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The Dialogue of Powers That Never Was: EU-Russia Relations 2005-2014

Virgile SARDA



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Dijver 11, B-8000 Brugge | +32 50 477 251 | info.ird@coleurope.eu | www.coleurope.eu/ird

About the Author

Virgile Sarda is a French graduate of the College of Europe in Bruges and SciencesPo Paris, where he specialised in European foreign and security policies. He served as an accredited assistant to a Member of the European Parliament (2025-2026), working on foreign affairs, European security and EU external action, with a particular focus on EU–Russia relations, the Eastern neighbourhood and democratic resilience. He previously completed a traineeship at the French Embassy in Moscow at the onset of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. His academic interests include democratic resilience, European foreign policy, EU–Russia relations and the evolution of the European security architecture. This paper is based on his Master's thesis at the College of Europe.

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Dijver 11 | BE-8000 Bruges, Belgium | Tel. +32 (0)50 477 251 | E-mail
ird.info@coleurope.eu | www.coleurope.eu/ird

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Abstract

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has renewed questions about the relations between the European Union (EU) and Russia. This paper examines an earlier, failed attempt at structuring that relationship: a potential 'dialogue of powers', in which both actors would recognise and balance each other as powers, whose seeds were arguably planted in the 2005 Common Spaces. It asks why this dialogue failed to materialise in the period between 2005 and Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. Drawing on official EU and Russian documents alongside 23 semi-structured interviews with EU officials, member state diplomats, NATO officials and independent scholars, the paper assesses both sides' capacity to wield constitutive, compulsory and institutional power, before turning to the institutional structures and self-perceptions to explain their respective performance.

The paper finds that the EU came to dominate the constitutive sphere, setting the normative terms of the relationship, while Russia dominated the compulsory sphere, mobilising military, economic and symbolic pressure; neither, however, succeeded in shaping the other's behaviour. With neither actor able to prevail directly, this deadlock displaced the struggle onto their shared neighbourhood, where competing efforts to shape Eastern European states' behaviour came to substitute for the increasing confrontation neither side could win outright, contributing to the crises in the region.

The paper further argues that this imbalance was compounded by a deeper failure of mutual recognition: the EU's and Russia's own institutional structures and self-perception rendered the other's dominant mode of power effectively unthinkable as a legitimate expression of power at all. The EU could not conceive of compulsory power as an available instrument, nor easily recognise Russia's use of it as anything other than an anachronism. Russia, in turn, understood power in essentially material and coercive terms and so could not recognise the EU's constitutive influence as power at all, only as one-sided interference. This dual failure – of balance and of recognition – explains why the dialogue of powers did not develop and offers a framework for understanding the deeper structural obstacles that would need to be overcome for a genuine dialogue to become possible in the future.

Introduction: The 2005 Common Space of External Security and the Seeds of a Dialogue of Powers

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has cast a new light on the relations between the European Union (EU) and Russia. Among the possible architectures that could structure this relationship is a 'dialogue of powers', an arrangement in which both actors recognise and balance each other as powers. Such a dialogue emerged, embryonically, in the past, without ever fully developing. This paper seeks to understand why the EU and Russia failed to establish a dialogue of powers in the period between the creation of the Common Spaces in 2005 and Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. Drawing on official documents and a series of expert interviews, it examines each actor's capacity to wield constitutive, compulsory and institutional power. It argues that this attempt at a dialogue of powers foundered due to an imbalanced expression of power and was closely tied to a mutual failure to recognise one another as powers to dialogue with.

The notion of 'dialogue' employed here is rooted in Thucydides' Melian dialogue,¹ in which the idea of power plays a central role in the relationship between two political entities. Yet the Melian dialogue was, precisely, not a dialogue of powers: one of the two parties was effectively devoid of power, and the exchange was consequently one of domination rather than of mutual positioning. A dialogue of powers, by contrast, presupposes a relationship between two *relatively equal* powers. Such a 'balance of power', of which Kissinger is one of the most prominent modern theorists, is what allows a degree of equilibrium to emerge between them.² A dialogue of powers therefore relies on the recognition by the other as a power to dialogue with and on a relative balance of power in the relationship.

Building on this conceptualisation, the EU and Russia would need, first, to recognise each other as powers to dialogue with and, second, to display a relative balance of power in the means through which they express it. The Road Maps for the Common Spaces, and especially the Common Space of External Security, can be read as having planted the seeds of such a dialogue: by recognising one another as partners, the EU and Russia arguably created the conditions for the fulfilment of the first of these two conditions. Yet this recognition was, at the time, ambiguous. The Common Space established the EU and Russia as entities to dialogue with, yet it is less clear whether it constituted a recognition of the other as a power, whose views and actions had to be taken into account because they bore on the other's own conditions of existence – as suggested, for instance, by the commitment to an "exchange of views on new

¹ Thucydide, *La Guerre du Péloponnèse*, translated by J. Voilquin (Paris : Les Belles Lettres, 1953).

² Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994).

initiatives and on possible use of instruments related to security and stability".³ This recognition remained largely implicit, leaving considerable room for interpretation. The 2005 Common Space entailed the conditions for the mutual recognition as powers, in other words the *potential* for a future dialogue of powers rather than an actual one.

Ultimately, despite having its seeds planted in 2005, this dialogue of powers never developed and ended in 2014 with Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea.⁴ This paper examines why this dialogue of powers between the EU and Russia did not materialise. To answer this question, the paper proceeds in two stages, moving from the observable to the explanatory. It first establishes *whether* the EU-Russia relationship was in fact balanced across the different spheres in which power can be expressed, asking to what extent the balance of power, or absence thereof, contributed to the (non-)realisation of a dialogue of powers between 2005 and 2014. Once this empirical pattern has been established, the paper turns to *why* it took this particular shape, examining how each actor's power-wielding capabilities shaped its ability or inability to recognise the other as a power. This ordering reflects a broader methodological premise that recognition itself is not directly observable and must be inferred from the concrete ways in which actors behave towards one another.⁵ Assessing the balance of power first therefore provides the empirical basis from which the deeper, more interpretive question of mutual recognition can subsequently be addressed. This structure allows to address the two conditions for a dialogue of powers: the recognition by the other as a power to dialogue with and a relative balance of power in the relationship in order to understand why such a dialogue did not develop between the EU and Russia.

Framework of Analysis

This section outlines the paper's typology of power, its treatment of perception and recognition and the methodology to study the EU-Russia relationship between 2005 and 2014.⁶

³ European Union and Russian Federation, *15th EU-Russia Summit, Annex 3: Road Map for the Common Space of External Security* (Moscow: 10 May 2005), 37.

⁴ Konstantin Khudoley and Maciej Raś, "The History of Russia–European Union Relations", in *The Routledge Handbook of EU–Russia Relations: Structures, Actors, Issues*, ed. Tatiana Romanova and Maxine David (London: Routledge, 2022), 15; Dmitry Danilov, "The Political and Security Relationship", in Romanova and David, *op.cit.*, 154.

⁵ Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall, "Power in International Politics", *International Organization* 59, no. 1 (2005), 39–75; Thomas Lindemann, *Causes of War: The Struggle for Recognition* (Colchester: ECPR Press, 2010).

⁶ For further details, see Virgile Sarda, "2005–2014: EU-Russia Relations, A Dialogue of Powers?", Master's thesis (Bruges: College of Europe, 2025).

A Typology of Power

Power in international relations remains a multifaceted concept. This paper draws on Barnett and Duvall's taxonomy of power, refined by Casier into three categories (constitutive, compulsory and institutional) as a structure to analyse how the EU and Russia performed across different spheres of power between 2005 and 2014.⁷

First, *constitutive power*, combining Barnett and Duvall's structural and productive dimensions, is the capacity to shape another actor's identity, interests and understanding of the world through discourse and social relations rather than direct coercion.⁸ It is assessed here through EU and Russian leadership discourse on norms and identity. Second, *compulsory power*, following Barnett and Duvall and echoing Dahl's classic definition, is the direct use of material or symbolic resources to alter another actor's behaviour against its interests.⁹ In line with Dahl, intentionality and conflict of interest matter more here than eventual success: even a failed attempt at coercion counts as an expression of compulsory power. Following Carr's distinction between military, economic and symbolic power, this includes non-military forms of pressure alongside overt coercion.¹⁰ Third, *institutional power*, following Barnett and Duvall, captures how an actor shapes another's environment indirectly, through third countries and shared institutional frameworks.¹¹ In the EU-Russia case, this is assessed through both actors' engagement with, and competition over, their shared Eastern neighbourhood.

Contrary to Casier's comparison of theoretical underlying capabilities, this paper looks at the tangible, final expression of power within each category, rather than each actor's theoretical capacity to act:¹² what mattered during the period studied was less what each actor was hypothetically capable of doing, in terms of material constraints, than what each actor actually attempted, in other words what each actor was willing to try. To explain the failure of the dialogue of powers, the answer therefore lies in the expression of willingness to wield power by each actor.

Because a dialogue of powers is inherently relational, the analysis also draws on the literature on perception and recognition. Following Jervis, Wendt and Gross Stein, it

⁷ Barnett and Duvall, *op.cit.*, 39–75; Tom Casier, "The Different Faces of Power in European Union–Russia Relations", *Cooperation and Conflict* 53, no. 1 (2018), 101–117.

⁸ Barnett and Duvall, *op.cit.*, 53–55, 107; Robert A. Dahl, "The Concept of Power", *Behavioral Science* 2, no. 3 (1957), 201–215.

⁹ Barnett and Duvall, *op.cit.*, 50.

¹⁰ Edward Hallett Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis: 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (London: Macmillan, 1946).

¹¹ Barnett and Duvall, *op.cit.*, 51.

¹² Tom Casier, "Power in EU-Russia Relations", in Romanova and David, *op.cit.*, 84–85.

examines how the EU and Russia perceived each other's expression of power.¹³ It further draws on Lindemann's framework distinguishing status, role and identity recognition in order to assess whether and how failures of mutual perception translated into a failure to recognise each other as powers worth dialoguing with.¹⁴

Building on this framework, the paper hypothesises that the failure of the EU-Russia dialogue of powers stemmed from an imbalanced expression of power between 2005 and 2014 and that this imbalance is itself significantly associated with a mutual failure, at the time, to recognise each other as a power to dialogue with.

Methodology and Limitations

The analysis rests on two bodies of evidence. First, primary sources from the period between 2005 and 2014: official EU and Russian documents, summit statements and leadership speeches are used to trace each actor's discursive projection of constitutive power, as well as to establish the record of compulsory and institutional initiatives such as sanctions, military exercises, energy pressure and neighbourhood policy instruments. This documentary analysis is complemented by 23 semi-structured interviews conducted in 2025 with EU officials, member state diplomats, NATO officials and independent scholars.

Official documents and public discourse establish the *observable* record of the relationship: what the EU and Russia said, committed to and did. But this record says little about *why* an actor behaved the way it did, or how its own institutions understood the choices being made. This is where interviews add value: because perception and self-perception are internal, sometimes unrecorded processes, they are better accessed through practitioners belonging to institutions that took part in the discussions, debates and drafting that produced the behaviour.

The fact that these interviews were conducted roughly a decade after the events raises a concern about accounts being reconstructed retrospectively and coloured by more contemporary developments. In this case, the 2022 invasion likely reshapes how officials narrate the 2005-2014 period. Yet distance also allows officials and experts to speak more candidly about a time in the past and sometimes to address

¹³ Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976); Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Robert Jervis, Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, *Psychology and Deterrence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985); Janice Gross Stein, "Threat Perception in International Relations", in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*, 2nd ed., ed. Leonie Huddy, David O. Sears and Jack S. Levy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹⁴ Thomas Lindemann, *op.cit.*

institutional culture with more detachment than would have been possible in real time. Moreover, this paper's interest lies in identifying the durable institutional structures and self-perceptions that shaped the EU-Russia relationship throughout the period and that, by several interviewees' own account, persisted well beyond it. These features are, by their nature, relatively deeply rooted, stable and retrospectively recoverable.

The method outlined carries some limitations. First, interview accounts remain vulnerable to institutional self-justification, to hindsight bias and to the uneven availability of interlocutors. To mitigate these risks, this paper draws on a relatively large panel of 23 interviewees across diverse institutional vantage points, allowing triangulation of accounts against one another as well as against the documentary record.¹⁵

Second, this paper is a product of the time it was produced in. It would very probably not look at the EU-Russia relations between 2005 and 2014 in the same way if this work was not written in 2026. This temporal positioning is particularly important when interpreting a past relationship in light of its subsequent trajectory. The events of 2014 and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 provide knowledge unavailable at the time, inevitably shaping how we interpret developments between 2005 and 2014. This research therefore uses later developments as an analytical perspective to reconsider previously less visible dynamics. However, identifying this period as containing the 'seeds' of later developments introduces a hindsight bias. The 2025 interviews similarly involve retrospective interpretations.

Third, the paper applies the approach of a dialogue of powers and a typology of powers, to analyse EU-Russia power relations at the time. However, any analytical approach comes with simplifications to facilitate the analysis.

Fourth, the research does not take into account the domestic dynamics of the EU and Russia, nor the internal dynamics of non-EU Eastern European countries which have been important drivers for their alignment, or not, with EU values. The analysis is limited to the positioning of non-EU Eastern European countries through the role of EU-Russia relations. It uses the term Eastern neighbourhood because this is how the EU perceived them at the time.

Fifth, another limit is the difficulty to analyse the EU-Russia relationship, in particular in the sphere of security and defence, without addressing the role of the United States (US).

¹⁵ Rebecca S. Natow, "The Use of Triangulation in Qualitative Studies Employing Elite Interviews", *Qualitative Research* 20, no. 2 (2020), 160-173.

Finally, the paper does not draw on Russian documents and interviewees. Taken together, these limitations impact the scope and interpretation of the research. The analysis is strongest in explaining how different forms of power and recognition shaped the EU-Russia relationship and contributed to the failure of a dialogue of powers. It cannot, however, provide a comprehensive causal account, disentangle EU-Russia dynamics from domestic, Eastern European or transatlantic factors, or offer a fully symmetrical account of Russian perceptions. The findings should therefore be understood as a theoretically informed interpretation of one dimension of the relationship.

The following section applies the framework of analysis to assess how the EU and Russia each performed across the constitutive, compulsory and institutional spheres of power and to consider what this assessment reveals about the balance or imbalance of power between them. This empirical assessment provides the foundation for the subsequent section which will explain why the relationship took this particular shape.

Balance of Power in EU-Russia Relations in Light of the Assessment of the Different Types of Power

This section assesses the EU's and Russia's respective performance between 2005 and 2014 across the three spheres of power set out in the previous section: constitutive, compulsory and institutional. For each sphere, it examines the expression of willingness to wield power by both actors and its effect, or lack thereof, on the other's behaviour. It finds that the EU and Russia were each dominant in a different sphere, the EU in constitutive power and Russia in compulsory power, while their institutional power, exercised indirectly through their shared neighbourhood, remained comparatively balanced. The subsequent section will then assess the overall impact of this power performance on the EU-Russia relationship.

Performance of the EU and Russia for Each Type of Power

Constitutive Power

Looking at the EU-Russia summits, and particularly at the 2005 Road Maps for the Common Spaces that represent the point of departure for this paper, the language of these frameworks was primarily shaped by the EU's norms and implicitly sought to direct Russia's interpretation of normal behaviour. For example, the Road Maps contain references to concepts such as "respect for international law, [...] democratic principles and human rights", which are referred to as "common values" while being

framed in a way that fits the paradigm promoted by the EU.¹⁶ By using these 'common values' as foundations for the EU-Russia Common Spaces, the EU was implicitly defining the scope of normal behaviour in the relationship in a way that policies deviating from these common values would be constituted as aberrant. These 'common values' were consistently referred to as the foundational framework for the relationship with Russia by EU institutions.¹⁷

Vladimir Putin's speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference represents a first attempt for Russia to exert constitutive power.¹⁸ Albeit not directed towards the EU in particular, this discursive contestation of what was perceived as a Western expansion towards the East sought to challenge and reshape the European interpretation of security, legitimate behaviour and international order, which therefore fits within this analysis of Russia's constitutive power towards the EU. This discourse was framed using the language promoted by the European Union, specifically in comparison to more recent narratives centred on sovereignty and traditional values.¹⁹ For example, this discourse insisted on the importance for Russia of "democracy, freedom, openness and a sincere partnership with all the members of the big European family", while to some extent already interpreting these common values differently.²⁰ Russia's interpretation of normality was still constituted within a European paradigm, while also beginning to challenge it.

Even in the face of conflictual events, the EU-Russia relationship in the sphere of constitutive power was dominated by the EU's attempts to draw Russia towards its norms, values and conception of the world. For example, in response to the 2008 invasion of Georgia, the Council of the EU declared that "the European Union has shown itself willing to engage in partnership and cooperation, in keeping with the principles and values on which it is based. We expect Russia to behave in a responsible

¹⁶ Council of the European Union, *15th EU–Russia Summit Press Release*, 8799/05 (Moscow: 10 May 2005), 2, 6, 17, 26, 32.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* European Parliament, *Report on EU Economic and Trade Relations with Russia*, A6-0135/2005 (Brussels: 26 May 2005), 1, 6; European Parliament, *Resolution on the EU–Russia Summit Held in Sochi on 25 May 2006* (Brussels: 15 June 2006), 1-3; European Parliament, *Report on EU Economic and Trade Relations with Russia*, A6-0206/2007 (Brussels: 24 May 2007), 6, 8, 11, 12, 14; European Parliament, *Resolution of 17 June 2010 on the conclusions of the EU/Russia summit* (Brussels: 17 June 2010), 2; European Parliament, *Resolution of 6 February 2014 on the EU–Russia Summit* (Brussels: 6 February 2014), 2.

¹⁸ President of Russia, *Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy* (Munich: 10 February 2007), 2, 5, 8, 12.

¹⁹ President of Russia, *Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly* (Moscow: 21 February 2023), 6-8, 12, 23; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation* (Moscow: 31 March 2023), 2-5, 7-9.

²⁰ President of Russia, *Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy* (Munich: 10 February 2007), 2, 5, 8, 12.

manner".²¹ These principles, "respecting international law and the principles of good neighbourliness and peaceful cooperation",²² were wielded constitutively, as a way for the EU to frame its interpretation of international relations as legitimate and Russia's behaviour as violating international norms, counter-productive and therefore aberrant.

Through initiatives like the EU-Russia Partnership for Modernisation launched in 2010, the EU was describing Russia's development trajectory as intertwined with a partnership with the EU and framing the European norms and practices as a natural progression towards modernity.²³ This highlights the way the EU was exerting constitutive power in its relationship with Russia, attempting to shape Russia's interpretation of itself, of its history, of its future and therefore its behaviour. Even in 2012, when Russia increasingly contested the European narrative stemming from the EU's discourses, weakening the EU's domination of the constitutive sphere of the relationship, the EU maintained its constitutive power and a position of relative authority in that sphere of the relationship. For example, the EU press statement on the 2012 EU–Russia Summit reiterated that "a comprehensive New Agreement should provide the best basis for us to move forward towards our common goals, while respecting our values".²⁴ Here, the EU continued to frame its normative assumptions as the baseline for cooperation, implicitly expecting Russia to align with European interpretations of law and order on the international scene.

In parallel, the 2013 Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation further articulated Russia's desire for a multipolar world linked to spheres of influence.²⁵ This document was in part directed towards Europe because of the unprecedented emphasis it puts on Europe's civilisational and economic importance. However, the framing of Russia's norms and values within a civilisational competition with the West, which ties into a broader Russian-centric approach, limited Russia's ability to project this interpretation of the world into the European one: for constitutive power to shape another actor's behaviour, the interpretation of reality being promoted must be internalised by that actor as legitimate or attractive, rather than simply asserted against it. By defining itself in opposition to European norms rather than seeking to

²¹ Council of the European Union, *Extraordinary European Council, Presidency Conclusions*, 12594/08 (Brussels: 1 September 2008), 2.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Council of the European Union, *Joint Statement on the Partnership for Modernization, EU-Russia Summit*, 10546/10 (Rostov-on-Don: 1 June 2010), 1, 2; European Council, *Remarks of Herman Van Rompuy, President of the European Council, following the 28th EU-Russia Summit*, EUCO 162/11 (Brussels: 15 December 2011), 2, 3.

²⁴ European Council, *30th EU-Russia Summit*, EUCO 241/12 (Brussels: 18 December 2012), 1.

²⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation* (Moscow: 12 February 2013), 1-2, 4-5.

persuade Europeans of their validity, Russia's narrative could resonate with domestic and 'near-abroad' audiences, but had little purchase on European actors, for whom it read as adversarial rather than as a plausible account of their own world. The norms and values promoted by Russia, such as the "privileged interests" narrative²⁶ following the invasion of Georgia, and asserting Russia's own understanding of multipolarity and a direct answer to a Western claim to set normative standards of international behaviour or the emerging discourse of "traditional values"²⁷ positioned against Western liberal social norms, were reactive counter-narratives rather than a means to wield constitutive power in the sense of shaping another actor's outlook on the world.

A central tenet of the EU's domination of the constitutive power relationship with Russia was its expectation, as expressed by the European Council, that Russia would converge on European norms to become a modern and responsible international actor.²⁸ In that sense, the EU's exercise of constitutive power was proactive and sought to promote its interpretation of reality towards Russia through discourses and by positioning Russia as a norm-taker in the structural relationship. By actively projecting its own interpretation of reality onto Russia, while remaining largely unaffected by Russia's interpretation of reality, the EU was the only entity significantly exerting constitutive power in the relationship. However, although the EU to some extent influenced the paradigm within which Russia evolved, it ultimately did not shape Russia's behaviour. 'Evolved within' this paradigm means that Russian elites developed their understanding of what was possible, legitimate or conceivable in international affairs within a conceptual and normative environment partly shaped by the EU. In this sense, the EU influenced the boundaries of the space of possibilities within which Russia formulated and pursued its interests, without determining the choices it ultimately made.

Compulsory Power

Militarily, the beginning of the period studied coincides with a significant increase of Russia's defence spending.²⁹ The signal that credible military tools are being put in place was articulated with strategic exercises displaying the Russian capability to use

²⁶ President of Russia, *Interview Given to Television Channels Channel One, Russia, NTV* (Moscow: 31 August 2008), 3.

²⁷ President of Russia, *Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly* (Moscow: 12 December 2012), 1-19.

²⁸ European Council, *Remarks of Herman Van Rompuy, op.cit.*, 3.

²⁹ Jonas Grätz, "Russia's Military Reform: Progress and Hurdles", *CSS Analyses in Security Policy*, no. 152 (2014), Center for Security Studies, ETH Zürich; "Военная реформа 2008–2020: Цифры и факты [Military Reform 2008–2020: Figures and Facts]", *Индекс безопасности [Security Index]* 17, no. 1 (96) (2011), 37–52; Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, *Military Expenditure Database* (Stockholm: SIPRI, input 'Russia', 'Current US\$'), accessed 4 May 2025, <https://milex.sipri.org/sipri>.

these tools. This display was directed towards the West, and notably Europe, for example through the *Zapad* military exercises of 2009 and 2013. They both mobilised dozens of thousands of personnel to demonstrate Russia's capacity to project credible military power along Europe's eastern borders.³⁰ Beyond exercises, operational deployments showcased Russia's willingness to use its military capabilities in its neighbourhood. The 2008 war in Georgia demonstrated Russia's readiness to launch a military campaign in what it considers as its 'near abroad'. The overall Russian military posture directly affected the strategic choices of the EU through its member states. In that sense, through military means, Russia was trying to directly control the conditions of existence of European states. In other words, it was proactively attempting to force the EU member states into behaviour that ran against their interests.

At the time, the EU itself lacked any tools to use military power. The Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) remained limited. For example, the EU Monitoring Mission in Georgia, launched under the CSDP as the EU's security response to Russia's invasion in 2008, is a narrow-scoped mission composed of a few hundred civilian observers.³¹ This highlights the EU's inability to wield defence tools in the period studied. One could argue that this is because a significant number of its member states were also NATO allies and that NATO was expressing military compulsory power on behalf of Europe. However, even NATO's displayed capabilities were incomparably weaker than the Russian ones at the time. NATO's *Steadfast Jazz* exercise organised in November 2013, in response to *Zapad*, mustered 6 000 troops.³² In comparison to the 90 000 troops deployed a few months earlier by Russia, this showed a significantly weaker willingness to use military resources.³³ The gap in favour of Russia was not in terms of raw military capabilities, but in terms of credible willingness to use them. Neither the EU nor its member states were able to considerably exert compulsory power through military means. In EU-Russia relations, Russia was therefore dominating the expression of compulsory power through military pressure.

Moreover, Russia's dominance over European energy supplies was another fundamental pillar of its relationship with the EU in the compulsory sphere. Europe's dependency on Russian energy and the Russian state's control over its energy sector allowed it to use its resources to try to directly control the European actions through

³⁰ Dave Johnson, "VOSTOK 2018: Ten Years of Russian Strategic Exercises and Warfare Preparation", *NATO Review*, 20 December 2018; Roger McDermott, "Zapad 2009 Rehearses Countering a NATO Attack on Belarus", *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 6, no. 179 (30 September 2009); Liudas Zdanavičius and Matthew Czekaj, *Russia's Zapad 2013 Military Exercise: Lessons for Baltic Regional Security* (Washington, DC: The Jamestown Foundation, 2015).

³¹ European Union External Action Service, *EUMM Georgia: The European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia – Civilian Mission* (Brussels: 30 November 2020), 3-4.

³² NATO, *NATO's Steadfast Jazz Exercise Gets Underway* (Brussels: 2 November 2013).

³³ Dave Johnson, *op.cit.*, 7.

energy blackmail.³⁴ The 2006 and 2009 gas crises, during which Russia cut off gas supplies to Ukraine, in part because of Ukraine's growing political convergence with the EU, resulted in severe shortages across Europe.³⁵ It was more than a bilateral dispute: beyond Ukraine, Europe itself was targeted symbolically and materially.³⁶ By displaying a credible threat related to energy security, Russia attempted to push Europe to alter its international behaviour. Beyond the field of energy, Russia also leveraged its economic relationship directly with individual member states to threaten and coerce them into shifting their foreign policies. For example, in 2013 Russia banned Lithuanian dairy products, in what was interpreted as a way to intimidate the Lithuanian Presidency of the EU, which was at the time preparing the Eastern Partnership summit in Vilnius.³⁷ For its part, before the sanctions against Russia were introduced in 2014, the EU was unable to leverage its economic position to coerce Russia into changing its behaviour. In the context of the invasion of Georgia, the EU's short-lived hints of halting economic cooperation with Russia despite its continued actions in Georgia, highlight the EU's inability to use compulsory economic power to shape Russia's behaviour.³⁸ In the EU-Russia energy and broader economy relationships, Russia was the only one of the two actors significantly wielding compulsory power.

In addition, Russia used diplomatic humiliations and symbolic use of compulsory power. For example, in 2007 President Vladimir Putin deliberately used his labrador to intimidate Chancellor Angela Merkel, who was also at the time holding the EU's rotating presidency, in what was a diplomatic "demonstration of power".³⁹ This was a symbolic Russian attempt to frame the relationship in confrontational terms and assert dominance, aiming to intimidate that Germany into pursuing policies that favoured Russian interests, for example in the field of energy dependence. Neither Germany nor other European institutional actors reacted.⁴⁰ Overall, Russia displayed a willingness to enter a power struggle, a *rapport de force*, which Europe did not. Once again, Russia

³⁴ European Commission, Directorate-General for Energy and Transport, *EU Energy and Transport in Figures – Statistical Pocketbook 2007/2008* (Luxembourg: 2008), 32.

³⁵ European Commission, *Commission Staff Working Document Accompanying the Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council Concerning Measures to Safeguard Security of Gas Supply and Repealing Directive 2004/67/EC: The January 2009 Gas Supply Disruption to the EU: An Assessment*, SEC(2009) 977 (Brussels: 16 July 2009).

³⁶ European Parliament, *Gas Crisis: MEPs Worried About Impact on Public* (Brussels: 8 January 2009).

³⁷ European Parliament, *Russia's 'Trade War' Against EU Presidency Is Unacceptable, Say MEPs* (Brussels: 9 October 2013).

³⁸ Jan Weisensee, *Measuring European Foreign Policy Impact: The EU and the Georgia Crisis of 2008*, EU Diplomacy Papers 9, College of Europe, 2010, 12.

³⁹ Angela Merkel, *Freiheit: Erinnerungen 1954–2021 [Freedom: Memoires 1954–2021]* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2024), 452–454.

⁴⁰ Press and Information Office of the Federal Government of Germany, *Resolving Energy Issues as Partners* (Heiligendamm: 21 January 2007).

was the only actor in the relationship actively attempting to compel the behaviour of the other.

To conclude, Russia displayed a capacity to mobilise coercive means that was unmatched by the EU or its member states. However, mirroring the imbalance in the constitutive sphere in an inverted way, despite being one-sided, the compulsory power relationship did not influence the EU's behaviour. Russia dominated the sphere of compulsory power, yet it ultimately did not have enough power in that sphere to shape the EU's behaviour.

Institutional Power

The EU exerted its institutional power primarily through normative and constitutive mechanisms. The definition of the Eastern Partnership affirmed that it would be “based on commitments to the principles of international law and to fundamental values”.⁴¹ The EU expected a convergence of its Eastern neighbours towards its conception of the world, and in particular of regional order and of ‘normal’ behaviour for an actor in its neighbourhood.

This discursive constitutive approach towards neighbouring countries came with incentives to align with EU norms and regulations, notably through the Association Agreements including Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (AA-DCFTAs) and their expected economic benefits.⁴² By negotiating, and in most cases signing, these AA-DCFTAs Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia and Armenia (which negotiated but ultimately did not sign) converged towards EU norms and values and adopted an interpretation of normal international behaviour that was, in part, shaped by the EU.⁴³ By constituting its neighbours' interpretation of normal behaviour, the EU influenced the international environment Russia was part of.

Finally, the EU's institutional power relied to a limited extent on a compulsory approach. Although it used economic coercion in the shape of sanctions against Belarus to try to compel it into adopting a behaviour that was in line with its preferences, the lack of change in Belarus' behaviour, combined with the EU's

⁴¹ Council of the European Union, *Joint Declaration of the Prague Eastern Partnership Summit*, 8435/09 (Brussels: 7 May 2009), 5.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴³ European Parliament, Directorate-General for External Policies, *The State of Implementation of the Associations and Free Trade Agreements with Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova with a Particular Focus on Ukraine and Systemic Analysis of Key Sectors* (Brussels: 2017), 6; Paruyr Hovhannisyan, “A Closer Look at the New EU-Armenia Association Agreement Negotiations”, European Friends of Armenia, October 2010, 3.

struggle to respond to the Russian coercion against Armenia, Georgia and Ukraine⁴⁴, highlights the limits of the EU's compulsory tools. In other words, when directly challenged by Russian actions in the region, the EU had only a limited ability to shape Russia's behaviour indirectly, through its influence over their shared neighbourhood.

By contrast, Russia expressed its institutional power through compulsory tools, trying to alter the EU's environment through the intimidation and coercion of the countries in the region. Russia repeatedly used its economic leverage to compel other actors into behaving in a way that aligned with its preferences. Russia's compulsory approach was, however, not limited to deterring alignment with the West. For instance, in 2009, Russia banned dairy products from Belarus.⁴⁵ This economic coercion served to compel Belarus into a greater alignment with Russia. To these examples, one could add the diplomatic coercion towards Armenia and its subsequent U-turn on the eve of signing the Association Agreement with the EU or the military coercion of Georgia and the annexation of Crimea and the destabilisation of the Donbass. Russia showed, throughout the military, symbolic and economic levels, a compulsory approach to its neighbourhood, with the overarching objective of reinforcing its dominance within the post-Soviet space and to weaken the EU's position and diffusion of norms in the region, therefore attempting to influence the EU's behaviour towards Russia by altering its international environment on the Eastern flank.

However, Russia's institutional power was limited by its struggle with the EU's constitutive tools, as highlighted by the failure of Russia's pressures to deter the progressive convergence of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia with European norms, values and conception of the world. The result of these dynamics was growing friction between the EU and Russia in the sphere of institutional power, in their shared environment, as illustrated for instance by the Russian Foreign Ministry's reaction to the EU criticism of Russia's actions in Ukraine in March 2014.⁴⁶ Given their strengths and limitations, the EU's and Russia's indirect attempts to shape each other's policies through their shared environment were relatively balanced. Ultimately, between 2005 and 2014, both the EU and Russia were able to wield institutional power in their 'shared neighbourhood', but they both fell short of achieving their regional objectives of altering the other's international policies.

⁴⁴ Nicu Popescu and Andrew Wilson, "European and Russian Power in the Troubled Neighbourhood: The EU's Strategy for Influence in the Eastern Neighbourhood", European Council on Foreign Relations, 16 June 2009.

⁴⁵ "Russia Bans Belarus Milk Products as Tensions Rise", *Kyiv Post*, 6 June 2009; "Москва отказалась от белорусского молока. Что будет с ценами [Moscow Refused Belarusian Milk. What Will Happen to Prices]", *Комсомольская правда* [Komsomolskaya Pravda], 8 June 2009.

⁴⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *Comments from the Information and Press Department Regarding the Statements of the President of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso, in the European Parliament* (Moscow: 14 March 2014).

To conclude, while the relations between the EU and Russia were imbalanced with regard to constitutive and compulsory power, they seemed relatively balanced when it comes to institutional power. While they failed to directly shape each other's behaviour, the struggle became ultimately to shape the other's policies indirectly, through their environment. In other words, while the EU failed to transform Russia, and Russia failed to coerce the EU, the struggle to alter each other's behaviour ultimately took place in their 'shared neighbourhood'.

The following section brings together the paper's findings on constitutive, compulsory and institutional power, to assess their combined effect on the EU-Russia relationship. It argues that the EU's and Russia's respective hegemonies in the constitutive and compulsory spheres produced an imbalance of power and traces the consequences of this deadlock for the wider relationship.

Impact of the Power Performance on the EU-Russia Relationship

Between 2005 and 2014 the EU was in a position of constitutive hegemony. The EU was the norm setter in the relationship with Russia, defining Europeaness and expecting Russia to converge with that conception. This asymmetry was visible in the very terms of the debate: Russian elites and society engaged at the time in a long-standing debate over Russia's own relationship to Europeaness and belonging to Europe, while no symmetrical significant debate took place within Europe over the EU's relationship to Russianness or over Europe converging towards Russian norms. The debate on European norms was within Russia and on the conceptual terms set by the EU: for example, the 'common values' such as respect for international law, democratic principles and human rights as defined by the EU or the distinction between normal and aberrant behaviour. However, although the EU was the only one capable of exerting constitutive power in their bilateral relationship, it was not enough to determine Russia's behaviour.

In parallel, Russia was a compulsory hegemon. It was able to mobilise its state apparatus to exert pressure on the EU and its member states, while the EU was incapable of even trying to coerce Russia into changing its behaviour. However, like in the case of constitutive power, that hegemony did not lead to a change in behaviour of the other party: Russia's compulsory power was not enough to influence the EU's behaviour.

The EU and Russia were therefore each hegemonic in a different, non-overlapping sphere of power. This configuration created an imbalance of power: a balance of power requires parity not merely in the aggregate, but within each sphere of power considered individually. One actor's dominance in a sphere offsetting the other's

dominance in a different sphere does not constitute an aggregated balance of power.

This deadlock had two consequences. First, with Russia being unable to wield constitutive power and the EU unable to muster compulsory power, the sphere of institutional power became the only one in which the power struggle between the two could still be expressed. This is one of the factors that contributed to the crisis crystallising in the 'shared neighbourhood'. Second, and more fundamentally, the EU and Russia were each exerting power in a sphere the other was largely incapable of operating in. The dialogue of powers between the EU and Russia did not materialise because they were speaking different languages of power, which the other was incapable of understanding.

Having established that the EU-Russia relationship was imbalanced across the spheres of constitutive and compulsory power and that this imbalance, rather than a rough aggregate parity, is what foreclosed a genuine dialogue of powers, the paper now turns to the question *why* the relationship took this particular shape.

Explaining the Imbalance of Power: Institutional Structures and Self-perception in EU-Russia Relations

This section examines the EU's and Russia's uneven capacity to wield constitutive and compulsory power through two analytically distinct explanatory factors: institutional structures and self-perception. Institutional structures explain an actor's capacity to exert a given form of power: what a decision-making system structurally permits or denies, independent of what any actor within it wants. Self-perception and identity, by contrast, explain an actor's propensity or even its capacity to conceive of wielding a given form of power at all. Holding these two levels apart makes it possible to identify from which direction, if not both, each actor's weaknesses and strengths came from. In other words, to what extent each actors' institutions allowed them to muster each type of power and to what extent their self-understandings made the use of that power conceivable.

The EU's Ability to Wield Constitutive Power and its Struggles with Compulsory Power

The Role of EU Institutional Structures and Decision-making Capacity

First, the decision-making process of EU foreign policy is based on unanimity, with member states remaining the central actors.⁴⁷ The need to find a consensus led to a

⁴⁷ Interviews 1-2, 4-5, 7-15, 17-20, 22-23.

policy of the smallest common denominator, which made it difficult to provide strong responses to crises and to adopt decisions that entailed political risks.⁴⁸ In the management of the relationship with Russia, finding consensus among the member states on decisions that implied potential negative consequences, ranging from the possibility of a whiplash effect to an escalation of the relationship, was impossible. Additionally, one would have to add the supranational level to the complexity of the EU's foreign policy decision-making process and the stakes of coordinating the intergovernmental and supranational entities to exert compulsory power.⁴⁹

Second, the institutional architecture through which the EU could wield compulsory power is also characterised by its relationship with NATO. During the period studied, the EU's capabilities for managing civilian and military operations were constrained,⁵⁰ and the member states relied on the NATO structure for their defence.⁵¹ However, NATO was a defensive alliance,⁵² it did not produce a foreign policy. This implied for European security actors the necessity to coordinate between different organisations with different memberships, to conduct a foreign policy towards Russia that was unified and coherent in the sense of addressing issues throughout the spectrum, from the political level to the specific fields of defence and security. Coordinating, for example, political dialogue with Russia, neighbourhood policies, energy security and defence postures, was *de facto* impossible.

Conversely, constitutive power did not rely on a particular institutional framework. The EU's constitutive power found its roots in the overall contextual position of the EU in the 2000s and leveraging that position to promote its conception of the world.⁵³ Moreover, constitutive power also requires less unity, it can be more diffuse. It was more a general dynamic of the promotion of 'European values' towards the East. In that context, the lack of unity and coherence that characterised the EU's institutional framework for foreign policy did not have a negative impact on its ability to wield constitutive power towards Russia. On the contrary, having a common narrative emanating from different sources, with different variations, made that constitutive power more effective and played a key role in reaching different kinds of actors in Russia, effectively shaping the domestic debate of the country.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ Interviews 1-2, 4, 7, 9, 13, 23.

⁴⁹ Sandra Fernandes, "Intra-European Union Dynamics", in Romanova and David, *op.cit.*, 37–47.

⁵⁰ Interview 22.

⁵¹ Interviews 1, 9-11, 13, 18.

⁵² Interview 11.

⁵³ Interviews 6, 16-17, 22.

⁵⁴ Interview 6.

The EU's Self-perception and Identity

Beyond institutional frameworks, the EU's performance in the different spheres of power is also linked to the degree of political intentionality within the leadership of its institutions⁵⁵. Political intentionality can be identified as a determining factor of the ability of an actor to exert power in the different spheres.⁵⁶ Constitutive power can be diffuse and can therefore be wielded with limited political intentionality. On the contrary, compulsory power relies on deliberate and resolute decisions, for example mobilising troops for an exercise or mobilising state resources to cut off energy supplies. One cannot act in the compulsory sphere without a strong political intentionality.

European political leadership tended to view international relations through a 'Kantian', post-historical worldview in which interdependence, trade and shared norms were treated as the only legitimate means of engaging with other states⁵⁷ and the deliberate use of material power to compel another actor was seen as an anachronistic, essentially irrational departure from that order.⁵⁸ The EU identified as a peace project.⁵⁹ Operating within this worldview may have made it difficult for the EU leadership to conceive compulsory power as an available policy instrument in the first place.⁶⁰ Building on its position and dynamic at the time, the EU perceived itself as spreading the norms and values that had allowed it to be peaceful and prosperous. This self-perception had two effects. First, the EU's self-image as a successful and attractive model reinforced the belief that it could, and should, serve as a normative reference point. Consequently, this identity bolstered its willingness to use constitutive power. Second, it simultaneously hindered its capacity to envision compulsory power.⁶¹ The idea of wielding material resources to advance interests in direct opposition to Russia, that is, using compulsory power, was interpreted as a conflictual path, which ran against the EU's identity as a peace project.

Moreover, this EU perception of conflicts as irrational and by extension the possible tensions brought by the pursuit of interests in opposition to another actor, led to the development within the EU of an intellectual framework where compulsory power became unthinkable. Compulsory power was not even recognised by the EU as a way for an international actor to express itself.

⁵⁵ Interviews 3-4, 8, 10, 13, 18.

⁵⁶ Interviews 3, 9, 13, 19, 22-23

⁵⁷ Robert Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 3.

⁵⁸ Interview 8.

⁵⁹ Interviews 4, 7, 10-11, 15, 17-19, 21.

⁶⁰ Interview 13.

⁶¹ Interviews 1, 4, 9, 13-14, 17, 20.

Russia's Ability to Wield Compulsory Power and Struggles with Constitutive Power

The Role of Russian Domestic Institutional Structures and Decision-making Capacity

First, Russian foreign policy decision-making is centralised, with a unity of command in the hands of the President and an institutional framework that is more streamlined and vertical than in the EU.⁶² Concretely, the President envisions strategic objectives and foreign policy orientations to meet them, the respective ministries implement these orientations through concrete actions, and if these actions require a coercive dimension towards another actor the Russian leadership has the capacity to leverage its state resources to pursue these actions, be it military aggression, energy blackmail or diplomatic humiliation.

Yet, this centralised institutional framework also hinders Russia's ability to evolve in the sphere of constitutive power. The idea of generating a narrative, an interpretation of reality that can be exported and directed towards other actors to influence their conception of the world implies a certain degree of decentralisation. This decentralisation involves a wide range of actors and stakeholders, only loosely connected to official institutions, capable of producing interpretations of reality, norms and values that do not feel artificial or state-directed. It also allows these narratives to be transmitted through a wide array of channels, reaching into another actor's internal debate and shaping its understanding of the world.⁶³ Russia's centralised institutions therefore led to the production of a narrative by a narrow group of stakeholders closely related to the authorities, pushed by Russian state-owned media and more likely to be perceived as propaganda. This undermined the Russian authorities' efforts to produce their own conception of the world that they could export.⁶⁴

One of the institutional factors determining the Russian performance in exerting the different types of power is the relatively central role in the Russian foreign policy decision-making process played by actors with a security focus.⁶⁵ For example, although having formally a limited role in framing Russian foreign policy, the Security Council became, throughout the 2000s, the main forum where Russian foreign policy orientations were discussed.⁶⁶ Moreover, foreign policy institutions tend to be headed by *silovikis*, Russian elites with a security and military background. For example, in 2008,

⁶² Interviews 6, 9, 11, 17.

⁶³ Interviews 10, 14, 16, 21.

⁶⁴ Interview 14.

⁶⁵ Interviews 6-7, 9.

⁶⁶ Tatiana Romanova, "The Dynamics of State and Societal Actors in Russia's Policy on the EU", in Romanova and David, *op.cit.*, 28.

Nikolai Patrushev, former director of the Federal Security Service (FSB), close advisor to Vladimir Putin and with a deeply rooted security background, was appointed Secretary of the Security Council of Russia. Yuri Ushakov offers another example: after serving as Ambassador to the US, he became Deputy Chief of Staff of the Russian government that same year, then Aide to the President for International Affairs in 2012. Though his background does not fit the traditional *siloviki* profile, his position at the intersection of diplomacy, security and great-power relations underscores how perceptions of strategic influence, power projection and security shape Russia's foreign policy institutions.

The fact that institutions that determine Russian foreign policy give, formally and informally, a substantial share of power to military and security actors may be an explanatory factor. Without necessarily being directed towards the outside, this may also correspond to an inward-looking security dynamic, especially after 2011 and the demonstrations "For Fair Elections", when massive protests in Moscow sparked fear among the authorities of a 'colour revolution' in Russia.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, this centralised security-oriented institutional framework could facilitate the conceptualisation of coercive, or even confrontational, action as viable options to achieve foreign policy objectives.

Russia's Self-perceptions and Identity

Russia's self-perception as a unique great power under siege from Western liberal norms can be traced, in this period, to a specific set of developments:⁶⁸ the Soviet collapse and its consequences for Russia's great-power status, NATO and EU enlargement into what Russia considered its traditional sphere of influence, as well as the 2003-2004 'colour revolutions' in Georgia and Ukraine, which Russian leadership read as Western-orchestrated attempts to install pro-Western governments at Russia's expense.⁶⁹ This paper analysed, through the Russian leadership's communication between 2005 and 2014, how this threatened self-perception was specifically oppositional and reactive to EU norms and played a role in Russia's struggle to wield constitutive power. Because it was shaped in reaction to the perceived threat coming from the EU, Russian identity in the 2000s-2010s was constituted in opposition to the European conception of the world: it was less a rival vision arrived at independently than a defensive response. As a consequence, this oppositional identity generated values that initially found little resonance within EU institutions and member states. For example, the Russian Eurasian identity, which was in part bolstered by the authorities in reaction to the perceived threat of Europeaness and the norms it entailed, could

⁶⁷ Interview 6.

⁶⁸ Interviews 6-7, 14, 17.

⁶⁹ President of Russia, *op.cit.*, 2007.

challenge the EU's narrative inside Russia. However, it could not produce interpretations of reality that could be directed towards the EU to shape its perception of the world, its debate and its behaviour.

Beyond direct EU-Russia relations, this same threatened self-perception extended into Russia's neighbourhood, where the resulting sense of a threatened, unique civilisational entity limited Russia's constitutive power towards its neighbours. The combination of a Russian-centric uniqueness that characterises Russia's perception of itself and of its neighbourhood, with the historical and current disputes stemming from the perception of the use of force and territorial aggression in Russian identity, made the Russian interpretation of reality more difficult for its neighbours to identify with.⁷⁰ For example, Russia's rhetorical framing of its involvement in Transnistria and Abkhazia as a duty to protect toward 'compatriots abroad',⁷¹ combined with a military support to these regions which aligned with its identity as a protector, had a repelling effect on Moldova and Georgia in the constitutive sphere.

However, the same besieged narrative that shaped Russia's identity gave a rightful justification to the Russian leadership to take the necessary actions to defend Russia's unique civilisational project against the perceived Western aggression, reinforcing its capacity to exert compulsory power. Moreover, this identity contributed to bolstering the Russian leadership's willingness to adopt compulsory, coercive or even conflictual policies, as it made the restoration of Russia's perceived sphere of influence, notably through the use of force, a necessary condition for trying to reduce the dissonance between its condition and its self-perception as a great power.⁷²

Having examined the EU's and Russia's institutional structures and self-perceptions separately, each explaining, respectively, why the two actors could not muster and could not conceive, the power they each lacked, this paper now turns to how these two factors interacted directly at the level of the relationship itself. The following section examines how the EU's and Russia's respective institutions and identities shaped not only their own capacities and propensities, but also how they each perceived and consequently misrecognised, the other's exercise of power.

Impact of the Institutional Frameworks and Identities on the EU-Russia Power Relationship

Between 2005 and 2014, the EU and Russia each interpreted the other's behaviour through lenses and assumptions drawn from their own institutions and identities, rather

⁷⁰ Interviews 14, 16.

⁷¹ President of Russia, *op.cit.*, 2008.

⁷² Interviews 2, 6-7, 9, 12-13.

than the other's actual logic. The EU applied its own perception to Russia, and Russia applied its own perception to the EU.⁷³ For example, already in parallel to the negotiation of the Common Spaces, the 'Orange Revolution' in 2004 and, later, the Maidan protests in 2014 were read by Russian leadership through the lens of Russia's own centralised, state-directed institutions: because Russia's own political system could not itself produce spontaneous, decentralised mass mobilisation independent of state direction, these events were interpreted as the actions of a great power whose institutions were centralised enough to direct conflictual policies against Russia, rather than as movements driven by citizens yearning, diffusely, for the freedom and prosperity they associated with their Western neighbours' model. Conversely, the EU interpreted the repeated economic, diplomatic and military pressures Russia placed on Ukraine and Armenia around the signature of the AA-DCFTA not as the signals of a geopolitical actor that considered itself a great power with a legitimate sphere of influence, but as a lingering reflex of a Soviet-era, security-driven approach to international politics that would fade once Russia recognised that these agreements would also serve its own economic interest.

Therefore, the EU was not only capable of wielding constitutive power and incapable of exerting compulsory power: it perceived the world disproportionately through the prism of constitutive power, to the point of becoming largely blind to the expression of compulsory power. The opposite was true of Russia, which struggled, conversely, to wield constitutive power and which similarly read the EU's own exercise of constitutive power (its promotion of norms and values through frameworks such as the Eastern Partnership or its support for civil society) primarily through a compulsory, instrumentalist lens. In other words, each actor was unable to perceive power precisely in the sphere it was itself incapable of wielding; and since this was, in each case, exactly the sphere the other actor dominated, the EU and Russia were ill equipped to recognise power being exercised in the very sphere the other was most inclined to use it.

These mutually skewed perceptions became structurally embedded in the EU-Russia relationship, directly feeding the failure of mutual recognition that this paper identified as a core pillar for a dialogue of powers. For example, while the EU formally recognised Russia as an equal partner, using the label of 'Strategic Partnership', it did not recognise Russia as a 'normal great power'.⁷⁴ This led to the repeated grievance on the Russian side of being treated as a junior partner and as any other neighbourhood country. This perception is significantly skewed: the EU gave particular attention to Russia, for example through the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, special

⁷³ Laure Delcour, "From a 'Common' to a 'Contested' Neighbourhood", in Romanova and David, *op.cit.*, 393-394.

⁷⁴ Andrei Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).

Road Maps, Common Spaces and qualification as an equal partner. But the EU did not refer to Russia as a power, great or not, because to some extent it did not recognise Russia as a power. This absence of recognition, which frustrated Russia, stems from the fact that the EU at the time did not conceptualise its external relations, and particularly its relationship with Russia, through the same power lens that guided the Russian perception. The EU could therefore not recognise Russia as a power, not because it considered that Russia lacked the attributes to be one, but because the mere conception of power relations in the way that Russia was conceiving it was to some extent unthinkable at the EU level. Conversely, Russia's own conception of power remained rooted in an understanding of international politics in which power is measured chiefly through the possession and demonstrated willingness to use coercive capabilities. This left Russia structurally unable to recognise the EU's principal mode of influence (its capacity to shape identities, norms and conceptions of legitimacy) as a genuine expression of power at all. As a result, an actor lacking hard coercive capabilities could not, in Russian eyes, be a power in its own right regardless of its success at shaping other actors' identities and interests, leading Russia to deny the EU recognition as a power to dialogue with.

Bringing together balance of power and recognition of the other as a power in the EU-Russia relationship between 2005 and 2014, the EU's struggle to wield and to recognise compulsory power as a way for an international actor to express itself and Russia's relative inability to exist in the sphere of constitutive power, help explain the absence of genuine dialogue of powers and the increasing instability of the relationship.

Conclusion: 2005–2014 as a Formative Period in EU-Russia Relations

The period from 2005 to 2014 represents a pivot, from the launch of the Common Spaces to the *Maidan* revolution, from an at least displayed hopeful cooperation to an increasingly intense confrontation. That period was therefore the cradle of dynamics in EU-Russia relations that persisted beyond 2014 and can hence, to some extent, help explain the subsequent evolution of the relationship.

Based on the typology of power used, the beginnings of a shift in both the EU's and Russia's attempts to fill the gaps of the powers they struggle to wield can be noticed after 2014. The EU tends to use relatively more compulsory power after 2014, notably through sanctions and the emergence of institutional instruments designed to generate, coordinate and finance defence capabilities, such as the Permanent Structured Cooperation, the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence, the European Defence Fund and the European Peace Facility. Russia meanwhile exerts relatively more constitutive power, forging and promoting within Europe its own interpretation

of European norms and values, with an increase of Russian hybrid activities towards Europe, including foreign information manipulation and interference, cyber operations, intimidation, coercion, subversion and sabotage.

Looking at the evolution of the EU-Russia relationship through this typology of power, it can be argued that these dynamics have been progressively reinforced. The post-2014 dynamic accelerated after 2022, with the EU increasingly exerting compulsory power towards Russia and Russia increasing its capacity to constitute Europeans' perception of normality. If an overall balance of powers across all individual spheres emerges; if both actors become able, across each of the constitutive, compulsory and institutional spheres, both to wield that form of power and to recognise its exercise by the other; this would lead to a mutual recognition of each other's way of expressing power and a real dialogue of powers could become possible. The common fora for the EU and Russia may be effectively dead, but joint committees and summits are not necessary to a meaningful dialogue. A dialogue of powers could *de facto* emerge through the interactions between the EU and Russia as two powers that send each other signals through their actions, understand each other's expression of power and respond to it.

However, obstacles exist that hinder the emergence of this balance of powers. On the EU side, four conundrums can be identified that limit the European ability to exist in the compulsory sphere. First, the EU has successfully projected its values towards non-EU Eastern European countries in part because it was not perceived as a security threat. This was not a question of these countries preferring EU policy to have no security dimension at all: Georgia, for instance, actively sought EU involvement in the resolution of the conflict with Russia following the 2008 war. The EU mediated the six-point ceasefire agreement of August 2008 and subsequently deployed the EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM), an unarmed civilian mission tasked with monitoring the implementation of the agreement. Tellingly, despite Georgia aspiring at the time to both EU and NATO membership, contrary to the EU, NATO did not play a formal role in the conflict resolution process. What Georgia sought, therefore, was not the absence of a security dimension in European engagement, but a form of involvement compatible with the EU's non-compulsory character: one that could contribute to conflict resolution without entailing a military presence or a security guarantee of the kind associated with NATO. The EU's involvement in a security-adjacent matter like conflict resolution was not, then, evidence that it lacked a security dimension altogether, but rather evidence that it was not perceived as a security threat in the way a compulsory power would be. It operated in the constitutive and institutional spheres rather than the compulsory one, and it was precisely because it was not, and could not be, a security guarantor that it was welcomed as an interlocutor.

The EU will therefore have to find a balance between the necessity to incorporate security in a more compulsory way in its foreign policies, given the evolution of the global order and the loss of attractiveness or constitutive power that this could entail, especially for hedging countries, as it was the case for Georgia between 2012 and the disputed 2024 legislative elections. Under the 'Georgian Dream' government, Georgia continued to pursue formal EU integration, including candidate status granted in December 2023, in response to a population that remained overwhelmingly pro-European. At the same time, the government pursued policies accommodating Russian interests, for example refusing to join Western sanctions after 2022. This strategy depended at the time on Russia reading the EU relationship as economic and normative rather than a security-related one. A more overtly security-oriented EU would collapse precisely the ambiguity that made this hedging possible, forcing states like Georgia or Armenia into a binary choice. Incorporating a stronger security dimension to EU policies could therefore lead to dividing lines: protecting those perceived as aligned with EU preferences while renouncing its attractiveness to others. However, without protecting Eastern European countries striving for values based on democracy and rule of law, as a full-fledged security guarantor, the EU could lose its attractiveness anyway.

Second, foreign policy and defence remain the strongest bastion of national sovereignty within the EU's integration process. The question of what institutional format European defence integration should ultimately take, whether a purpose-driven coalition of national armies, a longer-term alliance among states, a fully integrated single army or an arrangement limited to a shared defence market, therefore carries stakes that extend well beyond defence policy itself. Each of these options implies a different answer to the deeper, still-open question of what kind of polity the EU is tending towards: imperial, federal, confederal or, given the European project's track record of institutional creativity, some configuration not yet captured by existing categories. Because the sovereignty costs entailed in any shift towards a more integrated defence architecture are, by this same logic, particularly high, member states can be expected to favour a cautious approach to further integration in this domain.

Third, a key question raised by this paper is the role of political leadership and of societal constraints on that leadership, in shaping the EU's foreign policy. The weakness of the EU leadership's intentionality on issues related to Russia and to security may change with new political figures, with different experiences shaping their perceptions of the world. However, the question of their political margin of manoeuvre to take politically risky decisions will remain, given that a significant share of the EU population remains reluctant to envision the possibility of conflict. Moreover, if a balance of

powers is to be established, the EU's societies, political elites and institutions will have to face the conundrum whether to select leaders who defer to, and act within, prevailing societal preferences or leaders willing to act as trustees, exercising independent judgment to reshape public understanding of what risks are acceptable.

Fourth, the necessity to define a European identity is driven by several factors. The EU's identity has historically rested less on fixed territorial boundaries than on adherence to a shared political and normative project, one that is, in principle, open to any European state prepared to embrace it. This has left the EU with structurally ill-defined borders, since the criterion for belonging is a matter of political and normative alignment rather than geography. In the context of the confrontational relationship with Russia, which itself has a complex relationship to its European identity, the question of the EU's borders and therefore of what is and is not European, will become increasingly pressing. Moreover, if the EU increasingly becomes a security actor, with a confrontational positioning to balance Russia, it may become increasingly difficult to combine this dynamic with its peaceful identity. The idea of a 'force for good' may allow the EU to preserve the moral element of its self-perception, but it would ultimately run against the idea of a 'peace project' without a redefinition of the EU's relationship to peacefulness and conflict. Finally, given the long-term confrontation with Russia and the transatlantic burden-sharing dynamic, it is possible that European countries will have to reinforce their defence cooperation to ensure their own security. This evolving European security arrangement could combine three distinct levels: a political level, at which strategic direction remains the prerogative of the member states acting through the Council; an industrial and financial level, at which EU-level instruments such as regulatory frameworks and joint funding mechanisms would be used to build up member states' common defence procurement capacity; and an operational level, at which the resulting capabilities would ultimately be deployed within NATO's Command and Control Structure. Articulating these three levels together would, however, blur the line between the sovereign prerogatives of Europe's nation states, the political objectives pursued by EU institutions and the European pillar of NATO. This dynamic creates a need for a more overarching European identity that transcends the EU or any other regional organisation, that can encompass the continent and that will have to find its roots deeper in history than the Cold War.

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