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The Russian factor in EU policies towards the 'shared neighbourhood'

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Abstract: *Peace and stability in the neighbourhood is an issue of pivotal importance to the EU's security, mostly because Brussels believes its internal security starts outside the Union's borders. In that sense, the EU has promoted a number of policies and frameworks for relations with the 'shared neighbourhood' with Russia, such as Partnership and Cooperation Agreements in the early 1990s and the European Neighbourhood Policy in the 2000s. The latter has been complemented in its goals by the Eastern Partnership and the Black Sea Synergy, among other initiatives and assistance programmes. This paper aims at analyzing how, within this scenario, Russia affects EU security policies and strategies in the so-called 'shared neighbourhood'. Following a constructivist framework of analysis focused on discourse analysis and process-tracing, it argues that Moscow, either in the condition of EU´s strategic partner or a regional power with its own neighbouring ambitions, represents a significant challenge to EU´s policies towards the 'shared neighbourhood'. For that purpose the paper will provide an overview of EU and Russian security approaches towards the region in order to identify nodal points of tension and conflicting interests. EU-Russia bilateral relations will also be object of analysis as they will allow us to identify the topics under discussions and see how they affect EU policies and strategies in the 'shared neighbourhood'.*

Keywords: European Union, Russia, shared neighbourhood, security.

Introduction

After the end of the cold War the EU negotiated Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCA) with countries of the former Soviet Union in order to establish friendly relations with these states and prevent potential economic and political instability in the region from spilling over into the Union. However, the EU remained a low-profile player in the region until the development of the ENP. The EU's last rounds of enlargement brought the EU closer to the post-Soviet space: an area traditionally perceived to be part of Moscow's sphere of influence. The fact that, since the mid-2000s, the EU and Russia are sharing a common neighbourhood in Eastern Europe and South Caucasus has significantly impacted on regional dynamics of power. This geopolitical transformation in the region has also affected perceptions about the geostrategic relevance of the shared neighbourhood to EU and Russian security. By doing so it impacted on these actors' perceptions of each other as regional actors, which in turn has had consequences on EU-Russia bilateral relations and the very way they frame their policies towards the common vicinity.

Within this framework, this paper aims at analyzing how Russian regional and security policies impact on the development and evolution of EU security approaches and strategies towards the shared neighbourhood. This analysis is based on the understanding that both the EU and Russia frame their relations with the neighbourhood in security terms. These actors seem to share the belief that their internal security starts outside their borders and thus both try to persuade their neighbours into their sphere of influence. The outcome is a competitive trend that imprints EU-Russia bilateral agenda but is all the most visible in issues concerning the shared neighbourhood. Hence, they often perceive the deepening of relations between their neighbouring countries and the 'other' regional power as a political loss to their security strategies.

The paper uses a constructivist approach to security and power, based on process-tracing and discourse analysis to tackle the EU and Russian competing security approaches towards the shared neighbourhood and the way Moscow regional policies impact on the EU's strategies towards this area. To do so the paper starts by exposing the constructivist definition of security and power and the methodological options that frame the research. Within the constructivist tradition power and security are understood as social and political constructions, in which actors define and redefine their relationships based on their perceptions and interests at a given moment. Therefore, this framework provides important avenues into the study of relational aspects of security and the possibilities for change and transformation that enables us to map the dynamics of EU and Russian competing discourses and practices over the shared neighbourhood and their impact on the definition of a European strategy for the region. Secondly, the paper analyses the evolution of the EU and Russian policies towards their common vicinity, focusing on the security dimension. Thirdly, the paper explores the impact those policies – and the perceptions they produce – have on the

evolution of the eastern dimension of EU neighbouring policies. The paper ends with some concluding remarks concerning the analyzed topic.

A constructivist reading of EU and Russian security approaches towards the 'shared neighbourhood'

Social Constructivism is a social theory applied to IR studies since the late 1980s (Fierke and Jørgensen 2001, p. 5). It assumes the world to be an artifice, i.e., a social construction, which reflects agents' power, interests and understandings of the world. In this reading of reality relations are seen as mutually constitutive and time-evolving (Fierke 2007, p. 171). In this process, discourses are crucial to understand reality for it is the ability to communicate that makes possible to socialize and imprint actions with meaning: diffusing perceptions of the 'self' and the (threatening) 'other', contributing to create identities, establish relations of power and (re)define interests (Adler 1997, p. 332). As a result, discourses and practices are perceived to be interweaved together in the form of discursive practices. Furthermore, discourses are often portrayed as structures reflecting a hegemonic understanding of social reality and having a constitutive effect by disciplining and making interaction and decision-making possible (Simmerl 2011, pp. 3-6). These interactions (either among agents or between agents and structures) create processes of social learning, which affect not only actors' identity formation but also the way they perceive and define their own interests (Checkel 1999, p. 548). That means that interests are also defined as being social constructions that evolve and change according to agents' perceptions (Guzzini 2000).

In the constructivist tradition power is conceived as having a dimension of productiveness and possibility – based on ideas and norms – that becomes meaningful through discursive practices and, therefore, is to be found everywhere (Burke 2008, p. 363). Then, power becomes the imposition of one vision of the world, determining shared meanings that contribute to build actors' interests, discourses and practices. The result is the ability to establish the rules of the game and persuade others to accept them, resulting in a hegemonic and asymmetrical social order (Adler 1997, p. 336). In this regard, discursive practices become structures of signification, which construct social realities and binary oppositional relations of power where one member aims at being hegemonic.

Security, on its turn, is defined as a political process whereby threats are socially and discursively constructed (Fierke 2007). Moreover, security practices are often understood to reproduce patterns of power that construct, (re)produce and transform hierarchical and asymmetrical relationships among actors (Burke 2010, p. 94). In this sense, security emerges as an instrument of power aiming at reinforcing it by diffusing perceptions of threat and danger that legitimize certain practices.

Power and (in)security are thus seen as mutually constituted and dynamic social constructions resulting from discourses, perceptions and interactions (Fierke 2007, pp. 6-7). This provides important avenues into the study of EU and Russian

security approaches towards their common neighbourhood and their impact on EU-Russia relations. First, this framework gives us a wide-range of conceptual tools to understand the linkages between interests, discourse and perceptions, as well as their influence on power and security. Secondly, by stressing reality as a process that is constantly evolving, the social constructivist understanding of power and security sheds light on the fact that actors are willing to adapt themselves to the demands of the moment, changing their interests and perceptions of their contextual environment whenever necessary. Process-tracing and discourse analysis provide important inputs to this framework of analysis. While process-tracing helps us to identify the social context within which relationships take place, discourse analysis enables a critical interpretation of the identified patterns of behaviour and transformative trends, tackling dynamics that would otherwise remain invisible. In identifying and explaining EU and Russian discourses and patterns of behavior on power and security matters concerning the shared neighbourhood, we will be able to critically analyze the interplay between the EU's and Russia's hegemonic discursive practices over their common vicinity and their impact on the evolution of the EU's neighbouring policies eastwards.

EU and Russian security approaches towards the shared neighbourhood
Relations with neighbouring countries in Eastern Europe and South Caucasus were always of pivotal importance to the EU's post-Cold War foreign and security policies. However, due to the focus on the enlargement process, it was not until the creation of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in 2004, that the EU started to pay greater attention to the countries in its shared neighbourhood with Russia (Casier 2012, pp. 32-33). Since then, the EU has perceived the region as having a direct impact in its internal order. Therefore, it has tried to move beyond the framework of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCA) established in the 1990s to introduce a security dimension in its relations with countries in the region. As a result, the EU's approach towards its eastern vicinity can be read as an extension of the internal 'European project' aiming at preserving its security, stability and prosperity (Averre 2009, pp. 1693-1694).

As a matter of fact, the ENP was developed to deal with the new security challenges at the EU's borders after the last rounds of enlargement (Jeandesboz 2007, p. 397). Although there was nothing new about challenges in the region, the transformation of the EU's contextual environment triggered a process of change in its perceived threats. As a result the EU's interests in the neighbourhood were redefined and new political discourses were constructed to establish new relations of power and persuade the countries in the shared neighbourhood to adopt EU norms and values, thus contributing to reinforce its security.

Through Action Plans and a wide-range of trade and assistance programmes, the ENP intends to create a 'ring of friends' around the EU and 'promote stability and

prosperity' across the continent (Communication from the Commission 2003). This goal was already mentioned in the European Security Strategy (ESS), a document adopted in 2003 acknowledging that the enlargement brought the EU closer to troubled areas, and the need to promote stability and good governance in the immediate EU neighbourhood (European Council 2003). The ESS also highlights that 'the internal and external aspects of security are indissolubly linked' (European Council 2003, p. 2) and, therefore, EU's security interests cannot be untied from its overall approach to the neighbourhood (Browning and Joenniemi 2008, p. 520).

This security focus on issues concerning the eastern vicinity was further reinforced by the launch of the Black Sea Synergy (BSS) in 2007 and the Eastern Partnership (EaP) in 2009. Since then, the EU has been trying to assume a greater regional role, increasing its strategic importance for the neighbourhood (Council of the European Union 2009, p. 6). The BSS is a facilitation mechanism aiming at promoting the EU's interests in the neighbourhood on a set of policies of regional interest, such as migration, law enforcement, good governance, the protracted conflicts, energy security and the fight against organized crime (Andreev 2008, pp. 101-102). Progresses in these sectors are understood to be cornerstones to stimulate reforms in the policy and economic sectors, support stability and sustainable growth, and promote the resolution of conflicts in the region (Tsantoulis 2009, p. 253). The main goal of this initiative is thus to circumvent the flaws and shortcomings of the EU's bilateral policies towards the region by promoting a regional multilateral framework for cooperation (Tassinari 2011, p. 232). Furthermore, it acknowledges that a dynamic regional initiative can further help to address problems in the Black Sea area, 'benefit the citizens of the countries concerned as well as to contribute to the overall prosperity, stability and security in Europe' (Communication from the Commission 2007, p. 2).

Officially, the EaP's main goal is to promote socio-economic reforms and further political dialogue in and with the six participating countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. In practice, however, the EU is extending its power eastwards and persuading these countries to adopt measures that contribute 'to strengthen the prosperity and stability of these countries, and thus the security of the EU' (European Council, 2008).

The EU's overall approach towards its eastern vicinity relies heavily on positive conditionality and socialization, because the EU wants to promote its norms and values beyond its borders (Headley 2012, p. 428). Accordingly, the EU offers a stance in its internal market and financial support to stimulate economic, political and social reforms, as well as security cooperation in the neighbourhood (Communication from the Commission 2003, pp. 10-15), in order to address the root causes of instability, crisis and conflict. As a result, the EU's political and financial support to its neighbouring countries is used to persuade them to take the reforms that best suit the EU's security interests (Armstrong 2007, p. 5). Alongside, the social learning processes resulting from institutional and people-to-people contacts and aiming at creating

collective shared understanding of proper behaviour reveal, in practice, the EU's superiority within this (asymmetrical) relationships and its attempt to establish the rules of the game and impose its vision of the world over the neighbourhood. The consequence is a structural foreign policy seeking to influence and transform the political, economic and social systems of the EU's neighbours (Emerson 2011, pp. 56-57). This structural foreign policy is quintessential for the EU's extension of power over the shared neighbourhood, in order to preserve its own peace and security.

This extension of power for security purposes is perceived in Moscow as a challenge and constraint to Russia's leverage over the post-Soviet space. Since the early 1990s, Moscow perceives this region as the main focus of Russian foreign policy (Trenin 2009, p. 8). Similarly to the EU, Moscow's strategy towards the shared neighbourhood represents an extension of its internal project aiming to shape its external environment by establishing friendly states on its periphery as a sine qua non condition for domestic and regional security (Averre 2009, pp. 1696-1697).

Moscow looks at its vicinity as a sphere of privileged interests and a direct link to its internal development (Radchuk 2011, p. 29) and international projection because it believes that it can only be a pole in a multipolar world if it has a sphere of influence (Judah et al. 2011, p. 23). Hence, Russia believes it has the right to intervene and control events in the post-Soviet space. For the same reason, it remains suspicious towards the EU's increasing involvement in the region, for it fears that Brussels persuades the countries in the shared neighbourhood to gravitate around the EU and NATO orbits, weakening Moscow's leverage in the region (Massari 2007, p. 11).

The economic recovery experienced during the 2000s allowed Russia to imprint its domestic and foreign policies with a strong dimension of assertiveness and pragmatism. Henceforth, Russia has not hesitated to use its resources to increase the vulnerabilities and political, security and economic dependences of the countries in the region, allowing Russia to preserve asymmetric relations favouring the maintenance of these countries in its sphere of influence (Baev 2007, p. 454). This rationale mirrors the geopolitical and geostrategic importance of the region to its security.

In the political realm, this strategy includes regional initiatives that aim to preserve Russia's leadership in the post-Soviet space and assure a political environment favourable to Russian interests, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (Tolstrup 2009, pp. 932-933). In the military field, the presence of its troops across the region and Russia's prominent, but nor impartial, role in the protracted conflicts of the post-Soviet space have put a long strain on decision makers in the shared neighbourhood (Trenin 2009, p. 11). Economically, Russia has developed several bilateral and multilateral attempts to integrate the markets in its periphery, such as the Single Economic Space, and has steadily taken a share on the main economic sectors in the region (Tsygankov 2006, pp. 147-148). Moscow has also made use of differentiated energy prices, gas and food embargoes to project its hard power and explore the vulnerabilities of its neighbours, in order to reinforce its regional

influence and increase the economic and political revenues to the Kremlin (Denisov and Grivach 2008, p. 96).

Although in general Moscow deploys a more assertive strategy over the shared neighbourhood than the EU, Russian authorities have been increasingly resorting to soft power to enhance its economic attractiveness to promote stability and security in the region. In this regard, it has been promoting pro-Russian youth groups and Non-Governmental Organizations in Russia and abroad, while presenting its own concept of democracy and freedom – 'sovereign democracy' – as an alternative to the liberal model enforced by the EU (Popescu and Wilson 2009a). Furthermore, discourses relating to the common civilizational and cultural legacy of the Soviet Union are often used to justify Russia's greatness and right to interfere in the near abroad (Makarychev 2009, p. 55), thus working as structures of signification aiming at reinforce its power over the region.

Simultaneously, these discourses reveal that Moscow perceives the amity of its neighbours and the harmony of their political choices with Russian interests as a pivotal requirement to preserve its influence in the region and, consequently, guarantee Russia's domestic, regional and global security.

We see, therefore, that both the EU and Russia try to create links of interdependence with the countries in their vicinity – whether through conditionality and socialization, in the case of the EU, or the deepening of vulnerabilities in the region, in the case of Russia – and establish asymmetrical relations that can, potentially, create sources of influence (Casier 2011, p. 497). Both of them want to extend their power over the region, imposing their vision of the world through a number of policies, initiatives and strategies, in order to establish the rules of the game and persuade the countries in the shared neighbourhood to accept asymmetrical relationships in which they are supposed to contribute to the security projects of these two regional actors. This competition for power and influence over the same region has the potential to drag Russia and the EU into (indirect) confrontation, turning the EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle a cornerstone cause of tension. This competitive dynamic is a key feature of EU-Russia bilateral relations, which in turn affect the formulation of the EU's policies towards the region as the following section unveils.

The EU's perceptions of Russian security strategies in the shared neighbourhood and their impact on the EU's neighbouring policies

As previously mentioned, the EU remained a low-profile actor in the post-Soviet Space until the development of the ENP in the mid-2000s. In part, this can be explained by the fact that during the 1990s and early 2000s the EU was very much focusing its efforts on the Enlargement process. However, the Russian factor is one element that cannot be left out of this equation and should not be disregarded as providing an explanation for the development and evolution of the EU's policies and approaches

towards the eastern neighbourhood. Either in the condition of EU´s strategic partner or a regional power with its own neighbouring ambitions, Moscow represents a significant challenge to EU´s policies towards the 'shared neighbourhood' and has an undeniable impact on the way the EU frames its approaches towards the region. This is, of course, a two-way process in which EU and Russian policies and approaches towards the region are defined (and transformed) according to their perceptions at a given moment. Accordingly, to understand how Russian strategies towards the shared neighbourhood are impacting on the EU´s policies towards this region we will need to shed light on the EU-Russia bilateral agenda and the way Moscow perceives the European growing influence in its near abroad, though the focus of the analysis rests with the EU's perceptions and policy evolution on issues concerning the shared neighbourhood.

EU-Russia relations are framed by the PCA ratified in 1997, which established the structures for the development of: relations of partnership; political dialogue and economic, social and cultural co-operation; and economic relations (Agreement on Partnership and Cooperation establishing a partnership between the European Community and their member states, of one part, and the Russian Federation, of the other part, 1997). At this point, cooperation between the EU and Russia was seen as pivotal to the European security and the need to maintain a positive and constructive dialogue featured prominently in the bilateral agenda.

Nonetheless, Russian political assertiveness and economic growth in the 2000s affected the dynamics of its relations with the EU. From 2003 onwards the EU-Russia relationship gained a more pragmatic dimension, meaning that any element of conditionality or interference in Russian internal affairs would have Moscow's veto (Headley 2012, p. 428). Alongside, the Kremlin's self-exclusion from the ENP framework and the very concept of 'shared neighbourhood', which Russian leaders perceived as a threat from the West to what used to be Russia's traditional sphere of influence and a direct challenging to Russian regional power, contributed to the creation of a competitive agenda between the EU and Russia over the region (Gower and Timmins 2009, p. 1687). Unwilling to become one of the EU's many neighbours, Moscow opted to remain outside the ENP framework insisting that its relations with Brussels should rest on the basis of an equal and strategic partnership (Haukkala 2008, p. 38). In this regard, the 2003 St. Petersburg EU-Russia summit established the goal to build four common spaces under the PCA framework – 1) economy, 2) freedom, security and justice, 3) external security and 4) research and education (EU-Russia Summit, 2003) – that recognize Moscow as strategic partner. In addition, in 2005 Russia and the EU adopted 'Road Maps' for implementing these common spaces and creating the 'infrastructure of a genuine strategic partnership' (Marsh 2008, p. 185).

This pragmatic turn was supported by the perception that the EU enlargement eastwards implied a range of issues concerning the future shared neighbourhood that had to be dealt in the framework of a working relationship (Flenley 2008, pp. 198-199).

The eastern enlargement added a level of complexity in EU-Russia relations that despite significant progresses in several areas of technical cooperation have suffered from political ups and downs and mutual distrust. Given the historical past and memory of many of the EU's new member states, it became more difficult to reach common strategic decisions regarding Russia (Massari 2007, p. 1). On the other hand, France and Germany have been reluctant to deepen relations with the EU´s eastern neighbours because they are aware of the strong presence of Russia in the region. Furthermore, they recognize its strategic importance and fear that any rapprochement to the East might jeopardize relations with Moscow (Popescu and Wilson 2009a, pp. 2-3). The EaP partners themselves acknowledge Russia as serious player in the region with the potential to impact on their political and economic systems (Popescu and Wilson 2009b). Often these countries try to take advantage of their geostrategic and geopolitical position to balance their relations with the EU and Russia – even if the ability to do so varies significantly among them – and refrain from submitting themselves to one of these two regional powers (Korosteleva 2011b, pp. 14-15). The lack of consensus within the EU on issues involving Russia have hampered the effective promotion of its norms and values in both Russia and the shared neighbourhood, affecting perceptions about the coherence and effectiveness of EU foreign and neighbouring policies.

Overall, the four common spaces established between the EU and Russia in 2003 lack practical content and remain largely a rhetorical commitment. However, cooperation is particularly difficult under the Common Space of External Security. Despite Russia's contribution to the EU's operation in Chad and Somalia (EU-Russia Common Spaces Progress Report 2008, p. 3) and the creation of the EU-Russia Political and Security Committee in 2010 (Dettke 2011, p. 128), in the external security field the EU-Russia strategic partnership reveals a level of competition resulting from their divergent positions regarding the shared neighbourhood (Nitoiu 2011, p. 462). Since 2004, EU regional policies in this area have been growing in number and scope strengthening the perception of the EU as a political and strategic actor in the region, whereas Russia understands the shared neighbourhood as its privileged sphere of influence and believes that, for that reason, the EU foreign and security policies should not interfere in its vital area of interests.

Although the Union recognizes Russia strategic relevance to the European Security architecture it has been eager to develop its own security strategy towards the post-Soviet Space. This represents a challenge to the formulation and evolution of the EU's policies towards the shared neighbourhood. This is because the EU often founds itself torn between a cooperative string in EU-Russia relations that stresses the need to address common security challenges in the continent and a competitive dimension on issues concerning their common vicinity, because both regional powers want to impose their vision of the world over the region and establish the rules of the game on their own terms.

Since the early 2000s Russia has been trying to reinforce its influence in the near abroad. For that purpose, Moscow has developed a pragmatic regional strategy that aims at favouring friendly relations with the countries of the post-Soviet Space independently of their authoritarian trends (Tsygankov 2006, p. 109). Furthermore, Moscow has preserved its role as major player in the protracted conflicts in the region favouring the maintenance of the status quo in order to satisfy its regional interests (Igumnova 2011, pp. 258-259; Mankoff 2009, p. 245). This new assertiveness in Russian regional policies and the fact that the Enlargement brought the EU closer to Russia´s traditional sphere of influence propelled the EU to assume a more active role in security issues at its eastern borders. In this regard it launched the ENP and several related initiatives that, as previously discussed, have a clear security purpose. Overall, the EU promises a stance in its internal market in exchange for political and economic reforms aiming at addressing the root causes for tension, instability and conflicts at its borders. Moscow perceives this new approach towards the region as a direct challenges to its traditional privileges in the near abroad and therefore has developed competing models of economic integration to those promoted by the EU (Tsygankov 2006, pp. 147-148), while presenting the concept of 'sovereign democracy' as an alternative to the EU's liberal system of governance (Makarychev 2009). With a robust approach and a whole array of mechanisms, both positive and negative, hard and soft, Russia is trying to undermine EU's security strategies in the Eastern periphery (Popescu and Wilson 2009a).

As part of its approach towards the near abroad, Russia has been seeking to control the transportation of gas and oil from the Caspian region to the EU (Winrow 2007, p. 219). Alongside, Moscow has been trying to gain control of the major companies in the energy business in its neighbourhood. This serves a double purpose. On the one hand, control of these companies will allow Moscow to have the monopoly of energy transit from Central Asia to Europe. On the other hand, this is an important and strategic asset that provides Russia with additional leverage to influence the political and economic options of its neighbouring countries. However, this strategy has led to several energetic crises in the region that spread the perception of Russia as an unreliable partner unable to provide secure energy supplies to Europe. In this context, the EU has been trying to deepen relationships with countries in the shared neighbourhood as a mean to access the energy deposits of the Caspian Sea and counterweight its dependence on Russian energy assets. To achieve that purpose the EU has been promoting the implementation of the TRACECA, the 'Great Silk Road' project and the European Energy Community, which aim to link Europe with Asia via the Southern Caucasus therefore avoiding Russian territory and provide secure energy supplies to Europe (Gachechiladye 2002, p. 124). Furthermore, the EU has signed agreements on energy related projects with countries in the shared neighbourhood that will allow the flow of substantial gas supplies from Azerbaijan and the Caspian Sea region to the EU (Report to the Meeting of Foreign Affairs Ministers 2009, p. 4). In

order to guarantee security of energy transit and supplies the EU has also been involved in mediating gas disputes between Russia and countries in the region (Tsantoulis 2009, p. 253).

The events in Georgia in 2008 have further worsened EU-Russia relations – and their perceptions of each other as regional powers – leading the EU to condemn Moscow for the violation of Georgia's territorial integrity with the use of force and the unilateral recognition of Abkhazia and south Ossetia. Under the framework of the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) and the ENP, the EU had already managed to become more active on security issues in the region. In this regard, it inaugurated the EU Rule of Law Mission to Georgia in 2003 (EUJUST THEMIS) and the EU Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) in cooperation with Moldova and Ukraine in 2005, and has been actively trying to address the root causes of conflicts in the region. However, the war in Georgia and the deployment of the EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM) in the country in 2008 represent a clear shift from a low-profile approach to active engagement towards conflict resolution in the EU's eastern neighbourhood. In fact the conflict provided the momentum for the EU to play a more active role in the region. Although the European Parliament acknowledged Georgia's responsibility for starting the war, it was clear that its condemnation rested with Russia alone. In particular, the EU was very critical of Moscow's policy of distributing Russian passports to South Ossetian and Abkhaz citizens and considered it a provocative stance towards Georgia (Bowker 2011, p. 201). Even if the fact that the EUMM is not permitted access to the 'occupied territories' in Georgia severely restrains its ability to change the grass root causes of the conflict and promote its sustainable resolution, the EU´s response to the Russian-Georgian war was interpreted as a clear sign of the EU's willingness and capability to play a significant role in regional security (Ghazaryan 2010, pp. 234-235).

The EaP initiative launched as a response to the events in the region, cause suspicion among Russian leaders that accused the EU of trying to carve out a new sphere of influence in Russia's own backyard and creating new dividing lines in Europe (Ria Novosti 2009). The EU-Russia summit of 2009 exposed even further the mistrust and disagreement between the two sides, when President Medvedev suggested that 'the EU itself did not know yet why it needs the Eastern Partnership', even if stressing that he did not want the initiative 'to turn into a partnership against Russia' (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2009). The fact that the EU is increasing its role as a security actor in the region and overtaking Russia as the main partner of most countries in the shared neighbourhood has, thus, reinforced Moscow's perception that the EU's ambitions eastwards are reducing its room for maneuver and constraining its options in the post-Soviet Space (Judah et al. 2011, p. 25). When the EaP was launched, the initiative was severely criticised by Moscow for allowing the EU a further engagement into its traditional area of interests (Tumanov *et al.* 2011, p. 130). Looking at the EaP as an unfriendly act, Moscow has been resisting the EU while showing that its neighbouring policies are weak and, most of all, that there are alternative and more

coherent models that the ones promoted by the EU (Popescu and Wilson 2009a). In fact, Russia sees the EU's initiatives in the region as constraining its leverage in its traditional area of geopolitical and economic interests (Freire 2011, p. 159). On its hand, the EU tends to perceive Moscow as a hostile power relying on the Cold War notion of spheres of influence, particularly whenever it tries to block the EU's neighbouring policies and initiatives (Trenin 2009, pp. 3-4).

The competing discursive practices analyzed here emerge as structures of action and signification whereby the EU and Russia try to reaffirm its – moral and political – superiority and prove the other as an unreliable partner. In this way they project the other as a threat and use that constructed image to attract the countries in the shared neighbourhood into their sphere of influence and persuade them to accept their exercise of power, as well as the terms of an asymmetrical relationship, in exchange for protection from this threatening 'other'.

However, this does not mean that the EU and Russia have their backs turned on each other permanently. Indeed, when we analyze the official political rhetoric we see that it is far more cooperative that competitive. This is because none of the parties believe they better off without each other; rather they recognize the need to deepen the EU-Russia cooperation (Freire 2011 p. 143). The preservation of a cooperative voice in EU-Russia bilateral relations – even if largely declaratory – reflects the fact that European security is complex and implies the interconnectedness of both Moscow and Brussels. This is precisely the reason for the reluctance of the EU to become more politically involved in the shared neighbourhood and clearly assume its security interests over the region, for it does not want to risk its relations with Moscow. On its hand, Russia is willing to cooperate with the EU on matters regarding their common interest in regional stability. However, it will only work in its own terms and not on supposed shared interests and values previously defined by Brussels (Headley 2012 p. 445). Notwithstanding, the power games and dynamics between the EU and Russia have often been more visible than this cooperative string whenever their 'privileged' interests are on the table.

Conclusion

By focusing on the constructivist approach to power and security this paper analyzed the dynamics resulting from EU and Russian neighbouring policies and revealed that, to some extent, both the EU and Russia want to reach the same goal in the shared neighbourhood. Indeed, both envisage expanding their influence and reinforcing their exercise of power in the region in order to safeguard their internal security, stability and prosperity, while increasing their global power and international projection. In this complex scenario, the EU's agenda revolves around extending its power eastwards and deepening the economic and political integration of the countries in the shared neighbourhood, whereas Russia has been seeking to explore vulnerabilities in the region in order to restore its national, regional and global power and reassert its

influence in the post-Soviet space. The result is a competition between two regional rationalities – and hegemonic ambitions over the shared neighbourhood – that has an important impact on EU-Russia bilateral relations and the very way the EU is framing its policies and approaches towards the shared neighbourhood.

Although the eastern enlargement is often provided as the sole reason for the EU's growing presence in the shared neighbourhood, Russian policies towards the region should not be disregarded as an explanation for the development of the EU's neighbouring policies and strategies. In several occasions, the EU has used Russian assertive stance towards the shared neighbourhood as a justification to reinforce its own footprint in the region. By diffusion perceptions of threat and danger associated with Russian regional initiatives, the EU has been legitimizing certain practices aiming at secure the environment at its borders. In this regard, Moscow's aggressive approach towards energy security provided the justification for the EU to deepen its relations with countries in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus as a means to access the energy deposits of the Caspian Sea and provide secure energy supplies to Europe. In the same way the Russian-Georgian war provided the momentum for the EU to play a more active role in the region, representing a clear shift from a low-profile approach to active engagement towards security and conflict resolution in the region. Therefore, the EU has been constructing the image of Russia (and its regional policies) as a threatening 'other' against which it needs to be protected. The promise of security against this threatening 'other' is thus an instrument of power that enables the EU to increase its presence in the shared neighbourhood. However, Moscow has also a negative perception of EU neigbouring policies and believes that its ambitions eastwards are reducing Russian leverage in the region. Accordingly, whenever the EU tries to deepen relations with its eastern neighbours Moscow frames this attempt as a security threat that justifies the adoption of a more assertive stance towards the region. The result is a cycle of construction of threat perceptions that demand security responses, which in turn create more threat images and so forth. This apparently never-ending cycle turns the EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle into a cornerstone cause of tension and a key feature of EU-Russia bilateral relations, though its outcome is unpredictable

From these diverging positions result the distrust and misunderstanding that imprint the EU-Russia agenda and lead these actors to block each other initiatives, because they perceive their competition over the shared neighbourhood as being mutually exclusive. However, these dynamics become further complicated by the EU's and Russia awareness on the need to cooperate in a number of fields. The political discourse emphasizes the cooperative orientation of EU-Russia relations revealing the European security complex nature and the need for a joint EU-Russia strategy to address common threats. However, power dynamics have often been more noticeable whenever their privileged interests in the shared neighbourhood are on the table.

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