphere of influence).

This description highlights some of the substantial differences that make a 'Finnish path' for Ukraine effectively moot. There are key differences in Russia's attitude towards the situation, in the external environment and, crucially, in the internal trends and dynamics of the two countries.

As previously shown, Ukraine occupies a central historical and cultural place in the mind of the Russian public. It is regarded as the birthplace of Russian culture. Keeping Ukraine in its orbit reinforces both Russia's pride and its

national identity. Any 'imperial' project is incomplete, if not meaningless, without Ukraine. Russian elites, whoever they are, will always regard Ukraine as a core national interest, worth fighting for. The Russian public will be easily mobilised in support. By contrast, Finland was only part of the Czarist empire for a century (1809-1917) and was governed as an autonomous Grand Duchy, not regarded as a Russian heartland. It, therefore, generates no such heated emotions.

From the geopolitical point of view, Ukraine is the key link between Russia and the rest of Europe and, if controlled by another power, one of the most acute points of vulnerability. The Russians remember the lessons of history better than most, including the fact that the great Ukrainian plain has served as the route of most major invasions, up to and including World War II. By contrast, Finland's geographical position, relief and climate make it a much less likely or feasible invasion route against Russia. This was underlined by the Finnish Foreign Minister, Carl Enckell, after the signature of the 1948 Agreement, when he attributed the relatively soft terms of the document to the "particular geographical position" of Finland, by contrast to "the East European friends of the Soviets". The historical contexts for Finland in the late 1940s and Ukraine in 2014 couldn't be more different. There was no intention of creating a 'Finnish bridge' of any sort, an action which would have had limited uses and many associated risks in the context of the Cold War, where sides were clearly delineated and economic interaction between the two blocs was not nearly at today's level. The very nature of the Cold War - the static nature of the balance in Europe, the clear demarcation lines and relative isolation of the two sides - made 'Finlandisation' possible. Even in such a rigorous environment, it was necessary for Finnish leaders to be extremely cautious in avoiding any gesture that could trigger a Soviet intervention. Equating 'Finlandisation' with neutrality may not necessarily be accurate, if one considers that there were, in fact, neither international security guarantees of any kind for Finland, nor any 'counter-guarantors' from the West. A Soviet invasion would have undoubtedly had costs - and likely push all Scandinavian states towards closer relations with NATO - as well as risks of escalation in the context of the Cold War. But, if one takes into account the terms of the 1948 agreement, Finland's status was dependent on the USSR's benevolence (which is likely why Moscow had no major problems with it). This certainly does not resemble the 'bridge between East and West' mantra.

Some analysts (Botticelli 1986) circumscribe the regional dynamic to the "Northern Balance Theory", which states that the balance between Western and Soviet interests was maintained by a USSR-friendly Finland, a neutral Sweden and NATO members Norway and Denmark. No such regional conditions exist, or are today possible, in Eastern Europe. But the theory does underline the fact that maintaining neutrality depends heavily on decisions taken by neighbouring countries (not necessarily great powers), as well as on the regional power equation. In Ukraine's case one should examine the possible paths for the Republic of Moldova or Belarus in a possible settlement. Maintaining, in today's Ukraine, the kind of domestic acquiescence and self-censorship that can keep the Kremlin reassured would be virtually impossible in the age of 'Twitter revolutions'. The overwhelmingly negative opinion about Russian influence evidenced by the latest polls, as well as the dismal showing of pro-Russian parties in the elections, coupled with the young generation's European aspirations, poor opinion of censorship and opportunities to travel abroad and access information, put Ukrainian society in 2014 a world apart from Finland in the 1960s. There is no way that Moscow (or any other major actor, for that matter) could exercise the kind of decisive, uncontested influence on the country's political life needed to ensure unchallenged neutrality. Necessary internal compromises that curtailed the exercise of certain rights and limited a democratic government's choices were more easily justified in the era of mutually accepted destruction. Today's political landscape is simply too complex and fast-moving to permit Ukraine becoming 'Finland 2.0'.

3. POTENTIAL ROLE OF THE 'BRIDGE' SOLUTION IN A CONTINENTAL SECURITY ARCHITECTURE

The concept of a 'Eurasian security architecture' has been circulated for a number of years, with Russia offering by far the most substantial and articulated view in this regard. Its outlines were first drawn in a speech, delivered by then-President Medvedev in Berlin in 2008 (Russian Presidency 5 June 2008). The proposal was further fleshed out in 2009, when a draft 'European Security Treaty' - EST (Russian Presidency 29 November 2009) was presented by foreign minister Sergei Lavrov at the December NATO

ministerial meeting. It drew on positions consistently expressed by Moscow over the previous years and codified them in a set of core principles. The most important of these was the so-called "indivisibility of security", which would, according to the draft treaty, forbid countries from "strengthening their own security at the expense of other parties to the treaty, member states or organisations" (draft EST text 2009). At the same time, it would provide a type of 'blanket Article 5' to all signatories, by giving any party the right to intervene militarily in support of another ("Every party shall be entitled to consider an armed attack against any other party an armed attack against itself"). These provisions would make it practically impossible for European states bordering Russia to effectively ensure their own security. None can match its military capabilities and even attempting to do so would likely fall under the "strengthening own security at the expense of others" heading. Collective defence organisations would be similarly barred ("indivisible security"). This would be another step towards Moscow's goal of the removing the US from European security affairs, or, at least the severe diminishing of its role to the point where it could no longer serve as an effective 'offshore balancer' to Russia.

More recently, president Putin has also indicated the Kremlin's preference for an overarching agreement, a "peace treaty" that will formalise the outlook of the world after the Cold War. "The Cold War is over. But it did not end with peace. [Nor with] a transparent and clear agreement on new rules and standards", he stated in a speech delivered on the 24th of October 2014 (Sputnik News 24 October 2014).

However, a comparison between Russian rhetoric and its actions in Ukraine is far from reassuring. It's hard to imagine compatibility between brutal, militarily-backed *realpolitik*, guided by the zero sum principle and "indivisible security". The Moscow interpretation of the term seems to be that its own military forces should be able to ignore such inconvenient 'divisions' as legally recognised state borders. And it is unlikely to react in a positive manner should other states decide that an armed attack against Ukraine or Georgia "is an armed attack against themselves" (draft EST text 2009).

The truth of the matter is that, within the new 'security architecture', Moscow wants to formalise a key role for itself, likely accompanied by the recognition of its own sphere of influence, comprising, if not all former Soviet states, at least 'Russian-speaking' areas in these countries. Such objectives are hardly

inconspicuous (Klein 2009; De Haas and Marcel 2010) and so are their negative effects on the proposal's viability (Kramer and Fata 2010; Weitz 2012).

The difficulty in both sustaining and enforcing such a settlement stems from the fact that there is, realistically speaking, no final settlement that would be acceptable by all parties. A slide one way or the other would either put an untimely end to Russia's regional ambitions or to the EU's Eastern policy.

Virtually all the actors involved - the EU, NATO, US, Russia and Ukraine itself - are currently redefining their strategic priorities and objectives. The EU's Eastern Partnership has been a positive initiative, which generated tangible results, but it is not enough. It does not have an end state (and cannot be considered an end in itself) largely because the EU as a whole has not decided what it really wants to achieve in its Eastern Neighbourhood. The new Juncker Commission has unambiguously stated that no new members will join the Union in the following five years and this reflects the mood of most current Member States. But enlargement has been the EU's most successful policy and 'slamming the door' in the face of European states willing and able to fulfil all criteria would be not just an admission of failure, but a blow to the very founding principles of the Union. However, it is unlikely - given the current internal issues the EU struggles with, as well as the broad palette of external challenges - that the issue of enlargement will be settled, one way or the other, in the near future. Though, it is imperative to keep the option on the table, even if it's a long-term one. Equally clear is the fact that the EU must maintain a working relationship with Russia.

This will be difficult, chiefly because Russia itself is struggling to come to terms with its place in the world. In fact, a large portion of the blame for the Ukrainian crisis can be attributed to Moscow's inability to generate a viable integration project for its region of interest. It has utterly failed to match the EU's power of attraction and, in fact, still struggles with the concept of 'soft power'. Its only means of projecting power are the traditional ones (military intervention, supporting affiliated regimes via direct and indirect subsidies), but those can go only so far in today's world. Its nationalistic streak has done much to alienate other post-Soviet states and its Customs Union / Eurasian Economic Union integration project seems clumsily handled. Recent statements - like the one made on August 29th by president Putin with regard to Kazakhstan's lack of statehood tradition (immediately followed by a suggestion that it is to the Kazakh people's advantage to "remain in the greater

Russian world" – see Radio Free Europe 3 September 2014) - have only contributed to alienating neighbours. As a metaphorical synthesis of Russian efforts and real effects, it seems Moscow has aimed to be the Third Rome, but appears more and more like the Second Babylon.

As for the US, it is still considering its role in Europe and redefining its post-Cold War relation with Russia (Jensen 2009; Stent 2014). For some policymakers, the 'pivot to Asia' is the future and the US should focus on real strategic competitors (i.e. China). They relegate the Ukrainian crisis to a regional problem, ranking somewhat below the self-proclaimed 'Islamic State' and are happy to pass on as much responsibility as possible to Europeans. For others, the US never left Europe, nor should they contemplate the option. Indeed, one can argue that NATO has been reinvigorated by the Ukrainian crisis and has reacted adequately to reassure its members and reinforce the security of its Eastern flank. It remains clear that NATO and the Transatlantic alliance remain relevant and that most European states view them as cornerstones of European security.

4. CONCLUSIONS

As is quite often the case, the 'bridge' solution is one that looks good on paper, but would struggle to survive contact with reality. Neither enforceability nor sustainability of such a deal could be maintained at the necessary levels, a result that can be attributed to a broad range of factors.

Some of these pertain to the current global and regional context. A 'Finland' option is derived from the history of the Cold War, a time when the 'balance of terror' ensured unprecedented stability in Europe, with static lines of contact and rigorously respected rules. Today's permanently shifting landscape makes a similar balance nearly impossible to maintain. On a macro level, globalisation and technological advances multiply the possibilities of interaction and influence. 'Offshore balancers' like the US or China can be more easily brought into play. On the regional level, the equation is far more complicated and conflictual in 2014 Eastern Europe than in Cold War Scandinavia. The specific conditions for a 'Finland scenario' are not met. An essential aspect is that any solution for the Ukrainian case would impact, one

way or the other, the Republic of Moldova, Georgia and, quite likely, Belarus and the Central Asian states as well.

Other factors are associated with intra-state dynamics. On a general level, social and technological advances mean that populations are more mobile, more informed and have higher expectations. The likelihood of quick and decisive socio-political changes is exponentially greater.

As previously shown, the question of national identity plays a central role in this case. Moscow's military action has galvanised a sense of separate, non-Russian identity in much of the Ukrainian population, particularly among the younger generations. This identity is increasingly associated with an aspiration towards a 'European' (i.e. Western) model of society. Consequently, a new pro-European political elite has coalesced in Kiev, with a level of ambition to match. Many of the old political figures have been swept away, including almost all openly pro-Russian politicians. It will take some time for Russia to rebuild its political network in Ukraine and it will never approach its old level of influence as long as Crimea and the Eastern regions are removed from the political mainstream.

The occupation of Crimea, the military intervention, the subsequent international sanctions, all have created a significant financial liability for the Federation's budget, adding to the already wide economic gap between Russia and the EU. Moscow's attempts to reorient east, towards China, have resulted in a set of deals which, while heralded as political triumphs, appear rather to push Russia towards a losing economic model – supplier of energy and raw materials for its neighbouring state. In seeking to become a hegemon in Eastern Europe, Moscow may have inadvertently set itself on the path of becoming Beijing's junior partner in Asia.

This would be a deadly blow to the authoritarian, 'neo-imperial' and nationalistic model of society assiduously promoted by the current Russian leadership. In fact, in this model we find the root cause of the Ukrainian conflict and the main reason why a genuine '50/50' solution has little chance of working at this time. This main stumbling block could have been anticipated simply by looking at the sources for such a proposal. They are almost exclusively Western. And the simple reason for this is that this is not a solution that Russia can accept in the long term. As shown, Ukraine is part of the very core of Russian strategic interests and a key element in defining Russian identity. Doubly so if that self-assumed identity is that of a great

power, a regional hegemon at the very least. Without Ukraine, Vladimir Putin would have little to show for his empire building efforts. Belarus, a few increasingly reluctant Central Asian states and a few unrecognised enclaves in Georgia or the Republic of Moldova are simply not enough. In fact, most of them tend to absorb Russian resources without providing major benefits.

At the same time, the other international actors are still struggling to define their own strategic interests and long term approaches to the region. A final settlement at this stage would impact everyone's calculations. It is clear that Ukraine is, at the moment, at the exact intersection of two major integration projects - the EU and a Russia-centred one. Despite their significant age difference, both of these projects are 'works in progress' and have not yet defined their limits or their aspirational final stages. They also have only poorly-defined ideas on how to relate to each other (the 'common economic space from Lisbon to Vladivostok' being a very distant goal right now). The truth of the matter is that the EU does not know yet what to do with Ukraine (or with the other Eastern partners). But it does make a genuine effort to assist them and ensure that democracy and prosperity are part of their future. The Union may be a 'work in progress', but this has, so far, been its natural state and it manages to work quite well. The opportunities it offers Ukraine and its people vastly overshadow other options.

Russia, on the other hand, knows quite well what it wants, but has so far been utterly unable to make a palatable offer. Its own Customs Union / Eurasian Economic Union seems like a doomed project squeezed in between powerhouses EU and China. Politically, many states view it as a transparent attempt to recreate a space of Russian hegemony, modelled on the defunct Soviet Union (president Putin's stated admiration of the USSR doesn't help in this regard).

Ukraine can't remain a 'no man's land' between these two projects and, unfortunately, there is little space for real neutrality and little advantage to be gained from it. However, the desire to end the active phase of the crisis and normalise, at least in part, relations with Russia, make it likely that some sort of deal will be made. It may even look, on the surface, like the aforementioned 'bridge' solution. But it is exceedingly unlikely that any party, least of all Russia, would view it as a final settlement.

A 'grand bargain', defining Russia's relations to the West once and for all is also unlikely. Without satisfactory resolutions in key cases (chief among these

Ukraine, but also the Transdniestrian issue, Georgia and others), an overarching agreement is impossible.

A more probable outcome for the near future would be a policy of 'complex containment'. This could be aptly described as 'cooperation at arm's length'. Both the EU and NATO have acknowledged that Russia can no longer be considered a genuine partner. The fact is, Moscow has positioned itself as, not just a competitor, but an outright adversary of the West. Its revisionist stance and attempts to undermine the current international system are dangerous and should not be downplayed. There are two particularly undesirable end results which the West must be careful to avoid. The first is appeasement – trying to remodel the European security architecture according to Russia's wishes would alienate virtually all Eastern member states, discredit the EU and destroy its Neighbourhood Policy, weaken international norms and, most of all, validate Russia's actions as a model of success. The second is alienation – completely rejecting any and all Russian concerns and pushing it into a cycle of adversity with the West.

'Complex containment' is based on the fact that the current tensions are temporary and are largely based on the outlook of Russian leadership at the moment and how it chooses to frame the country's options and concerns. Some of its actions, in particular those designed to pressure the EU's Eastern partners, must be contained and mitigated. NATO must adjust to the new threat environment and reinforce its Eastern flank. No Russian action must be without an adequate response and the West must clearly underline the limits. But dialogue must continue and so must economic and political interaction, to the highest extent possible. 'Complex containment' will not be a permanent situation, but only a temporary point of balance, highly dependent on political evolutions, especially those within Russia. The final goal should be an honest partnership, based on respect for both the principles of international law and the sovereign choices of all states. It is doubtful that any of them will want to live under a bridge.

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