

TENSIONS, PROXIMITY AND COMPLEMENTARITY: DWELLING UPON EU-RUSSIA NEIGHBOURLY RELATIONS

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Abstract. *Despite several paradigm differences, tensions and challenges that bring back chills from the Cold War times, the EU and Russia cannot escape their cooperation. Being the main geopolitical entities in Europe and sharing borders, neighbours, economic and security concerns, both actors are bound to continue and develop their relations. Isolationism is out of the question in the current globalised and interconnected world. Thus, the current article offers a general outlook at the factors and characteristic which will always define their interaction and which will subsequently force EU and Russia into cooperating. The research is based on a theoretical framework defined by two main concepts: proximity and complementarity.*

Keywords: EU, Russia, complementarity, proximity, cooperation

1. Introduction

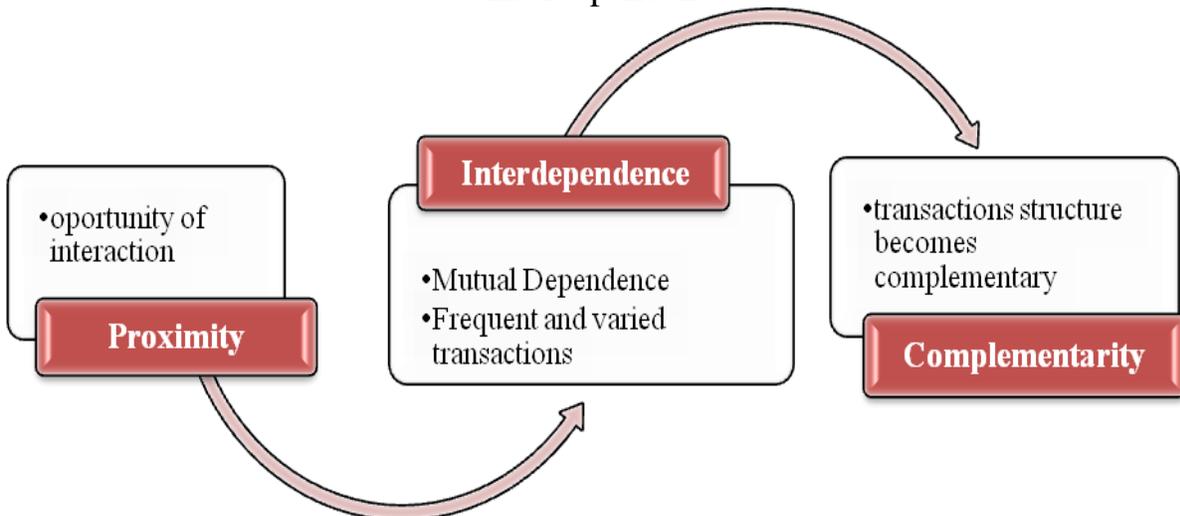
A simple glance at the world map is sufficient to comprehend that Russia and the EU, who share security concerns and an important common neighbourhood, have but one choice in the current international multipolar and globalised environment, namely to further develop the existing partnership. Being the biggest geopolitical entities on the European continent, Russia and the EU are already interdependent in many spheres, being important partners in several key areas such as trade, energy and external aspects of security. Nevertheless, the main factor that hinders the cooperation between the two actors is not related to economics nor geopolitics; it is widely accepted that the problems in EU-Russia dialogue stem from negative perceptions of each-other (Pop, 2016, pp.53-61).

In other words, the EU and Russia -the leading global players in Europe- are close to one another (or one inside the other – the Kaliningrad enclave) and are developing intense economic and political relations. Such an approach could be based on two fundamental arguments: the "proximity" and "complementarity" (Starr, 2005, pp.389-396).

2. Theoretical Framework

The two concepts are of particular relevance in understanding the nature of interaction between the two actors: The European Union and Russia have common borders (proximity) and the structure of their transactions is complementary (EU ensures a high proportion of its energy necessity by imports from Russia which, in turn, has as main source of income in its GDP the energy exports in the Union). Incidentally, the two concepts are closely related to the concept of interdependence; whereas proximity causes the existence of interdependence, which in turn induces some complementarity in state relations (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Proximity, complementarity and interdependence



Source: Author's representation

In the field of geography of international relations, especially in the study of international conflicts, the *proximity factor* was analysed from different perspectives. Mainly, there are two core directions situated at opposite poles: proximity either reduces or induces conflict between states.

The first direction was initiated by the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, who believes that ethics in foreign policy is only valid for neighbours, whom he defined as proximity, which often suspended the danger of a conflict (Denboer, 2010, p. 67). In other words, the proximity makes the states which are in the vicinity of one another to be more important, "relevant", the greatest proximity being the common borders. Regarding proximity, Harvey Starr considers that states (or any other social units) that are close to each other and interact, communicate more effectively by default. Basically, they are able to interact with each other, which Starr defined as "an opportunity of interaction". Moreover, the proximity is directly proportional to the intensity of interaction. Considering the distance and time factor, the opportunity of interaction explains why neighbouring states develop dense and varied transactions. For example, in the particular case of EU's natural gas imports, proximity to Russia makes it extremely

difficult to substitute the Federation as its main supplier, given the enormous costs that would imply building a new transport and pipelines infrastructure.

The second direction in literature implies that despite the high relevance of neighbours in interstate relations, there are certain instances where proximity can become a factor of accelerating the emergence of disputes or conflicts (Denboer, 2010). Most times the escalation of conflicts between proximal states is due to territorial disputes or cultural differences, so that intense interaction between states can have both positive and negative effects (Starr, 2005, pp. 389-396). One relevant example in this regard is the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, located in close proximity to Russia and the European Union. The geographical position of Ukraine characterised by proximity to both the EU and Russia has twofold consequences: on the one hand, it has intensified transactions and cooperation with the European Union, especially after the last enlargement of the Union, whilst, it has amplified tensions with Russia, escalating conflicts in the region, on the other hand.

However, regardless of the nature of effects, increasing dependencies implicitly lead to the development of a complementary structure of transactions between states. For example, in the last decade until the latest imposed sanctions, despite political tensions between the EU and Russia trade relations have intensified and accordingly, transactions between the two actors have become more complementary. To sum it up, the concept of complementarity, it is an implication, a natural effect of the relationship of interdependence, whereas interdependent states depend on one another and thus complement each other. The fact that EU and Russia are interdependent has been well established in literature (Finon and Locatelli, 2007; Proedrou, 2007; Vecchi, 2011; Sakwa, 2012; Krickovic, 2015, etc.) which subsequently makes them complementary as well. Moreover, complementarity is directly proportional to interdependence so, the stronger the interdependence, the more heightened the degree of complementarity (Vecchi, 2011, pp. 7-12).

3. Bound for conflict or cooperation?

Undoubtedly, the proximity of EU and Russia represents a strong strategic component, providing the two spaces opportunities of interaction in various fields, such as: economy, security, environment, etc. Moreover, geographically, Russia is and it will remain the biggest and most important EU neighbour and continuing to play a leading role in Eurasian and Euro-Atlantic grounds. From this perspective, the European Union and Russia are "sentenced" to co-exist close to each other and even, in certain situation, one inside the other, as the Kaliningrad region is located within the Union. Enhanced interaction between the two spaces also lead to the emergence of interdependence, based on the principle of complementarity between needs and resources (Vecchi, 2011, p. 9); On the one hand, the Russian Federation is the main supplier of energy to Europe and one of the top suppliers to the clear majority of raw materials used by EU's industries. On the other hand, the European Union is the main investor in the Russian economy and

a major supplier of know-how and technology. Thus, at first glance, we can say that the EU and Russia are too close (geographically, culturally and economically) not to realise that close cooperation can provide an opportunity to increase welfare and security in both spaces (Bahgat 2006, p. 964).

Nevertheless, the recent events in Europe and in the world, are a living proof that interdependent and complementarity are not enough to ensure strategic and efficient cooperation. The differences in paradigm, the geopolitical tensions and the major differences in collective memories of the past tend to weigh heavily on the EU-Russia interactions, as Arbatova stated that “the current crisis in the Russia – West relations stems from the profound misunderstanding of each other’s views regarding acceptable foundations of European security and stakes across the post -Soviet space” (Arbatova, 2016, p. 31). Moreover, on a structural level, EU-Russia partnership is highly challenging as the EU is not homogenous and this new complex hybrid type of actor that EU is difficult to be understood by a traditional realist, such as Russia.

Within this context, proximity and complementarity may reflect both the symbiotic and the competitive nature of interactions. In terms of economic interdependence, competition arises when the concerned parties depend on an identical resource (e.g., profits made by the buyer and seller), while symbiosis refers to a resource that is created by mutual contribution (Pfeffer and Salancik 2003, p. 41). The current article goes beyond economic relations and is focusing on proximity and complementarity (interdependence) in terms of political dialogue. Where does cooperation start and when do tensions takes over in EU-Russia dyad?

4. Proximity, the East-West division and the structural limits of cooperation

" [N]o other country reveals our differences as does Russia. This is a failure of Europe as a whole, not any Member State in particular."

(Peter Mandelson, EU Trade Commissioner, 2007)

In general, for the EU, relations with Russia reflect an essential feature of its actorness - *fragmentation*. Such feature is based on the lack of political homogeneity of the Member States (MS). The MS’s division regarding approach and policy vis-a-vis Russia creates tensions on two levels: European regional level (EU’s foreign policy) and national level (each state’s national foreign policy). Thus, bilateral disputes and tensions between Russia and EU members affect the Union's foreign policy towards Russia and hampers economic cooperation between the two actors. Meanwhile, at Member States’ level, Russia emerged as the most controversial issue in EU policy, since Donald Rumsfeld (US Secretary of Defence) divided the European club into 'new' and 'old' Member States, including in *old* Europe the states that did not support the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Overall, both in academia and political circles, there is a widespread conception in terms of EU MS division when it comes to their attitude towards Russia: there are two main

groups of states (old and new) which, in turn, promote either a pragmatic approach or a moral one. Basically, each Member State tends to adopt one of the *two main political paradigms* (pragmatism or moralism):

- At one end of the spectrum are states who see Russia as a key trading partner (usually the *old* Western European members, also called *pragmatists*). This group considers that Russia can be drawn on the EU's orbit through a wide-ranging cooperation and integration. They promote the involvement of Russia in as many institutions as possible and encourage European investment in the Russian energy sector.
- At the other end of the spectrum, there are states that perceive Russia as a threat (usually the new members from Central and Eastern Europe, also called *moralists*). According to them, expansionism and Russia's contempt for western must be managed by promoting a policy of soft "containment" (Leonard and Popescu, 2007, p. 2).

Such a grouping of EU MS highlights an important feature of EU in relation to Russia, namely – *the East-West division*. Although this division is still relevant at present, in the context of the Ukrainian conflict, the unity between the CEE states has lost some of its strength (Arbatova, 2016, p.37). Linking this division to the proximity dimension, it is quite clear that the closer the EU MS are to Russia, the more prone to tensions and disagreements they tend to be. To sum it up, *proximity in EU-Russia relations accelerates tensions and conflicts*, regardless of the intensity of interactions, thus complementarity (most Eastern members are heavily dependent on Russia when it comes to gas and oil imports) (Fig. 2).

Figure 2. East-West division, proximity and interactions*

<i>EU MS</i>	<i>East-West Division</i>	<i>Proximity</i>	<i>Interactions</i>
<i>Western members</i>	Pragmatists	Low	Cooperative
<i>Eastern members</i>	Moralists	High	Conflictual

*Assumption: the complementarity is constant and intense throughout the EU

Source: Author's representation

However, in an "audit of power" regarding the relations between EU and Russia, Nicu Popescu and Mark Leonard (2007) examined the bilateral interstate relations between EU and Russia by identifying five groups of Member States. These groups promote distinct policies and approaches towards Russia and include old and new members alike:

- "Trojan Horses" (Cyprus and Greece) who often defend Russian interests in the EU and are willing to oppose its common positions;

- "Strategic partners" (France, Germany, Italy and Spain) who enjoy a "special and privileged relationship " with Russia and whose governments have built bilateral relations which sometimes neglect the common objectives of the EU in areas such as energy and the neighbourhood policy;
- "Friendly Pragmatists" (Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Finland, Hungary, Luxembourg, Malta, Portugal, Slovakia, and Slovenia), which maintain a close relationship with Russia and tend to put economic interests above political goals;
- " Cold Pragmatists " (Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Ireland, Latvia, the Netherlands, Romania, Sweden and the UK), which focuses also on economic interests but are less reluctant than other states to accuse Russia's behaviour regarding human rights or other similar problems;
- "New Cold Warriors" (Lithuania and Poland) who overtly promote hostile relationship with Moscow and are willing to use the veto to block EU negotiations with Russia.

For this grouping of EU's members, it is more difficult to establish connections between their approach towards Russia and proximity. Nevertheless, the extreme positions (New Cold warriors and Strategic Partners) do tend to follow the same pattern of the *east-west division of EU* (East: Poland and Lithuania and West: Germany, Italy, France and Spain) – the closer they are to Russia, the more difficult the cooperation gets. For the Trojan Horses the issue is more complex, as the complementarity is higher than in any other EU MS (for instance, Cyprus and Russia develop a well-known tight financial relation) (Fig. 3).

Figure 3. "Audit of power" grouping, proximity and interactions*

<i>EU MS</i>	<i>East-West division</i>	<i>Proximity</i>	<i>Interactions</i>
<i>Trojan Horses</i>	Exception (higher complementarity)	Medium	Cooperative
<i>Strategic Partners</i>	Western members	Low	Cooperative
<i>Pragmatists (friendly or cold)</i>	West and East	Mixed	Mixed
<i>New Cold Warriors</i>	Eastern members	High	Conflictual

*Assumption: Complementarity is constant throughout the EU

Source: Author's representation

Regardless of the grouping of EU's Member States, a fact is certain: when it comes to Russia, bilateral relations prevail over regional ones. In this regard, the fragmentation of European political power is a certainty that hinders EU's common voice and weighs heavily on building a proper approach and strategy towards Russia.

5. EU-Russia – where to?

The current regional and international challenges and conflicts have brought EU-Russia relations to a halt. Barring the Ukraine crisis, most times, the criticism towards Russia is based on two main aspects: Russia's rationality to provide better contracts to the western MS and its tendency to negotiate and develop relations with the MS bilaterally. Moreover, such external actions are often perceived as an attempt on Russia's behalf to destabilise and sabotage the unity of the EU, under the principle *divide et impera*. From a rational standpoint, considering Russia's paradigms and perceptions, it does not make sense for Russia to have an interest in destabilising its main consumer and investor, or, in other words its main source of income. The existing fears and defective dialogue occur because of more complex considerations, such as the profound differences in paradigms and perceptions (Light, 2008, p. 7). In this context, the Union's fear of energy dependence on Russia is often unfounded. The geopolitical environment, not the actual energy dependence, has changed each other's perceptions over the last decades. For example, quantitatively, the EU's dependence on oil imports is much higher than on those of gas; however, natural gas is a more politicised sector than oil and consequently EU's attention is focused on them.

Regarding the *divide et impera* Russian strategy allegations, some European leaders continue to treat Russia on a bilateral level in order to pursue their own interests (Paillard, 2010, 65). Western Europe (Germany in particular) is not motivated to invest in the technological process and the development of transport infrastructure required in the CEE countries with the ultimate goal of consolidating the EU common energy market, but rather prefer advantageous contracts offered by Russia. Thus, the failure to integrate the energy market or the failure of the Nabucco project is exclusively due to EU's internal problems of coordination, which should clarify and strengthen their energy policy. Moreover, instead of criticising Russia's attitude regarding the politicisation of the energy sector, the EU should understand that behind the nationalisation of natural resources there is a reasoning and a highly robust logic, perfectly consistent with Russia's national interests.

In this framework, it is easy to perceive that a sound solution for enhancing development and regional integration between EU and Russia would be a deeper integration of EU's energy market and a better uniformization of its foreign policy vis-a-vis Russia. A common energy market would turn Europe into a single export market for Gazprom and would make bilateral political relations (disputes/tensions) less relevant. In this respect, Europe would be better prepared to address Russia with one voice.

Another tangible solution that should be considered by both the actors is related to improving energy efficiency in Russia. Such an endeavour could open a window of opportunity for enhanced cooperation between Russia and the EU. In this respect, the EU could become one of Russia's key partners in providing necessary expertise in technology or equipment. It would also be a less controversial way to cooperate.

Conclusions

Despite the general perceptions in literature and media, the prospects for regional cooperation and integration of Russia and the EU are varied. It is universally accepted that geography matters; and so is the case for EU and Russia: despite their differences, proximity and complementarity bound them to cooperate. Even though the proximity factor tends to enhance and escalate disputes and tensions, most of them stem from profound misunderstanding of each other's views of the past, European security and stakes across the post-Soviet space. Indeed, these are complex elements that hinder cooperation (negative perceptions and differences in collective memories of the past), but the complementarity of the two actors, transposed into an intense interdependence triggers them to interact. However, regardless of the difficulties in promoting cooperation, Russia and the European Union are "condemned and meant to interact", as isolationism is no longer an option in our present world.

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