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The Explanatory Value of Spatiality in EU-Russia Relations in the Post-Soviet Space

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Abstract

EU-Russia relations within the context of the post-Soviet space have been one of the most investigated research topics in the field of international relations. With the return of great power politics, this region has been one of the centres of attention for researchers of geopolitics. However, while geography and borders have played prominent roles in this debate, the aspect of spatiality has barely been researched. This paper seeks to explore these concepts in the post-soviet space. Rather than viewing this region as a static and defined space, we look at how it is approached to be integrated within the structures of the European Union (EU) and Russia. Moreover, this paper challenges the fixation on hard power and soft power within the EU-Russia debate. Through the application of spatial concepts and their link with power, we aim at bringing new insights to the debate about the post-soviet space. Specifically, we apply spatial concepts to the EU's European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). After that, we compare these instruments and their objectives with the Russian approach and look at how they differ or resemble EU-policies and intentions. We find that rather than the product of hard power and soft power, post-soviet countries are actively integrated within the wider spatial strategies of Russia and the EU. Through our analysis we discovered spatial concepts to be more appropriate and comprehensive to understand the conflict between Russia and the EU in the post-soviet space. In fact, instead of clashing perceptions in foreign policy attitudes, the conflict exposes deeper rooted and conflicting notions of space. While Russia views the post-soviet space as an indispensable part of itself, the EU aims at extending the EU community beyond its natural borders to create a common space of values.

Table of Contents

Introduction

We are currently writing the year 2021, and relations between the EU and Russia remain well below the freezing point. Recently, the painful visit of High Representative Joseph Borrell to Moscow only confirmed the unwillingness of both actors to trust one another, let alone relax the long-lasting tensions between them. Despite the anticipated diplomatic breakthroughs under a 'geopolitical commission', Russia and the EU continue to walk in opposite directions. It has been over two decades since Vladimir Putin rose to power in Russia and his relations with the West have been the subject of many studies. Strangely enough, things did start on the right foot with the newfound president seeking to normalise the relationship with the West in the early 00s. However, the Western partners failed to grant Russia's wish for a seat at the table with the other great powers.

In essence, Russia aspired to be one of the links within a multipolar world order (Mankoff, 2007; Sakwa, 2008). As time passed on, disagreements between Russia and the West would become progressively more explicit and hostile (Casier, 2016). This became most apparent for the first time with the colour revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, as the Kremlin presented these demonstrations as being set up by the West to install pro-western governments (Delcour & Wolczuk, 2015). The post-soviet space remained the most visible arena of contestation as Russia's military intervened in Georgia after the country's flirtatious rapprochement with NATO in 2008 (Allison, 2008). Later, in 2014, the breach between Russia and the West became unbridgeable after the annexation of Crimea (Cadier, 2014).

While at first NATO seemed to be considered the biggest threat by Russia, competition with the EU in the post-soviet space soon became a major factor of disagreement too. This is well illustrated by Russia's gradual change in perception concerning the EU's European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). While the initiative was received with annoyance and disinterest at first, the introduction of the Eastern Partnership (EaP), foreseeing the possibility for cooperating states to sign an Association Agreement (AA) with the EU, bombarded the ENP with a major concern (Rieker & Gjerde, 2016). As soon as Brussels intensified relations with post-soviet[1] states, Russia suspected these actions to be part of a European geopolitical agenda. At the same time, the EU condemns Russia's forceful actions against post-soviet states and considers them unlawful. Because of this seemingly irreconcilable clash of perceptions, EU-Russia relations remain gridlocked.

In the literature, scholars are continuously attempting to explain how and why these perceptions clash in the first place. In this context, the concepts of geopolitics and hard power politics have again come to the fore. Realist thinkers, for instance, have commented on EU-Russia and Russia-West relations frequently. One of the frequently cited theories in this field is by neorealist John Mearsheimer (2014). He argues that Russia's actions in Ukraine are natural consequences to the eastward expansion of the West. After all, the Western partners had been closing in on Russia's territory, thereby violating some of Moscow's vital interests. That way, Mearsheimer says, Putin was forced to react when one

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[1] The author is aware of the discussion about the term 'post-soviet'. However, for the sake of simplicity, the terms post-soviet states and post-soviet space will be used to refer to the countries and space in-between the EU and Russia.

of the last bastions of his geographical security was on the verge of integrating within the Western structures. Basically, Russia follows the 'realist way of thinking' whereas it has defined vital interests and pursues their consolidation. This line of thinking, of a 'realist Russia', has been supported by multiple other authors as well (Bock et al., 2015; Matsaberidze, 2015; Oğuz, 2015; Sauer, 2017; Trenin, 2009). The West, and most notably the EU, on the other hand is said to perceive politics in another way. Delcour and Wolczuk (2016), for example, compare the region-building mechanisms between the EU and Russia and divide them into two broad categories. The EU, through initiatives such as the ENP and EaP, applies 'soft' region building mechanisms, whereas Russia doesn't shy away from taking hard measures to execute its objectives. Nitoiu (2016) claims that there is a clash of values and worldviews between the EU and Russia, since they have completely different understandings of how they should behave in the international system. In general, when it comes to the EU, soft power mechanisms such as democracy promotion and the exportation of EU-values are often referred to as the main tools of foreign policy (Buşcaneanu, 2015; Nielsen & Vilson, 2014). Thus, the notion of hard power Russia against soft power EU with colliding world views seems to be supported by the literature.[2]

However, while geopolitics in the context of the post-soviet space are clearly gaining attention, there has been little to no research centred on the studying of spatiality within this context in Western literature (Korolev, 2015).[3] Territory and space have been narrowly defined within international relations and seldom are they at the centre of studies that investigate the role of the EU's soft power within its Eastern Neighbourhood (Jones & Clark, 2020). Yet, the way both Brussels and Moscow implement policies is strongly interwoven with spatial intentions and consequences. For example, the EU's 'big bang' enlargement to the East in 2004 drastically changed the territorial status quo in Europe and had major consequences on how Russia perceived the post-soviet space (see realism above). Be that as it may, Russia isn't *just* concerned with the hard security threat these territorial expansions bring with them. In fact, their territorial claim also resonates from various cultural and historical considerations that are deeply rooted within Russia's image of itself and its relation to the post-soviet space. In that sense, space and territory become complex concepts that are narrowly connected with security, culture, identity and history. Similarly, the EU's policies towards the post-soviet states are conducted within a certain spatial reality. The process of region-building in itself has a strong territorial connotation. As such the question about the intentions of initiatives like the EaP is raised. If they are indeed part of the European regionalisation process and, if yes, in which capacity can the EU project power through them?

Ultimately, this working paper sets multiple research goals. First of all, it contests the prevailing and also one-sided geopolitical tendency in international relations. Drawing from border studies, critical geopolitics and political geography, the paper aims at gaining

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[2] Auer, 2015; Bock, Henneberg & Plank, 2015; Cadier, 2014; Delcour & Wolczuk, 2016; Delcour & Wolczuk, 2015; Gunitsky & Tsygankov, 2018; Kuzio, 2017; Matsaberidze, 2015; Mearsheimer, 2014; Nitoiu, 2016; Sauer, 2017; Trenin, 2009; Wolff, 2015.
[3] This type of research is more common among Russian and Northern European scholars. See for example Makarychev & Yatsyk (2017), Morozova (2011) and Guzzini (2014).

a more comprehensive and nuanced view of geopolitics. At the core of our theoretical considerations is the restoration of spatial concepts within IR theorisation. Secondly, this angle of observation allows us to shed new light on the conflict between Russia and the EU in the post-soviet space. We argue that rather than being fixated on soft and hard power distinctions as defining factors in explaining the conflict, scholars should pay attention to the spatial elements at play. Importantly, this paper is primarily intended to explore various concepts that can later be applied in more concrete cases.

The Case for Spatial Attention in International Relations

While it might seem strange to reintegrate geography into the field of international relations and geopolitics, there is a good case to be made for it. After all, definitions of 'geopolitics' have become so blurred and diversified, that researchers now have to point out what exactly they mean by it. Not only are there different kinds of geopolitics, but there are also different meanings ascribed to the concept. Additionally, to make things even more complicated increasingly specialised areas within the field of geopolitics have emerged over the past few years. At the start of the 20th century and during the first half of it, several authors started thinking about geography as the basis and also legitimisation for political action. This school of thought, coined as 'classical geopolitics', claimed to approach geography objectively and made predictions about state behaviour based on geographical variables (Fettweis, 2015; Flint, 2016, p.17-20). However, classical geopolitics obtained a bad reputation because of the Nazi expansionism prior and during the Second World War (Kuus, 2010, p.3). Because of this, scholars refrained from using strictly geopolitical concepts in the following years.

After WWII, geopolitics was integrated within the general scope of international relations. Subsequently, the definition of geopolitics has become more fragmented and overshadowed by overarching theories (Klinke, 2012, p. 931). This is especially well illustrated within the field of great power politics and realism where geopolitics became interwoven with realpolitik in response to Henry Kissinger's intellectual ideas (Fettweis, 2000). Yet, in realist studies, geography and space only take on secondary roles in the wider scheme of variables (Kaspersen & Strandsbjerg, 2007). Even if space is explored within realist thinking, it happens in a very constrained way, approaching territory merely from its physical and material dimension. Wendt's constructivist theory as well gives into this reasoning as it describes territory as part of the state's rump materialism (Shah, 2012). These state-centric and static approaches towards space is what John Agnew (1994) famously named the 'territorial trap'. Thinking of state borders as fixed and timeless creates the false premise that the world is split up in exclusive territories with their own collective identities. However, that way scholars would disregard historical events and actions that eventually led up to the current configuration of space and rule out the dynamic process of creating new borders (Paasi, 2020). Indeed, one should acknowledge the transformative aspect of space, borders and territory to study collective identity since the historical process of spatial change informs us about the people, institutions and other actors within current bounded borders.

These observations have gained attention in the 90's where a new stream of scholars questioned the studying of space within international relations theory (Newman & Paasi, 1998). This school of thought has been given the term 'critical geopolitics' as it challenges the idea that the jargon used in geography is neutral.[4] Instead, geographical concepts are ideologically driven and highly politicised (Kuus, 2010). The original motive of scholars in critical geopolitics was to open up the debate surrounding geography in politics (Dalby, 2010). Similar thoughts are echoed in feminist geopolitics, generally seen as a side branch of critical geopolitics, where the self-proclaimed objectivity of classical geopolitical thinkers is contested. Dominant narratives in traditional geographical studies are deceptive and need to be critically analysed. Feminist geopolitics is especially advocating for more inclusion of undervalued sections of the population within the context of geopolitics (Hyndman, 2004). One of the main arguments for this case is the far-reaching impact global processes have on the everyday reality of the population at the one hand and how these processes are shaped through everyday interactions on the other hand (Massaro & Williams, 2013). In that sense, scholars should pay attention to a much broader level of activity.

So, following this brief overview, we can distinguish two intermediate conclusions. Firstly, there is a lack of geographical focus within international relations theory. Secondly, whenever geography is integrated within these theories, spatial concepts are narrowly approached, focusing merely on the physical or material aspects. In the next section we will introduce some of the basics that circulate in border studies, critical geopolitics and political geography. After that, these concepts will be introduced in the context of EU-Russia relations within the post-soviet space.

Spatial Concepts and Strategies

In the previous passage we already touched upon the overemphasis on the material dimension of territory within international relations theory. Still, the materiality or physicality of space constitutes an important element in understanding geography. Briefly put, under the physical aspect of space we distinguish examples like a strip of land or natural boundaries such as mountains and rivers (Sassen, 2013). These are the most common examples of how space is approached within common thinking. Moreover, this type of physical classification has been translated into conventional wisdom through easy-to-use maps that typically accompany children throughout their educational trajectory. One problematic outcome is that we have become accustomed to perceiving the world in fixed cartographic terms. The layout of maps creates the false impression that geographical units are easy to compare and inherently stable. In doing so, the complexity of boundaries is almost completely ignored (Lewis & Wigen, 1997, p.11).

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[4] There is also the school of 'biopolitics' that draws scholars away from territorially fixed reasoning to studying power in relation to populations. A more extensive overview can be found in the work of Campbell & Sitze (2013).

This omission is exactly where multiple scholars come in and try to alter the way we view space. Drawing from the theory of Bruno Latour, Kleinschmidt and Strandsbjerg (2010) claim that a combination of "the materiality of space" and the "sociality of it" eventually adds up to what is considered space. In other words, the *construction* of space is the second dimension that we should acknowledge. This is well covered in border studies, where borders and boundaries aren't purely seen as the physical reality of demarcations between two states. Rather, borders are full of symbolic meaning and may extend beyond the physical borders of the state (Paasi, 2020). Meinhof (2002), for example, has illustrated this through in-depth interviews with people living in border areas. Unsurprisingly, interviewees had different perceptions and ideas about territory and identity depending on which side of the shared border they lived. Crucially, they assigned certain characteristics to the people living on the other side, directly connecting the materiality of space (borders) with the sociality (assigned identity). Another example is the widely cited idea of the 'Russkiy Mir', a concept that centres around a common post-soviet identity (Pieper, 2020). In 2007, Russia brought this promotion of Russian language, culture and history in practice through the Russian World Foundation (O'Loughlin, Toal & Kolosov, 2016). By targeting specific population strata within post-soviet states, the Russian approach spatialises identity beyond its own borders. That way, it becomes clear that culture, identity, ideology, etc. don't limit themselves to physical borders. On the contrary, these concepts are diffused over different pieces of land, interfering with lives of citizens across state territories.

Subsequently, if space is not only materialistic nor exclusively predetermined and static, it can be altered over time. Precisely, we should think of space as a dynamic concept expressed through societal reproduction (Stojanovic, 2018). In that sense, Paasi (2020) argues that we should think of borders as "social processes that have become institutionalised and are continuously becoming rather than being." Agnew (2003) as well argues that borders are constantly reproduced, leading up to ongoing processes of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation. Again, it's important to note that these developments aren't necessarily accompanied by the creation of new formal boundaries. Regardless, it remains possible that the reconfiguration of space is expressed through different meanings assigned to boundaries or by a different kind of governance of that space. Now, if the construction of space is a dynamic process, bound to change and subject to the meaning that is ascribed to it, how do states and other international actors deal with it in a strategic sense?

To answer this question, we have to go back to the postmodern school that was also at the basis of critical geopolitics. Back in the '80s the works of Michel Foucault trickled down to geographers who were keen to translate his ideas into their field (Elden & Crampton, 2016, p.2). Foucault had captured the interest of geographers because he mentioned, albeit in rather vague terms, space in relation to concepts such as knowledge and power. In fact, he claimed that space, knowledge and power were all inextricably linked (Elden & Crampton, 2016, p.9). There is also the much-quoted interview from the journal Hérodote in which Foucault is asked to reflect on the concepts of geography and space (Foucault, 2007). But, as Matless (1992) argues, it is foremost Foucault's analysis and critique of human sciences itself that draws researchers into questioning the so-called "fundamentals" in the field of geography. Similar to the genealogical method that was used by Foucault to study the

history of madness, axioms existing within geography like 'nation', 'landscape', 'nature' and so on could be under scrutiny in a genealogy of geography. However, the goal of this paper is not to deconstruct all notions of geography and space, as some still offer much needed guidance in making sense of the world. Nonetheless, drawing from the postmodern critique on essentiality within geographical thinking it's possible to point at different accents that could be integrated in international relations theory.

One of those is the inevitable connection between space and power and how we should understand it when studying geopolitics. Following Foucault, each form of organisation or production of space constitutes as a technique of power (Klauser, 2013, p.98). In fact, space is identified as a mechanism within the wider range of discourses and practices that give shape to configurations reflecting the political and social order. Here, space serves as the normalisation or legitimisation of the political and social perspectives that come with the exercise of power (Shah, 2012, p.4). Put differently, the composition of space helps allowing for a legitimate deployment of the political and social order. Thus, according to this view, powerful actors who are able to shape and control space have power to construct the political and social order within. Again, space isn't necessarily expressed within a confined territory like state borders. Next to having physical control over land, one can exert power through normative functions that stretch beyond cartographic borders (Shah, 2012, p.4)

The implication of Foucault's notion of power directly translates back to the question how we should view space, not as a neutral and objective parameter of reality, but rather as a normative principle of power and control. Next to that, it allows us to restore the concept of space within international relations theory. With space as a tool for the organisation of desired political and social configurations, international actors can pursue these exact objectives through spatial strategies. Linking this information back to our research topic, we are interested in how Russia and the EU are able to gain control and exert power in the post-soviet space through foreign policy actions. Which means that, rather than hard or soft power determining the foreign policy actions of both, the most appropriate spatial strategies in order to pursue control are driving both actors to take action. So, in conclusion of this section, a couple of factors are important to take into account for the further conduct of this research. Firstly, spatial strategies and gaining control over space imply an active usage of power laced with strong normative mechanisms. Consequently, it makes less sense to excessively focus on the distinction between soft and hard power, since they both serve the same normative purpose. Indeed, we argue that the scholarly focus on hard/soft power concepts disregards or trivialises the initial intentions of international actors. Countering these deterministic views, we broaden the idea of how power is exerted by studying how it is spatialized. Secondly, in order to investigate this, we should distinguish which mechanisms are used in the realm of international actors of the calibre of Russia and the EU to gain control over and shape space.

Claiming Space

Having discussed the power-related effects of obtaining space, how do international actors succeed in claiming a piece of territory, region or even an idea? Here, key concepts like sovereignty and jurisdiction play an important role. Since much of the territory that we

perceive is split up in the geographical shape of 'the state', other international actors seem to face a daunting task in 'claiming' a piece of already occupied territory. However, when overcoming the territorial trap of mistaking space with static geographical units, one sees that the bordered area considered to be state territory is actually a multi-layered sphere including much easier approachable dimensions like culture, history, identity, etc. So, when discussing the claiming of space, one isn't necessarily referring to *just* the physical state territory but also to the people living within various states or even to an abstract idea like liberalism. After all, Western-Europe is mentioned with the Enlightenment in one breathe and constitutes as a prime example of how natural territory, history and society are strongly interwoven. What this means is that rather than having to integrate the entire state territory, international actors can lay claims through various structures of spaces extending beyond the presumed exclusive state territories. Naturally, in a world still dominated by nation-states, political systems are integral in how interactions are shaped or even allowed. Imagine, for instance, the EU eying a dictatorial state to export its beliefs of freedom and independence. While this strategy might be aimed at a broader spatial idea of exporting the EU-values in one of its neighbourhoods, the room for manoeuvre is limited by the nature of the considered dictatorial state, exactly because the latter tries to rigidly control all the previously mentioned layers existing within the territorial idea of the state. Such a situation might increase the difficulty of conducting a spatial strategy and reminds us that, while space isn't bound to state spaces alone, the deeply rooted idea of nation-states and its functions presents challenges for other international actors trying to claim space.

Nevertheless, a couple of mechanisms of how space can be claimed have been discussed in the literature. Jones et al. (2014) have put forward several mechanisms that allow states to influence their territorial reality. The first one is the process of centralisation, described as the process in which "the political, economic and cultural norms of the centre are imposed on the state's periphery." Here, the authors refer to the Soviet Union as an example of how territory wasn't just imposed in physical terms but also in the way of a Soviet mentality. Indeed, the physical dimension of space was used as a tool of power to ingrain political and social preferences imposed by the centre. Secondly, territory can be claimed through negotiations between the centre and the periphery as well. Closely related is the third possibility, federalism, where governance is distributed among multiple levels within the state. The system of federalism allows for regions to maintain autonomy in certain areas while having centralised decision-making in others. Finally, states could make claims on territories where the loyalty of citizens to the state and its institutions is obtained. Jones et al. (2014) argue that the promotion of *state nationalism* can help states with legitimizing their territorial claims. Here, again, the concept 'Russkiy Mir' serves as an excellent example. After all, Russia often justifies its foreign interventions by claiming its defending Russian citizens abroad (Menkiszak, 2014). One recent example of state nationalism in practice is the Russian annexation of Crimea where the Kremlin argues it fulfils the will of Crimean people who pledge loyalty to Russia rather than Ukraine, making it possible for the Kremlin to justify the territorial claim (Putin, 2014).

However, besides the state, other actors have manifested themselves in the playfield of gaining authority over space. Sassen (2012) points out that these actors come in many different shapes and float somewhere between the global and national levels. The variety of spatial actors challenges the traditional perspective that the nation-state alone is able to

claim authority over space. Indeed, other international actors too have the range and normative capacity to restructure and disrupt spaces that once seemed the exclusive area of the state. One such example would be the International Criminal Court with its universal jurisdiction across participating countries (Sassen, 2012, p. 62). Another example, and in line with our research topic, is the EU and its ability to shape space. With the EU being a configuration of different individual states while having a strong supranational dimension at the same time, it's neither a state nor an archetypical international organisation with strictly intergovernmental decision-making. Besides, the EU embodies the 'idea' of Europe and what it stands for in terms of norms and values. Moreover, because the EU has its own formal institutions, it actively constructs this idea and also the space in which it seeks to deploy its norms and values (Luukkonen, 2015, p.9). In other words, Brussels is able to design a certain space in which it operates and has the autonomy and rationale to formulate objectives. The next chapter of this research paper will provide the reader with examples of spatial approaches of the EU and Russia in the post-soviet space. Specifically, we will briefly look at the EU's EaP, its objectives and its relationship with space. At the same time, we investigate how the EU approach differs from the Russian one and if these differences manifest themselves through the concepts hard and soft power.

EU's Approach to the Post-Soviet Space

The EU's decision to launch the ENP in 2003 should not have come as a surprise to scholars of international relations. In fact, as a result of the Central and Eastern European (CEE) Enlargement, the EU's territorial status quo drastically changed, prompting the EU to rethink its strategy in the post-soviet space. Suddenly, Brussels was confronted with a number of new neighbours with whom it would have to establish stronger relations. Simultaneously, however, the EU could extend its normative reach even further eastwards while meeting the unspoken issue of enlargement fatigue (Popescu, 2008). In that sense, the ENP provided the opportunity to include the post-soviet countries in the normative idea of Europe, while they stayed excluded of eventual EU-membership (Browning & Christou, 2010, p. 112).

The ENP initially allowed participating countries to establish closer political, security, economic and cultural cooperation on a bilateral basis. Each and every cooperation got formalised through a jointly agreed Action Plan in which the 'key areas for specific action' were postulated (European Commission, 2004). One of the crucial conditions for cooperation is the attention for fundamental EU-values found in the founding treaties. While the EU maintains that decisions are taken jointly, there is a strong normative dimension present. As Leino and Petrov (2009) argue, it is the EU that is the dominant partner in these cooperation agreements, exporting the Acquis Communautaire through the Action Plans. That way, the EU aims at transforming its neighbouring countries without granting them membership. With the introduction of the EaP, as an ENP initiative to enhance the EU's presence on its Eastern flank, the normative intentions of the EU in the region became even more clear. Apart from a bilateral track, the EaP also offers a multilateral platform aimed at converging the EU and the participating countries (Van Hoof, 2012, p. 289). Yet, the bilateral framework is more extensive, with Association Agreements

(AA) serving as the legal basis to formalise cooperation between the EU and those EaP countries willing to associate with the EU and more customised agreements for the other EaP countries. The AAs were particularly interesting for partners since they provide the opportunity to conclude a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) with the EU. The DCFTA offers partner countries the possibility to deepen trade relations with Brussels. Not only is it easier for these countries to access the single market, several areas of their economic apparatus also get targeted for development and modernization. In turn, partners are expected to harmonise their legislation in accordance with several parts of the EU's Acquis Communautaire (Ágh, 2016, p. 43-44). Actually, the increased conditionality is a common thread in the EaP, formalizing the EU's normative expectations that were already present at the start of the ENP (Van der Loo, Van Elsuwege & Petrov, 2014). Through the EaP, the EU introduced the 'more for more' principle to stimulate EaP-countries into domestic reforms conform EU-values and standards in turn for financial support (Valieva, 2016, p.18).

In the end, the success of the AA's has been mixed with only Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine having concluded them to this date. Armenia, after increasing pressure from Russia, decided to join the Eurasian Customs Union (EACU) instead of deepening its engagement within the EaP framework (Grigoryan, 2014; Shirinyan & Ralchev, 2013). However, the EU reworked the AA with Armenia so it would be compatible with the standards of the EACU. Eventually, the negotiations led to the signing of the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership (CEPA) in 2017 (Vieira & Vasilyan, 2018). Much like the other agreements signed between the EU and its Eastern Partners, the CEPA emphasizes on "common values" and "joint activities and goals."[5] Yet, compared to previous agreements, the CEPA indicates more diplomatic maturity with attention for the precarious situation of Armenia, having to navigate between Russian and European interests (Hakobyan, 2019; Kostanyan & Giragosian, 2017). In the case of Azerbaijan, relations with the EU are still based on the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement that entered into force in 1999. Despite ongoing negotiations since the start of 2017, there is no tangible prospect for a new agreement yet.[6] Finally, EU-Belarus relations remain the least institutionalised with only Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreements as recent accomplishment.[7]

In the cases where the EU has signed agreements with Eastern partner countries, Brussels has aimed at transferring its norms, rules and values beyond the EU-borders. In many ways this mode of operating is reminiscent of the above-mentioned spatial mechanism 'centralisation' in which the centre (EU) tries to impose its preferences upon the periphery (neighbourhood countries). In that sense, the EU attempts to transform the Eastern Neighbourhood into an economic, political and social configuration that suits Brussels' interests best (Bosse, 2014). Through the exportation of its rules, norms, standards and values, the EU creates 'spaces of values' that stretch far beyond the formal EU-demarcations (Bialasiewicz, Elden & Painter, 2005). Or as Casas, Cobarrubias and Pickle (2010) put it: "the current EU's external border is a domain where a process of de- and re-centring European

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[5] EU-Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (2017).

[6] https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/neighbourhood/countries/azerbaijan_en

[7] https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/neighbourhood/countries/belarus_en

identity, territory and sovereignty is occurring. Here, the border is no longer the "edge" and limit of political sovereignty.

Because the EU captures the idea of human rights and democracy it also has access to different layers of non-EU states. By embodying 'the European way', Brussels reaches out to various spheres of societies within post-soviet states and (sub)consciously provides political and societal ideals for actors that have influential positions. Here we can refer back to the notions Foucault made about space and its function as mechanism to normalise or legitimise political and social perspectives. The EU, appealing to, controlling and influencing these diverse spaces is shaping them in accordance with the political and social fundamentals the EU stands for. In the case of the ENP, the exportation of the EU values beyond its territorial borders is an attempt to transform these post-soviet societies into like-minded partners. Through this process, Brussels is creating new socio-spatial boundaries (Scott, 2009). In doing so, multiple objectives like the stabilisation of the EU's external borders or improved trade relations are pursued as well. What matters less is the nature of the instruments used, as it alternates between imposed legal norms and mere soft power actions anyway. Instead, these instruments are applied to permeate different layers of the societies in the post-soviet states. By influencing them, the EU is actively shaping the post-soviet space into a configuration that functions within the wider political and social EU-hemisphere. Raising attention to the spatial dimension of the ENP-policies also gives an insight as to where the division with Russia lies. Since both actors are trying to shape the Eastern Neighbourhood with different intentions and perceptions, the post-soviet space becomes an arena for spatial contestations. In the next chapter we will investigate how Russia perceives the post-soviet space and go into detail on how the spatial division expresses itself.

Russia's Approach to the Post-Soviet Space

Contrary to the EU, Russia has been an active player in Eastern-Europe for many centuries, establishing close relations and even having included many of contemporary post-soviet states into previous configurations of the Russian empire or Soviet-Union. Territory, geography and space have been at the core of contemporary Russian struggles in the post-soviet space. Many of these issues are the result of historical processes and unveil long-standing socio-spatial notions of the post-soviet space. One straightforward logic that has been put forward by several authors to shed light on the importance of geographical notions within Russia's foreign policy leads us back to the initial nation-making process of Russia in the 9th century. In its early existence, Russia lacked natural boundaries, making itself highly prone to foreign interventions (Donkers & Hamers, p. 15). Because of its geographical vulnerability, the Russian state initially was occupied with territorial expansion for defensive reasons. This line of reasoning is what Kotkin (2016) strikingly coined as 'defensive aggressiveness' to explain the rationale of the Russian elite to associate territory with security. Indeed, because of the preoccupation with gaining territory for defensive purposes, territorial expansion was high up the Russian political agenda ever since the 15th century. Thus, over time, the Russian territorial approach has undergone an unquestionable equation with the country's safety and survival (Trenin, 2002, p.42-43). As a result, the

importance of control over territory became deeply engrained within the Russian raison d'état. In fact, the territorial rationale has survived different political systems and the ravages of time and continues to be a centrepiece of Russian foreign policy thinking (Ištok & Plavčanová, 2013). However, because of the interlinkage between security and territory, the descent of the Russian empire and eventually the dissolution of the Soviet Union have been accompanied with the sense of insecurity, injustice and loss as well (O'Loughlin & Talbot, 2005, p.25).

Closely related to the security issues associated with territory, the very being of the Russian state is also expressed in terms of geography and space. Because of its enormous landmass, the idea of Russia as a 'great power' can almost be taken literally. The size of Russia alone has influenced the way of thinking in Russian foreign policy since it seems self-explanatory that the biggest country in the world should be one of the most powerful as well (Trenin, 2002, p.12). Indeed, the current sentiment about Russia's righteous place in the world, as one of the links in a multipolar world, dates centuries back. Oskanian (2018) distinguishes three 'civilizing missions' that have justified the Russian case for 'exceptionalism' dependent on the political systems in Russia the last two centuries. Firstly, the Tsarist period predicated its claimed civilisational superiority on a combination of Western modernity and Orthodox Christianity. Later, this first mission integrated an ethnic-nationalist focus to improve on the state's authenticity with special attention to Russification of certain territories within the empire. The second form of exceptionalism straightforwardly refers to the Marxist-Leninist period under the Bolshevik regime. This mission contained a very distinct ideological basis including outspoken anti-Western elements in its composition. Yet, some elements of the previous imperial form of exceptionalism survived the transition to the communist regime. For example, the assemblage of USSR satellite states, moulded together in one overarching *soviet* configuration is reminiscent of the nationalist efforts of the Tsarist regime to create one coherent 'nationhood'. Additionally, 'backwardness' was targeted to disappear in several areas through the civilisational efforts of the Marxist-Leninist ideology, maintaining the strong hierarchical structure inherited from the Tsarist rule. Eventually, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, in which civilizational elements of the Tsarist empire had been conserved, the Russian Federation drew from both civilising projects as it looked to reinvent its position in the world. In many ways these objectives reflect two spatial strategies that were discussed above. Not only were these different regimes trying to set up a wider space interpreted in an ethnic-nationalist way, but they also pursued strong hierarchical structures that forced the periphery to comply with the will of the centre. This way of operating strongly overlaps with *state nationalism* and the process of *centralization*. Oskanian (2018) continues to argue that Russia nowadays relies on a hybrid form of exceptionalism, implementing historical narratives from both abovementioned periods in time. In doing so, the Kremlin has carefully crafted another civilising mission founded upon historical antecedents while integrating contemporary items such as economic rationality and international legality. However, the strong hierarchical view remains intact with the preservation of the near abroad as Russia's sphere of influence as focal point. That way, the above-mentioned spatial strategies that were pursued throughout the centuries kept defining the Russian foreign policy in the post-soviet space.

Consequently, Russian foreign policy remains heavily influenced by the sense of historical exceptionalism and the place it occupies in world politics. Accordingly, Putin has never shied away from expressing this, as Svarin (2016) rightly points out in his work. Besides, most scholars of Russian foreign policy seem to agree that Russia's great power sentiment still remains an integral variable in the Russian attitude at the world stage (Kempe & Smith, 2006; Kotkin, 2016; Lieven, 1999; Miskimmon & O'Loughlin, 2017; Trenin, 2002). Importantly, Russia's fixation on territory has also been carried over from the Tsaristic regime to the Soviet Union and still plays an important role today. However, one needs to concentrate on the broader socio-spatial dynamics that are inextricably linked with the material understanding of geographic spaces. As we have discussed above, Russian security is strongly connected with the amount of territory that falls under the state. The last decade (realist) scholars have argued that the sense of insecurity, instigated by Western expansion, is the main driver behind Russia's foreign interventions in Georgia and Ukraine (Mearsheimer, 2014). But this argument disregards other elements when examining the spatial and territorial reasoning of the Russian Federation. Going back to the concepts of geography, borders and territory, we know these concepts aren't empty, neutral or objective signifiers. Instead, these concepts are all loaded with meaning, depending on the historical context in which actors perceive them. This is exactly why, in the case of Russia, everything hinges on the post-soviet space. The post-soviet region, besides playing an important role in the relation to security, has been part of the civilizing projects of Moscow and still lives on as part of Russia in one capacity or another. Borders with post-soviet states such as Ukraine are full of meaning and sentiment moulded by centuries of shared experiences.

Having seceded so much territory, Russia found itself in the delicate position of having the geopolitical imagination of the past while being in control over the smallest amount of territory for nearly five centuries (O'Loughlin & Talbot, 2005). In this background, the gradual integration of several post-soviet states within the Western structures has strengthened the rooted image of the West as antagonist while harming the Russian sentiment of exceptionalism. Especially during the '90s Russia had difficulties adjusting to the new reality of the world order, in which it was downgraded to a secondary actor. Things changed with the introduction of Putin and the comeback of exceptionalism within the higher political circles (Svarin, 2016). This was evident by the change of direction in the relationship with the EU. After a couple of half-hearted EU-Russia cooperation attempts in the '90s, Russia started demanding more in terms of prestige and presence (Haukkala, 2003). In addition, ongoing frustration about obtaining WTO-membership and the pressure exerted on Russia by Western allies to comply to the Kyoto Protocol catalysed the Russian dissatisfaction with how they were treated by the rest of the world order (Sakwa, 2008). Shortly after, Russia was invited by the EU to join the ENP but turned this offer down because they refused to be treated on the same basis as every other Eastern-European state. Rather, it wanted to be considered as an 'equal power' to the EU and pursue bilateral relations instead (Emerson, Noutcheva & Popescu, 2007, p.11). With regards to the ENP as a whole, the Kremlin saw the project as a none-threatening instrument and is claimed to have not taken it too seriously (Cadier, 2014; Rieker & Gjerde, 2016). By the time the Eastern Partnership kicked off, the Russian perception of the ENP had completely changed. Soon it became evident that Russia saw the EU-initiatives as a threat to its exclusive claim on the

post-soviet space. Subsequently, Moscow was trying to stop countries from signing far-reaching (trade) deals with the EU, as was exemplified by the last-minute Russian counteroffer in the late stages of the EU-Ukraine DCFTA negotiations.

In fact, there are many examples of Russia attempting to block closer cooperation between post-soviet states and the EU. One clear illustration is the economic sanctions Russia invoked with regard to Moldovan products after Chisinau signed an association agreement with Brussels. In addition, a number of Moldovans working in Russia were prohibited to enter the country and threats were made about cutting the energy supply (Tsereteli, 2014). Similar examples can be found across different post-soviet states such as Armenia[8] and Georgia[9] as well. These examples are often, and rightfully so, associated with hard power politics. However, contrary to popular thought, Russia is actively trying to attract previous soviet states through the use of soft power too. In response to the EU's ENP and EaP, Moscow set up the Eurasian Customs Union that's evolved into the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). In some ways this organisation is reminiscent of the EU's structure as is proven in the legal framework and the drawing up of the institutions (Delcour, 2018). Moreover, Russia has sought to export its own societal ideas as well as supporting authoritarian policy in several post-soviet states (Lebanidze, 2014; Von Soest, 2015, p.8). Averre (2009) observes that Russia is also developing "an infrastructure of ideas, institutions and NGO networks" similar to the instruments that the EU is using. This point is reiterated by Ademmer, Delcour & Wolczuk (2016, p.10-11) who state that Russia also, similar to the EU, fosters domestic change in post-soviet states, but departing from historical ties and "existing interdependence". The point is that Russia in its use of instruments applies a wide range of instruments that it deems best suited with respect to overarching goals (Kazharski & Makarychev, 2015, p.5). So, Russia's policy towards the post-soviet region is not simply based on a set of realist axioma's that rely on hard power interventions. The fixation on the hard character of notorious foreign policy actions in Georgia and Crimea has overshadowed the wider spectrum of tools Moscow employs in order to reach its objectives. Moreover, by claiming that Russia operates on the basis of a 'realist worldview', stronger deeper-rooted historical arguments are pushed into the background. This is especially the case in deterministic realist studies that apply a narrow understanding of territory and merely interpret post-soviet borders as variables in an overarching game for security.

Instead, we argue that the Russian actions in the post-soviet space are the product of much more complex considerations. It takes broader understanding of territory how it is linked with the notion of exceptionalism, as well as culture, history and security. Factoring in the meaning behind territory eventually constitutes the studying of 'space', allowing researchers to paint a more complete picture about the Russian presence in the post-soviet area as well as presenting the complex relationship with the West. Specifically referring to the theoretical aspect of claiming space, we found the two abovementioned strategies reflected in Russia's foreign policy towards the post-soviet space. The process of *centralisation* is reflective in the historical structure of previous configurations of the Russian

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[8] See Terzyan (2018) and Terzyan (2019)
[9] See Nilsson (2018)

state where a strong central power dictated its will upon the periphery. While many things have changed, Russia still claims the position as *primus inter pares* amongst other post-soviet states and deems the periphery as an extension of itself. To enforce this belief, a combination of hard power and soft power tools have been imposed to the extend where even the harmonising EU-model has inspired Russia to institutionalise the post-soviet space. For legitimization it also draws upon *state nationalism*, a relic of past empires and territorial realities. In this view, the Russian notion of exceptionalism, as well as an overlapping unity amongst 'soviet' citizens are pursued. Ultimately, the spatial objectives of the Russian Federation are inspired by strong historical sentiments and continue to shape the foreign policy in the post-soviet space. Clearly, this notion of space is conflicting with the EU's objectives to tailor the region to the same 'spaces of values' that exist within the European Community. In that sense, the conflict is not so much predicated on differences in soft or hard approaches but rather the product of diverging and colliding understandings of the post-soviet space.

Conclusion

This research paper was written with the intention of casting different insights within the academic debate about the rocky EU-Russia relations in the post-soviet space. Additionally, this paper sought to (re)introduce concepts from other disciplines such as geography and border studies to complement traditional international relations theories. Specifically, these concepts were integrated to respond to different streams in the literature searching the roots of the EU-Russia conflict in the way both actors have different approaches towards the post-soviet space. While the EU is portrayed as merely soft-power oriented, Russia's foreign policy has been labelled in terms of hard power actions. Next to contesting these deterministic views of hard versus soft power, this paper also briefly highlights the evolution of geopolitics and the lack of attention for geography in geopolitical studies. In essence, we state that spatial concepts provide for more complex reasoning in the context of EU-Russia relations and to some extend international relations in general. Important is that we stop viewing space and geography strictly in its material and physical dimension. Rather, scholars of geopolitics should also take into account the dynamic aspect of space and the meaning that is connected with physical territories. That way, we see the transformative potential of territory while paying attention to the meaning ascribed to it. In this context, controlling and shaping space also constitutes as a form of power that isn't really captured in the traditional understandings of hard and soft power. Inspired by Foucault we discover that space is an expression of power reflecting the societal and political ideals of the one in control of it.

The fluidity of space, manifesting itself through different layers of society, also means that actors are able to form strategies in order to alter it in line with political and societal goals. In that sense, we looked at spatial strategies that could potentially be employed by states or as was exemplified by Sassen (2016), other international actors. Specially, these concepts were explored through the foreign policies of the EU and Russia towards the post-soviet space. Though, it has to be noted that the obvious limitation of the application of the theories is the lack of specific case-studies. Rather, this working paper has limited itself to

broadly linking the theoretical conceptions from a bird's eye perspective. Nevertheless, this framework has brought along a couple of reserved conclusions. Firstly, we found the spatial concepts to be more appropriate at portraying the real power of the EU in the post-soviet space. Instead of restricting itself to soft power actions, Brussels has a strong normative oriented approach towards the post-soviet states. Through the ENP and EaP, the EU is able to impose legal norms and export its values towards participating countries. In terms of spatial strategies, this is closely linked to the process of *centralisation*. By transporting EU values, principles, norms and laws beyond its natural borders Brussels is transforming its periphery into broader spaces of values. Yet, the EU also appeals to other layers of these post-soviet societies, implicitly or otherwise reproducing its political and societal beliefs. By capturing the attractive idea of democracy and liberalism in general, the EU is able to reach and permeate various spheres within post-soviet states.

Secondly, this also explains the Russian attitude towards the gradually increasing cooperation between post-soviet states and the EU. At first, Moscow underestimated the power of the ENP by not paying too much attention to it. On the other hand, the potential of the EaP soon concerned the Russian political elite. After all, the incremental exportation of EU-values and the transportation of norms, principles and laws threatens the position of Russia's as regional great power. Throughout the centuries, Russia has formed an identity that integrated the current post-soviet area as key part of a broader conviction of Russian superiority. These ideas are clearly expressed in territorial and spatial terms dating back to the origins of the Russian federation and the different configurations in which it has operated. Originally from a sense of 'defensive aggressiveness', Russia had to seek new borders in order to secure its survival. As the country grew larger, it also developed ideas of exceptionalism and translated those into practice through 'civilising missions'. Over time, these missions integrated the 'periphery' into the Russian political and societal configuration. Through the processes of *centralisation* and *state nationalism*, the Russian authorities tried to create one comprehensive *space*. After the dissolution of the Soviet-Union, the sense of loss was linked with insecurity, incompleteness but also injustice as it was, again, the West interfering in the Russian hemisphere. With the introduction of Putin as president, Russia strived to restore its presence as the exclusive great power in the region. For that purpose, all means were allowed, as the alternation between hard and soft power instruments prove. More important, however, is to understand the broader socio-spatial notions that are attached to the Russian view of the post-soviet state. In this case, the Western expansion towards the Russian borders is not just a threat in terms of security but also to the meaning that is attached to these territories and the larger expression of Russia's self and its exceptionalism through the control of the post-soviet region.

Ultimately, the conflict between the EU and Russia manifests itself more in terms of spatial division than in the difference in soft or hard approaches. The disagreement about the post-soviet space exposes fundamentally incompatible spatial visions. Whereas Russia wants to construct the post-soviet space in line with the historical Russian dominance in the region, the EU aims at extending the EU-community beyond its natural borders to create a common space of values. One of the main consequences of this seeming unbridgeable division is the binary nature that it implies for the post-soviet states themselves. After all, both spatial visions for the region have become mutually exclusive, making it nearly impossible for post-soviet countries to pursue an effective multi-vector foreign policy. Future research could

delve deeper into the interdisciplinary concepts of space and power by applying them to specific case studies. By analysing the impact of the spatial approaches of the EU and Russia in the post-soviet states a better understanding of the complexity within the region could be reached while also casting insights about the way forward.

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