EXTERNAL RELATIONS OF THE EUROPEAN UNION TOWARDS THE EAST
The battle of giants: the collision of EU and Russian foreign policies towards the contested neighbourhood and the Ukrainian crisis

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Abstract:
This paper critically interprets the international dimension of the Ukrainian crisis to reflect upon dynamics of power and security in the broader European space. It argues this crisis to be simultaneously the result and the intensifier of the collision of antagonist and mutually exclusive foreign policies towards the contested neighbourhood by the EU and Russia. For that purpose, it provides an overview of EU and Russian policies towards this region, followed by the discussion of the Ukrainian crisis in the midst of what can be considered to be a battle of giants for regional power and security.

Keywords: Contested neighbourhood; European Union; Russia; Security; Ukrainian crisis.

Introduction

The Ukrainian crisis is arguably one of the most pressing events in the broader framework of post-Cold War European security. It challenged the argument that the Nobel-awarded European Union (EU) had successfully maintained peace in Europe and triggered fears about the possibility of violence escalation at the regional level. Notwithstanding its internal dimension related to the incomplete transition of the country after its independence and the persistence of structural problems, such as nepotism, corruption, abuse of power and human rights’ violations, this paper argues that the Ukrainian crisis has a clear international dimension to it. When analysed from an international perspective, the tumultuous events that started in Kiev in November 2013 cannot be dissociated from the competition between the EU and Russia for power and security in their shared neighbourhood.
Arguably, countries in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus have been central to the regional strategies of both Brussels and Moscow from the early 1990s onwards. The end of the Cold War induced significant changes on dynamics of power and security across the broader European space. As the EU and Russia developed mechanisms to cope with this new reality and redefine their regional and security agendas it became clear that internal and external security were indissociably linked. Therefore, new frameworks for relations were developed aiming at assuring that external threats would not destabilise their respective internal orders, and that their power could create sources of influence beyond their borders thus allowing for the regional projection of these actors and the establishment of a first line of defence from the outer world. During the 1990s, EU and Russian policies towards this region were rather low profile mainly due to internal dynamics. Whereas the EU was very much focused on developing its foreign policy competences and preparing the Eastern enlargement; Russia was engaged in solving issues inherited from more than 40 years of global bipolar confrontation and the manifold challenges deriving from the disintegration of the Soviet Union – including political instability, economic crisis, social turmoil and the lack of agreement between political elites (e.g. Eurasianists, Atlanticists and Nationalists) (White, 2012, pp. 305-318).

Since the EU’s Eastern enlargement in 2004, the EU and Russia share a common neighbourhood in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. If until then their projection of power towards these regions had been secondary to other political and security concerns, now this space becomes an area of contested interests by the EU and Russia something that has had important consequences for the dynamics of power produced by and reflected in interactions between these two regional giants. As a result, the EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle has been marred by several struggles for power conferring and antagonistic tone to relations between Brussels and Moscow. This paper envisages to critically analysing these struggles for power by focusing on the Ukrainian crisis as simultaneously the result and the intensifier of dynamics of power and security in the EU-Russia-contested neighbourhood triangle.

In order to delve into this complex topic, the paper starts by providing an overview of EU frameworks for relations with countries in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. The second part of the paper presents the main foreign policy tools used by Russia to engage countries in its near abroad and boost its regional influence. The third part of the paper puts these conflicting approaches into comparison and uses the Ukrainian crisis to illustrate how antagonistic interests and strategies towards the same drove the EU and Russia into a route of collision. The final part of the paper focuses on the Ukrainian crisis as an event leading to the intensification of the EU-Russia dispute for influence over an area of common interests and a more vocal mutual-demobilization that has increasingly gained the contours of a regional battle of giants between Brussels and Moscow.