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ВНЕШНЯЯ ПОЛИТИКА ЕВРОПЕЙСКОГО СОЮЗА В ИЗМЕНЯЮЩЕМСЯ ГЕОПОЛИТИЧЕСКОМ КОНТЕКСТЕ

МАРИЯ РАКЕЛЬ ФРЕЙРЕ¹⁾

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Рассматривается позиция Европейского Союза (ЕС) относительно своей внешнеполитической деятельности в меняющейся геополитической обстановке. Анализируются вызовы, связанные с этим геополитическим контекстом, и то, как ЕС на них реагирует и отстаивает свою точку зрения. Рассматривается роль ЕС и его развитие с учетом внешнеполитического взаимодействия. Используется рефлексивистский подход, являющийся фундаментальным для понимания политики и рассматривающий внешнюю политическую деятельность как с материальной, так и с нематериальной точки зрения. Основное внимание уделяется эволюции внешней политики ЕС в отношении стран-соседей. Особый акцент делается на Европейской политике добрососедства и прежде всего на таком ее аспекте, как «Восточное партнерство».

Ключевые слова: Европейский Союз; внешняя политика; геополитика; европейская политика соседства; Восточное партнерство.

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EUROPEAN UNION FOREIGN POLICY IN A CHANGING GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT

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This article aims at understanding how the European Union (the EU) has been positioning itself regarding its foreign policy agenda in a changing geopolitical context. It analyses the challenges associated to this geopolitical context and how the EU has been responding and positioning itself in face of these challenges. It discusses the actorness of the EU and how this has been developing with a particular focus on its foreign policy. It follows a reflexivist approach looking at foreign policy from both a material and immaterial perspective, fundamental for understanding policies and actions. The article focuses on the evolution of the EU foreign policy towards its neighbours, with a particular emphasis on the European Neighbourhood Policy (the ENP), and the most particularly its Eastern Partnership (the EaP) dimension.

Key words: the European Union; foreign policy; geopolitics; the European Neighbourhood Policy; the Eastern Partnership.

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Introduction

The European Union (the EU) is an international organisation that was born from the ashes of the World War II. The willingness not to repeat the atrocities of a major war accompanied by a vision of integration as a process eventually leading to more cooperation and peace were at the basis of the creation of the European Communities. The economic rationale that has always underpinned of the EU project cannot be detached from the security dimension attached to the cooperation envisaged as a way to avoid the repetition of mass violence in Europe. During the time the project consolidated and expanded with the EU becoming a multidimensional actor with intervention in different areas, from economics to politics, from culture and education to security and defence, from agriculture and fisheries to cyber-space and technological development. This process of change and consolidation, which also included several enlargements, did not take place in a vacuum. The geopolitical context where the EU has been consolidating its presence and the way it has been developing beyond its own geographical space is of much relevance. In fact, the geopolitical context is a fundamental vector to understand policy decisions and actions, as well as how different players position themselves towards different issues.

This article seeks to address the challenges associated to a changing geopolitical context and how the EU has been responding and positioning itself in face of it. It discusses the actorness of the EU and how this has been developing with a particular focus on its foreign policy. It follows a post-positivist or reflexivist approach looking at foreign policy in more encompassing way, where both material and immaterial elements are fundamental for understanding policies and

actions, as further analysed in the text. In this framing, the meaning of the Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy adopted in June 2016, as well as the European Security Strategy of 2003 will be discussed, assisting in defining the ground for the EU policies and actions. The article also addresses the evolution of the EU foreign policy towards its neighbours, with a particular emphasis on the European Neighbourhood Policy (the ENP), and most particularly its Eastern Partnership (EaP) dimension. The rationale behind the launch of the ENP is closely linked to the need to develop a framework for relations with the new neighbours, in particular after the 2004, 2007 and 2013 enlargements. These enlargements shifted the map of Europe bringing the EU closer to Russia and making Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine direct neighbours of the Union, with important implications for relations in the «wider» Europe space.

Conceptualizing the neighbourhood has been a challenge since the end of the Cold War and the break-up of the Soviet Union, as it has implied structural changes to the geopolitical map of Europe. The enlargements of the EU and of the Atlantic Alliance have shifted balances and the new configuration of the external border of the EU, together with the new map to the East after the end of the Soviet Union and the way these different countries have developed their foreign policies, all contributed to important changes. In the process of redefining relations between all these actors, the EU and Russia have been central players. These are the main issues that will be analysed seeking to better understand how the EU has been positioning itself regarding its foreign policy agenda in a changing geopolitical context.

Foreign policy framework: a reflexivist approach

Foreign policy is an area of study that has been fast evolving and where studies are increasingly at the intersection of the domestic and the international [1–5]. This means that despite the prevalence of one of these perspectives in the analysis of foreign policy, in general the authors agree that foreign policy decision-making is integrated in the political programme of a government or organisation, and it is not immune to the broader context where it is projected, which might both hinder or project goals and achievements. Moreover, studies have evolved to include not only material dimensions of analysis, such as power relations in a traditional sense or measurements by the number of military equipment, but also immaterial or intersubjective factors, such as the role of motivations or identity in the shaping and making of foreign policy. This literature points to a post-positivist or reflexivist approach that seeks to look at foreign policy in a more encompassing way, where both material and immate-

rial elements are fundamental for understanding policies and actions [6–8]. The case of the EU as a foreign policy actor is illustrative in this regard.

When we discuss foreign policy the level of implementation becomes central as we look at the capacity to act versus the capacity to get results. The former relates to resources and concrete capabilities, human and material, at the disposal of the foreign policy actor to enact policy decisions. The latter relates to the capacity to get results, as to do something does not necessarily mean the capacity to achieve the expected result. This means that in the process of implementing foreign policy there are many times what is generally called in the literature miscalculation or misperception leading to readings of a situation that affect negatively the outcome. Also, in some cases the consequences of a certain decision end up not being the ones initially expected, but turn out to be unintended or undesired consequences leading to a distinct result from the one

expected. This might generate uncertainty and diversion in attaining policy goals, and certainly requires rethinking and repositioning in order to readjust decisions to the policy course envisaged.

In these processes of managing foreign policy shaping and making, issues of communication, perceptions and credibility end up being central. In fact, the way policy advisers, decision-makers and the whole bureaucracy associated to the process of selecting and communicating information are key players informing the process is undeniable. It adds to this central role the issue of propaganda, misinformation and fake news since in many instances these contribute to distorting perceptions and further add to a complex setting for decision-making. The issue of credibility is associated not only to how an international actor performs, but also to the expectations associated to this performance, in terms of how the «capabilities-expectations gap» [9] is managed. Moreover, it should be clear that decisions are not necessarily automatically implemented, and that implementation might thus lead to distorted interpretations or unintended consequences. This is of extreme relevance for a foreign policy actor as this might profoundly affect the context where foreign policy is directed at. The perceptions about geopolitics end up being informed to a great extent by a combination of these three elements: communication, perception and credibility.

It seems clear, therefore, that foreign policy is a moving target and that it is continuously made of choices. This is a daily task involving different actors and with consequences both for domestic politics and international relations. In the words of Christopher Hill, «all FP involves by its very nature not only the routine communication and discussion associated with diplomacy, but also a mix of coercive and cooperative elements, of threats and inducements. That some are so weak as to make few credible threats, and some so strong as to be able to make offers that others cannot refuse, so long as they truly possess sovereignty, i. e. the capacity to make their own decisions, while even great powers need to work with others. The EU has always employed such a mix» [9].

This sets the ground for looking at the EU as an international actor. A fundamental dimension of this particular actor is the fact that it includes 28 states (with Brexit soon making it a Union of 27 member-states), and that these are very different in terms of their size, political weight, economic performance, among others. This has led some authors to talk about a «two-speed Europe», a «multi-speed EU» or as Telò puts it, as «clusters of states» [10, p. 82]. The idea underlining these terms has to do with the fact that foreign policy is an intergovernmental policy-area, meaning that member-states require agreement to proceed with policy decision and implementation. The issue-area at stake

is quite relevant in this regard, as it is easier to find agreement in certain areas to the detriment of others. For example, the dilemmas associated with contradictory trends of more openness and flexibility or of more closeness demonstrate how different categories of issues are dealt with also differently. When discussing issues of new technologies innovation member-states tend to be open and favour interdependence, whereas when we talk about more traditional issue areas, such as security, usually there is a less cosmopolitan and open approach, as this is considered a core area of states' actuation and where sovereignty still plays the most relevant role. These debates basically translate one of the oldest debates in the EU, which relates to the interstate and supranational dimensions of actuation and how these inter-relate. This is a constitutive part of the process of construction of the EU and will remain as such for the foreseeable future. It clearly illustrates the dimensions where member-states are willing to cede their decision-making competencies to supranational institutions and those that keep being the sole prerogative of member-states decision-making.

This setting for the EU foreign policy makes this a multi-faceted policy, as it engages with most areas of actuation of the Union, from security and defence to trade and enlargement. It also makes foreign policy a multi-method policy, meaning that areas such as the Common Foreign and Security policy (CFSP) are within the intergovernmental decision-making domain, while issues related to trade policies, which are a fundamental pillar of the EU actuation, have a supranational or communitarian decision-making procedure. The intergovernmental dimension means the need for a convergence process between the foreign policies of the member-states, and the supranational or neo-institutionalist perspective sees the EU as a more independent actor displaying autonomy from member-states [11]. It should nevertheless be noted that in many areas the EU and its member-states share decision-making competencies, meaning there could be projects running in parallel at the supranational level, but also as a part of national policy. This is the case, for example, of development cooperation or humanitarian aid, where the EU became a major player internationally, and where both the communitarian level and the national level play a role. The EU foreign policy is also multi-level, meaning that it takes place in different levels, from the domestic to the international, and that in fact some internal policies have an externalization dimension (i. e. energy or migration and asylum policies might to a great extent be focused on internal matters, but they also have an external, even transnational, dimension), and the way these are drawn and implemented is fundamental in the assessment of the EU's international actorness.

The EU: defining the actor

The EU's political and security actorness is very much defined by the strategic documents it has adopted regarding security-related matters. There are two main strategic documents issued at the EU level, which have been complemented by other documents that seek to define guidelines for action, roadmaps for implementation, assess progress, and advance with other actions that might be needed. The European Security Strategy [12] is a fundamental document in this regard that sought at the time it was published, back in 2003, to draw the roadmap for decisions on how the EU could define its role in security matters. This strategic document is clearly shaped by the post-11 September 2001 context of terrorist attacks in the United States. Its formulation is very much tied to the responses that were given in this context, including references to «rogue states» – acting against the norms shaping the international system – and the need for these states to return to «normal international society». The document also voices a clear concern with the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and the dangers associated with different actors eventually having access to these, as a serious instability factor. The document provided for the need for a strategic culture reflecting the actorness of the EU, and that should be based on early, rapid response capabilities and if need be robust interventions. The latter should be able, thus, to draw on both civilian and military means in order that the EU can be effectively recognised as an international actor with capacity to intervene upon request.

The goal was to further coordination means in terms of the actors and instruments available, as decisions in these matters, as previously analysed, take place at the intergovernmental level. In parallel to the internal efforts at coordination in order to better respond to different challenges, the EU also sought to develop strategic partnerships with different states, in order to build a more coherent set of relations with relevant actors for its international relations. Russia, China, Japan, Canada and India were some of the countries identified as central in this rationale of building a network of partnerships [see for example 13]. In the development of these relations, within the EU and towards the outside world, the ESS underlines the so-called «normative power» along the lines of the principles underpinning the very own the EU project, as central. This means the core the EU values of democracy, the rule of law, respect for fundamental rights and freedoms, among other, should be at the basis of the development of these relations. Also, the document underlines the EU role as a «civilian power» which points to the ability to make use of civilian capacities in its interventions, though not fully dismissing military means. However, it underlined then, as the more recent strategy keeps highlighting, that the civilian

component of the EU is the one that better fits in its conceptualization as an international actor. It should be noted the term «civilian power» applies only to the EU and not to its member-states. The Strategy clearly maps how the EU should approach security issues within and beyond its borders, but it does so in light of long term objectives.

More recently, in June 2016, the EU presented the Global Strategy for the Foreign and Security Policy of the European Union [14], which seeks the Union's affirmation as an international actor in a multipolar international order. The Global Strategy is «global» by designation not just because it aims at a global role for the EU, but also because «it focuses on military capabilities and anti-terrorism as much as on job opportunities, inclusive societies and human rights. It deals with peace-building and there resilience of States and societies, in and around Europe» [14, p. 4]. The EU seeks to promote multilateralism in international affairs, as well as further regional integration mechanisms as part of a renewed global governance system. This becomes clear in Federica Mogherini's (High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy / Vice-President of the Commission) foreword: «We will engage in a practical and principled way, sharing global responsibilities with our partners and contributing to their strengths. We have learnt the lesson: my neighbour's and my partner's weaknesses are my own weaknesses. So we will invest in win-win solutions, and move beyond the illusion that international politics can be a zero-sum game» [14, p. 4].

However, if the document aims at providing a roadmap for the EU's affirmation internationally, there have been some concerns on how this might be pursued. Two main issues have arisen regarding the implementation of the goals defined: first, that the EU has to work more on its power of attraction as with the recent economic and financial crisis which led to more profound social crisis, Brexit and political changes within some of the member-states, it might lose attractiveness to other players, in particular the so-called emerging powers, with a more diverse and dynamic economic potential. As stated by Sven Biscop [15] the «decrease in the EU's influence in its neighbourhood is matched by a rise in influence of other powers that are sought for as security providers». This idea leaves very clear the need for a renewed strategy towards the neighbourhood, where engagement aiming at stabilisation should be key. The challenges in the EU's neighbourhood attest are clearly to this need. This leads us into the analysis of the European Neighbourhood Policy (the ENP), and in particular of the Eastern Partnership (the EaP) as an example of how the EU defines foreign and security policy towards its neighbourhood.

Changing geopolitics: enlargement and the new neighbourhood

The successive waves of enlargement of the EU have brought its external borders closer to Russia, whereas significantly changing the map of Europe by the alteration in the borders design of this international organisation. The enlargement policy has had as a consequence the perpetuation of the inside/outside dynamic in the sense that there are countries which accession process is completed and become full members, and there are others whose aspiration at membership is public but their membership might never be accomplished. In order to minimise the effects of non-membership and facing the fact that the EU cannot simply enlarge with no restraints, the Union created the European Neighbourhood Policy (the ENP). The rationale behind the launch of the ENP is closely linked to the need to develop a framework for relations with the new neighbours, in particular after the 2004, 2007 and 2013 enlargements. These enlargements, as mentioned, shifted the map of Europe bringing the EU closer to Russia and making of Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine direct neighbours of the Union.

The ENP emerged as the «Wider Europe – Neighbourhood: A new Framework for relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbours» initiative in early 2003 [16], initially aimed at Belarus, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine, with the goal to further cooperative relations with these countries. The initiative was later extended to the southern Mediterranean countries, recognising the Med-dimension as fundamental for security and stability of the EU and its external borders. The South Caucasus countries were added to the policy in 2004. The ENP was formally launched in 2003 and consolidated in 2004 [17]. The ENP has two main dimensions, a southern one, including the Mediterranean countries and the Middle East, and an eastern dimension including Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine and the three South Caucasus states, namely, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. Russia was left out of this neighbourhood package as it wanted a different framework for relations with the EU [18], which became a policy of positive differentiation since Russia is recognised as a strategic partner with a dimension and characteristics that make it distinct from other countries in the neighbourhood. «The EU and Russia have decided to develop their strategic partnership through the creation of four common spaces as agreed at the St. Petersburg Summit in May 2003. Russia and the enlarged European Union form part of each other's neighbourhood. It is in our common interest to draw on elements of the ENP to enrich work on the common spaces, notably in the areas of cross-border and sub-regional co-operation. The EU and Russia need to work together, as neighbours, on common concerns» [17, p. 6].

The Strategic Partnership with Russia was developed, but since the late 2013 crisis in Ukraine and its continuation in February – March 2014, relations have

been stalled. The imposition of sanctions by both these actors and the difficult political relations have made of the current period the most difficult one since the end of the Soviet Union. This new context in the EU – Russia relations resembling old days of frosty relations has been contributing negatively for the overall relations developed in the wider Europe area, meaning that not only the EU – Russia relations are directly affected, but also the countries in the neighbourhood have to manage the context of tension that is currently in place.

The ENP sought the building of a «ring of friends» [19], where the values cherished by the EU could be promoted and shared more widely in the building of close relations between these states and the EU. Co-operation should translate into effective measures regarding economic and political integration, meaning the ENP is an encompassing policy that goes beyond the more traditional area for cooperation as promoted by the EU, regarding trade and economic relations, to include political, social and other policy issues. However, the ENP always carried attached to its goals the underlining principles of the EU integration and co-operation – the normative dimension of the EU – as made clear in the commitment it foresees regarding the sharing of values such as the rule of law, good governance, respect for human rights, the promotion of good neighbourly relations, and principles of market economy and sustainable development. The ENP priorities are thus the fostering of what became known as the three Ps policy: proximity, prosperity and the fight against poverty. This is in line with the ESS of 2003 as it is with the Global Strategy of 2016, showing that the underlining objectives remain clear, although the ability to implement these have become increasingly under pressure. The goal of avoiding new division lines with the changes in the geopolitical configuration of this actor was very much present along the way. These reasons the ENP became a policy built around a bilateral dimension, in terms of the agreements signed with each of the countries in the Neighbourhood, described as tailor-made and promoting a bi-directional relationship on the basis of «joint ownership» of these processes. Simultaneously, the policy became a multilateral platform seeking to promote regional cooperation initiatives, given not only the geographic proximity, but the concrete acknowledgment that many interactions have a transnational character and make more sense if included in a regional framing. Soon it became clear that fostering cooperation at the regional level feeds also into bilateral dynamics. These multilateral platforms have evolved and are now organised under four main areas: Platform 1. Democracy, good governance & stability. Platform 2. Economic integration & convergence with the EU policies. Platform 3. Energy security. Platform 4. People-to-people contacts. The scope of these areas of cooperation is a reflex of the

wide partnership that the EU seeks to develop with these countries. To better address the concerns and needs of the Eastern partners, the EU launched the Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative at the 2009 Prague Summit, which is directed at the six post-Soviet states mentioned – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

To fulfil its objectives the EaP aimed at 1) reinvigorating existing relations by giving them more consistency in the form of the signature of Partnership and Cooperation Agreements and Action Plans to implement the objectives defined; 2) at building on the enlargement experience in the sense that despite not offering membership, the EU wanted the policy not to become a «second-best» option but to be read by the neighbours as a targeted and encompassing policy offering cooperation in a wide array of areas and allowing for deep integration even if not envisaging formal membership; and 3) at increasingly promoting an alignment of reforms and policies of these neighbouring countries to those of the EU, so fostering the *acquis communautaire* as the basis for the consolidation of closer relations. As the ENP was the EU initiative it is understandable that for its enactment the EU sought the promotion of its principles and reforms in the neighbourhood countries in the direction of closer proximity to the EU «ways of doing». This practice, which we might call of «transformational diplomacy» – this term was first used by Condoleezza Rice in 2006 in the context of developments in Iraq and Afghanistan – has been object of criticism as promoting a policy based on «model export» and imitation practices from the EU. The idea is that by imitation the replication of procedures might render relations easier, allowing for a closer rapprochement in procedures. However, the «export» of the EU norms and «ways of doing» was seen by some as interference in domestic practices. In face of criticism the EU has always underlined it is fostering cooperation and this has to come from the neighbouring countries, thus dismissing «imposition practices» in what it describes as balanced relations. This is a debate that remains in place, though the new Global Strategy seeks to reframe the EU approach with the promotion of «resilience» as a way to foster local development and emancipation, instead of transformation. To which extent this will promote a rather different approach from the EU is to be seen, as projects-development keeps being one of the main operational tools at the EU's disposal. A recent trend that should be noted here is the fact that increasingly the actuation of the EU is becoming more technical (project-based) and less political, thus losing the pejorative connotation of imposition of governance schemes [20].

The instruments available have been the Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (the PCA), which are legally binding agreements between the EU and these third countries where the EU works to support the dem-

ocratic and economic development of a country and sets out the partner country's agenda for political and economic reforms, with short and medium-term priorities of 3 to 5 years. The Action Plans, which define the roadmaps for implementation include the principle of differentiation and progress based on the definition of benchmarks. This means that the most progress is achieved, the most benefits might be negotiated and put in place. It is like a rewarding format in such a way as it constitutes a concrete motivation for implementing reforms, which in many cases are not easy to pursue, generating political or social resistance. These agreements are jointly negotiated with a view to promote «joint ownership» – this is the idea mentioned before that these agreements are the responsibility of both the EU and the partner country – reflecting local needs and capacities, as well as the ability of the EU to respond to these. To this effect, priorities are jointly defined regarding mainly political and economic reforms.

Further to these agreements, the EU established the so called Association Agreements which envision deeper informal integration. These are «International agreements concluded with third countries with the aim of setting up an all-embracing framework to conduct bilateral relations. These agreements normally provide for the progressive liberalisation of trade (to various degrees: Free Trade Area, Customs Union...): offering Most Favoured Nation treatment; intention to establish close economic and political cooperation; creation of paritary bodies for the management of the cooperation, competent to take decisions that bind the contracting parties; providing for a privileged relationship between the EU and its partner; and since 1995 the clause on the respect of human rights and democratic principles is included and an essential element» [21].

According to the EU sources, in a large number of cases, the Association Agreement replaces a cooperation agreement thereby intensifying the relations between the partners. Currently the EU has three Association Agreements in place, namely with Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. However, the challenges associated to the implementation of these agreements are many, and the recent halting in financial support to Moldova given the non-fulfilment of the agreed conditions is an example of how politics of conditionality have been part of the process to assure a sustainable reform process in these partner countries and that the EU funds are adequately used. This suspension of funds had to do with the lack in reforms in the justice sector as foreseen for the years 2014 and 2015. The last 28 million in support to this process were not transferred from the EU to the Moldovan authorities. At the time, the Head of the EU Delegation to the Republic of Moldova, Ambassador Peter Michalko commented that: «The EU continues to support Moldovans as they

work hard for a better future. We are now reflecting on how we can assist the citizens in the coming years. We want to give priority to projects that directly improve the lives of Moldovans» [22–23]. The same procedure is being applied regarding the need to reform the law on the voting system and seriously address corruption. The EU might hold 100 million euros if adequate measures are not taken by the Moldovan authorities to address these issues [24–25]. This form of pressure was also used back in 2015 following the banking scandal and the need to form a new government [see for example 26]. These procedures demonstrate the other side of the rewarding policy, when states are non-compliant with the agreed measures. The EU has been more attentive to the monitoring of progress and assessment of reforms' implementation putting pressure on these countries' authorities to closely accompany the reforms. Responsibility and accountability become in this way important weight-measuring of progress for all actors involved. This close monitoring seeks also to assist in the fight against corruption, which is well-known to be a widespread problem.

The heterogeneity and diversity of the Eastern Partnership countries is well-known and this is reflected in different levels of intensity of the EU relations with them. As mentioned before, the higher level of integration with partner countries are the Association Agreements which the EU has signed with Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. The framework for relations with the other Eastern Partnership countries, namely Armenia is the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA), signed in November 2017 and which has as a specific trait the fact that it does not include economic clauses that would clash with Armenia's membership of the Eurasian Economic Union. This has emerged as an example of a bilateral agreement between the EU and a partner country that does not need to clash directly with other integration projects being promoted in the Eurasian space, allowing Armenia to both develop relations with Russia, for long a close partner, whereas also developing closer cooperation with the EU.

The relationship with Azerbaijan is framed under the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement which became in force in 1999 and follows the broad scope defined for these agreements. From November 2016 it was agreed to launch negotiations on a comprehensive agreement, with the goal of furthering cooperation between the two parties, with a particular focus on energy relations given the country's central role in bringing energy from the Caspian to the EU countries. Moreover, conflict settlement is also on the agenda with the EU promoting confidence-building activities and supporting the Minsk Group for the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict [27]. This ambitious agenda has nevertheless not been matched by big steps in relations, thus this new commitment to an enhanced partnership is to be fol-

lowed, particularly regarding the areas for cooperation that will gain more relevance. This will allow to define better the framework for the bilateral relationship, either framed in a more economic and energy-oriented cooperation, or going beyond these areas to include other political issues.

The case of Belarus is a particular case in the Eastern Partnership framework as the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the EU and Belarus was signed in 1995 but not ratified by the EU on the grounds of limited political rights and other freedoms in the country, such as political prisoners and the holding of electoral processes described as not free and fair. In 2004, the official position from the Commission towards Belarus stated that «Belarus and the EU will be able to develop contractual links when Belarus has established a democratic form of government, following free and fair elections. It will then be possible to extend the full benefits of the European Neighbourhood Policy to Belarus. Meanwhile the EU will consider ways of strengthening support to civil society in ways described below» [17]. The main elements described pertain to democratisation issues, particularly the holding of free elections and the development of civil society. Moreover, Belarus and Russia are parts of the Union State and Belarus is a member of the Eurasian Economic Union which brings added constraints to the development of closer relations with the EU. Nevertheless, the example of CEPA might be followed in case the EU and Belarus move ahead with their cooperation. In recent years there have been signals of progress, with a Mobility Partnership concluded and visa facilitation and readmission agreements being negotiated. The EU – Belarus Human Rights Dialogue was resumed in July 2015 at the initiative of Minsk and political prisoners have been released. All these steps mean that the restrictive measures the EU imposed on the country after the 2010 elections described as unfair have mostly been lifted in February 2016 (the arms embargo and some personalities' bans remain in place), with economic cooperation being devised in coordination with other financial institutions, such as the European Investment Bank (EIB) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (the EBRD). In 2016, and in face of favourable developments, the EU – Belarus Coordination Group was established to oversee progress in relations and contribute to further cooperation [28]. Belarus has been promoting the idea that the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union cooperation should further develop creating a more integrated space from Lisbon to Vladivostok. According to Belarusian sources, «driven by the necessity to avoid new dividing lines in the region, Belarus is a firm advocate of the “integrating integrations” idea in the EaP framework. In the long run it could provide a basis for convergence of the integration processes in the European Union and the Eurasian Economic Union,

and creation of a common economic and humanitarian space between Vladivostok and Lisbon» [29].

Conceptualizing the neighbourhood has been a challenge since the end of the Cold War and the breakup of the Soviet Union, as it has implied structural changes to the geopolitical map of Europe. The enlargements of the EU and of the Atlantic Alliance have shifted balances. The new configuration of the external border of the EU, together with the new map to the East after the end of the Soviet Union, and the way these different countries have developed their foreign policies, all contributed to important changes. In the process of redefining relations between all these actors, the EU and Russia have been central players. The «common neighbourhood» came to being after the enlargement of the EU in 2004 (and subsequent enlargements) that brought the EU border closer to the post-Soviet countries that are now part of the Eastern Partnership of the EU. These have developed relations with both the EU and Russia though in different intensities.

The late 2013–2014 events in Ukraine, and the instability that remains in the eastern parts of the country show the difficulty in managing this neighbourhood, towards which both the EU and Russia have defined priority goals. In fact, just as much as the EU claims stability at its neighbouring areas is fundamental for its own stability, developing therefore cooperation programmes directed at these states, Russia also understands its neighbourhood, and particularly the countries in the post-Soviet space as long-term partners, seeking to promote cooperation and stability through good neighbourly relations. The end goals are not very much different, but the means and the programmes defined for the development of cooperation with neighbours in the EU and Russia have been clashing. Ukraine became recently a good illustration of these clashing projects, with the decision to opt over the signature of an Association Agreement and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area with the EU or its integration into the Eurasian Economic Union, furthering rapprochement to Russia, putting the country up to a choice that meant the exclusion of the «other».

This means that Ukraine's option for one or the other project was exclusive and this put a lot of pressure on the local authorities to define the course the country wanted to follow. It should be noted that since 1991 Ukraine had mainly pursued a multivectoral foreign policy, where it tried to balance relations both with the EU and Russia. However, the proposal that was put on the table required a choice, and this highlighted the tension that has underlined relations.

The different projects the EU and Russia have developed for the common neighbourhood translate these tensions whereas also leaving windows for cooperation that should not be simply shut. This debate has been conceptualized around the «wider Europe proposal» as promoted by the EU and the «greater Europe proposal» as promoted by Russia [30–31]. The former reads wider Europe as including the EU, the EaP countries and Russia in a web of interdependent relations that should make cooperation the end goal in relations. The latter reads greater Europe as a multipolar Europe where Russia, Turkey and the EU should be partners in defining cooperatives approaches. In a simple way, what these two understandings demonstrate is that the way Europe is understood in Moscow and in Brussels is not exactly the same, not so much in terms of physical borders, but rather in terms of political projects and of how relations should develop [32]. This points to some extent to the politics of «othering» in foreign policy, which have clear geopolitical implications, meaning that the «shared» space becomes an area of contestation by these two big players, rendering limited the scope for action of the EaP countries. It is important to underline here that neither Russia nor the EU have unlimited influence in the shared neighbouring area, which strengthens the argument that these countries have agency, i. e. despite external pressure they manage to some extent to define courses of action and policies. As analysed before the level of political independence is different from country to country in the EaP area, given mainly political, economic and security considerations, but these countries should not be read as simple actors performing the role assigned by bigger players.

Conclusion: EU foreign policy towards its Eastern neighbours – building bridges?

The EU has become an actor with an increased presence in foreign affairs, in different issue-areas and through different instruments. In this article we sought to understand how this actor can be defined and what this implies in terms of its actuation, particularly towards its Eastern neighbours. As the literature makes it clear, the EU is a multi-faceted, multi-method and multi-level actor in terms of its foreign policy, as it deals with different areas from trade to environment or from education to security and defence. However, in dealing with different matters, the EU has a complex decision-making process and its decisions regarding foreign and se-

curity policy fall within the interstate level, meaning that there is the need to negotiate political courses of action among all member-states. On the one hand, this implies time-consuming processes that many times allow only vague wording in documents. On the other hand, making of decisions have the strength of gathering wills and thus becoming also stronger in terms of their appeal and potential. Through the ENP and then more specifically the EaP the EU put in place a policy of cooperation with these states, that despite not envisaging membership, sought to open cooperation channels allowing for close proximity between the EU and

these partner states. At the time, Romano Prodi, the president of the Commission stated that the EU was offering «all but the institutions», exactly putting into simple words the underlining principle of furthering cooperation without formal integration. As the EU put it, the end goal was the promotion of more trade, more education exchanges, more political reforms in what became known as the «more for more» rationale – the more we get closer, the deeper our relations can be. The harmonization of procedures is one of the main elements in the EU's policy seeking to make it easier to give substance to the «more principle». However, as analysed, some have raised criticism about the extent to which these processes are indeed jointly owned or more part of a one-way process where the EU model is dominant.

Despite the debates, the EaP has allowed the development of differentiated relations with the EaP countries, with the Association Agreements signed with Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine signalling the deeper level of cooperation achieved this far. As analysed, nevertheless, not without constraints, as the case of Moldova suggests. As for Armenia it achieved also a considerable level of cooperation in the new format

of a Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement. Azerbaijan and Belarus are the two partners with which cooperation is least developed, though in both cases, and again at different speeds, cooperation has been intensifying. These differences signal to some extent the flexibility that came to characterise this policy, in the sense that relations with each partner are designed at the convenience of both the EU and the state concerned, as well as the relevance that the partners recognise to developing closer relations with the Union. The formula is not perfect, as we have seen, but it has been providing a solid ground for the development of relations between the EaP countries and the EU. It has also defined the EU as an active actor beyond its own borders. In the changed geopolitical context, after the EU enlargements and more assertive engagement of Russia in international affairs, this framework has assured a relevant role for the EU in its vicinity, not meaning though its policies have always been successful. The various crisis in its neighbourhood, such as in Ukraine, but also in its southern dimension, just as Libya or Syria, clearly demonstrate the many challenges the current geopolitical context offers.

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