

European Union's institutional discourse on the Eastern Partnership and its reception in Russia

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Introduction

For much of the last two decades, the European Union has been faced with a peculiar dilemma with regard to its Eastern neighbourhood countries; they are neither part of EU proper nor are they just another other, for they are too important a puzzle piece in managing relations with Russia. Over time, this ambiguity found institutional anchoring in, first, the European Union's Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and, more recently, its more focused form - the Eastern Partnership (EaP), aimed at Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Much has been written about the Eastern Partnership, with scholars focusing on its foundation and rationale (Tulmets 2008; Lapczynski 2009; Korosteleva 2011a; Copsey and Pomorska 2014), on its scope (Verdun and Chira 2011), and on the mechanisms devised to achieve the EU's goals with regard to the Eastern neighbourhood (Korosteleva 2011b; Stegnyy 2011). An equal amount of attention has recently been paid to evaluating the efficiency of the Partnership and to proposing further venues for strengthening its role in managing the relations between Brussels and the six Eastern European capitals respectively (Delcour 2013; Nielsen and Vilson 2014). Finally, most recently, the Eastern Partnership has been re-evaluated in light of the European Union's Global Strategy foreign policy conception of 2016, which increasingly emphasizes the need to strengthen the neighbourhood's resilience to threats and challenges (European External Action Service 2016; Ikani 2018; Eickhoff and Stollenwerk 2018).

These accounts of the European Neighbourhood Policy and of the Eastern Partnership have constituted valuable contributions to the growing literature on the European Union's relations with its neighbourhood. Still, we argue that the literature has paid insufficient attention to two important matters. First, the discursive positioning of the Partnership by the European Union not only vis-à-vis the six partner countries themselves, but also vis-à-vis third countries. Second, we argue that the scholarship has not credibly assessed the position of the obvious elephant in the Eastern Partnership room, namely the Russian Federation, towards a region that the EU describes as its shared neighbourhood with Moscow, but that Moscow itself regards as its natural sphere of influence (with the notable exception of Gretskiy, Treshchenkov, and Golubev 2014).

To remedy for these two shortcomings, this article proposes to "go to back to basics" and to juxtapose the European Union's framing of the Eastern Partnership with the framing of the very same policy framework in the Russian Federation. By means of discourse analysis and framing, we intend to

lay bare the terms in which the European Union has been presenting the Eastern Partnership to both its own citizens, the citizens of the six partner countries, and third countries. To this end, we analyze primary EU documents on the Eastern Partnership – predominantly Joint Declarations issued at the EaP summits taking place every two years and the corresponding remarks by the European Council Presidents, next to several foundational EU foreign policy documents. We juxtapose these with the framing of the EaP (and the overarching ENP) in the Russian political (parliamentarian and presidential), expert, and academic discourse. Our research is guided by the following questions: Has the European Union been consistent in its framing of the Eastern Partnership as, for instance, a predominantly economic and political initiative? Or has the European Union changed its framing efforts of the EaP in favor of a more security- or normative-driven approach to the neighbourhood? Have the same frames been articulated in the Russian discourse? In Russia, can we identify a difference in framing the EaP among the various discourse participants? Such a comparative analysis brings to the fore the various representations of the EU's foreign policy towards Eastern Europe in both the European Union and the Russian Federation, signaling divergent and/or overlapping conceptualizations of the region laying in-between the EU and Russia. This seems to be the more relevant at times in which the region in question seems to be plunged into identity, political, economic, and security crises.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: this introduction is followed by a section outlining the conceptual framework and methodological choices we have made to address both the EU and Russian discourse on the Eastern Partnership. The following section addresses the frames the European Union has utilized to communicate the Eastern Partnership, with the subsequent section analyzing the framing of this foreign policy initiative in Russia. Before concluding, the paper discusses the findings, highlighting and explaining similarities and differences across the two actors studied.

Conceptual framework

Since the 1990s, scholars of the European Union have underlined the importance of intersubjective meaning construction at the basis of the Union's policy in general and foreign policy in particular. Namely, Kohler-Koch (2000) argued for the centrality of meaning-making and contestation processes in the quest for the legitimacy in the definition and adjustments of the EU's institutions. Neither a systematic processing of information nor deliberation can reduce the fundamental ambiguity of social situations, so that decisions have to be made and institutions built based on frames - intentional, selective definitions of the situation (Kohler-Koch 2000, pp. 515-516). As such, frames are conceptual structures that organize political thought, policies, and discourse (Gamson 1992). The process of framing consists in 'selecting, organizing, interpreting and making sense of a complex reality so as to

provide guideposts for knowing, analyzing, persuading and acting' (Rein and Schön quoted by Kohler-Koch 2000, p. 515, see also Snow and Benford, 1992). Framing results in the 'construction of intersubjective views' with concrete social consequences: different interpretations of the situation call for different actions and forms of social organization (Larsen 2004, p. 64). Usually, framing is a competitive process with high stakes; indeed, the predominant framing of the issue may influence the possibility for action and institutional change (Hajer 1993). A discursive tool often used for framing are narratives – coherent stories about social reality, which highlight a certain chronological pattern of development and change and attribute agency.

In the study of EU's foreign policy, researchers agreeing on the performative potential of discourse have highlighted the centrality of the discursive struggles in the shaping of EU institutions and political actions towards its near and far neighbourhood (namely, Smith 2003, Paasi 1998, 2001, Larsen 2000, 2004, Jones 2010, and Nițoiu 2013). Thus, Larsen claims that the EU's actorness in international relations - as complementary to but not fully overlapping with the actorness of the member states - is constructed in relation to its obligations to meet international challenges and pursue its own political and economic goals (Larsen 2004, p. 69, also Larsen 2000). Coherent discourses about external challenges and threats and internal goals help EU member states 'coalesce around a shared geopolitical understanding' (Jones 2010, p. 418) and thus further the legitimacy of its external action and its institutions (Jones 2010, p. 428). The role of the scholar, who wishes to understand the origin and relative success of policies and institutions, is to look for ways certain meanings are temporarily fixed in discourses (Larsen 2004, p. 66; Kohler-Koch 2000, p. 516).

With respect to such temporarily fixed meanings in the discourse about the EU's external relations, several prominent ways of framing the EU's role have been identified. Thus, Nițoiu (2013) lists five partly overlapping options in the self-presentation of the EU as an external actor in the 2000s: narrative of the EU as a promoter of peace, EU as a democratizer, EU as a promoter of good neighborliness, EU as a welfare promoter and the security narrative. Probably with the exception of the security narrative, all these images present the European Union as an exporter of a successful model, as a peaceful, well-governed and prosperous actor, interested in cooperation and in sustainable development of its partners by sharing keys to its success. This outward oriented definition of EU's foreign policy bears on the approach the Union takes towards its neighbours. The promotion of peace, stability, good governance and welfare by the EU relies on its self-credited success in these areas, especially in comparison with the less successful non-members. This 'universalist prescription of the EU model' (Browning and Christou 2010, p. 112) underpins a unilateral projection of institutions and policies and undermines genuine contestation (Korosteleva 2016) and genuine partnership (Haukkala 2008, p. 44; Manners 2010, p. 40). Based on this research, we are therefore likely to find the aspiration to 'share'

the EU's successes in these different spheres through the interaction with its neighbourhood partners in its discourse on the neighbourhood policy.

In the case of the Eastern partners, this tendency should be even more pronounced. Central and Eastern Europe were imagined by European polities as 'the incarnation of Europe's past, a past that the West had overcome' (Diez 2004, p. 326), and thus set to re-join the 'European family' by catching up and adopting EU's values and institutions. Based on this logic, the Eastern Partnership can be expected to be framed as outward efforts to improve neighbors' performance in political, economic and governance terms, with relatively little mention of the neighbors' own preferences or ability to impact EU's practices and institutions in these areas.

In what concerns the security narrative in the EU's external relations and its ENP in particular, it has two interesting dimensions. Arguably, the reliance of the EU on its model character (as a peaceful tolerant community based on good governance principles) as basis for its legitimacy calls for a 'totalizing liberal security view' demanding the acceptance of the EU's 'way of doing things' as the basis of the EU's acceptance of others (Parker cited in Browning and Christou 2010, p. 112). The EU's normative agenda is thus understood and framed as a major component of its security policy. Economic, political, but also normative convergence of the EU's neighbourhood with the EU can improve stability and security by extending the European order beyond EU's borders (Jones 2010, p. 427), while still drawing boundaries between the EU proper and this extension. We can thus expect the Eastern Partnership to be framed by the EU as bringing security to the EU and the region based on an extension of the EU's practices to the neighbourhood.

Another component of the EU's security narrative is its relations with Russia, both as a big neighbouring country and as a central other, in relation to which EU's identity is defined (Diez 2004, Nițoiu 2013, Larsen 2004, Neumann 1999). According to Oudenaren, Russia is special as 'the only country in Europe outside of the European Union that has a tradition as a great power and that still has aspirations to be an important global actor as well as part of an integrated Europe' (quoted in Fernandes 2016, p. 25). Historically, Russia provided a benchmark against which Europe and, later, the EU, has understood itself, so that Russia's alterity was a 'productive force' in the production of Europe's identity (Browning 2003, p. 55; Paasi 2001). The Eastern Partnership may be therefore constructed in relation to the Russian ambitions in the region, as a geopolitical counterweight to it, but also as a way to manage specific security threats to the EU, linked to Russia, such as energy security and the possible negative effects of instability in Eastern Europe (Nițoiu 2013). There is a tension between EU security achieved by the projection of the EU's normative and governance model (the model which relies namely on the productive use of Russia's alterity) to the Eastern Partnership region, on the one side, and the pragmatic security, for example, energy security, which can be achieved by not frustrating

Russia's key interests in the region. Consequently, we can expect conflicting, incoherent or ambiguous framing of the security aspect of the Eastern Partnership by the European Union.

As to the reception of the EU's Eastern Partnership in Russia, the existing literature leads us to believe that it is likely to be driven by two main logics: first, the complex and changing relations between Russia and the European Union, and, second, the complex and changing relations between Russia and its new 'near abroad', composed of the former Soviet republics and former members of the communist bloc. With relations to the European Union, the great power legacy of Russia (as the inheritor of the Soviet Union's statehood) and its ambition to remain a great power meant that it strives for egalitarian, partnership relations with the EU (DeBardeleben 2017, p. 120). Following this ambition, it declined to participate in the ENP and negotiated a different framework for the systematic interaction with the EU (the Four Common Spaces, Hughes 2006). Still, the unilateral projection model of the EU's foreign policy, described above, made it difficult for Russia to impose itself as an agent of common regional policy, on par with the EU. The active promotion of its normative agenda by the EU and Russia's self-definition as a self-reliant actor, including in terms of normative identity, made it indeed very difficult to find common ground for mutually acceptable regional roles for both actors (Haukkala 2008). One important consequence of this impossible partnership was Russia's newly affirmed goal of keeping and strengthening its role as the 'leading actor and the guarantor of order in the post-Soviet space' (Prozorov 2007, p. 319). Indeed, while until approximately 2008, Russia's response to the EU's initiatives in the shared neighbourhood was mainly defensive (Haukkala 2008, p. 46), it has since developed a number of institutional integration frameworks for the region (CIS Free Trade Zone, Customs Union, Eurasian Economic Union) and deployed a variety of economic and political tools to attract former Soviet republics to join them. This integration offer has been constructed with reference to and often in explicit competition with the expansion of the European integration project to the East, in the form of the EU and NATO enlargement. It remains, however, unclear how the weaker form of this integration – the Eastern Partnership – has been understood and interpreted in Russia and whether the (geo)political, economic, security or other considerations have been predominantly used in framing this understanding.

In our analysis of the framing of the Eastern Partnership in the EU institutional discourse and its reception in Russian institutional, academic and expert discourse, we distinguish and trace the use of four different frames: political, economic, security, and normative (Table 1). We do not consider these frames to be mutually exclusive ways to make sense of the EaP framework and practice; it would indeed be impossible to draw a clear line between, for instance, the political and the normative aspects of Partnership, taking into account the centrality of values and norms in the EU's political identity. At the same time, it is rare that a single frame dominates the discourse of a complex collective actor, such as the European Union or Russia, as discursive agreement in the area of declaratory diplomacy is

limited and different meanings will compete and struggle (Larsen 2004, p. 62). We aim however to highlight the relative emphasis on certain ways of meaning-making over others and traces changes in this emphasis over time.

Frame	Explanation
Economic	Focus on economic costs and benefits, on free movement and trade incl. energy market, on welfare and living standards, on employment, on business and entrepreneurship, on science and education
Political	Focus on domestic politics, democracy, reforms, civil society, on the interest of the people and their will, on integration and institutional ties, on good neighborly relations, on (ethnic) minorities, on regulatory convergence, good governance, role of law, human rights
Normative	Focus on shared values and principles, on identity and belonging, on common future and aspirations, on culture, unity and diversity
Security	Focus on peace and order, crime fighting, conflict and crisis management, border security, energy security, control and sovereignty, on military power and geopolitics

Table 1. Four main frames of the Eastern Partnership

Our corpus is divided in two parts. For the EU side, we have looked at several foundational EU foreign policy documents and the Joint Declarations issued at the biannual EaP summits and the corresponding remarks by the European Council Presidents. For the Russian side, we relied on full transcripts of parliamentary debates, on presidents' speeches and interviews, on academic literature published by Russian scholars in Russia on the Eastern Partnership, and on semi-structured expert (elite) interviews¹.

Our analysis proceeded as follows. For the EU discourse, we looked for the declared goals and motivations of the Eastern Partnership framework and practices, with regard to our four frames (economic, political, normative, and security) and traced important changes in the relative weight of the frames across time (2008-2017). For the Russian discourse, we have searched the parliamentary debates and presidential speeches (available online in the databases of the parliament and president, respectively), in the same period (2008-2017), for mentions of the Eastern Partnership and recorded the discourse interpreting its goals and practices, taking note of the framing choices. Additionally, as there are close linkages between academia and political decision-making on the ENP and EaP in Russia (Treshenkov 2013, p. 31), we searched for high-impact publications on Eastern Partnership in Russia-based academic outlets. Finally, we added the interpretations of the EaP from semi-structured expert (elite) interviews conducted in Russia. We first present the analysis of the EU discourse, before turning to Russia.

¹ The interviewees were selected among staff of Russian academic institutions (predominantly universities), advisory councils and think tanks (such as the Russian International Affairs Council), and the state bureaucracy. To preserve anonymity, the interviewees are identified by letters instead of names (A, B, C, etc.).

Framing the Eastern Partnership in the European Union

The Eastern Partnership, initially a joint Polish/Swedish initiative to tackle the heterogeneity among the ENP partner countries in terms of their geographic location and their own ambition qua developing relations with the EU, has received green light at the June 2008 European Council summit in Brussels. The heads of EU member states declared to be welcoming 'the proposals for developing the eastern dimension of the European Neighbouring Policy' to further 'promote regional cooperation among the EU's eastern neighbours and between the EU and the region' (Council of the European Union 2008, p. 19). The Russo-Georgian war in August 2008 confirmed that the European Union would be an actor likely to be called upon when one of the ENP partner countries would find itself in distress, thereby further highlighting the lack of a dedicated EU policy framework involving only the Eastern European ENP members. It is then this very conflict in Georgia that needs to be seen as a catalyst behind the EU's enhanced efforts to conclude the EaP, which was finalized during the Czech Republic's Council Presidency in the first half of 2009 (Neuman 2015).

From Prague (2009) to Vilnius (2013): the Eastern Partnership as a politico-economic initiative

With this in mind, it becomes interesting to assess the Joint Declaration of the Prague Eastern Partnership Summit, which saw the representatives of then 27 EU member states and the six Eastern European partner countries gather in Prague to formally launched this long-awaited and long-negotiated initiative. Read through the prism of the four discursive frameworks applied throughout this article – namely politics, economy, security, and norms – the Eastern Partnership is predominantly presented in politico-economic terms. This certainly does not mean that the other two frameworks – security and norms – would not be relevant, but that political and economic framing clearly dominated this stage of the EaP. To illustrate, the participants have agreed that the EaP 'will be based on commitments to the principles of international law and to fundamental values, including democracy, the rule of law and the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms [...]' (Council of the European Union 2009, p. 5). Yet, while such references to shared values have been sporadic and superficial at best, the remainder of the Declaration places great emphasis on the fact that the Partnership is to be an inclusive policy framework aimed at creating 'the necessary conditions to accelerate political association and further economic integration' (ibid., p. 6, emphasis added).

Interestingly enough, though created in the aftermath of the Russo-Georgian conflict, the Eastern Partnership does not position itself as a forum for addressing – let alone solving – the many regional, often frozen, conflicts spanning the region, incl. the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan (both EaP members), Transnistria (involving Moldova), and South Ossetia and Abkhazia (both involving Georgia and Russia). Similarly, no third countries are mentioned as neither potential partners to the EaP, nor as potential obstacles to the EaP fulfilling the goal of closer political

association and economic integration. This would thus be in line with the often repeated statement of the European Union that the Eastern Partnership is not against anyone (SOURCE). The EU's insistence on this point however has only confirmed Russia's suspicion of the contrary, as the following section in this article demonstrates.

The dominant framing of the Eastern Partnership as a politico-economic initiative continued throughout the first four years of the Partnership's existence. While two of the four thematic platforms established the structure the day-to-day work between the EU and the six Eastern European countries – namely, Democracy, good governance, and stability and Contacts between people – would allude to the EU also venturing into more normative-based cooperation, the EU went to great lengths to maintain the framing of a political and economically mutually-beneficial partnership. As such, the bulk of both the Joint Declaration following the EaP summit in September 2011 (Warsaw) and November 2013 (Vilnius) is of a rather technocratic nature, taking stock of the progress made and of future challenges in the many areas of cooperation, from mobility and visa regimes, over energy and transport cooperation, all the way to sustainability. Besides legislative convergence in these areas, the EU focused at both summits on the possible finalization of Association Agreements (AAs) and of Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTAs), once again standing as proof for the Union's continued emphasis on political and economic cooperation. During this period, the EU begins to distinguish between the six partner countries, falling back upon its widely employed approach of conditionality – differentiation based on compliance: 'According to these principles [differentiation and mutual accountability], the pace of reforms will determine the intensity of the cooperation, and partners most engaged in reforms will benefit more from their relationship with the European Union, including closer political association, deeper gradual economic integration in the EU Internal Market and increased EU support' (Council of the European Union 2009, p. 2).

While the EU thus did not alter the framing of the Eastern Partnership, we observe few subtle changes, first occurring outside of the Eastern Partnership scope strictly speaking, but slowly being integrated into the Union's communication on the EaP. In the European Commission's and the High Representative's Joint Communication "A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood" commissioned in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, the European Union puts much more emphasis on building deep democracy, as opposed to focusing on the existence of free, fair, and competitive elections only. Not only is the concept of deep democracy elaborated upon – 'the kind that lasts because the right to vote is accompanied by rights to exercise free speech, form competing political parties, receive impartial justice from independent judges, security from accountable policy and army forces, access to a competent and non-corrupt civil service' (European Commission & High Representative of the European Union 2011, p. 2) – but it was also given a much more prominent place when dealing with the neighbourhood. This trickled down into the Vilnius summit declaration, where, unlike in previous

editions, '[m]aking further steps in strengthening democracy, guaranteeing respect of human rights and rule of law' (Council of the European Union 2013, p. 4) became one of the main EaP goals. Yet, also in Vilnius, as argued above, the Eastern Partnership continued being framed as a political and economic endeavor that exists for the benefit for all parties involved and that is not positioned against the interests of any third country. This is all the more surprising considering that it was just before the Vilnius summit that then Ukrainian president Yanukovich announced that Ukraine would, after all, not sign the long-negotiated Association Agreement with the EU; an act often explained as a result of Russian pressure on Kyiv. Not yet knowing what the ultimate consequences of Ukraine's decision would be – i.e. a domestic political crisis in Ukraine, Euromaidan, Russia's involvement, the eventual annexation of Crimea to Russia and an outbreak of civil unrest in the East of Ukraine – the EaP countries solely took 'note of the unprecedented public support for Ukraine's political association and economic integration with the EU' (Council of the European Union 2013, p. 3). While such scarce reference to the evolving situation in Ukraine can be explained by the fact that Council conclusions are usually drafted much ahead of the summits themselves and thereby making any last minute change rather difficult and by the fact that Ukraine herself had to agree to the Council conclusions, then President of the European Council, van Rompuy, was more outspoken during the press conference that followed the summit. In an innuendo at Russia's involvement in Ukrainian domestic politics, he assured Ukraine that with regards to the AA and the DCFTA, the EU was ready to sign these setting aside 'short term considerations' and overcoming 'pressure from abroad' (European Council 2013, p. 2, emphasis added). These subtle changes in the EU's discourse on the Eastern Partnership were herald of the more substantial changes in framing this policy initiate in the years to come.

From Vilnius (2013) to no summit at all (2019): the Eastern Partnership as a geopolitical project

In 2015, Riga witnessed the first Eastern Partnership following Euromaidan and the events that had followed in Ukraine after the previous Vilnius summit. In Riga, the European Union and its six Eastern European partner countries no longer framed the Partnership as a predominantly political/economic partnership, but began to frame it in geopolitical terms, acknowledging competition for the region. As European Council President Tusk put it, 'our [Eastern] partnership will grow increasingly closer and offer by far the best prospects for Europe as a whole' (European Council 2015, p. 2). Whereas in Riga the EU and the Eastern Partnership countries continued highlighting the progress made within the many sectors of mutual cooperation, the summit – and the resulting Council conclusions – were clearly dominated by both the EU's and the region's geopolitical and security concerns in the aftermath of the Ukraine/Crimea crisis.

Consequently, in terms of framing the Partnership along the political / economic / legal / normative lines, the Council presents its conclusions in much more normative- and legally-driven

terms. Concepts absent in previous years, such as sovereignty and territorial integrity, are now given a prominent place: '[t]he acts against Ukraine and the events in Georgia since 2014 have shown that the fundamental principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity within internationally recognized borders cannot be taken for granted in the 21st century on the European continent' (Council of the European Union 2015, p. 2). In this vein, in the framework of the Eastern Partnership, the EU suddenly began to pay attention to the many regional conflicts that span the entire region; conflicts, which, as has been maintained above, existed ever since the EaP's launch, yet only entered the discourse during the 2015 summit. Where the EU previously emphasized legal approximation to enhance economic relations, it now called for strengthening efforts in the many multilateral fora in place to address the Chisinau-Tiraspol dialogue, or in the Minsk Group to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (Ibid., p. 3). Furthermore, reflecting the more pragmatic and geopolitically oriented character of the EU's foreign policy as testified by the concurrent debates on the EU's Global Strategy (2016) and the Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy (2015), the Riga summit did not shy away from acknowledging power competition in the neighbourhood. Inspired by the then negotiated Global Strategy, the EU's response to such geopolitical pressure being exerted upon the six partner countries was to strengthen the 'resilience of Eastern European partners faced with new challenges for their stability' (Council of the European Union 2015, p. 7).

Yet, despite clearly being informed by geopolitical competition, the Riga summit at no time outright mentioned the Russian Federation as the European Union's primary competitor in the region. Even European Council President Tusk, in his remarks, refrained from naming Russia, only maintaining that 'consistent and strong commitment to the Eastern Partnership and each of our partner countries is the main message of this summit. And it is a necessary message in light of the last years' turmoil, aggression, intimidation and even war in this part of Europe' (European Council 2015, p. 1). Finally, he reiterated that our [the European Union's with the EaP countries] relationship is 'built on free will, respect and equality' (Ibid., p. 2). By the last Eastern Partnership summit to date, taking place in Brussels in November 2017, such restraint on the EU's part was for the most part absent. Commenting on how the region's frozen and armed conflicts prevent its development, Tusk was clear in assigning blame: 'The EU condemns Russia's aggression and will never recognize the illegal annexation of Crimea' (European Council 2017, p. 1). Hence, within the framework of the Eastern Partnership, it took until 2017 for Russia to formally enter the equation. In a similar spirit, the summit conclusions have once more reiterated the importance of sovereignty, territorial integrity, principles of international law, good governance, human security, stability and resilience (Council of the European Union 2017). In this light, the Eastern Partnership's old claim to build 'a common area of shared democracy, prosperity, stability and increased cooperation and is not directed against anyone' (Ibid., p. 3, emphasis added) seems somewhat disingenuous. As of now, there is no Eastern Partnership summit planned for 2019

due to the European Council's focus on bringing Brexit to a successful completion. Instead, an expert conference to mark the 10th anniversary of the Eastern Partnership is being mulled for May 2019 to take place in Brussels (Jozwiak 2018).

Framing the Eastern Partnership in the Russian Federation

Initially, the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) did not provoke a big discussion in the Russian academia nor in the federal parliament. The European Commission's report "Big Europe" in March 2003 marked the beginning of an academic discussion about the role Russia could play in regional cooperation initiatives of the EU and on the compatibility of the Russia-driven and EU-driven regional integration of post-soviet states (Gretskyi and Treschenkov 2012, p. 124). While Russia itself could not agree to be a member of the European Neighborhood Policy on par with much smaller countries, it could consider a benevolent and active role as a regional leader connecting the regional integration processes in the shared neighborhood (Ibid.). Still, the focus of attention in 2003-2004 was on the "Big Bang" enlargement of the European Union and the pressing issues of the agreements between Russia and the new EU member states, including the problematic issue of cargo transit to Kaliningrad. Additionally, Russia was active in reintegrating economically with Belarus, Ukraine and Kazakhstan (Single Economic Space agreement with Ukraine signed in 2003) and was not very convinced by the EU's potential for common foreign policy (Ibid., p. 126).

The situation changed after the "Orange Revolution" in Ukraine when Russian authorities witnessed the potential of the European Union's "soft power" and the attraction of its promise of economic welfare on the post-soviet space (Treshenkov 2013, p. 16-17). The academic community reacted faster than the political institutions: the number of publications on the ENP and the policy of the EU towards Eastern Europe increased between 2004 and 2009. While the political decision-makers were rather skeptical about the possible impact of the new neighbourhood policy², academic audience was much better prepared. Most Russian academic publications of this period frame the ENP in geopolitical terms: thus, Shishelina depicts Eastern Europe as a strategically important region, rich in resources, that the Western European countries sought to obtain as a 'prize' from winning the Cold War, to create a new 'sanitary belt' (Shishelina 2008, p. 74, 77). Malysheva describes the Eastern Partnership as a program aimed at removing the target countries from the Russian sphere of influence and placing the EU in the position of their new 'curator' (Malysheva 2009, p. 47). This logic of

² As one interviewee maintained, 'quite frankly, when we were approached by the Polish about the Eastern Partnership initiative, we were not too worried about our neighbourhood, seeing that the ENP itself did not amount to much' (Interview A, Russian International Affairs Council, 5 April 2016). Furthermore, it was seen as lacking the necessary financial means to make any real difference and was observed as not being unanimously supported by all the member states, testifying to a rift among these (Interview E, Russian State University for the Humanities, 19 April 2016).

competition between the EU and Russia for the influence on and control over the Eastern European countries is a common trait of most academic publications of this period.

Russian scholars advanced that the declared goals of the program differed from the real intentions of the European Union. Reviewing the literature, Sergunin and Tikhonov identify three main goals of the EaP (2009, p. 33-34): first and especially in the case of the Caucasus republics, the EaP would serve finding alternative energy sources for Europe. After the "energy crises" where Ukraine and Belarus were cut off from Russian supplies during winter and, as transit countries, could not deliver energy to Europe, this goal appeared especially relevant (Treschenkov 2013). Second, scholars agreed that the EaP aimed at reducing Russia's geopolitical influence on the post-soviet space and increasing EU's own influence in the region. Third, it was seen as instrumental in completing the disintegration of the post-soviet space. While formulating and pursuing these goals in the region, scholars assumed that the EU worked in close cooperation with the United States (Zhiltsov quoted in Sergunin and Tikhonov 2009, p. 34; MP Likhatchev's speech on 20.03.2012).

In the parliament, no mention of the ENP or Eastern Partnership is recorded in plenary sessions before 2009. In 2009, the leader of the Duma faction of the party "A Just Russia" Bagdasarov is the only MP to raise the issue of the possible impact of the Eastern Partnership on Russia. In May 2009, he requests additional information on the program from the Government and in July, he deplores that Russia does not have its own program to counteract the EaP and other similar programs of the European Union on the post-soviet space. He fears that in addition to the eastwards expansion of NATO, the economic expansion of the EU poses a serious threat to Russia's interests (Plenary minutes, July 23, 2009).

Russia's President at the time Medvedev shared the academia's suspicion and Bagdasarov's concern about the EaP. In 2009, an ENP dimension aimed specifically at Eastern European countries and including three Caucasus countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia) had been fully shaped and presented at the inaugural Eastern Partnership summit in Prague on May 7. At the end of the same month, at the concluding press conference of the EU-Russia summit in May 2009 in Khabarovsk, Medvedev was asked by journalists about his attitude towards this new program. He responded in a nuanced way: some participating countries may use the EaP as an anti-Russian tool and he 'would not like to see this partnership lead to consolidation between countries with anti-Russian attitudes and other European countries' (May 22, 2009, official translation). Later that year Medvedev was asked by a Belarusian journalist whether he opposed Belarus's participation in the EaP. He answered that if the program was seen as beneficial by the country and if it aims at supporting the participating states, he would not object. Still, if the program serves for discussing anti-Russian topics, he would find it unpleasant (23.11.2009, Interview to Belarusian media). Thus, he shared the academia's inclination that there may be more to the EaP than the European Union would officially acknowledge. Moreover,

whatever the announced aims of the EaP, it was the continuation of the EU's eastward advancement and thus presented a challenge to Russia's control of its immediate neighbourhood. Russia thus had to come up with a response.

The focus on Eurasian integration process

The crystallization of the Eastern Partnership was a trigger for a more active Eurasian integration policy by Russia (Mikhailin 2017, p. 98): Customs Union in 2010, Free Trade Zone of the CIS in 2011, Single Economic Space in 2012. By 2013, when several EaP countries were supposed to sign Association agreements with the EU at the summit in Vilnius, Russia was concurrently offering them a regional integration alternative. It was not anymore relying on its sheer weight or on the historic ties for ascertaining its interests in the region. Some Russian scholars thought that the lack of membership perspective in the EaP program could even make it easier for Russia to promote its own integration initiatives: for instance, Moldova and Ukraine could grow impatient in the "antechamber" zone of the EU and Russia could step in as a regional attraction center (Romanovskaya and Romanovskiy 2010, p. 3).

In 2010-2012, Russian political discourse focused on Eurasian integration. In the parliament, MPs actively discussed the consecutive steps of the Eurasian economic integration and paid no explicit attention to the Eastern Partnership³. Russian presidents did not raise the EaP as a topic in major speeches either. More implicitly, European integration appeared in the institutional discourse in two ways: as a simultaneous and often competing integration project and as a model of regional integration.

Now that Russia had to offer institutional economic integration to the neighbor countries with a variety of options and acknowledged a multi-speed differentiated approach to each country, it could play the same game as the EU. It advertised the potential of enhanced exchange and legislation harmonization, thus reusing a lot of the EU discourse on mutual benefit and integration. Scholars in Russia monitored the developments in the EaP to estimate the competition, framing it mostly in geopolitical terms (Treshenkov 2013). The second summit of the EaP in Warsaw in 2011 offered Russian researchers an occasion to review the intermediate results of the program and check them against the Russian fears and suspicions. They deemed the program only partly successful: on the one hand, it became better coordinated, received additional funding and recorded target countries' progress on the ways towards visa liberalization and free trade agreements with the EU. On the other

³ There are three mentions of Eastern Partnership between 2010 and 2012 in the Duma, but they are cursory. Only on one occasion the EaP is mentioned in a clearly negative way, as one instance of unfriendly European politics towards Russia, aiming at tearing Ukraine and Belarus off Russia (Abel'tsev, Liberal Democrats, 06.09.2011).

hand, it did not manage to bring about democratization nor to stabilize conflict zones. Moreover, disagreements among the EU members on the program persisted (Arutiunian and Sergunin 2012, p. 94-95).

Scholars note that failing to include Russia into the shaping of this program was a major structural issue: Russia remained suspicious about the EU's intentions in the region and thus the conflict potential between EU and Russia remained important (Arutiunian and Sergunin 2012, p. 96). Kosikova (2012, p. 188) underlines that the EU made free trade zone agreements with the EaP countries conditional on their refusal to participate in the Russia-led Customs Union, which complicated Russia's relations with Ukraine. More productively, politicians should be looking for ways to combine both types of regional integration for post-soviet states rather than defining them as mutually exclusive (ibid., 189). This suggestion squares badly with the general vocabulary of geopolitical competition used by Russian scholars and leaders. In practice, however, the insistence on the complementarity of the European and Eurasian regional integration projects is very present in Russian discourse since at least 2001, when Putin first spoke of Greater Europe from Lisbon to Vladivostok (REF). It serves a double function of showing Russia's openness and readiness to cooperate and, at the same time, of undermining the EU's claimed normative superiority. As the previous part of the paper has shown, the European Union was even more hesitant to admit that it participates in a competition for the EaP countries, instead it insisted on the lack of conflict of its cooperation offer with other options for the participating countries.

Eastern Partnership at the center of attention

On September 12, 2013, in the wake of the Eastern Partnership summit in Vilnius in November, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on the unacceptable pressure Russia applied on Eastern Partnership countries. The Russian Parliament reacted with a statement, which was hotly debated in the plenary session the following week. The structure of this discussion is very similar to the general tone of academic and think-tank publications in Russia in the previous years: the same tropes and arguments now are voiced in the Duma. A. Pushkov (United Russia), the head of the Duma's foreign affairs committee, led the discussion. He depicts the Eastern Partnership program as a neo-imperial policy aimed at creating colonial-type dependence of the participating states on the EU. While the participants and namely Ukraine need to adjust to the European Union in terms of their legislation and political choices and risk high economic losses from opening their markets, the EU does not even offer them a membership perspective. Participating in the EaP also makes it difficult for these states to maintain good relations with Russia and to participate in Eurasian integration. The European Parliament's resolution is described as another proof of the uncompromising plan of the EU to drag Ukraine and other EaP countries (Moldova, Armenia in particular) into the EU's exclusive sphere of

interest, so that a compromise with Russia is unlikely. Other MPs support Pushkov stating that the EU designed the EaP to oppose the Eurasian integration process in an explicit and intentional way (L. Slutsky, LDPR, head of the Duma's committee on Eurasian integration). EaP is a tool in the Eastwards expansion of the EU in its competition with Russia for geopolitical strength and resources (M. Emelianov, A Just Russia). The framing of EaP at this stage is highly political, it is about the competition between two "centers", two strong regional actors (the EU and Russia) over who controls and influences the "periphery" (see Browning and Christou 2010).

After the Vilnius summit and the beginning of the Euromaidan protests in Ukraine, following the refusal to sign the Association Agreement by Ukraine (Azerbaijan and Armenia declined as well), Duma held another discussion on the Eastern Partnership in December. This debate very clearly centered on what both Pushkov and Slutsky call a geopolitical battle for Ukraine and for the post-soviet space in general. The EU, according to Slutsky, insists on the association agreement despite it being detrimental to Ukrainian economy, which would be regulated from Brussels without Ukraine participating in the decision-making. Pushkov adds that the EU uses misinformation and myths to keep Ukraine close to itself: he recalls the Orange revolution as a similar occasion of the West's involvement into the domestic affairs of Ukraine. This very heated discussion mirrors in a way the EU rhetoric: the speakers insist on the free choice of Ukraine and its people, but deny choices they cannot accept as not reflecting the true will of the population.

Against this background, the EU-Russia summit in January 2014 presents a series of positive, constructive statements from the two sides on the cooperation and creation of a "Big Europe" without dividing lines. Putin insists on the compatibility of the European and Eurasian integration processes: 'they could effectively complement each other and contribute to the growth of mutual trade turnover'. For the EaP countries, this clearly presents a challenge: 'These states are striving to cooperate more actively with the European Union and simultaneously maintain close historical and cooperative ties with Russia' (Putin, January 2014). Putin suggests that a common free trade zone including the EU- and Russia-led integration frameworks could be created. On Ukraine more precisely, he reminds the media that Ukraine has a free trade zone agreement with Russia and could not sign an association agreement with the EU without direct economic consequences for Russia.

The geopolitical interpretation wins

After autumn 2013, the Eastern Partnership is not discussed in the same way by Russian political elites: there is no doubt anymore that the EaP is aimed against Russia. The Association Agreement with the EU comes to the forefront as the most important and problematic consequence of the EaP participation for post-soviet states. The discussion is over and one clear interpretation of the events in Ukraine becomes predominant. According to this interpretation, the EaP and, particularly, the EU's

insistence on the Association Agreement (backed by the US) provoked the split in Ukraine's society and elites. This split resulted in violence and necessitated Russia's involvement. We find this framing in the last mention of the EaP in Duma in September 2014:

'Not accidentally the fratricidal civil conflict in Ukraine began precisely with the rejection of the association with the European Union by Yanukovich on the eve of the November Eastern Partnership summit in Vilnius. The specter of Ukraine's entry into the Customs Union, its accession to the Eurasian project loomed before Washington; it became an intimidating factor for our strategic opponents. Within the framework of the famous Brzezinski paradigm, with Ukraine Russia was a superpower; without it, it could never be one' (26.09.2014).

Several months later, Putin voiced this interpretation in an interview: the EaP program prompted its participants 'to make an artificial choice "between Russia and Europe"', which they should not have been forced to make. The crisis in Ukraine resulted from this tension: 'We repeatedly warned the USA and its western allies about harmful consequences of their interference in Ukrainian domestic affairs but they did not listen to our opinion' (09.02.2015, interview to the Egyptian newspaper Al-Ahram). Here, the EU and the USA are treated as a single actor, which is typical of the Russian political elites' approach of not recognizing full international agency of the EU. It is possible to see this conflation of the EU with the US as a result of the predominance of the political framing. Since the 1990s, Russia saw the EU as an economic rather than a political competitor. The political framing reinvigorated the old Cold War discursive habits of essentialist contrasting, "us" vs "them", that is, Russia vs the US. With the shift of the frame, the agency seems to have shifted as well.

Many Russian scholars have readily adopted the (geo)political interpretation of the Eastern Partnership as an intrinsically conflictual framework and a trigger of the civil war in Ukraine (Arutiunian and Sergunin 2015, p. 114; Ponomareva and Rudov 2016, pp. 67-69). Ponomareva and Rudov go further and submit that Ukraine was not only prevented by the Western powers from joining the Eurasian Economic Union, but also used as a training ground for anti-Russian coalition creation and a misinformation campaign (2016, p. 68-69). Gaman-Golotvina (the president of the Russian political science association) and colleagues agree with foreign minister Lavrov who presents the EaP as a zero-sum game: including post-soviet states into the EU's zone of influence means their exclusion from Russia's zone of influence (Gaman-Golotvina et al. 2014, p. 21). They advance that Ukraine would lose from the tight cooperation with the EU and that the transnational corporations lobby (another old enemy – the capitalist) stood behind the plan of an open trade zone with the EU (Ibid., p. 24). One of our interviewees explained that the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs began to regard the Eastern Partnership as a political and security project (rather than an economic one), that was pushed for by the EU's Central and Eastern European member states, still traumatized by the Soviet experience.

These countries – in Russia’s view – regarded the EU’s policy in Eastern Europe as a zero-sum game (Interview A; Interview F, Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 20 April 2016).

Some scholars are, however, more nuanced in their analysis and use several frames, including the economic and security ones. For instance, Arutiunian and Sergunin note that Ukraine and Armenia's decision to decline the association agreements in Vilnius was based on cost-benefit calculations rather than purely political pressure from Russia. Russia offered these countries substantial economic advantages (lower energy prices) (Arutiunian and Sergunin 2015), and, for Armenia, the security considerations played a key role as well (Barakhvostov 2016, p. 202): only Russia would be able to protect it in the case of a regional military conflict.

Russian scholars working on the Eastern policy of the European Union agree that simply ignoring Russia as a regional player on the post-soviet space is not a productive course of action for the EU or the West in general. Our Russian interviewees have all shared the strong belief that despite initial EU-Russia discussions on earlier drafts, Russia’s legitimate interests in the shared neighbourhood were disregarded and that the final proposal – as later jointly adopted by the EU and the six Eastern European countries – had a strong anti-Russian character. The EU’s plan to sign Association agreements with Ukraine and Armenia without consulting Russia or making it possible for these states to stay within the process of Eurasian integration proved the lack of will by the EU to recognize Russia’s legitimate interests in the region (Arutiunian and Sergunin 2015, p. 116). Politically, some key countries (Ukraine, Belarus, Armenia) are so important to Russia’s self-understanding as a great power that it cannot accept their foreign policy choices unequivocally removing them from Russia-led frameworks. The EaP came to be seen as a tool of such removal both in academia and in politics.

Discussion

On the basis of scholarly literature, we expected EU’s framing of the Eastern Partnership to be primarily focused on improving neighbors’ performance in political, economic and governance terms via closer cooperation and interaction with the Union. In line with this expectation, we have seen that originally the EaP was presented in the launch documents as a project which can ‘promote regional cooperation among the EU’s eastern neighbours and between the EU and the region’ and thus ‘accelerate political association and further economic integration’ (Council of the European Union 2008, p. 19, p. 6). Closer ties and better coordination on different levels, including mobility and visa regimes, energy and transport cooperation, all the way to sustainability are emphasized in the review of the EaP in the Joint Declarations following the EaP summit in September 2011 in Warsaw and November 2013 in Vilnius. Economic framing clearly dominated the first four years of the EaP.

The political dimension, with the focus on the democratic institutions, rule of law, and deep democracy became more prominent in the EU's framing in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. This new focus is consistent with our expectation that the Eastern Partnership could be expected to be described as bringing security to the EU and the region based on an extension of the EU's practices to the neighbourhood.

In terms of security framing, we were also looking for potential incoherence in the framing, linked to the problematic role of Russia as the potential competitive center of attraction for the EaP states. Here, we find incoherence mainly in the continued EU's insistence on the lack of competition and on the completely self-referential character of the EaP. As a result, on the one hand, EU representatives have on many occasions reassured Russia that the EaP is not aimed against it – we can find the latest example in the list of the “myths on the EaP” published by the European External Action Service on April 22 of this year⁴ - and on the other hand, until 2015, no mention of Russia or of the potentially competitive nature of the policy was to find in its official discourse aimed at the EaP countries or the EU member states. It took until 2017 for Russia to formally enter the framing of the EaP. The event that partly solved the inconsistency in the EU discourse and made the competitive nature of the EaP in relation to Russia explicit was the crisis in Ukraine in 2013-2014. After it, the EU discourse has turned more normative (in terms of the choice of a future in line with values and identity) and security-oriented (in terms of geopolitical conflict).

In Russian discourse, in contrast, we expected to find explicit framing in terms of competitiveness, which is indeed the case. First of all, political science scholarship in Russia interpreted EaP as a potential tool for geopolitical competition used by the European Union to push Russia further away from its traditional sphere of influence in the ‘near neighbourhood’. In the same vein, Bagdasarov (leader of a parliament faction) and Medvedev (then president) some members of parliament raised the issue of the possible impact of the Eastern Partnership on Russia. They initially frame this competition in economic terms, in line with the EU's own framing at that time and agree with academics that there may be more to the EaP than the European Union would be prepared to officially acknowledge. This unconfessed dimension of EaP is exactly the geopolitical competition the EU openly denies.

⁴ ‘MYTH: The Eastern Partnership initiative was designed by the EU to provoke Russia. FALSE: The Eastern Partnership initiative is not against any country; it is a mutually beneficial and constructive platform for countries in the region to build a closer relationship with the EU, if they so choose. The EU does not demand that any of its partners need to make a choice between the EU or any other countries. We stand for good neighbourly relations. The Eastern Partnership respects the individual aspirations and ambition of each partner country.’ (European external Action Service, April 22, 2019, available at http://eueuropaeas.fpfis.slb.ec.europa.eu:8084/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/35712/mythsabout-eastern-partnership-factsheet_en, last accessed May 1, 2019).

This understanding of EaP in Russia, as an improbable but potentially dangerous competitor offering to the shared neighbourhood countries benefits of economic cooperation and integration, had major policy consequences. Russia accelerated its own integration projects in the region and reused a lot of EU discourse on the mutual benefits of 'further economic integration' and of the harmonization of legal frameworks for the whole region. By 2013, it appeared as a real competitor to the EU offer, persuasive enough to cause the change of mind of Ukrainian and Armenian leadership on which regional integration bloc they would prefer to join.

Up until the violent crisis in Ukraine, Russia has however also used the EU's open insistence on the compatibility of the two regional integration processes. This framing of regional integration initiatives led by the EU and Russia respectively is indeed present in Russian discourse since at least 2001, when Putin first spoke of Greater Europe from Lisbon to Vladivostok - the metaphor used by the EU representatives as well. In the midst of the Ukrainian crisis, at the EU-Russia summit in January 2014 the two sides presented a series of constructive statements on the creation of a "Big Europe" without dividing lines. Putin suggested even a common free trade zone including the EU- and Russia-led integration frameworks. The background for this cooperative discourse is the heated geopolitics-framed parliamentary debate on the future of Ukraine in Russia and the progressive shift towards geopolitical framing in the EU leadership. A gap has opened between the optimistic discourse between the EU and Russia and the progressively more gloomy 'domestic' discourse of each actor.

It is possible that claiming the 'free choice' for the EaP states, both sides expected that the 'correct' choice will be made. Korosteleva claims that 'both the EU and Russia have naturally assumed a premature closure of the ideological debate over the choice for an integration course' of the shared neighbourhood countries (2016, p. 4). They also underestimated the attractiveness of the alternative choice and the extent to which both elites and the population were divided. Arguably, this inability of both actors to acknowledge the presence and ambitions of each other in the shared region and engage in a genuine political competition is one of the main reasons of their clash over Ukraine in 2013 (Korosteleva 2016).

This clash showed the limitations of the optimistic declaratory discourse on cooperation between the EU and Russia on regional integration and made explicit the logic of competition which, arguably, underlined both the EaP and Eurasian integration, as creations of rivalry between two "centers", two strong regional actors aiming at controlling and influencing the "periphery" (Browning and Christou 2010).

Conclusion

In this paper we presented the results of discourse analysis, focused on ways the European Union and Russia framed the Eastern Partnership policy of the European Union, aimed at six countries in the 'shared neighbourhood' – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Our focus has not been on the policy tools or the effects of the Eastern Partnership, but on the ways in which it was made sense of in the official documents and institutional speeches. We overviewed foundational and reviewed documents produced by the European Union, as well as the parliamentary discourse, presidential speeches and interviews and academic literature in Russia-based outlets, in search for four ways of framing the Eastern Partnership – as an economic cooperation project, as a political project, as a normative project or as a security-driven project.

We have established that both the European Union and Russia initially understood Eastern Partnership as an economic integration project, aimed at increased exchanges and flows between the European Union and the six participating countries. While the European Union was very hesitant to admit the competitive potential of the Eastern Partnership, in relation to Russia's ability to integrate and/or influence the EaP countries, in Russia the economic attraction maneuver by the EU was understood in terms of geopolitical competition for influence in the region. With time, Eastern Partnership received a deeper political dimension, with an enhanced focus on the rule of law and democratic institutions beyond free elections, introduced into the EU discourse by the Arab Spring. The spread of democratic institutions was meant to improve stability in the region and thus guarantee security for both the EU and the participating countries.

The initial hesitation of the EU to admit the conflict potential of its regional cooperation offer became unsustainable in the face of the Ukrainian crisis over the choice of the "center" to join. Partly in reaction to EaP, Russia developed a number of regional integration frameworks and used much of the same discourse as the EU to legitimize them and to incite countries to join: references to mutual benefit from enhanced cooperation and legislative harmonization, projection of normative ideals and offers of security and stability for the countries and the region. Even then, the EU only came to openly acknowledging the role of Russia in the region in 2017, when its framing of EaP became much more security-oriented, and in fact much closer to the Russian way to frame it as a step in the geopolitical game between Russia and 'the West'.

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