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The partnership that failed: EU-Russia relations and the war in Ukraine

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Books reviewed

Natalia Chaban and Ole Elgström *The Ukraine Crisis and EU Foreign Policy Roles, Images of the EU in the Context*.

Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2021.

Mai'a K. Davies Cross and Ireneusz Pawel Karolewski (eds.) *European-Russian Power Relations in Turbulent Times*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021.

Thane Gustafson *The Bridge: Natural Gas in a Redivided Europe*. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2020.

ABSTRACT

Between 2014 and 2021, the EU's relationship with Russia oscillated between the ever more elusive quest for a mutually acceptable geopolitical balance and increasing conflict. The conflict focused primarily on the future of Ukraine. Three new books analyse essential parts of this conundrum: the changing nature of the EU's power in the context of the Ukraine conflict, the long-standing EU-Russia business and energy relationship, and the self-image and external perceptions of EU foreign policy towards Ukraine. While written before the 2022 war, the books remain highly relevant because they dissect an ongoing process of changing EU actorness in its Eastern neighbourhood. In order to analyse the path to the 2022 war and its aftermath, future research must expand on this scholarship by enlarging the spectrum of theoretical approaches while navigating the new constraints that the war and the ensuing tense policy debates have put on empirical work.

KEYWORDS

Russia; Ukraine; war; power; perceptions; EU foreign policy

The war unleashed by Russia against Ukraine in February 2022 has been broadly described as a turning point for European politics, security and economy. In the weeks preceding the Russian attack, the Kremlin addressed his demands for a new European security architecture primarily to the United States, and treated the European Union (EU) as Washington's minor partner. Moreover, it snubbed Ukraine as a failed polity without a history of statehood, which the West merely used in an anti-Russian function (Putin 2022). Nonetheless, the most profound consequences of the war concern Ukraine's relations with Russia and the EU, its place in European politics and the relationship between Russia and the EU.

EU-Russia relations have been the subject of a large number of scholarly publications in recent years. Since the early 2010s, this scholarship has become increasingly pessimistic about the state and trajectory of the relationship. Unsurprisingly, after 2014, a year marked by Russia's annexation of Crimea and armed conflict in the Donbas, negative assessments and predictions multiplied. Emblematically, Forsberg and Haukkala (2016) described EU-Russia relations as 'the partnership that failed'. While acknowledging the non-linear development of the relationship, as well as various attempts to revive cooperation until the early 2010s, they argued that the accumulation of differences and conflicts in the economic, political and – most notably – security arenas made a deep crisis the most likely outcome. Hence, they viewed the conflict that began in Ukraine in late 2013 as the culmination of a long-term crisis in relations.

This view epitomises the dominant assessment of EU-Russia relations among scholars in the 2010s. A significant strand of this literature applied constructivist models focusing on identities and perceptions to understand the nature of differences between Russia and the EU, analysing a vast range of policy areas (Casier and DeBardleben 2018) and geographical contexts (Samokhvalov 2017; Siddi 2020). Some scholars delved into the specific Russia policies of EU member states in order to reveal different national elite perceptions and hence explain the incoherence of Brussels' approach to Moscow (David, Gower, and Haukkala 2013; Fix 2021; Siddi 2017; Thaler 2020). Particular attention was devoted to EU-Russia energy relations, which has been the long-term economic cornerstone of the relationship, as well as arguably its most strategic component (see for example Belyi 2015; Högselius 2013; Oxenstierna and Tynkkynen 2014). Trans-disciplinary, multi-authored works dissected the causes and dynamics of the Ukraine conflict, the EU's policy towards Russia after the annexation of Crimea, and evaluated the actorness of the EU in this context (Averre and Wolczuk 2018; Bossuyt and Van Elsuwege 2021; Romanova and David 2021)

Meanwhile, a different body of scholarship investigated the changes in Russian foreign policy in order to understand its anti-Western and eventually anti-EU shift (Cadier and Light 2015; Sakwa 2017). Some of these works had the merit of unearthing the shifting historical and identity narratives in the post-Soviet space that contribute to explaining the causes of the Russia-Ukraine war (Fedor et al. 2017). A comparatively smaller, but significant set of works focused on the EU's approach to its shared neighbourhood with Russia, analysing how the Union induced domestic change and reforms (Nizhnikau 2019) or how it (re)framed its policy in the light of the 'return of geopolitics' to the region (Youngs 2017).

While the scholarship is extremely vast and rich in terms of topics and approaches adopted to analyse them, a few key questions stand out that should be revisited following Russia's attack on Ukraine in February 2022. Arguably, the most salient question concerns how the conflict in Ukraine has reshaped European politics and security, cementing the 'return of geopolitics', and how the EU has adjusted to the new context. What kind of power is the EU, and has its actorness been enabled or constrained by the confrontation with Russia? This question should be addressed by including the perspective of external actors, such as Ukraine, rather than from an EU-centric perspective. Moreover, the EU-Russia relationship should be reassessed against the broader background of growing geopolitical competition: is its current, deep crisis only the result of geopolitical confrontation in Eastern Europe,

or is it also part of a broader contestation between liberal and illiberal ideas, a regional conflict between a US-led and a new China-led block? Has selective cooperation in areas such as energy been abandoned for good, leaving room for uncompromising confrontation?

While published shortly before the 2022 war, the contributions in Mai'a K. Davies Cross and Ireneusz Pawel Karolewski's edited book *European-Russian Power Relations in Turbulent Times* provide tentative answers to some of these questions. The authors argue that structural reasons, notably geopolitical competition in Eastern Europe, and identity-related factors such as Russian ontological (in)security caused the deterioration of EU-Russia relations. The book's most original contribution to EU studies lies in the analysis of how the EU has adapted to Russia's growing assertiveness in the 2010s. Cross and Karolewski argue that the EU has been mostly a reactive power, but it is turning more proactive as a result of Russian aggression in Eastern Europe. EU actorness and power has been enabled, rather than constrained by Russia's actions. The cooling of relations with the United States and Washington's erratic foreign policy during the Trump presidency – a development that is highlighted repeatedly by the authors – also spurred the EU into action.

The book has the merit of relating the EU-Russia relationship to the broader global context, particularly by arguing that it is one of the central dynamics behind the emergence of a less stable international system. On the other hand, the book reiterates some of the questionable assumptions of earlier scholarship. The authors state that they 'recognise at the outset that it is primarily Russia's behaviour that has and is changing in this relational dynamic'(p. 5). While Russia's foreign policy has certainly changed since the early 2000s, so has the EU's, not least due to its Eastern enlargement, the inclusion of member states with different foreign policy priorities and the launch of new policy frameworks, such as the Eastern Partnership. The initial assumption that the EU has changed little inevitably leads to the conclusion that it is mostly a reactive power and, ultimately, underestimates its agency. Similarly, the claim that change happened primarily in Russia's foreign policy downplays developments in, and the agency of Ukraine – a country that has witnessed two revolutions and substantial domestic and foreign policy change in the last two decades.

While Cross and Karolewski's book addresses numerous important empirical developments, the range of theoretical frameworks adopted by contributors is limited to the main grand theories of International Relations, and the methodology of several chapters is rather loose. Recognising the need to anchor the analysis in rigorous methodology and apply theory systematically, Natalia Chaban and Ole Elgström's *The Ukraine Crisis and EU Foreign Policy Roles* adopts role theory and perception studies to investigate EU foreign policy and EU-Ukraine relations. The book has a coherent and solid theoretical base, which it tries to link to policy analysis (for instance, assessing the effectiveness of EU foreign policy) and policy development (offering pathways to differentiated and nuanced communications of the EU with Ukraine). The book takes stock of a broad range of literature on EU perception studies and role theory over the last fifty years and highlights how external perceptions of the EU changed, especially after the 2008 economic crisis.

The main innovation in Chaban's and Elgström's analysis is the focus on Ukrainian perspectives. The book begins with an overview of developments in Ukraine. The analysis revolves around a comparison between self-conceptions and external (Ukrainian) elite perceptions of EU foreign policy. In this sense, the analysis is consistent with the stated

goal of avoiding the trap of Eurocentrism and instead assess how the EU is received and reacted to as a foreign policy agent by external actors. Four EU policy roles are identified in the Ukraine crisis: the EU as a global and regional power leader; the EU as a bilateral partner; the EU as a mediator; and the EU as a public diplomacy actor. While self-perceptions concerning performance and effectiveness are generally positive among EU policy makers, the analysis of Ukrainian elite perceptions reveals a different picture. The EU is seen as a considerable power in the economic and normative sphere, but as an inefficient mediator, as weak in public diplomacy and as non-existent in the security realm. Chaban and Elgström highlight that considering these perceptions is important in order to evaluate EU foreign policy, but they also stress that such views sometimes stem from unrealistic expectations by Ukrainian elites. In the book, the focus on EU and Ukrainian perceptions and EU-Ukraine relations comes at the cost of neglecting Russian foreign policy roles and perspectives, which also play an important role in shaping the EU-Ukraine relationship. This omission can however be justified by the complexity of including a third perspective in the book, as well as by the fact that Russian agency and EU-Russia relations are analysed extensively in other works.

Indeed, scholarly literature has devoted much greater attention to the EU-Russia relationship, including specific policy aspects. In this respect, Thane Gustafson's *The Bridge* is one of the latest examples. The book investigates energy trade, the single most important economic aspect of EU-Russia relations. The focus is on gas, the most politically sensitive energy source in the relationship due to its intrinsic features. As gas can only be shipped via pipeline or – at very low temperatures – in liquid state by tankers, gas markets are more regional and fragmented (as opposed to global oil markets). Due to its geographic proximity, existing infrastructure and relatively low production costs, Russia has become the largest and most competitive gas supplier to the European market. While theory is not the focus of Gustafson's book, its premise is grounded in liberalism: energy trade contributes to peaceful relations by enhancing shared interests.

Gustafson's excellent historical narrative meticulously reconstructs how the Soviet- and Russian-European gas relationship originated, how it expanded from the 1990s to the 2010s and how the main actors and guiding ideas evolved over time. He shows that gas trade started thanks to the initiative of European state-owned businesses, national diplomacies and Soviet officials. Due to the restructuring of the European energy market in the 1990s and 2000s, leading to privatisations and the digitisation of gas trade, the personal and long-term contractual ties between Eastern and Western actors have largely been replaced by spot markets and short-term business relations. This had an impact on the nature of the energy relationship. However, as Gustafson emphasises, the main threat to the EU-Russia 'gas bridge' came from growing geopolitical tensions and the rise of environmentalism in the 2010s. Geopolitical tensions led both sides to be wary of excessive interdependence and seek alternative partners. Especially in the second half of the 2010s, environmentalism increasingly undermined the idea of gas as a less polluting fossil fuel that could act as a back-up to renewables, or as transition source on the path to a carbon-neutral society. Following Russia's attack on Ukraine in 2022, geopolitical considerations and the environmental agenda have seemingly coalesced in the EU, resulting in the RePowerEU plan to overcome dependence on Russian fossil fuels by *inter alia* accelerating the energy transition.

Taken together, the three books provide excellent empirical analyses of different aspects of the EU's relationship with Russia and Ukraine on the eve of the 2022 war. They offer answers to highly relevant questions concerning the EU's foreign policy actorness and power, and the way these are perceived by external actors. Due to the war and the rapidly changing context, future scholarship should treat these answers as work-in-progress and continue to focus on the questions that they try to address. For instance, the EU's changing actorness and articulations of power in Eastern Europe is a long-term process that will continue to unfold in the coming years, possibly in a non-linear way. Most notably, the EU's adoption of a more strategic or geopolitical stance in foreign affairs could generate tensions with the liberal paradigms that have guided EU external action until recently. Analysing other actors' perceptions of the EU will continue to be essential in order to predict and assess the effectiveness of EU foreign policy.

At the same time, future studies should expand the empirical focus to topics that have been neglected thus far, adopt different and critical theoretical approaches and improve methodological rigour. From an empirical perspective, research should continue to combine a focus on EU-Russia-Ukraine interaction in Eastern Europe with an explanation of how it relates to broader global trends – without forgetting other locations where this interaction occurs, for instance North Africa and the Middle East. Empirical studies will have to face the constraints that the war and sanctions have imposed on cross-border research cooperation and even on the freedom of opinion and expression.

From a theoretical standpoint, scholarship on EU-Russia relations in particular should go beyond the realist/liberal (or geopolitical/normative) dichotomy, deepen constructivist analyses and, most importantly, venture into critical theories such as postcolonial and securitisation theory. As nearly every aspect of the EU-Russia relationship becomes securitised, a systematic analysis of the discursive processes through which this is happening appears very apt. On the other hand, postcolonial approaches could provide a framework to foreground the perspectives of Ukrainian and other Eastern European actors located between the EU and Russia. New constructivist studies could analyse the ongoing process of (re)construction of European, Russian and Ukrainian identities, not least by highlighting the processes of antagonistic othering that are well-entrenched historically and are being radicalised once again by the current conflict. Ultimately, this research agenda could be functional to understanding the nature of present disagreements and trace a path to address them constructively.

Disclosure statement

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