

The Clash of Discourses Regarding Relations with Russia: New Fault Lines in the European Union?

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Abstract: *Following the annexation of Crimea and the secession war in Eastern Ukraine, the topic of European security has returned as a major benchmark for a number of EU and non-EU countries. For a couple of years, in 2014-2015, the discourse of condemnation and international sanctions against the Russian regime dominated the agenda of the European-Russian relations. Nevertheless, the economic considerations and the ascension of right-wing or left-wing populism(s) in the European Union acted as a drag on European unity and solidarity. Thereby a series of political leaders in the EU and its Eastern Neighbourhood began to ask for economic rapprochement with Russia, while others remained very cautious. Based on a comparative qualitative method, this paper explores the clashing discourses about relations with Russia, in light of the discourse theory. The dynamics of divergent positioning regarding Russia after 2016 led to the question of possible new fault lines in the European Union. Inconsistencies on this topic can be seen between West and East, between post-communist countries on the Eastern Flank with Poland, Romania and the Baltic States, on one side, and Hungary, Bulgaria, Slovakia and the Czech Republic on the other side, and between Western chancelleries with rather different views such as Berlin, London or Rome. The aim of this article is to explore the increasing differences and clarify whether conflicting approaches regarding relations with Russia could create real cleavages between EU Member States and threaten European unity.*

Keywords: *European Union, EU-Russia relations, Eastern Neighbourhood, discourse, populism*

Introduction: Discourse Theory and the EU-Russia Relations

After the annexation of Crimea in March 2014, followed by the secession war which erupted in Eastern Ukraine, it became clear that the topic of European security, as well as the relations with Putin's regime, needed an appropriate answer/readjustment from the European and Euro-Atlantic institutions as well as an explicit positioning of their respective member states. Theorists and analysts in the European Union and the United States announced a major turning point in relations with Russia, "from courtship to confrontation" (Maass, 2017:1-4). The relations between the West and the Russian

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This article was submitted to RJEA editors in September 2017.

Federation in the post-Cold War period have never been really warm, although in the 1990s they were to some extent neutral and based on mutual acceptance. In 2014, Russia's shocking and illegal annexation of Crimea and the war fuelled by Moscow in Ukraine's Donbas region have marked a pivotal moment for policy makers and military planners in the West (Makarychev and Yatsyk, 2016).

The aim of this article is to explore the various and sometimes clashing discourses on the EU-Russian relations, from the EU Member States, and to determine whether the existing differences may or may not lead to a real division of the European Union based on this issue. The research will clearly demonstrate that the cleavages driven by the EU's Russia policy are deepening. Although the disagreements with regard to Russia, between different European countries, platforms and politicians become more and more evident, our answer in the conclusion is that the growing cleavages regarding the EU's Russia policy will not eventually disintegrate the European Union, since there is no country, political platform or relevant politician in the EU, the most Eurosceptic ones included, who is advocating a strategic switch from the EU membership to joining the Eurasian Union or other form of political rapprochement with Russia.

The structure of this article includes four sections. In the introduction, we define the aim of the paper and the research question and we also present the methods that we used to conduct the research. Along with the theoretical framework, a number of relevant titles and authors are cited in order to introduce the topic. The second section continues and extends the review of the existing literature and finds the current "place" of the European discourses on EU-Russia relations, amidst the change from the consensus of 2014 to the more dynamic, nuanced and volatile political climate after 2016. The third section is a rather prospective one, in search of an answer to the disagreements regarding the EU's Russia policy and the resilience of the European Union facing this challenge. Finally, the conclusions summarize the arguments and formulate the final answer to the research question, accompanied by some remarks on the limitations of the present paper and further research opportunities.

Based on a comparative qualitative method, this research consists of a thoroughly comparative analysis of the most relevant types of political discourses on the EU-Russia relations, referring to public documents, press releases, statements, interviews etc. focused on the topic. The already mentioned question is examined through the lens of a large variety of political expressions in the European Union, and structured on criteria such as affiliation to the right-wing or left-wing ideology, different regions, specific national interests, electoral contexts or government positions etc. Essentially, there are two main steps of the present analysis: the first, in which we observe the depth of the cleavages between the European options with regard to the EU's Russia policy, and the second in which we address the resilience of the European Union faced with growing differences of vision in relation to the Russian Federation.

The basis and resources of political discourses with regard to bilateral relations, in the liberal democracies as well as in the post-Soviet Russia, were significantly enlarged and diversified after 1991. They shifted from the rigid ideological "orthodoxy" of the Cold War

to a number of specific national considerations. These new strategic, political, economic and social considerations triggered multiple differentiations and nuances in the Western world, but maintained more or less the same doctrine of international relations in Moscow, hostile to the West.

The decline of traditional ideologies after the end of the Cold War prompted a turning point within the discourse theory. A new generation of authors, with Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe as leading representatives, started to focus on discursive representation of power relations, mainly from the perspective of constitutional order, specific conflicts and confrontations, destruction and reorganization of the dominant networks of power (Laclau, 2000; Mouffe, 1996). Briefly said, the discourse theory is based on a combination of “anti-essentialist ontology and anti-foundational epistemology” (Howarth and Torfing, 2005:13). On the first dimension, the discourse theorists usually affirm that there is no pre-existing or self-determining essence of the world. Consequently, the theory is searching for the ultimate impact of the absence of a “centre”/authority capable to organize and manage the world. On the second dimension, the epistemology of the theory is obviously a relativist one. As Richard Rorty suggested, the existence of reality does not necessarily guarantee the existence of truth (Rorty, 1989). This observation leads to the more recent concept of “post-truth” politics (Keyes, 2004), in which the idea of truth is distorted by prefabricated options, emotions and interests. The populist platforms in the United States and the European Union (Trump, Le Pen, Farage, Wilders, Petry, Orbán etc.) indicate that even discourses about relations with Russia are no exception to the post-truth society and can easily compromise moral and foundational exigencies.

As it was observed, “the resurgence of the nationalist, populist and more generally extremist political groups coincided with the emergence of the third generation of discourse – at the beginning of the 1990s” (Henry and Mişcoiu, 2015:213). In fact, it is a case of changes in politics (practice) prompting changes in theory and not the other way around. The discourse theorists incorporated therefore in their theses after the 1990s many if not all the trends from national and international politics and tried to offer explanations for a changing world through the lens of political discourses. Even though discourse theorists attempted to formulate hypotheses in various subfields of political science and real politics, we admit that they were not successful in all situations. Not everything can be explained in light of the discourse theory. However, they had a quite good impact in a number of areas, such as identity politics, populism and to some extent international politics.

The use of identity issues and discourse theory in explaining EU-Russia relations on both sides of the “barricade” is emphasized in a number of relatively recent books and publications. For instance, Professor Andrey Makarychev from the University of Tartu believes that the “analysis of identity as the key factor shaping EU-Russia relations requires focusing on its discourse underpinning. It is through discourse analysis that one may identify and interpret perpetual references to Europe as Russia’s constitutive Other for substantiating a set of arguments inherent in Russia’s identity making” (Makarychev, 2014:24).

The confusion and ambivalence of Europe in relation to Russia is notorious. The French historian Alain Besançon gives an almost cultural explanation for this incapacity to oppose consistently the Russian ambitions in Central and Eastern Europe: “the West was

fascinated by Russia. From the first moment [the westerners] met Russia, they wondered what Russia really is. The West was attracted by Russia, but it also feared Russia. They tried to include Russia in their world and tried to expulse it. The West failed in both attempts” (Besançon, 2013:7).

Historically speaking, the European-Russian relations always depended on the level of Russian commitment to the European order, but also on the nature of the relations between the Western European powers, especially those between France, Germany and the United Kingdom. This principle is valid even today. The political discourse in the European Union with regard to Russia reflects in its essence the state/credibility of the European Project and the way in which Europeans show confidence in the viability of a united continent. The more optimistic the Europeans are, the more powerful and determined their Common Foreign and Security Policy is, and the more depressed the political climate in Europe is, the more divided the approach to European-Russian relations is. The dynamics of political discourses with regard to relations with Russia works actually as a mirror of the European security order but at the same time it illustrates the unity or lack of unity of the European peninsula.

The first serious alert of the post-Soviet Union era was the Russian-Georgian war in August 2008. The West’s response was timid and actually encouraged Russia to become more and more assertive. Then the Ukrainian crisis hit the international indulgence regarding Russia’s claims to regain its regional sphere of influence. Between the two East European crises, a recess of about six years represented a lost opportunity for the European Union and NATO to act consistently. For instance, at the 2008 NATO Summit in Bucharest, the French and the Germans rejected the American proposal to invite Ukraine to join the Alliance. Instead of securing Ukraine and Georgia, the European Union launched in 2009 the Eastern Partnership², a compromise between the aspiration of the post-Soviet republics for European integration and the “enlargement fatigue” in the Western countries.

Russia saw all these weaknesses and hesitations as invitations to reclaim its dominance in the region. As it was noticed, “despite the Union’s presence in Georgia through the EUMM³ and the increased visibility of security in EU-Russian relations, the growing dissatisfaction of Brussels in Russian developments is expressed in the 2008 review of EU-Russian relations conducted by the Commission. Nonetheless [...] the focus rapidly returned to trade goals” (Fernandes, 2011:212). The relapse to convenience and business interests, after the Russian invasion in Georgia, was a political mistake that later exacted a heavy price from the European Union and especially from its Eastern Neighbourhood.

From EU Consensus to Divergence in Relations with Russia

A remarkably vast literature covers the post-Cold War West-Russia relations. Some titles were already mentioned in the first section. One of the basic observations of this massive volume of literature is the fault line between the pre-2014 and the post-2014

² A political initiative launched at the Prague EU Summit in May 2009, in order to develop political collaboration and economic integration between the European Union and the “Eastern Neighbourhood” consisting of Belarus, Ukraine, Republic of Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan.

³ The European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia.

periods. While the pre-Ukraine crisis works are rather optimistic and focused on the potential for the collaboration between Russia and the West (Smith, 2006; Talus and Fratini, 2010; Haukkala, 2011; Drent, 2012 etc.), the “post-Crimea” literature emphasizes the geopolitical rivalry in Eastern Europe and even the perspective of the “Cold War II” (Naumescu, 2015; Alcaro, 2015; Ross Smith, 2016; Grigas, 2016; Nitoiu, 2016; Makarychev and Yatsyk, 2016, Charap and Colton, 2017 etc.).

According to the purposes of this article, we won't stress extensively the significance of the pre-2014 literature. It is however useful to mention that different authors were taking into consideration the increasing economic opportunities and the potential of certain areas of cooperation between the European Union and Russia such as energy, banking, IT and telecom, automotive industry, infrastructure etc. It is therefore not a surprise to find several accommodating approaches of the EU-Russia relations signed by western European scholars in different volumes and academic journals. To give just two examples, it was apparently largely accepted that “the economic interests of both parties are increasing the mutual importance of this bilateral relationship and this is particularly the case with energy” (Johnson and Robinson, 2005:3) and also that there were “clear signs of opening a window of opportunity in EU-Russia relations” (Drent, 2012:5-6). In Central and Eastern Europe, even before the Ukraine crisis of 2014, the authors were usually more cautious with the idea of the West-Russia rapprochement, reflecting the historic “Russo-scepticism” in Poland, Romania or the Baltic States, and suggesting that Russia will always oppose the Western liberal order and try to regain its sphere of influence in the region: “while Germany made Russia its largest trade partner, Obama's attempt to ‘reset’ relations with Russia (under the presidency of Medvedev) has visibly faded after Putin's come back to Kremlin in May 2012. [...] Russia still opposes the anti-missile shield in East-Central Europe and believes the interceptors diminish in fact its own potential of deterrence in the region” (Naumescu, 2013:77-78).

The moment of optimism in the West has been undoubtedly strengthened by the Obama “reset policy” of 2009, even though that famous announcement seems today insufficiently prepared. The Russian-Georgian war of August 2008, despite its clear premonitory message, was rather neglected by most of the western strategists, policy makers and academia, with some exceptions. In his 2010 book on the Russian-Georgian war, Ronald D. Asmus tried to unveil that the military aggression on Georgia is the “West's inconvenient truth”. The American analyst and former US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs criticizes the passiveness of the Bush and Obama administrations in 2008-2009, but he adds that “the Europeans were losers too, since, if anything, they have been even less foresighted and proactive than the Americans. For months before the war broke out, Georgia pleaded in vain with the European Union to put monitors on the ground to stabilize the situation before it exploded” (Asmus, 2010:ix).

The geopolitical concerns reappeared in 2014 in Central and Eastern Europe, along with the EU and NATO strategic analyses based on the concept of “hybrid warfare” initiated by Russia (Renz and Smith, 2016:1-60). According to this complex defence strategy, the Member States should stay firmly and united in condemning the Russian aggression against Ukraine, dismantling all forms of political, military, economic, cyber or propaganda aggression conducted by Moscow in different European countries,

and imposing economic sanctions. The controversial Russian project of the Eurasian Union, which emulates the European Union, is explicitly blamed for deteriorating and destabilizing the regional political climate in Eastern Europe and for having a negative impact both on Russia and the West. Several authors argue that a number of serious strategic miscalculations, resulting from a long time “zero sum game” between Russia and the United States, ruined the prospects of the post-Soviet Eurasian sphere, to the detriment of all sides: the Russian Federation, the West and the countries caught in-between, in the so-called “buffer zone” (Charap and Colton, 2017).

The post-2014 literature on the EU-Russia relations reflects the dramatic change of the West’s discourse regarding the deteriorated relations with Moscow. In the first two years after the annexation of Crimea, the political consensus in condemning the Russian aggression against Ukraine was highly incorporated in the bibliographic fresco of that period, while the appearance of the discourse cleavages on this topic in the European Union started to be reflected mostly in the post-2016 titles.

The tones and nuances within this vast literature are obviously diverse, covering a large spectrum, from radical criticism to rather moderate analyses. All of them have as starting point the annexation of Crimea and its consequences on the European order. Agnia Grigas, for instance, sees “an increasing tendency in Russian foreign policy towards reimperialization of the post-Soviet space, especially in regard to territories where Russian compatriots reside” (Grigas, 2016:9). Russia’s defiant behaviour is blamed for the deeper deterioration of the relations with the West: “Moscow responded to the sanctions with an amalgam of nonchalance and defiance, rolling out its economic penalties and threatening more. [The crisis] shredded the relationship between Russia and the West and threatened the entire post-Cold War European political-military order” (Menon and Rumer, 2015:xiii). More recently, the disagreements in the European Union on how to deal with Russia have made some authors to rebalance approaches of the topic, being tempted to believe that “the deterioration of the relation was shaped by the divergent internal transformations of both the EU and Russia” (Maass, 2017:1).

The quasi-unanimous discourse of condemnation and the pack of international sanctions against the Russian Federation seemed at that time the proper response to military aggression on a sovereign state and defying the international law. In March 2014, the European Council agreed on the first diplomatic measures against the Russian regime and in July 2014 the European Union adopted a set of economic sanctions “in response to illegal annexation of Crimea and deliberate destabilisation of a neighbouring sovereign state” (The European Council, 2014). Scholars from western academia endorsed the new political attitude in strong and passionate words, calling for a firm response: “The time has now come to defend those countries against Russia by other means [than EU accession], to convey the clear single message that we do have foreign policy tools other than enlargement, and that these countries can have Western (EU and US) protection even if they are not, and may never be, EU members” (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2014). The sanctions, renewed every six months⁴, produced significant damages to the Russian economy, but still

⁴ On 28 June 2017, the Council prolonged economic sanctions targeting specific sectors of the Russian economy until 31 January 2018.

Moscow made no concession to Ukraine regarding Crimea, while the Russian separatists continued their military actions in Donbas. The truce agreements Minsk I and Minsk II⁵, negotiated in the “Normandy format”⁶, could only bring partial results and transformed the war into a frozen conflict.

The European political leaders delivered their own speeches and statements, more or less along the same line. Chancellor Angela Merkel led from the beginning the choir of condemnation at the level of the European Union, based on “continuing moves to absorb the Ukrainian autonomous territory of Crimea into the Russian Federation” (Deutsche Welle, 2014). Former French President Hollande joined the common EU position, considering the annexation “unacceptable”, and adding that “France will never recognize the legality of such actions but prepare a strong response” (Kyiv Post, 2014). Even more critical and determined proved to be the former British Prime Minister David Cameron, who considered that the actions in Crimea are “a flagrant breach of international law and send a chilling message across the continent of Europe. [...] The choice remains for President Putin: take the path of de-escalation or face increasing isolation and tighter sanctions” (The UK Government, 2014). Among the European powers, only Italy was more hesitant in 2014 in imposing economic sanctions against Russia. Italian premier Matteo Renzi asked for keeping an open line of dialogue with Moscow and warned that sanctions “take us back to an Iron Curtain situation” (The Telegraph, 2014). However, Italy did not veto the EU policy of sanctions.

The next two years brought considerable changes to the picture of European unity related to Russia, with deeper cleavages between the positions of the Member States. The champion of sanctioning Putin’s regime remained Angela Merkel, pushing to renew sanctions every six months, but the German chancellor and her partners faced stronger resistance from some countries. Even in Merkel’s coalition cabinet, consensus between Christian-Democrats and Social-Democrats was not self-evident, as long as the “German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier criticised sanctions against Russia and said all-or-nothing approach to sanctions failed to yield results in Ukraine” (Wesslau, June 2016). In September 2015, as a member of an Italian delegation of 18 politicians calling on Crimea, former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi declared that “Crimea split from Ukraine was democratic” (Reuters, 2015). Much more critical with regard to the EU policy was Marine Le Pen, leader of the far-right National Front and one of the finalists of the 2017 French presidential elections. While she was paying an official visit to Moscow, she said that the “sanctions are stupid” and “blamed the European Union for declaring a Cold War on Russia that would hurt all concerned”, adding that “it’s not in line with traditional, friendly relations nor with the economic interests of our country or other countries and harms future relations” (Reuters, 2014). Le Pen continued to criticize the European Union for the sanctions, culminating in January 2017 with the statement according to which “Crimea’s reunification with Russia was not illegitimate” (TASS, 2017), but based on a free and democratic referendum.

⁵ On 11-12 February 2015, in the Minsk Summit, a truce was agreed for the conflict in Eastern Ukraine.

⁶ A format of negotiation of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine with the participation of the leaders of Germany, France, Russia and Ukraine.

It is symptomatic that even in the countries that form the hard-core of the European Union, namely Germany and France, the national consensus of a single political discourse in relation to Russia is not possible anymore. Dutch politics is not able either to speak with one voice on this topic, although 196 Dutch citizens died in the bombing of the flight MH 17 in July 2014 in Eastern Ukraine by pro-Russian separatists, using a Buk missile system brought from Russia, as the Dutch investigators concluded (Sharkov/Newsweek, 2016). The leader of the far-right Freedom Party, Geert Wilders, preparing for the 15 March 2017 general election in the Netherlands, delivered the following speech: “Well-being of our country depends on autonomy and possibility to take our own decisions. Events of the recent months showed that we should resolve the issue of a referendum on the EU membership as soon as possible. Brussels must not dictate with whom we should have economic and political relations. Restoring relations with Russia is a priority for a traditional trading country as the Netherlands. For many centuries, our states have been finding only benefit from a mutual cooperation, despite of existing conflicts. And today, lifting of the anti-Russian sanctions is a necessary condition for our prosperous future” (South Front, 2016). The German media advanced even a comparison between Marine Le Pen, the France’s National Front leader and Frauke Petry, the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) leader, including the approach to relations with Russia: “Both even agree that sanctions against Russia should be lifted. [...] The AfD’s youth organization is entering an alliance with Russian President Vladimir Putin’s Young Guard” (Deutsche Welle, 2016).

Taking into consideration all these divergent political discourses, *Politico* spoke at the end of 2016 of a “new Putin coalition” in Europe and North America. The analysis scrutinized political actors in countries usually opposing Russia’s increasing assertiveness who were then in favour of lifting sanctions and improving relations with Moscow. Here is the *Politico*’s list of Putin’s friends as perceived in November 2016: the US President elect Donald Trump, the right wing candidate for French presidency François Fillon, the Greek prime minister Alexis Tsipras, the Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán, the new Bulgarian president Rumen Radev, the Dutch opposition leader Geert Wilders, the new Moldovan president Igor Dodon, the Estonian Centre Party leader Jüri Ratas, the former mayor of Tallinn who became Prime Minister in the small Baltic republic. And the list is not exhaustive. In such an ideological melange, it is therefore not surprising to see that Donald Trump picked as the next US Secretary of State the CEO of the giant ExxonMobil, who has close relations with Putin and was decorated by the Kremlin in 2013 with the *Friendship Order*. In the same category, analysts placed the French presidential nominee Fillon blaming the West for provoking Russia by extending NATO too close to its borders, or Hungary’s Orbán proclaiming that “without the Russians it’s impossible to manage rightly the Hungarians’ future” (Politico/Kroet, 2016).

The American geopolitical intelligence platform *Stratfor* has a rather similar view on this issue, identifying the risk that the West’s divide could open a window of strategic opportunity for Russia: “shifting political winds and growing discord among Western powers that, so far, have stood shoulder-to-shoulder against Russia have created an opening for Moscow as it seeks to bring an end to its two-year standoff with the West. [...] Should sanctions against Russia be lifted, the more vulnerable states on its borderlands will turn to other powers or alliances to guard against Moscow’s potential aggression” (Stratfor, 2016).

The successive crises of the European Union, from the euro zone crisis and sovereign debts crisis to the migrant crisis, have eroded step by step people's confidence in the EU institutions and policies. All over the Euro-Atlantic space, US included, the cleavage between mainstream politics and anti-establishment platforms deepens. There is a strong connection between the main fault line in the politics of the West and the new EU disagreement regarding future relations with Russia. Generally speaking, the ones who oppose mainstream politics and the European integration see the anti-Russian sanctions only as a reflection of the Brussels apparatus' political will, not as a logical measure against Moscow's manoeuvres in Eastern Europe. In other words, "everything that comes from Brussels is wrong and has to be rejected", seems to be the new paradigm of political discourses of populist platforms.

Makarychev sees the discourses on both sides, European Union and Russia, as dominated by a pluralism of voices and interests, confusion, misunderstandings and above all a dynamic perspective that makes things quite volatile. In his approach, "discourses of Russia and Europe are not only in the process of constant formation; both are internally dislocated. By dislocation, one shall understand indeterminacy, instability, uncertainty, and ambiguity. [...] European discourses contain both Russia-skeptic voices and those calling for accommodation with Moscow in spite of multiple normative disconnections" (Makarychev, 2014:28).

A plausible connection indicates that the European unity and determination against Russia's increasing assertiveness could only be a "collateral victim" of a much deeper cleavage between mainstream politics (EU institutions, NATO and most of the national governments) and anti-establishment movements. Leaders such as Marine Le Pen, Geert Wilders, Nigel Farage, Frauke Petry and of course Donald Trump gained political support criticizing everything coming from the "establishment" as being corrupt, opaque, non-democratic and against citizens' direct interests. Consequently, even the sanctions policy against Russia would be useless, ineffective, economically counterproductive for the European companies and provocative in relation to Moscow. Based on different political reasons, the American President Donald Trump criticized in December 2016 the final Obama sanctions against Russia, considering that "we are the true target of Obama's sanctions" (Politico/Nelson, 2016) because they only try to "box in" the new administration in relation to Putin's regime.

The Russian question and the future of the European Union

The future of the European Union is undoubtedly about more than relations with Russia. No politician, expert or author can pretend that the nature of relations between the European Union and Russia is a decisive factor for the existence of the EU. Nevertheless, there is a strong and mutual connection between the two topics in the sense that the ascension of nationalist and populist platforms in different EU countries could affect the European unity and determination in relation to Russia, while European disagreements regarding a common position vis-à-vis Putin's policy could deepen or add extra burden to the current crisis of the European Union.

The fact that the European order depends to some extent on relations with Russia is not new. After the Napoleonic wars, the Euro-Russian interdependency became undeniable,

in the context of a long discussed continental balance of power. In his *World Order* of 2014, Henry Kissinger noticed that “the liberties of Europe and its concomitant system of order required the participation of an empire far larger than the rest of Europe together and autocratic to a degree without precedent in European history” (Kissinger, 2014:49).

Comparing decision-making processes in Europe and Russia, it is self-evident that the authoritarianism in Moscow facilitates individual and uncontested decisions, while the European Union has difficulties in obtaining consensus between the (still) 28 Member States. From this perspective, any consistent strategy or policy of the European Union in relation to Russia looks rather fragile and vulnerable to internal contestations, depending on egoistical and divergent national interests.

Geopolitical and/or economic considerations usually give the clue for understanding the member states’ positions. For the ones located on the Eastern Flank of NATO and of the EU, geopolitics and security along with a tough regional history are the main vectors in shaping their attitude. Poland, Romania and the Baltic countries are the best examples of this pro-sanctions category. Under these circumstances, it is not a surprise to see that the bilateral relations of these countries with the Russian Federation have seriously deteriorated after the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis. As an example, “the official public discourse in Romania on the current state of affairs and future prospects for relations with the Russian Federation followed the same pattern [of condemnation]. [...] That kind of rhetoric became sharply confrontational, on both sides, after the illegal annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in March 2014 and its political-military intervention in South-Eastern Ukraine” (Celac and Dungaciu, 2014:344-345).

For Italy or Spain, having no geopolitical considerations related to Russia, economy seems to be more relevant in the equation of the EU-Russia relations. This is the reason why their prime ministers have expressed softer positions at EU Summits regarding relations with Russia or even opposed the idea of sanctions, as was the case with Matteo Renzi. There are also exceptions to this general observation regarding the different views of Russia’s neighbours and of faraway EU Member States, such as the post-communist Hungary or Slovakia in Central Europe trying to accommodate Russia, on one hand, and the UK as a fervent supporter of EU sanctions and firm positions against Moscow, on the other hand. In South-East Europe, Bulgaria and Greece are also in favour of lifting sanctions against Russia, based on their traditional ties with Russia.

As the main European power, Germany is in-between the Western and Eastern flanks of the European Union, inspiring nowadays politically and economically a whole region (Central Europe) that was traditionally exposed to both German and Russian expansionism. There is no doubt that Germany has also strong economic interests in Russia, even bigger than Italy or Spain. Major German companies made investments in Russia, in energy, industry, trade and financial sectors. Approximately 50 per cent of the German consumption of natural gas is satisfied from Russian sources (Zha and Shiryaevskaya/Bloomberg, July 2017). One could suppose therefore that Germany is the first Member State interested to advocate in Brussels against EU sanctions. In spite of these considerations, Angela Merkel proved to be the most consistent European leader supporting the idea of imposing and maintaining economic sanctions against Russia, after

Crimea's annexation. The only reasonable explanation for this apparently "anti-economic" behaviour of the German chancellor is her strong political commitment to the European Union's normative power and regional security issues.

During Merkel's terms, Berlin looked to Russia rather politically than economically. The conservative discourse of the Chancellor regarding Moscow prevailed even when the grand coalition with the social-democrats facilitated a conciliatory and "pacifist" approach at the Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs. A pragmatic business oriented approach would have been probably more comfortable for Germany, but Angela Merkel, a former citizen of DDR⁷ and an experienced political leader in her 60s, has a strong sense of history and a feeling of solidarity with the former communist Eastern European countries. She understood that the only way for the European Union to survive as a significant global actor is to maintain its normative power and fundamental values, and to make no compromise with an increasingly assertive Russia.

For the European Union, the question of its internal cohesion will be essential in the coming years. There are already a number of issues and fault lines dividing the Member States, from euro zone policies, fiscal and banking union to the Schengen Agreement and the migrant crisis. Relations with Russia loomed as a corner stone for the Union only recently and somehow surprisingly. Nobody anticipated in March 2014 that the EU consensus regarding Russia, after Crimea's annexation, would disappear in less than three years at the level of political parties if not yet at official level. The political disagreements are now deepening on this topic and could become soon a real cleavage between a few groups of states. On one side, the pro-sanctions group led by Germany, including Poland, Romania and the Baltic republics, not to mention the outgoing UK, on the other side a growing group of states suggesting a progressive lift, such as Italy, Greece, Hungary, Spain, Austria, probably Bulgaria with its new president etc.

In 2017⁸, three major electoral moments (Netherlands, France and Germany) and two more of medium level (Austria and the Czech Republic in October) could pose a threat to the EU unity and prompt an official change to the Russia policy of the European bloc. Even though the Dutch general election on March 15th and the French presidential election on May 7th went well for the European Union, it is not yet clear how the new majorities will be formed in both parliaments and how much political stability will the new governments have. There is a clear growing support for the nationalist, radical and Eurosceptical platforms in some of the EU founding member states and in many others. What is really striking is the fact that in France, for instance, it is not only the extremist Marine Le Pen threatening with a change in the Russia policy of France, but it was also the centre-right wing candidate, François Fillon and the radical leftist Jean Luc Mélenchon voicing tough criticism on this topic. Mr. Fillon repeatedly asked for the lifting of the EU sanctions against Russia. He was considered as having close ties with President Putin, from the period when they were both prime ministers (2008-2012). Nevertheless, the risk of a U-turn of France's Russia policy under a hypothetical Fillon presidency was considered moderate to low, as David Cadier concluded in his analysis for *The National Interest*. Despite

⁷ The German abbreviation for Deutsche Demokratische Republik (East Germany during the Cold War).

⁸ Editors' note: the article was submitted in September 2017.

Fillon's cold views on the EU, Paris won't simply break up with Brussels mainly because of the "great importance he attaches to bilateral relations with Berlin" (Cadier, 2017). In other words, some changes could have been expected, but not a U-turn. A conservative French presidency could probably induce some changes in the foreign policy of Paris but never trigger a "revolution". The scenario of continuity is however valid, after the triumph of the pro-European centrist Emmanuel Macron, as long as Germany itself keeps the current line in relation to Russia, but does not exclude a turning point once a new chancellor with a different foreign policy approach will be elected in Berlin, sooner or later.

The current sanctions against Russia will expire on 31st of January, 2018. The European Council has to decide later this winter what comes next on this thorny subject. Stratfor makes a connection between the EU's next decision and the new US administration: "As the next EU vote on the issue approaches, Germany will probably try to preserve the sanctions. But without Washington at its side, Berlin's influence may not be enough to sway opposing EU countries to keep them in place. Furthermore, two of Russia's most adamant critics in the European Union — the United Kingdom and Poland — will have less clout in the bloc over the next year thanks to the Brexit vote and Warsaw's controversial domestic policies" (Stratfor, 2017). It is therefore an obvious truth that the pro-sanctions option in Brussels is weakening, not only because of continuous changes in domestic politics of the EU Member States, but also because of the fact that the two main military powers of the West, the United States and the United Kingdom, are distancing themselves from the European Union. Moreover, in the summer of 2017 the US Congress adopted a new package of sanctions against Russia, which could affect even the EU (German) companies involved in the Russian-German project Nord Stream II. The new sanctions were criticized by the German officials. Under these circumstances, France and Germany will most likely start to focus on the nascent project of the common European defence and reshape their whole security discourse.

In a comprehensive analysis for the *European Council on Foreign Relations* suggestively entitled "Putin's Friends in Europe", Fredrik Wesslau concludes that: "While Russia is not responsible for the emergence of these pro-Russian parties, it has embraced them, especially as relations between the West and Russia have deteriorated. The parties are useful for Moscow in that they help legitimise the Kremlin's policies and amplify Russian disinformation. At times, they can also shift Europe's domestic debates in Russia's favour. But it is their politics of disruption – underpinned by their scepticism towards the European Union – that does most to destabilise European politics" (Wesslau, October 2016). The list of the pro-Russian parties in the European Union appears in the same analysis to be longer than one can expect: on the far right wing, we find the German AfD, the Austrian FPÖ, Greece's Golden Dawn, Hungary's Jobbik, France's Front National, Italy's Northern League, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), and Belgium's Vlaams Belang (VB). On the far left, the actors are Cyprus's AKEL, Germany's Die Linke, the Czech Republic's KSCM, Podemos in Spain, and the Greek Syriza. The Italian Five Star Movement and the Human Shield Party in Croatia also belong to the pro-Russian camp, concludes Wesslau. Surprisingly or not, all these parties had fairly good results in the past national/European elections or they started to grow in popular support, being expected to get spectacular scores in the next electoral processes.

One last aspect to be mentioned in this section is the alleged implication of Russia in the domestic politics of several EU Member States. Even before CIA and the former US President, Barack Obama, blamed Russia for “hacking the American presidential elections” in November 2016, a number of similar accusations of Russian interferences in some EU countries’ politics were launched in 2015 and 2016. Germany was one of these countries and the fact that the German government officially asked the federal intelligence service in Berlin to prepare a report on this issue is significant. Just before the end of 2016, the issue was recalled. Germany entered in a crucial electoral year that will decide not only the future of the country, but probably the future of the entire European Union. Cyber-attacks, including “the kind that in Russian doctrine” are called hybrid warfare, now “belong to normal daily life”, warned Angela Merkel herself, adding: “We must learn to manage this” (Financial Times/Wagstyl, 2016).

Conclusion: can Russia divide the European Union?

It is already commonplace to reiterate that the European Union is facing hard times. In the midst of the storm, the issue of the Member States’ relations with Russia and its discursive reflection is just one of a long list of clashing options. Still under the EU and the US’ sanctions imposed in 2014, Moscow started a complex offensive strategy in order to ruin the West’s unity and popular confidence in the mainstream politics. The largely accepted name for this strategy is hybrid warfare⁹.

This article intended an incursion into the most relevant European discourses on the EU-Russia relations. Finding general trends, models and unanimous opinions or at least well defined ideological or regional categories of options has proved to be non-realistic. Diversity is by far the strongest characteristic of these discourses, even though some benchmarks were identified: the pre and post-2014 periods, clearly marked by the turning point represented by the Ukraine crisis, the “disaffiliation” of the European populist, nationalist and Eurosceptic platforms from the official EU’s Russia policy, the slowly weakening of the pro-sanctions group, the differences between countries having only economic interests in relation to Russia and others who have historic and geopolitical interferences with Russia, the deepening of the cleavages between various interests and options with regard to the future of the relationship with Moscow. Whether consensus seemed to be in March 2014 the keyword of the EU leaders and parties in relation to Russia, after the illegal annexation of Crimea, we saw a gradual fading of the European normative power starting with 2016, once the major electoral moments of 2016 and 2017 were approaching.

To the second part of the question, with regard to the resilience of the European Union facing deepening discursive cleavages on the topic, the answer of this research is to some extent optimistic. The main argument consists in the lack of a strategic alternative for the Europhobes. Russia is not attractive enough to European cultures to produce a rupture of the united Europe. The issue of criticizing the EU’s sanctions is used by different populist platforms just to “legitimize” their anti-Brussels discourse. None of them seems really

⁹ According to the *Encyclopedia of International Relations* of the Romanian Academy (2017, vol. 2, p. 190), the hybrid warfare is a military strategy that combines elements of conventional, unconventional and cybernetic war.

interested in pivoting to Russia, but only in transferring prerogatives from European institutions back to national governments.

Something that this research cannot say is how long the EU's sanctions policy against Russia will persist. A return of Crimea to Ukraine looks rather unrealistic, at least in the short and medium term. This means that the problem causing the sanctions is not yet resolved and the defenders of the norms of the international law should continue to act one way or another against the aggressive regime in Moscow. Politically speaking, this won't be easy and we cannot rule out the possibility that in a few years the European Union will give up on renewing the sanctions. Maybe at that time a new research focused on the European discourses in relation to Russia would bring to the surface deeper, more substantial and surprising aspects of these complex bilateral relations. But this change of approach will definitely depend on how the Russian regime and its politics evolve in the coming years.

As many authors have already noticed, in the past two years Russia took advantage of the crisis of the European Union and began to improve its image and influence mainly through the lens of the nationalist, populist and Eurosceptical platforms. Some of these parties have been receiving funds from different Russian sources, the most well-known case being the massive loan granted to the French National Front. As I have mentioned previously, several cyber-attacks of Russian origin are also incriminated in destabilising western democracies and influencing elections.

This paper demonstrated so far that the cleavages between the discourses on Russia from different European leaders are deepening. The fact itself does not necessarily mean that the crises and disagreements within the European Union were created by Russia, but undoubtedly Russia fuelled them in its favour, weakening the positions of the mainstream parties, leaders and pro-sanctions governments. Germany and especially the United States are the western democracies that officially complained in 2016 of Russian cyber-attacks against their domestic politics. Russia denied all accusations. Obviously, conclusive evidence is difficult to obtain and deliver publicly by intelligence services. Moreover, in all these countries there are political leaders and parties that ridiculed the official accusations against Russia, making them even less credible for the large public. Under these circumstances, the allegations of Russian cyber-attacks looked as if Obama was lamenting after the surprising defeat of the democrats and tried to delegitimise Trump's presidency. It is the reason why many ordinary people believe they will never know the truth of this hazy story.

However, the possibility that Russia policy disagreements will disintegrate the European Union is relatively low. For this to happen, it would be necessary to see that at least one Member State considers EU membership an alternative to, let's say, the Eurasian Union proposed by Putin. There is no evidence that even somebody from the pro-Brexit camp took into consideration a UK "exit" from the Western structures for an alliance with Russia. Neither Le Pen, nor Wilders or Petry proposed a change of the strategic option of their countries, from the EU to Russia. We can only suspect, without having evidences, that none of these far-right nationalist leaders are real fans of Russia but everything they do is to boycott the pro-European governments.

Populism covers a whole range of topics, and probably the relationship with Russia is just one of the tools used to discredit establishment and mainstream politics. But the clash of discourses regarding relations with Russia is not in itself a decisive for the future of the European Union. We do not expect that someone will ask for a referendum to decide between sanctions against Russia and leaving the EU. The opposition to Russia's condemnation is not strong enough to prompt a real debate on the EU spinoff. Most probably, according to current trends, in a couple of years, also depending on 2017 elections, the European Council won't be able anymore to renew the sanctions, because of the loss of the critical mass to impose them. But Europeans disagree in many other aspects, first and foremost on the cleavage of national sovereignty versus transfer of powers to Brussels. The issue is not new, but the crisis of the European Union has resuscitated old anxieties and identity fault lines. If there will be an end of the European Union, it won't be the different views on relations with Russia that causes it.

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