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Towards Stronger Normative Power: the Nature of Shift in EU Foreign Policy in the Context of the Crisis in Ukraine

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Abstract

The crisis in Ukraine of 2014 produced considerable change in the EU international environment, which not only tested its capabilities to react very quickly and adequately but also actually destroyed previous subtle balance of its Member States in relations with Russia. The EU Member States were not able to continue to maintain in these relations the “disunity” pattern, which was successfully described in the European Council on Foreign Relations study “A Power Audit of EU – Russia Relations” already in 2007. New turbulence pushed EU member states closer together, re-introduced old geopolitical constraints and concerns about national and international security and limited the room for diplomatic maneuver and finally produce new “unity” pattern. However nature of that new pattern remains not yet fully investigated from academic point of view. The aim of the article is to present results of analysis of this shift in foreign policy preferences of the EU and its Member States. The research is targeted to identify the nature of this change, which happened through process of adjustment to new reality, in the hierarchy of foreign policy preferences of Member States and finally of the European Union in general. The aim of the paper will be achieved by implementation of analysis of collected empirical data on foreign policy preferences of the EU Member States. The analysis will be based on typical methods of foreign policy analysis. Those include analysis of legal acts, statements of politicians, analytical literature and interviews with experts from the EU Member States. The conclusion of the article is supposed to answer to the main research question and to explain nature of new choices in the EU Members States foreign policies and its effect to the EU foreign policy towards Russia in general.

KEYWORDS: European Union, Foreign Policy, Member States, Russia, Foreign Policy Preferences.

Introduction



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The European Union’s common foreign policy is often an object of criticism, sometimes even outright ridicule. Yet to the wonder of many, with the heightened state of crisis in the Ukraine, the EU’s response in terms of Russia has been its strongest yet. The EU implemented a whole series of diplomatic démarches and even applied economic sanctions and restrictions to Russia. Below is a description of these measures made by the EU External Action Service: “In response to Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea and continuing destabilization of Ukraine - including aggression by Russian armed forces on Ukrainian soil - the EU has suspended talks on visas and a new EU-Russia agreement. Most EU-Russia cooperation programmes have been suspended. Targeted measures have been taken against Russia in areas including: access to capital markets,

defence, dual-use goods, sensitive technologies (including those in the energy sector). The European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development have suspended the signing of new financing operations in Russia. A trade and investment ban is now in force for Crimea/Sevastopol, bolstering measures taken to mark the EU's non-recognition of the annexation of Crimea. Furthermore, a number of individuals and bodies in Russia and Ukraine are subject to travel bans, and their assets have been frozen" (European Union External Action, 2015).

Earlier, this kind of general agreement by all the EU countries was unimaginable. It became obvious that something had changed in the EU common foreign policy formation mechanism, that a new structure emerged which is now the object of special research and commentary.

In actual fact, EU and Russian relations were never short of attention. However traditionally it has been the so-called "low politics" themes which have received the most attention, i.e., trade, visa regimes, scientific and cultural exchanges, transport, energy, which gradually "shifted" from the business into the geopolitical sphere once Vladimir Putin consolidated his power. Meanwhile in the field of "high politics", in its relations with Russia the EU was never a serious player. And one of the main reasons for this situation has been the variety in EU Member States' attitudes towards Russia and their prospective relations with the country, a point which has been spotted numerous times by a majority of observers and researchers. Some member states view Putin's Russia's development vectors negatively, considering it an obvious turn towards dictatorship in the country's interior and a sign of aggression in its foreign policy. Others thought that despite Russia's internal domestic development problems, it would still be possible to engage in successful and profitable cooperation with the country. Ultimately, this was determined by the non-existence of a common EU position and favourable conditions for Russia whereby it could have relations not with a unified block, but with separate states.

In 2007 researchers of the think-tank "European Council on Foreign Relations (further – ECFR)" who examined this problem prepared an influential study "A Power Audit of EU – Russia Relations" (Leonard, Popescu, 2007), which is still being widely cited. The researchers not only analyzed the situation, they also provided specific recommendations for a common EU strategy in regards to Russia. However this study received most attention not due to its recommendations which have now lost some of their relevance, but more for the successful classification of EU Member State attitudes towards Russia into five groups: "We have identified five distinct policy approaches to Russia shared by old and new members alike: '*Trojan Horses*' (Cyprus and Greece) who often defend Russian interests in the EU system, and are willing to veto common EU positions; '*Strategic Partners*' (France, Germany, Italy and Spain) who enjoy a 'special relationship' with Russia which occasionally undermines common EU policies; '*Friendly Pragmatists*' (Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Finland, Hungary, Luxembourg, Malta, Portugal, Slovakia and Slovenia) who maintain a close relationship with Russia and tend to put their business interests above political goals; '*Frosty Pragmatists*' (Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Ireland, Latvia, the Netherlands, Romania, Sweden and the United Kingdom) who also focus on business interests but are less afraid than others to speak out against Russian behaviour on human rights or other issues; and '*New Cold Warriors*' (Lithuania and Poland) who have an overtly hostile relationship with Moscow and are willing to use the veto to block EU negotiations with Russia" (Leonard, Popescu, 2007).

Although the images used to identify the EU state groups were more literary than scientific, they, especially the 'Trojan Horse' metaphor, gradually became almost a political science category describing the specific policies of smaller states in power games with the larger players. For example, in the context of the current crisis in Ukraine, there have been numerous discussions in the global press suggesting that the public expressions of good will towards Russia made by the leaders of Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic are a sign that the 'Trojan Horses' group is growing noticeably larger (bne IntelliNews, 2015; Bai, 2015; Mudde, 2014; Marušiak, 2013; Liedekerke, 2014).

Indeed, the differences in EU Member States and their policy approaches towards Russia have mostly been and continue to be widely researched, as, most likely, based on them we can give the most convincing explanation as to why the EU does not have a common strategy or a consistent policy when it comes to Russia (Forbrig, 2015). Precisely they receive the most discussion, as mass media records and widely disseminates all the controversial declarations made by state leaders, which go on to serve as an expression of these differences of the member states.

This has ultimately created a kind of inertia in thinking, which interprets the never-seen before unified stance taken by EU member states in terms of Russia as if it were a temporary coincidence, like an exception to the rule, or like a decision that will shortly be reversed and we will soon revert to our usual disharmony in interests. This might be why the very fact of the formation and stability of the unified EU position has not received a greater deal of attention or more comprehensive discussion. Indeed, the mentioned ECFR, which since 2010 has carried out consistent monitoring of the behaviour of EU member states also presents its assessments of state uniformity regarding one or another foreign policy issue. Nevertheless, the observed increase in the degree of uniformity of EU states regarding Russia in 2014 has not yet been more comprehensively interpreted. The compilers of the mentioned report, understandably, raising for themselves other, broader objectives, made the following comment on the increased uniformity in EU member states behaviour regarding the introduction of sanctions against Russia: "Germany, not itself a strong proponent of harsh sanctions, was the clear leader in consolidating a common sanctions policy, especially after mid-summer. The European Commission was key in preparing a package of sanctions acceptable to major member states. Other states that pushed hard for sanctions (often despite heavy costs) included Sweden, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, UK, and the Baltic States. France deserves recognition for halting the sale of Mistral warships. Slovakia, Hungary, Italy, and Spain were reluctant to sign on to sanctions, but eventually agreed..." (ECFR, 2015a).

Naturally, no larger doubts arise regarding the substantiation of such an explanation with facts or events. However, in any case, in our view it is too laconic. That is why in this article the goal is to take a more in-depth look at how and why the mentioned configuration evolved from the earlier complete dissonance of EU state policies regarding Russia.

The article seeks to give a more comprehensive explanation as to how it was possible for the EU to achieve this unprecedented degree of unity and to shape to a larger extent the tougher face of European foreign policy against Russia.

In light of this goal, answers to the following more detailed questions had to be found:

- _ Why did some states push for sanctions despite (sometimes heavy) costs?
- _ Why did France sacrifice its sale of warships?
- _ Why did Germany become a leader?
- _ Why did some states eventually agree despite initial reluctance?

The analysis will be based on typical methods of foreign policy analysis. These methods embrace critical examination of the foreign policy behaviour of state and other international actors by monitoring of the interplay between domestic and external forces; review of the organization, psychology and politics of decision-making; analysis of the impact of leadership upon foreign policy and the impact of public opinion and state type upon foreign policy, etc. However in this particular case, due to the limited size of the article, a lesser amount of methods will be used. These include the analysis of legal acts, statements of politicians, analytical literature and already-published reports by experts from the EU member states.

The conclusion of the article is supposed to answer the main research question and to explain the nature of new choices in the EU member states' foreign policies and its effect on EU foreign policy towards Russia in general.

But before starting to discuss the decisions by separate EU member states and their groups to support sanctions against Russia, another circumstance, the most important one to have urged this change, should be mentioned. And that is Russia's stroke of revisionism which brought about this entire process. Russia became more than just a state which decided to disregard the rules of a democratic political system common to Europe (free elections, the rule of law, freedom of speech, respect for minority rights, etc.), but also found unacceptable European rules for order and security that became established after the Cold War that were based on states' rights to independently decide on their development vectors, the refusal to resort to force, and the inviolability of state borders.

Yet at the same time it should be noted that in any case, Russia's requirement to give it special rights and the respective power and treachery policy in terms of its neighbours was just an external factor which only encouraged the formation process of a unified EU response, though did not unilaterally determine the actual shape of that EU response. In order for the emergence of a common, not fragmented, EU position, each of the states had to "go down" a certain path towards reaching a final decision, until their reaction reached its current status.

It has been the Baltic States, Poland and Romania that have had the least distance "to go", due to their historic experience of Russian aggression. That is why these countries view Russia's increasing aggression or even more so, its success in Ukraine, as a zero-sum game that poses an actual existential threat.

Looking from their position, Russia's actions in Ukraine should receive an unambiguously critical assessment. Estonia's president Tomas Hendrik Ilves was one of the first EU heads of state to compare the annexation of Crimea to Nazi Germany's annexation of Sudetenland in 1938 (Ilves, 2014). Lithuania's president Dalia Grybauskaitė in November, 2014 repeated several times her assessment of Russia's threat as a terrorist state. On November 21 during a joint press conference with the NATO General Secretary Jens Stoltenberg, she said: "...We can all see that our neighbour, Ukraine's neighbour, is behaving in a way that neighbours should not behave, or as a state that places importance on international law and international responsibilities, as well as agreements it has itself signed. We can see that the Russian military, Russian soldiers are today present in eastern Ukraine, meanwhile that same state is openly lying in denying this. A state which orders its soldiers to remove their identification symbols, which brings in its army and heavy artillery without any identification symbols – this kind of state bears all the hallmarks of international terrorism. That's all I can say..." (Alkas.lt, 2014).

That is why these states urge the European Union to also take up a maximally strict stance and react to Russia's actions in Ukraine, and they are convinced that the EU's response has not been sufficiently decisive, strict or effective. The Lithuanian Minister of Foreign Affairs Linas Linkevičius has publically voiced this position. Ahead of a two-day informal meeting of European Union Foreign Ministers on 6-7 March, 2015 in Riga, the minister, in his assessment of the situation that had developed in Ukraine following the signing of the Minsk Agreement, claimed to journalists that: "Being unified is all well and good, everyone is all for this unison, but being united not to do anything is not for me. I don't like that. We must be unified in actually doing something" (BNS, 2015).

As is widely known, the Baltic States and Russia are linked via important economic ties. Russia is a significant market and energy resource provider for the Baltic States. On the other hand, even before the Ukraine crisis, Russia used economic and energy pressure measures as a way of applying political pressure on numerous occasions, to the extent that these countries have gradually had to "learn" and become used to living without Russia's market, and to accelerate their efforts in diversifying their energy resource providers. However, in the face of the existential threat posed by Russia, it is obvious that these dependencies lose their primary significance and do not interrupt these countries from wholeheartedly supporting EU sanctions.

"Hawks" – consistent criticism of Russia

In their rhetoric on Russia, Poland's leaders have been somewhat more reserved than their colleagues in the Baltic countries. However their position on the necessity of applying EU sanctions on Russia and of making them stricter if the peace agreements are not abided, plus the further escalation of the conflict, has been decisively strict (Reuters, 2014). Expressing its concern over the possible destabilization of the entire region, Romania demonstrated complete support for the application of EU sanctions on Russia as well (Chiriac, 2014).

Countries which have a different historical background, such as Sweden, the UK and the Netherlands, are also among the unconditional backers of EU sanctions. The primary motive uniting them is their disappointment in Russia. They hold a very critical and skeptical view of contemporary Russia's development trajectory and believe that the time has come to exert pressure to stop its slide down this path. For example, UK and Russian relations took an obvious turn for the worse one decade ago and have remained rather cold to this day. That is why UK Prime Minister David Cameron's critique of Russia's actions in the Ukraine was one of the most categorical and unambiguously supported a broad as possible application of sanctions and their further strengthening (Gross, Bryan-Low, 2015). The opposition Labour Party leaders also in effect approve of this position.

Sweden's strict position has primarily been determined by the conservative government whose foreign policy has been influenced by the consistent critic of the Russian regime and initiator of the European Eastern Partnership, Carl Bildt (Gardels, 2014). The significant increase in Russian military activity in the Baltic Sea region has also notably contributed to Sweden's position. Public opinion is also in favour of this kind of stance. The possibility of becoming a NATO member is also receiving more serious consideration in Sweden as well. The Social-Democrats who came to power after the elections in October, 2014 have not strived to change the country's strict position, perhaps only tempering certain accents in the recent rhetoric.

An exception in this group is the Netherlands, which basically had no historic or geopolitical problems with Russia and has always first sought to develop profitable economic relations with it. Critical comments over the state of democracy or the human rights situation in Russia from the pragmatic Dutch governments have similarly not been forthcoming. Of course, the crude infringements of international law that Russia made in 2014 could not go by unnoticed, however the Netherlands were not inclined to stand out, much less end up in the group of countries expressing most criticism of Russia. In their view, it would have completely sufficed to simply follow the initiative shown by the German leadership, while the sanctions could have been more symbolic than fundamental (Togt, 2015).

The change in the Netherlands' position was fated by the accident when on July 17, 2014 the Malaysian Airlines plane was brought down above eastern Ukraine, on route from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur. During the attack 283 passengers and 15 crew members were killed. Among the close to 300 dead, two thirds were Dutch citizens. This catastrophe fundamentally changed Dutch society's approach towards the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The government too could not ignore this change, and came to understand that regular diplomacy would not be enough to control this particular conflict. As such, contrary to their plans, the Netherlands became a supporter of stricter sanctions against Russia.

German Leadership and French Sacrifice

Germany's leadership has been without a doubt the most significant change which has led to the common European Union position gaining solid support. Keeping in mind the hitherto hard-fought and patiently nurtured special relations between Russia and Germany, the turnaround from the summer of 2014 was very important. How and why did it eventuate?

As is known, until quite recently Germany was first and foremost an economic power that avoided playing a more distinctive role in foreign and security policy. And this was a rather comfortable

position, allowing it to concentrate its attention on economic and social issues, and to develop relatively politically neutral yet economically beneficial and profitable ties with Russia.

On the other hand, the fact that Germany has started to acquire a more obvious foreign policy profile was noted by observers and experts even before the apogee of the Ukraine crisis. According to the Strafor analysis: "As the de facto leader of the European Union, Germany has to contend with and correct the slow failure of the European project. It has to adjust to the U.S. policy of global disengagement, and it must manage a complex, necessary and dangerous relationship with Russia. A meek foreign policy is not well suited to confront the situation in which Germany now finds itself. If Germany doesn't act, then who will? And if someone else does, will it be in Germany's interest?" (Friedman, Lanthemann, 2014).

Having this in mind, it is much easier to understand why, alongside factors such as the difficulties in European integration, the relative "standing back" of the USA and Russia's revisionism, Germany in actual fact was left with no other choice but to take up the leadership role and fundamentally influence the hitherto poorly articulated common European Union policy in terms of Russia.

Subjective factors have also contributed significantly to these objective circumstances. German Chancellor Angela Merkel went to considerable effort to convince Putin to uphold a different policy in regards to Ukraine and to reject plans for the annexation of Crimea. However the breaking point came in the early days of March, 2014. According to a correspondent from the New York Times "Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany told Mr. Obama by telephone on Sunday that after speaking with Mr. Putin she was not sure he was in touch with reality, [...] "In another world," she said." (Bakermarch, 2014).

This "miscommunication" between Merkel and Putin became a determining factor that helped change both Germany's public opinion, as well as the business community's position in terms of Russia. As Russia continued to escalate the conflict in Ukraine, support for sanctions grew accordingly. If in March only 24% of surveyed respondents were in favour of sanctions, then by June this figure had grown to 52%, and 54% by September (Wehner, 2014). Regardless of the sanction-related losses (export to Russia decreased by 26%), Merkel managed to win over Germany's business community to join her side (Pond, Kundnani, 2015).

Finally, bolstered by her support at home, the chancellor convinced the other European Union states that forcible alteration of country borders needs to be opposed in principle, and that such actions cannot go by without recourse. Even if certain losses need to be experienced as a result. In this context, France's position was particularly important. Unlike Germany, France's economic ties with Russia are much less developed, which is why the introduction of sanctions against Russia was felt to a much lesser degree than in Germany. However the crisis in Ukraine and its ever increasing escalation has become difficult to coordinate politically with the contract signed with Russia back in 2011 for the construction and sale of two Mistral warships valued at €1.2 billion. The French president François Hollande, despite trying to maintain the position that the EU sanctions and the transfer of the warships had nothing in common, in November, 2014 nevertheless made an announcement about the suspension of the contract "until further notice" (BBC, 2014).

France's decision to delay the sale of the warships, even though this contract did not figure amongst the restrictions foreseen as part of the sanctions, did bring France and Germany noticeably closer together, while also strengthening the central position of both states in the European Union, as well as its united policy regarding Russia. The common position of Germany and France helped bring the sides involved in fighting in Ukraine to the negotiating table in Minsk in February, 2015 and reach a new agreement for peace.

This closeness of Germany and France and their decision to act together undoubtedly strength-

ened and safeguarded the possibility of successfully leading the European Union. Of course, today Germany alone is already capable of leading the European Union forward and to act as a leader in common EU policy. However, this leadership would have been much less fathomable if France had not indefinitely delayed and thus associated the transfer of the Mistral warships to Russia with regulation of the conflict in Ukraine, that is, if France's president had not gone together with Merkel to participate in the peace negotiations in Minsk. According to ECFR researcher Josef Janning: "The tandem has entered a new stage, in which both possess leadership resources, albeit in different policy areas, but in which leadership is not clearly allocated – sometimes it is shared, at other times lost for lack of strategic consensus. Also, the relationship still seems to depend highly on the chemistry between leaders, which makes it less stable and predictable. It took over two years and three profound challenges for Merkel to reconnect strategically with Hollande. Now, the pairing is back and seems determined to lead – but for how long?" (Janning, 2015).

Indeed, at the same time we should draw attention to the fact that although the researcher comments on the existence of a new quality of relations between France and Germany, he nevertheless ends his thought with the rhetorical question about the sustainability of this new tandem.

Researchers in Finland notice a different aspect of the quality of this new leadership. According to them, this distinctive role of Germany and France is at the one time beneficial and features potential shortcomings, as it does not make sufficient use of the EU's own institutions that could have a more clearly defined mandate to negotiate on behalf of all the EU, more so than just Germany and France have now (Raik, 2015). Indeed, as we might have well noticed, the EU institution leadership newly appointed in 2014 (President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the European Council Donald Tusk and even the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs Federica Mogherini) have not played a particularly significant role in this instance.

The "Neutrals" – loyal Europeans

This group includes Finland, Denmark, Bulgaria, Portugal, Slovenia, Croatia, Belgium, Luxembourg, Malta and Ireland. For a majority of the states in this group, Russian relations are not among the highest priority issues, neither in an economic sense, much less so in a political sense. The non-existence of the main fundamental tensions naturally encourages these states not to take a prematurely anti-Russian stance by default. Quite the opposite, they first of all think that closer cooperation with Russia could be mutually beneficial. That is why in principle they do not oppose but support sanctions against Russia, however they believe that the dialogue should continue, and when it becomes evident that Russia is abiding by the agreements, the sanctions should be called off. For example, although neither Spain's economic or political ties with Russia are particularly wide or close, much less strategic, nevertheless, as the commentator from Madrid Nicolás de Pedro says, "for observers of Spanish foreign policy, the question is no longer whether Madrid is pro-Russian or not, but why Spain sounds so pro-Russian" (Pedro, 2015). According to the same observer, Spain was rather skeptical of the events at Maidan Square and once the conflict in Ukraine's east commenced, it stated that no good would come of it.

Yet the annexation of Crimea was Russia's move which changed Spain's position and opinion. "However, this firm position, like the one it took on Kosovo's independence, is primarily shaped by Madrid's concerns about Catalonia and the Basque Country and is completely unrelated to Spain's links with Ukraine or Russia (or Serbia)" (de Pedro, 2015).

Perhaps Finland and Bulgaria are the other two states that stand out from this group, who due to their geographical location and extensive economic ties with Russia do feel the outcomes of the conflict. Finland's statehood, much like that of the Baltic States, is based on the same principles that were settled on after the Cold War, which Russia is now openly infringing. However, Finland's behaviour is still quite different to the unambiguous opinions voiced by the Baltic States. Analysts from the Finnish Institute of International Affairs presented a comprehensive comparative anal-

ysis of Finland's and Estonia's reactions to the crisis in Ukraine and the motivations for agreeing to sanctions. According to them, both countries' response to the crisis was "similar but different". This contradictory description should be understood as follows, according to the authors: "Estonia and Finland took similar positions on many key issues regarding the Ukraine crisis. The common ground is based on both countries' attachment to the liberal world order and Western structures. However, there are deep-rooted differences between the Estonian and Finnish positions on the way to handle Russia and the need to adjust security arrangements, notably the role of NATO in the Nordic-Baltic region. It is common in Finland to see Estonia's approach as unhelpfully hawkish, and common in Estonia to see Finland's approach as too accommodating towards Russia" (Raik, Aaltola, Pynnöniemi, Salenius-Pasternak, 2015).

In actual fact, Finland, continuing along with the tradition from Cold War times, tried to take up a seemingly neutral position and to mediate in the conflict. Finland's president Sauli Niinistö as part of an official visit travelled to Sochi to meet with Putin on August 15, 2014. Yet it is unlikely that this would have brought about any conceivable results.

Bulgaria's case also depends on the historically traditionally friendly ties it shared with Russia. That is why it is not surprising that Bulgaria, unlike Russia's other former communist neighbours, is not such a categorical supporter of sanctions. According to a public opinion poll carried out in February–March, 2015, as many as 61% of Bulgaria's population does not agree with the sanctions and only 24% consider the conflict in Ukraine a threat to Bulgaria's security. The activities of the "Islamic State" and other terrorist groups is considered a much greater threat (ECFR, 2015b).

However the main conclusion from this study was that regardless of Bulgarians' friendship with Russia, they do not consider this country as an example to follow and expectations of greater security at home or guaranteed economic wellbeing coming from Russia, rather than membership in the European Union or NATO, are unfounded (ECFR, 2015b).

That is why Bulgaria naturally ended up amongst those countries that do not themselves recommend tightening sanctions yet do support the common EU policy regarding Russia being formed by Germany.

Thus, all the mentioned states took up the same position of "loyal" Europeans, albeit for different reasons, and in this way fundamentally contributed to the consolidation of the common EU position.

Besides the traditional 'Trojan Horses' of Greece and Cyprus, other countries that also sympathize with Putin, namely Austria, Hungary, Slovakia, Italy and to a degree the Czech president Miloš Zeman, could also be attributed to this group. The political elites and political leaders of these states do not avoid openly criticizing the EU sanctions policy and continue to be in favour of even the highest level of political dialogue with Russia.

However at the same time they are characterized by inconsistency, as when they criticize the sanctions, they also end up criticizing themselves. Regardless of their rhetoric, the representatives of these countries did not resolve to officially take up a different position in European institutions or to block the unanimous acceptance of sanctions.

Greece's new government, which now consists of the leftist populist "Syriza" Party that won in the elections on January 25, 2015, has on numerous occasions signalled that it will try to block EU sanctions against Russia. Yet this did not happen. The Informal Meeting of EU Ministers of Foreign Affairs, which was called to discuss the worsening security situation in Ukraine (the artillery attack against peaceful citizens in Mariupol on January 24), didn't change anything in this respect. The visit of the new Greek prime minister Alexis Tsipras to Moscow on April 8, 2015 failed to bring any unexpected results, despite raising considerable speculation.

**"Russland-
verste-
her's"¹
Club**

1 This well-directed expression I have found in Gustav Gressel's text (Gressel, 2015).

Austria too is not even trying to hide its skeptical approach towards the sanctions applied against Russia. It was the first EU country that Putin visited on an official visit after the annexation of Crimea on June 24, 2014. The reasons for their skepticism, according to Gustav Gessel, are essentially economic, yet there are also numerous provisions in Austria's own political culture, which is not adverse to various informal agreements (Gressel, 2015). Whatever the case might be, keeping in mind Germany's position, Austria was not prepared to transfer its doubts to the European level and oppose the common EU sanction policy.

Italian-Russian relations are in effect economic and have nothing in common with geopolitical conditions. Russia is one of Italy's most important energy resource providers and a market for Italian goods. Meanwhile Italy's relations with other East European countries, such as Ukraine for example, have always been smaller than minimal. That is why the conflict in Eastern Europe has been of interest to Italians only so far as it would not worsen good relations with Russia.

According to the commentator from Rome, Nathalie Tocci, it was most probably the downing of the Malaysian Airlines plane more than the annexation of Crimea or military activity in eastern Ukraine which encouraged Italy to review its position and to go along with the common EU position (Tocci, 2014). Another commentator says that Italy agrees that Russia violated international law, and thus appropriate sanctions must be applied. However this does not mean that further dialogue with Russia needs to be completely broken off, or that it should be pushed into diplomatic isolation (Francescon, 2015).

Yet while supporting the sanctions, Italy nevertheless tries to continue to maintain direct political contact with Putin and to further develop bilateral political relations with Russia. Already after the annexation of Crimea, on July 9, 2014 the then Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs Federica Mogherini visited Moscow. The pretext for the formal visit was the beginning of Italy's half-year presidency of the Council of the European Union. However such an open expression of attention to Putin almost cost the minister her chance of becoming the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs.

Hungary's pro-Russian policy is neither a new nor an unexpected phenomenon in the Central European political landscape. This is in part due to economic ties. Russia extended a loan, under favourable rates, worth €10 million to Hungary for the development of an atomic power plant (Shchelin, 2015). A greater degree of pro-Russian sentiments come from the specific political ideas of Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz Party, which detail that Hungary could be "a non-liberal democracy and have a similar political system to that of Russia or Turkey".

That is why explaining why Hungary was not sufficiently consistent and did not try to block the sanctions being applied to Russia is not such an easy task. Taking a further, closer look, it appears that this pro-Russian stance is more rhetorical than realistic. Hungary cannot ignore the position of its main trading partner. Approximately a quarter of Hungary's foreign trade was with Germany. Nevertheless, having considered the advantages that Hungary enjoys being a part of the West, they significantly outweigh the temptations that Putin has offered Hungary. As the situation is one where a choice must be made, like it or not, Hungary still chooses Europe.

The case of Slovakia is more distinctive. Although the Slovakian government and especially Prime Minister Robert Fico are critical of sectoral sanctions against Russia, and because public opinion is also divided, realistically the state's administration goes to obvious lengths to avoid any steps that would in any way harm the EU unity already achieved. Moreover, in recent years Slovakia has purposefully tried to reduce its dependence on Russia in all aspects, starting from energy and going all the way through to the leftover Soviet defence equipment that is still in use (Kobzova, 2015).

Conclusions

Compared to the audit of EU and Russian relations made in 2007, the present situation of EU unity and coordinated policy regarding Russia is much more pronounced. Specifically, current relations have taken the form of a stream of diplomatic *démarches* and legal and economic sanctions. The point of this policy approach is also rather evident.

This, of course, determined the change of the earlier configuration, that could be described as such:

- On the one hand, it appears that the group of Russia's 'Trojan Horses' has almost significantly increased in size – the traditional pairing of Greece and Cyprus has been joined by Italy and Central European countries – Austria, Slovakia and Hungary. On the other hand, thus far there are no serious indicators that these countries are in fact ready to justify the label applied to them. At least so far, the 'Trojan Horses' are inactive, their "loyalty" to Russia has been expressed only via the rhetoric of individual leaders. So even though they value partnership with Russia, it is not to the extent that they would exchange it for European cooperation. For them, Russia is a very important supplement to European cooperation. Though only a supplement, and not a substitute. If the necessity to choose were to arise, it is more likely that they would settle on European solidarity;
- The 'Strategic Partners' group, we could say, underwent a fundamental change (Italy and Spain dropped out), while the remaining France and especially Germany transformed from being strategic partners to the architects of a unified EU response, becoming leaders and the main EU negotiators in trying to mediate in the regulation of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. In this context, it should be noted that the rise of these countries' leaders came mostly at the expense of EU institutions;
- The composition of the group of 'Friendly Pragmatists' changed somewhat. It could be said that Austria, Hungary and Slovakia "left" this group, leaving Belgium, Bulgaria, Finland, Luxembourg, Malta, Portugal, Slovenia and Croatia which joined the EU in 2013. Spain maintains a similar position, whose declared strategic partnership with Russia never reached any noticeable acceleration. Ireland and Denmark could also be reservedly added to this group, who have not gone out of their way to stand out in this crisis in any real way, and also the Czech Republic, whose president Zeman's pro-Russian rhetoric obviously counterbalances the principled position of the government. However, most importantly, this group is no longer as "friendly" towards Russia. Even though these countries, at least on the official level, try to avoid rhetoric that either criticizes or justifies Russia, they have become rather reliable supporters of Germany's demonstrated leadership.
- That leaves the "Frosty Pragmatists" group, which except for the Czech Republic and Ireland which were once members, has now become substantially "more radical", like the "Cold Warriors". The fact that now besides Poland and Lithuania there is also the UK, the Netherlands, Sweden and the other Baltic States, it has transformed into a relatively important and influential force, capable of strongly representing its position in internal EU debates.

Indeed, it is difficult to forecast whether this new configuration shall last for a longer period. This will depend on external factors, primarily Russia's behaviour. However, in any case it can be stated that compared to 2007, a rapid return to the earlier situation in terms of relations is hardly imaginable, as obviously much time is still needed for the new coexistence of the European Union and Russia to form and take on a more distinctive appearance.

Yet the most important thing that has become evident from this exceptional episode in EU foreign policy is that the one-off expression of states' common position has not gone by without outcomes and is itself becoming another significant factor influencing decisions in the foreign policies of sep-

arate states, and respectively modifying the spectrum of states' opinion ranges. In this case, the European Union is becoming a "normative power" not just to the external world, but in terms of its own Member States. On the one hand, this is nothing surprising, however on the other hand, what is new is that for the first time the European Union is "steering" its Member States through a field transfused with so many complex and counteractive interests, as are relations with Russia.

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