



EU-Russia
relations

Is Russia interested in multilateralism and should the EU engage with it?

By Angela Romano



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Introduction

Russia sees and declares itself as a champion of multilateralism, the importance of which is consistently expressed in Russia's official statements and *Foreign Policy Concepts*.¹ Multilateralism is one of the instruments in any country's foreign policy toolkit used for achieving national goals. As such, it does not exclude unilateral or bilateral actions. Indeed, both Russia and the EU have been criticised for being selective and inconsistent in implementing their multilateral pledges and for turning to unilateral actions when more convenient.²

This paper considers multilateralism as the coordinated action among three or more states taking place on the basis of generalised principles of conduct and implying diffuse reciprocity.³ First, the principles of conduct are established *a priori* and agreed collectively to establish a basis of trust. When a state engages in multilateralism, it has therefore agreed to act within a specific normative framework. The current dominant framework of multilateralism is the one established by the United States and its allies and usually labelled as Western liberal international order. It combines three elements: 1) post-World War II "Charter liberalism" embodied in international organisations such as the United Nations (UN), World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Trade Organization (WTO); 2) liberal humanism, which places human rights and democracy above state sovereignty; and 3) (Anglo-American) economic neoliberalism, which also limits state sovereignty.⁴ It is important to remember that this is not the only possible framework and that any group of states can promote multilateralism on the basis of a different set of values and principles of conduct.⁵ It is therefore incorrect to assume that multilateralism is genuine only if it fits with the West's conceptualisation and (not always coherent) practice of it. As a consequence, it is incorrect (or knowingly malicious) to denounce a state for not being committed to multilateralism if its actions do not comply with *Western* multilateralism. The consistency of a state's foreign policy should be assessed only in relation with the multilateral framework (of principles of conduct and set of values) to which that state committed. As Clunan argues and this paper

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¹ For instance: *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (approved by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on November 30, 2016)*; *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (Approved by President of the Russian Federation V. Putin on 12 February 2013)*; *Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions during the 56th Munich Security Conference, Global Disorder – Other Opportunities for a New Agenda, Munich, February 15, 2020.* 9

² Wilson Rowe and Torjesen 2009; Drieskens and van Schaik 2014.

³ Ruggie 1993, p. 11.

⁴ Clunan 2018, pp. 46–48.

⁵ Maull 2020, p. 6.

will show, Russian ruling elites do not oppose Charter multilateralism, but reject the elements of liberal humanism and economic neoliberalism that became dominant in the late 1990s, which they see as imposing Western countries' values on the rest of the world.⁶

Second, multilateralism requires diffuse reciprocity, meaning that states can expect to benefit from multilateralism "in the long run and over many issues, rather than every time on every issue".⁷ Consequently, should a state consider that it does not benefit (or no longer does so) from multilateralism within a given framework, it could either challenge specific elements of it – a revisionist behaviour – or decide to forge another multilateral framework with a different group of states – antagonistic behaviour. Morse and Keohane describe this occurrence as "contested multilateralism".⁸

In addressing the question 'Is Russia interested in multilateralism?', this paper agrees with Maull that **the controversy is** not about the diplomatic procedure, "but **essentially about** the question of **which principles, values and organizations should determine the international order**" and **shape multilateralism**.⁹

This paper will show that Russia's approach to multilateralism differs from that of the EU primarily for its emphasis on state sovereignty, state interests and non-discrimination. Russia's emphasis on sovereignty follows from the perception that the country is underrepresented and cornered by the West. Multilateral initiatives therefore serve the purpose of reinstating Russia as a great power, enhancing its role and breaking the normative hegemony of the West. The aim of the Kremlin is not to overthrow existing international governance structures but to make them more representative of a multipolar world (with great powers as poles).

This paper maintains that these different views on multilateralism have led the EU and Russia to compete in particular in the common European space, entering into a spiral of growing suspicion and Manichean rhetoric that has culminated in the Ukrainian conflict and resulted in the current ebb in the EU-Russia relationship.

The author contends that an EU power struggle with Russia would only perpetuate tensions and generate conflicts on the European continent, and that the EU would benefit **more from shaping a new and constructive relationship with Russia**. This would allow the EU to engage Russia in multilateralism, above all on the European continent where the core of the problem lies.

This paper argues that in order to operate successfully, multilateralism depends on the existence of three conditions: a genuine interest in sustainable results, the willingness to compromise, and the willingness to act on the basis of diffuse reciprocity. The author therefore recommends that the first step to reshaping relations with Russia should be a change away from the current good EU/evil Russia narrative, which exacerbates their difference of interests and has established a zero-sum game leading to tensions and conflict. The EU should change the narrative about itself, Europe and Russia, and take into consideration the interests of *all* parties involved. This attitude must not be confused with, and must not turn into, a policy of appeasement vis-à-vis Russia's breaches of international

⁶ Clunan, p. 46.

⁷ Caporaso 1992, p. 602. See also Keohane 1986.

⁸ Morse and Keohane 2014, p. 386.

⁹ Maull, p. 1.

law and violations of territorial integrity, against which the EU must stand firm. Yet only a less confrontational and more inclusive attitude will lower mistrust and make durable cooperation possible on various matters, especially on (re)establishing a common space of security and cooperation in Europe. The EU has nothing to lose by adopting this approach; should the Kremlin not join in changing the narrative, the EU would at least have called the Russian bluff, undermining Russia's international credibility beyond the West.

1. Russia's multilateralism: conceptualisation and goals

The Russian conceptualisation of multilateralism is expressed in several *Foreign Policy Concepts* over the years with almost no change. For instance, the wording of the 2013 edition (before the Ukraine crisis) and of the 2016 edition (after) are almost identical in listing multilateralism among Russia's key foreign policy goals and describing it as the promotion of

mutually beneficial and equal partnerships with foreign countries, inter-State associations, international organizations and within forums, guided by the principles of independence and sovereignty, pragmatism, transparency, predictability, a multidirectional approach and the commitment to pursue national priorities on a non-confrontational basis; expand international cooperation on a non-discriminatory basis; facilitate the emergence of network alliances and Russia's proactive participation in them.¹⁰

In 2020, Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov reiterated the same concepts, indicating that "genuine multilateralism" must include the sovereign equality of states and non-interference in their domestic affairs, try to strike a balance of interests and represent the "cultural and civilizational diversity of the modern world".¹¹

Russia's conceptualisation of multilateralism is characterised by emphasis on state sovereignty, state interests and non-discrimination – which is described as "equal multilateralism".¹² Russia's emphasis on sovereignty is strictly related to a view of the world as multipolar – where the poles are the great powers – and where "no single great power can dictate the actions of another great power".¹³ Russia's "equal" multilateralism is therefore **mainly concerned with equality among great powers.**

Speaking at the 2017 Munich Security Conference, Lavrov explained: "We want relations based on pragmatism, mutual respect, and understanding of our special responsibility for global stability".¹⁴ **Status recognition by other great powers**, and above all by the United States, has been a fundamental goal of Russian foreign policy since the late 1990s, before Putin's arrival to power in 2000. The same was true also of the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The Soviet Union saw its parity with the United States recognised at the May 1972 summit between US President Richard Nixon and Soviet Secretary-General Leonid Brezhnev, where the two signed the important Strategic Arms Limitations Treaty (SALT1). The very fact

¹⁰ *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (Approved by President of the Russian Federation V. Putin on 12 February 2013); Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (approved by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on November 30, 2016).*

¹¹ *Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions during the 56th Munich Security Conference, Global Disorder – Other Opportunities for a New Agenda, Munich, February 15, 2020. 9*

¹² Casier 2018, p. 207. The term "equal" is also used directly by Russian authorities in speeches and foreign policy concepts.

¹³ Salzman 2019, p. 342.

¹⁴ Quoted in Miskimmon and O'Loughlin' 2017, p. 116.

that the US president went to the Soviet capital speaks volumes about the decision to recognise the USSR as equal. Even more so does the joint declaration they issued, which confirmed mutual respect for their political systems. Moreover, in his speech to the crowds in Moscow, Nixon affirmed: “*The only sound basis for a peaceful and progressive international order is sovereign equality and mutual respect. We believe in the right of each nation to chart its own course, to choose its own system, to go its own way, without interference from other nations*”.¹⁵

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia inherited the features that had made the USSR a superpower: the permanent seat on the UN Security Council (UNSC); the nuclear arsenal and other military equipment (significantly modernised over the past 20 years); and most of the huge Eurasian territory. Russia is still by far the world’s largest country, having borders with 14 countries and lengthy coasts on various seas.¹⁶ The Russian ruling elite therefore continued to see their country as one of the world powers that would shape the post-Cold War order. And with due reason. Cold War historians now agree that the peaceful end of the Cold War owed much to the collaboration of the two superpowers as well as to the long-term actions of their European allies.¹⁷ Yet the crucial factor was Soviet Secretary-General Mikhail Gorbachev’s bold initiatives to end the Cold War: Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan (which the USSR had invaded in December 1979), disproportionate concessions to end the arms race, and relinquishing Moscow’s grip on Eastern European countries.¹⁸ The end of the Cold War was epitomised by the first summit between Gorbachev and US President George Bush in Malta in late 1989, where they “buried the Cold War at the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea”.¹⁹

The Russian political elite thus believed that the end of the Cold War was a shared victory and expected to continue cooperation with the West in shaping the post-Cold War order in the world and especially in Europe. Already in December 1984 Mikhail Gorbachev (who would become the USSR leader three months later) spoke of Europe as “our common home. A home, and not a theatre of military operations”.²⁰ The idea of a European common home was among the instrumental factors in the adoption of the 1990 *Charter of Paris for a New Europe* setting the basis for the institutionalisation of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe and its transformation into the OSCE (in 1994).²¹ In 1991 NATO and Russia started a cooperative relationship that became deeper and more institutionalised throughout the decade and culminated in the 2002 summit establishing the NATO-Russia Council. This seemed to confirm Russia’s equal status in the post-Cold War order and as a partner in Europe.²²

¹⁵ Quoted in Maresca 1985, p. 12.

¹⁶ Kramer 2019.

¹⁷ For instance: English 2000; Loth 2002; Bozo, Rey, Ludlow and Nuti 2008; Bange and Niedhart 2008; Wenger, Mastny and Nuenlist 2009; Romero 2009; Leffler and Westad 2010; Young 2010; Villaume and Westad 2010; Romano and Romero 2020.

¹⁸ Fischer 2010, p. 288.

¹⁹ Brown 2010, p. 264.

²⁰ Cited in Brown, pp. 246–47.

²¹ For a recent discussion on the matter, see historian Svetlana Savranskaya’s intervention in *OSCE Security Days: Revitalizing Trust and Co-operation in Europe: Lessons of the Paris Charter*, 16 October 2020 – video available at: www.osce.org/secretary-general/465549

²² Overview of NATO’s ‘Relations with Russia’ at: www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_50090.htm

As Hughes points out, the decision of NATO to militarily intervene in Kosovo was the first significant Western break-up with UN-led multilateralism in the post-cold-war order, as NATO's bombing of Serbia in March 1999 – without a UNSC resolution – was in flagrant breach of international law.²³ It also seriously undermined Moscow's trust in NATO–Russia partnership and consultation mechanisms, as NATO's intervention was carried out regardless of Russia's strongest diplomatic opposition. The main international agreements and negotiating fora in which Russia participated alongside the United States and the major EU countries affirmed that the crisis should be solved under UNSC Resolution 1244 (1999), which stressed some form of advanced autonomy for Kosovo, integrity of Serbia and no imposed solution.²⁴ Those agreements were broken by the unilateral declaration of independence of Kosovo in February 2008 and by the speedy recognition that the United States and most EU countries granted to it. The Kremlin saw the handling of the Kosovo crisis as revealing US ambitions for hegemony in a unipolar world order.

The latter interpretation was reinforced by the communiqué issued by the NATO summit in Bucharest on 3 April 2008, which welcomed the prospect of membership of Georgia and Ukraine at some point in the future.²⁵ Moscow saw this as a confirmation of US hegemonic plans and as open disregard for Russian security concerns in the region.²⁶

Several scholars argue that Western unilateral actions exacerbated Russian security concerns.²⁷ Hughes contends that the Kosovo experience largely determined the Kremlin's approach in the Russo–Georgian war of summer 2008 and its unilateral recognition of the secessions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia on 26 August 2008.²⁸ Indeed, Russia's President Dmitry Medvedev at the time explained that Russian foreign policy was based on five principles, one of which was that the former Soviet space was a region of privileged Russian interests.²⁹

The acute sense that Russia's status, role and interests have been disregarded combines with the perception of a Western expansionism aimed at cornering Russia – which Putin described in 2014 as a continuation of “the infamous policy of containment”.³⁰ Sensitivity to encirclement is a constant of Russia's long history and goes a long way to explaining its current assertive and aggressive foreign policy.³¹ The ruling elite in Russia sees the country as encircled in an unstable and inhospitable security environment, where NATO's constant enlargement to the periphery of Russia poses a structural security challenge, and where the EU normative power questions the legitimacy of its domestic political model. Beyond Europe,

²³ Hughes 2013.

²⁴ UN Security Council, Resolution 1244 (1999) adopted by the Security Council at its 4011th meeting, on 10 June 1999.

²⁵ NATO, *Bucharest Summit Declaration Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Bucharest on 3 April 2008*, Para. 23.

²⁶ Hughes, p. 1013.

²⁷ Clunan, pp. 50–51. See also: McGwire 1998; Sarotte 2009; Charap and Troitskiy 2013; Charap and Shapiro 2015; Legvold 2016; Gehring, Urbanski and Oberthür 2017; Romanova 2018; Loftus and Kanet 2019.

²⁸ Hughes, p. 1013.

²⁹ Cited in Loftus and Kanet 2017, p. 30, note 8.

³⁰ Quoted in Casier 2018, p. 207.

³¹ Averre 2016, p. 718.

the EU is considered part of a “collective unilateralism” that promotes a world order over-representing the West and serving its interests.³²

Legacy of the past, status recognition and security concerns determine the Russian government’s goal to effect a more equal multilateralism.³³ There is specific intent in rejecting the idea that adherence to Western values is the precondition for being accepted as an equal partner. Putin has even contested shared norms in the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) – to which Russia subscribed in 1990 – due to perceived bias against Russia and other eastern member states.³⁴ **In a nutshell, Russia’s multilateralism serves the scope of asserting Russia’s great power status, enhancing its role in a (perceived) hostile West-led system of international governance and breaking the normative hegemony of the West.**³⁵ Lavrov’s speech at the 2017 Munich Security Conference openly communicated Russia’s views:

We categorically reject the allegations of those who accuse Russia and the new centres of global influence of attempting to undermine the so-called ‘liberal world order’. This global model was pre-programmed for crisis right from the time when this vision of economic and political globalisation was conceived primarily as an instrument for ensuring the growth of an elite club of countries and its domination over everyone else. It is clear that such a system could not last forever.

Leaders with a sense of responsibility must now make their choice. I hope that this choice will be made in favour of building a democratic and fair world order, a post-West world order, if you will, in which each country develops its own sovereignty within the framework of international law and will strive to balance their own national interests with those of their partners, with respect for each country’s cultural, historical and civilisational identity.³⁶

A crucial question is whether Russia’s intent is antagonistic or just revisionist. Johnson and Köstem notice that Russia “has the ability to shake up the existing international order but lacks the credibility, stability, or economic clout to lead the creation of a new one”.³⁷ Going beyond capacity assessment, this paper agrees with the view that **Russia does not to try to overthrow existing international governance structures but aims at making them more representative and equal.**³⁸ Clunan argues that Russia actually embraces key elements of the post-1945 West-led liberal world order. Although the World Bank, IMF and WTO reflect the West’s preferences, they are also non-discriminatory multilateral institutions “supportive of states as central actors” and characterised by “agnosticism about moral truth”³⁹, which are exactly the features the Russian government wants in multilateralism. What the Russian ruling elite refuses in West-led multilateralism are its post-Cold War elements: human

³² Casier 2018, p. 204, also drawing the concept of “collective unilateralism” from Makarychev and Morozov, 2011, p. 354.

³³ Salzman, p. 342.

³⁴ Averre, p. 718.

³⁵ Casier 2018, p. 205. See also Götz and Merlen 2019.

³⁶ *Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s address and answers to questions at the 53rd Munich Security Conference, Munich, February 18, 2017.*

³⁷ Johnson and Köstem 2016, p. 208.

³⁸ For instance, Sakwa 2012 and Romanova 2018a.

³⁹ Clunan, pp. 46–48.

liberalism (prioritising the rights of individuals vis-à-vis their governments) and economic neoliberalism (elevating the international rights of private non-state actors above state rights). Russia rejects both because they allow intervention in domestic affairs and hence erode state sovereignty.⁴⁰ In other words, Russia aims at changing those elements of current (West-led) multilateralism that require states to organise their society (a key aspect of sovereignty) in conformity with current Western political and economic standards. For Russia (and China) democratic pluralism in international relations (intended as relations between *states*) exists when state sovereignty is fully guaranteed – and that means the right to be different from the West.⁴¹

2. Russia's multilateralism: actions and directions

Russia's attempts to realise a more equal multilateralism go in multiple directions. First, the Russian government continues to uphold **the UN Security Council (UNSC)** as the key forum for tackling and deciding on security- and conflict-related matters. A recent example was Putin's call on 23 January 2020 for a summit of the heads of state representing the UNSC permanent members "in any country and at any point on the globe the counterparts find convenient" in order to discuss world affairs, seizing the 75th anniversary of both their common victory of the Second World War and the creation of the UN.⁴² Russia's commitment to the UN – also visible in the top quality of its missions⁴³ – is perfectly coherent, as the structure and rules of the UNSC typify the kind of great powers multipolarity that Russian ruling elites want to preserve and strengthen. Moreover, the principle of upholding international law that is highlighted in Russian official speeches and Foreign Policy Concepts⁴⁴ is indeed limited as much as possible to the UN Charter and UNSC resolutions. Russia's annexation of Crimea seriously damaged the credibility of Russian traditional emphasis on respect for international law and legal defence of sovereignty; very few countries supported the annexation, and even China abstained during a vote at the UNSC.⁴⁵ Interestingly, however, Putin tried to find *legal* justifications, by referring to the Kosovo precedent or referencing the UN International Court ruling that there is "no prohibition on declarations of independence" (although Crimea did not become an independent country but was integrated into Russia).⁴⁶

Second, **the BRICS** group – Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa – represents the most visible form at the global level of a multilateralism that is centred on state sovereignty and is alternative to Western values. Russia has been one of the main drivers of the BRICS consultations, and organised the first BRICS summit in Yekaterinburg in June 2009. The BRICS group allows Russia to avoid political isolation and to maintain global power status. It also provides economic security, allowing Russia to diversify trading partners and cope with

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ China and Russia have the same understanding of international rules and the international arena, and their cooperation in advancing this view has grown "strong and proactive", as argued in Ekman, Saari and Secrieru 2020.

⁴² *Tass*, 3 November 2019. The proposal received the immediate backing of French and Chinese counterparts, US interest to discuss arms control, and lastly British assent in March 2020; see *Reuters*, 13 March 2020, 'Britain backs Putin idea of five-way summit of world powers - UK embassy'.

⁴³ Remler 2020. It is worth noting that Foreign Minister Lavrov was permanent representative to the UN from 1994 to 2004.

⁴⁴ See examples reported and referenced above in the paper.

⁴⁵ Casier 2018, p. 214.

⁴⁶ *Address by President of the Russian Federation*, 18 March 2014.

Western sanctions.⁴⁷ The BRICS's share of the global economy rose significantly in the last decade, and the level of intra-BRICS trade has boomed, although this is to a large extent due to China's trade.⁴⁸ These dimensions are crucial to challenge Western dominance in the existing multilateral framework. The most powerful tool in this sense is the New Development Bank (NDB) that was created in 2014 to focus on developing sustainable infrastructure. In their November 2020 summit, the BRICS governments launched talks to expand NDB membership, which would allow the NDB to grant loans to developing countries and to establish itself clearly as the alternative to the West-led World Bank and IMF. This would further assert the status of the BRICS countries and their influence in the global economy.⁴⁹ The more Russia and China cooperate financially, the more they can frustrate Western economic sanctions. Interestingly, however, Russia's engagement with the BRICS group has oscillated over the years and has usually been reactivated whenever tensions with the West have arisen.

Third, Russia has also sought to raise its global power status through participation in **multilateral initiatives in Asia**. As a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Russia promoted the organisation's enlargement to India and Pakistan. In 2015, Russia and China signed an agreement on coordination between the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and China's Belt and Road Initiative. In December of the same year, Russia proposed a Greater Eurasian Partnership with the participation of member states of the EAEU, ASEAN⁵⁰ and SCO; the idea was unanimously supported at the Russia-ASEAN summit in May 2016.⁵¹ The EAEU and ASEAN signed a memorandum of understanding on economic cooperation and then moved forward to implementation.⁵² These initiatives are a testament to the Russian government's willingness to promote alternative *poles* to the West and to effect more equal multilateralism, as explained above. It is worth noting that these initiatives are also meant to contain or cope with China's expansionism in Central Asia, a post-Soviet space that Russia considers its most obvious sphere of influence.⁵³

Fourth, Putin has given priority to **Eurasian integration**, promoting multilateral structures in the realms of security and economic relations. Russia is the engine of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) created in 2002 and including Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The CSTO is meant, among other things, to protect Russia's sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space, help show multipolarity and increase Russia's status vis-à-vis an expanding NATO. Interestingly, the CSTO structure mirrors that of NATO to a significant extent.⁵⁴ Russia sustains the organisation through a variety of resources and tries to elevate its status in international fora such as the OSCE and SCO as well as the UN, where the CSTO gained observer status in the General Assembly in 2014.⁵⁵ In terms of regional economic cooperation, Putin and the leaders of Belarus and Kazakhstan, who were personally committed to the idea, launched the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in May 2014. The EAEU

⁴⁷ Salzman, p. 342.

⁴⁸ *Financial Express*, 13 November 2020: 'BRICS Summit: A new agenda for cooperation?'

⁴⁹ Tedeschini 2020.

⁵⁰ Association of Southeast Asian Nations

⁵¹ Troitskiy 2016, pp. 419–20.

⁵² *Tass*, 3 November 2019.

⁵³ On this tension see, for instance, Kaczmarek 2017. Chinese foreign policy under Xi Jinping has become more assertive and no longer follows Deng Xiaoping's low-profile approach.

⁵⁴ See the CSTO website (<https://en.odkb-csto.org/25years/>) and "The CSTO Structure" section in particular.

⁵⁵ Kropatcheva 2016, p. 1527.

now also includes Armenia and Kyrgyzstan; Uzbekistan, an observer since December 2020, has undertaken steps towards full membership. While Russia may be perceived as the dominant power in the EAEU, recent studies show that the other members are using the organisation to contain Russia through a strategy of balancing regionalism.⁵⁶ Interestingly, the Eurasian Commission (of the EAEU) has been keen to establish cooperation on statistics and various standardisation activities with EU, but contacts remain limited because the EU does not officially recognise the EAEU.⁵⁷ Most recently, Lavrov has drawn attention to Putin's "initiative to form a Greater Eurasian Partnership open to all associations and states of our vast common continent, including EU members".⁵⁸ According to Sakwa, the EAEU is also part of the Kremlin's strategy to challenge the expanding regional hegemony (and membership) of the European Union and instead realise a multipolar and diverse Europe, whose centres of power would be Brussels, Moscow and Ankara.⁵⁹

Indeed, Europe is a crucial theatre of Russian multilateralism. At this regional level, Russia has long favoured a **pan-European multilateral system for collective security**. This aim was a constant feature of Soviet policy, with proposals for a European security conference having been tabled since 1954. Only in 1969 did NATO member states accept a renewed proposal for a pan-European conference, which became the Conference of Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) in 1972–75. The ensuing Helsinki process culminated in the adoption of the Charter of Paris for a new Europe in 1990 and the creation of the OSCE in 1994. On 5 June 2008, President Medvedev proposed developing a new pan-European security treaty to "create a common undivided space and do away with the Cold War legacy". The idea was to formalise the principle of indivisible security as a legal obligation according to which "no nation or international organisation operating in the Euro-Atlantic region (would be) entitled to strengthen its own security at the cost of other nations or organisations".⁶⁰ The following year, Russia sent a draft European Security Treaty to the heads of state and to chief executives of international organisations operating in the Euro-Atlantic region, ie, NATO, the EU, CSTO, CIS⁶¹ and OSCE. However, NATO and the EU have consistently turned down proposals for inter-bloc policy coordination.⁶² The OSCE remains "the most inclusive and comprehensive regional security organization in the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian area".⁶³

The European level is the most crucial in the EU-Russia relationship given that the two are the big powers in the region and share a common neighbourhood. The following section presents their views and actions for multilateralism in the area and how the latter impact on their bilateral relationship.

⁵⁶ Tskhay and Costa Buranelli 2020.

⁵⁷ Romanova 2018, pp. 64-65.

⁵⁸ *Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions...*, Munich, 15 February 2020 (9).

⁵⁹ Sakwa 2014, p. 27.

⁶⁰ President of Russia, 'The draft of the European Security Treaty', 29 November 2009.

⁶¹ The Commonwealth of Independent States, founded in December 1991 following the dissolution of the USSR and including all former Soviet Republics except the three Baltic states. Current CIS members are Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan (Georgia left in 2009 after the hostilities with Russia; Ukraine did the same in May 2018.)

⁶² Troitskiy.

⁶³ OSCE, *Astana Commemorative Declaration: Towards a Security Community*, 1 December 2010.

3. The EU, Russia and multilateralism in the shared European neighbourhood: from cooperation to competition

Throughout the 1990s Russia was primarily open to cooperation with the EU on the latter's terms; convinced that the end of the Cold War was a shared victory, the Russian political elite was keen to prove its Europeanness. In 1994, Russia and the EU signed the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), which included references to human rights, democracy and the rule of law – which Russia had to establish – and provisions on copying EU rules (Art. 55). Rather than Europeanisation, the term “EU-isation” better describes the process of third countries espousing EU rules and standards.⁶⁴ In the span of a decade, the Russian position evolved from an optimistic attitude to EU-isation to a more critical one.⁶⁵

To begin with, **Russian ruling elites had never subscribed to their country being a weaker, unequal partner to the West or the EU.** Dominant in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MID) since 1996, this position became that of the Russian political elite after the enlargements of NATO and the EU intensified Russian fears of exclusion. Consequently, major speeches and documents quickly returned to emphasising the multipolarity of the world order.⁶⁶ Putin's arrival to power in 2000 and Russia's economic revival prompted the switch to a more critical rhetoric and attitude.

Second, the Russian acceptance of EU rules and standards has always been selective and instrumental.⁶⁷ This was evident in the 2005 roadmaps for the four EU–Russia common spaces and the 2010 Partnership for Modernisation, with EU and Russian officials and sometime business representatives promoting dialogue in many sectors (eg, energy, trade and investment, regulation of various products, environment, agriculture, space and telecommunication).⁶⁸ Russia's annexation of Crimea, the ensuing EU sanctions and Russia's reciprocal sanctions in 2014 led to the suspension of most of these activities and to *ad hoc* dealing with urgent matters.⁶⁹

Third, and the most important flaw in the relationship, **the EU and Russia lacked a shared vision for the larger European space.** Although they both publicly committed to building a common economic space in Europe (anchored in regional organisations such as the Council of Europe, OSCE and UNECE⁷⁰), they held different views on its specific characteristics as well as on the accompanying security structure.⁷¹ **On the one hand, the Euro-Atlantic “Wider Europe” project built around the EU and NATO aimed to export Western rules and norms through enlargement and partnership; on the other hand, the Russian “great Europe” project based on multipolarity pursued the goal of a more pluralistic Europe, where Moscow is recognised as one of the centres of power responsible for the regional order.**⁷²

⁶⁴ Romanova 2018, pp. 57–70.

⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 61.

⁶⁶ For instance: President of the Russian Federation (1998), *Mesto i rol Rossii v period formiruuschegosya mnogopolyarnogo mira* (*The place and role of Russia in the period of the emerging multipolar world*) – referenced in Romanova 2018, p. 61.

⁶⁷ Romanova 2018, p. 64.

⁶⁸ European Commission, Press Release ‘EU and Russia launch new partnership for modernization’, 1 June 2010. See also Larionova 2015.

⁶⁹ For an overview see: www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/177/russia

⁷⁰ United Nations Economic Commission for Europe.

⁷¹ DeBardeleben 2018, p. 115.

⁷² Sakwa, 2014, p. 27 ff.

The EU-Russia strategic partnership was in essence a marriage of convenience.⁷³ The existence of two different projects for post-Cold War Europe gradually dragged Russia and the EU into a spiral of increasing tensions and competition until the break-up over Ukraine.

While Russia could accept the EU's enlargement to central and eastern European countries, it grew suspicious and intolerant of the EU's engagement in the common neighbourhood through the Eastern Partnership "to strengthen the prosperity and stability of these countries, and thus the security of the EU"⁷⁴ and, even more so, of the transformative nature and purpose of EU policies in countries such as Georgia and Ukraine (let alone Russia itself). The EU's assumption was that Eastern neighbours and Russia would endorse liberal democracy and the market economy, and also increasingly accept EU norms and regulations integrated in the Eastern Partnership. Even if only inadvertently, the EU's requirement that Eastern partners such as Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia adopt regulatory and normative convergence with it was not power neutral; in other words, "the EU's policy towards its Eastern neighbours was more geopolitical than acknowledged" and thus fed competition with Russia.⁷⁵ The Russian government grew critical of these EU initiatives in the shared neighbourhood and started to counter them either through offering alternatives to these countries or making their adherence to EU rules costly (eg, via targeted alteration of energy prices and supplies, or via problems at the border or customs controls).⁷⁶ Clearly, the Russian ruling political elite was (and still is) highly concerned with the geopolitical consequences of any EU-isation of the shared neighbourhood,⁷⁷ which became ideologically conflated with NATO's expansionism in the same space.

The creation of the EAEU in 2014 therefore constituted both an alternative and a challenge to a West-led wider Europe. Yet Putin presented Eurasian integration as a nonideological, technical and pragmatic project attractive for citizens and business because of dynamic markets based "on single standards and requirements for goods and services, mostly unified with the European ones", meaning those of the EU.⁷⁸ Indeed, the EAEU was set up to be compatible with the EU. However, this alignment should take place between the two organisations rather than between the EU and individual EAEU states directly. Putin explained his approach by the need to maintain "the identity of nations in the historical Eurasian space in a new century and in a new world" and to create "an independent centre for global development, rather than remaining on the outskirts of Europe and Asia".⁷⁹ Again, while cooperation is envisaged and pursued, Russian multilateralism is always concerned with avoiding the EU-isation of the post-Soviet space and preserving a multipolarity where Moscow is one of the key power centres. As Mannin aptly summarises, "post-Cold War Euro-Atlanticist, EU expansionist and Euro-Asian models of Europeanisation stand in potential cooperation and competition with each other".⁸⁰

⁷³ Casier 2018a, p. 26.

⁷⁴ Council of the EU, *European Security Strategy*, 2009, p. 23.

⁷⁵ Casier 2018, p. 209.

⁷⁶ Romanova 2018, p.67.

⁷⁷ Ibid, p.68.

⁷⁸ Putin, 'Novyi integratsionnyi proekt dlya Evrasii – budushchee, kotoroe rozhdaetsya segodnya' (New integration project for Eurasia – the future which is growing today). Interview, *Izvestia*, 3 October 2011 – referenced in Romanova (2018), p. 68.

⁷⁹ President of Russia, 'Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club', 19 September 2013.

⁸⁰ Mannin 2018, p. 22.

In light of this, Casier is right to suggest that **misperceptions of the other's behaviour and goals in the shared European neighbourhood were the crucial drivers of the deterioration of the EU-Russia relationship. Both subjects increasingly read the other as driven by geopolitical intentions of domination in the area.** Already in 2007–2008 Russian rhetoric had visibly changed as it dropped the usual reference to “European choice” and talked openly of calculated reciprocity, competition and rivalry.⁸¹ Growing distrust legitimised radical countermeasures, which in turn fed suspicion and reactions until rivalry logic escalated into direct confrontation in Ukraine.⁸²

This dynamic also exacerbated the difference in approaches to multilateralism – EU multilateralism is rules-based, while Russian multilateralism refuses external interference in domestic affairs and values. The communication of the European Commission and EU High Representative to the European Parliament and the Council on strengthening the EU's contribution to rules-based multilateralism, issued on 17 February 2021, confirms the EU's self-image as a normative power keen to diffuse its norms and values in multilateral fora and global governance.⁸³ Russia will continue to see the EU as promoting Western collective unilateralism to the non-Western countries of the world.

As reality has caught up with perceptions, the restoration of relations and multilateralism requires first of all a process of normalisation and trust-building. The following section recommends a number of steps to commence the process.

4. Policy recommendations: the EU should change narrative with a view to re-engaging Russia in multilateralism

The relations between the EU and Russia have been marred by deepening mistrust over more than two decades. The situation has reached a new low with Lavrov's statement that communication with EU leaders may be ceased if the latter are reluctant to have a mutually respectful dialogue with Russia, and that Brussels's reactions over the case of opposition leader Alexei Navalny jeopardise the possibility of further interaction with the EU.⁸⁴ Moreover, Lavrov proved to be a rude host, to say the least, when EU High Representative and Vice President for foreign affairs and security policy Josep Borrell made his first visit to Moscow earlier this year on 5 February. During the joint press conference, Lavrov called the EU an unreliable partner and, attacking the sanctions policy, accused the EU of hypocrisy in pursuing multilateralism as a cover for Western exceptionalism. None of these remarks was actually new, but the blow was particularly harsh considering that Borrell, in an interview given ahead of the visit, had called “for putting aside negative rhetoric and starting a frank exchange of opinions”.⁸⁵ Borrell acknowledged the current status of rivalry and the many specific disagreements on the conflicts in the shared neighbourhood, as well as on the (mis)treatment of political opponents in Russia. Yet he pointed out that

⁸¹ Dekalchuk 2018, p. 105.

⁸² Casier 2018a, p. 26

⁸³ European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security policy, ‘Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council on strengthening the EU's contribution to rules-based multilateralism’, Brussels, 17 February 2021 JOIN(2021) 3 final.

⁸⁴ *Interfax*, 4 February 2021 ‘EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell: Putting aside negative rhetoric would be good starting point for frank EU-Russia dialogue’.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

our channels of communication have remained and need to remain open. But they have not always been put to sufficient use. Instead, we have been talking more about each other or even past one another, which only perpetuates mistrust and does little to address the challenges in our relationship. Putting aside negative rhetoric would be a good starting point for a frank and direct exchange of views between the EU and Russia, which is all the more needed when relations are far from satisfactory.⁸⁶

The EU and Russia remain closely interdependent, but now economic relations are being affected by the negative political climate. The EU's selective engagement with Russia has proven inadequate to produce results. The numerous dialogues between the EU Commission and Russian officials from different ministries and bodies at different levels are constrained by the centralised Russian state system: those officials have limited room for manoeuvre as the MID is fully in control of the agenda and (in agreement with the President's office) limits any concessions which might make Russia look unequal. The key to unlocking the situation is at the core of Russian government.

In the aftermath of Borrell's visit, calls for a hawkish approach to Russia are mounting, especially from European People's Party MEPs.⁸⁷ Yet Borrell's reading of the situation was right – **“the point of diplomacy is precisely to engage, to pass messages and try to find a common ground, especially when things are bad”**.⁸⁸ Any additional aggressive action by the Russian government gives ground to calls for the EU to punch back. This paper contends that this course of action would be short-termist, ineffective and counterproductive. EU reactions to specific Russian wrongdoings must be firm. Yet a cool-headed approach should guide the elaboration of an EU strategy aiming at mid- to long-term solutions that are able to guarantee security in Europe. **This paper argues that the EU has more interest in shaping a new and constructive relationship with Russia** than in taking a tougher stance, and that multilateralism is a key tool for this new relationship.

We know that the approaches of the EU and Russia to multilateralism differ on the question of values. Yet whether multilateralism be *effective* (EU)⁸⁹ or *equal* (Russia), it is seen by both the EU and Russia as the best guarantee of respect for international rules.⁹⁰ In the rhetoric of both the EU and Russia, multilateralism is tightly interwoven with the UN and the supremacy of international law. The EU Global Strategy of 2016 engaged the EU to “promote a rules-based global order with multilateralism as its key principle and the United Nations at its core”.⁹¹ This differs little from what has been affirmed in several Russian *Foreign Policy Concepts*, as illustrated in section 1 of this paper.

For multilateralism to produce results there are several prerequisites, the most important of which is the attitude of the parties involved: a) Do they share a genuine interest in sustainable results? b) Are they willing to compromise? c) Are they willing to act on the basis of “diffuse reciprocity”?⁹²

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ *Politico*, ‘Bested by Lavrov, Borrell faces fury in Brussels’, 10 February 2021.

⁸⁸ *Interfax*, 4 February 2021 ‘EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell: Putting aside negative rhetoric would be good starting point for frank EU-Russia dialogue’.

⁸⁹ Council of the EU, 8 December 2003, *European Security Strategy*, p. 11.

⁹⁰ Casier 2018, p. 205.

⁹¹ EEAS, *European Union Global Strategy*, p. 8.

⁹² Maull, p. 5.

As the main bone of contention between the EU and Russia lies in the European space, this paper suggests that the **EU should re-engage Russia in multilateral activity on the European continent.**

a) The EU and Russia share a genuine interest in sustainable results on security in Europe.

Despite the ascendancy of China or signs of economic decline, Russia remains a big power, not least due to its massive nuclear arsenal, its permanent seat on the UNSC and the huge size of its territory stretching across two continents. Security cannot be real and stable if Russia is not part of the system or, even worse, is cornered as the foe. Even with its unimpressive economic performance, its ageing population and its growing political tensions, Russia still has sound capabilities to create great damage and disruption in any part of the world (including within Western democracies). Johnson and Köstem draw attention to the fact that “Russia’s frustrations have increasingly turned it in reactive and confrontational directions”.⁹³ This has been particularly true in the European theatre. Adopting a **more confrontational stance would both exacerbate Russian reactions globally** and push it farther into an alliance with China; both scenarios are undoubtedly in the worst interest of the EU. Most importantly, a more confrontational attitude would also **perpetuate a situation of continual conflicts on the continent** and, as France’s President Emmanuel Macron noted, Europe would continue to “be the theatre of a strategic battle between the United States and Russia”.⁹⁴ Furthermore, confrontation has proven to be counterproductive for the EU’s transformative goal for Russian society: as EU–Russian relations have grown tense, so has Russian policy towards non-governmental organisations (NGOs), opposition and journalists. Moreover, EU sanctions **limit the socialisation of officials and constrain the interaction of civil societies.**⁹⁵

There are reasons to believe that the Russian ruling elite still has a genuine interest in a European security and cooperation framework, provided Russia can participate in shaping the framework on an equal footing with the EU (or the West). This has been a constant of Russian policy since at least 1815, throughout the inter-war period, the Second World War and even during the Cold War, with recurring proposals between 1954 and 1969 (and the eventual CSCE). More importantly, the Russian government’s current entente with China is hardly the first and best choice for Russia, as the latter can only be the minor partner in that relationship; China’s economic primacy now combines with fast-growing military expenditure, which will challenge Russian geopolitical primacy in the long term.⁹⁶ However, an EU-Russia relationship “built on a mismatch of interests and contrasting approaches and ambitions is inherently fragile, even when geographic proximity and the complementarity of strengths (and weaknesses) suggests that it should be a partnership of choice for both”.⁹⁷ Consequently, **for the EU to effectively involve Russia in multilateralism, a change of mindset, narrative and communication is the fundamental first step that needs to be taken** (see next point).

b) The willingness to compromise will hardly materialise in the current situation of opposing narratives; the EU must break free of this Manichean trap.

⁹³ Johnson and Köstem, p.208.

⁹⁴ Ambassadors’ Conference – Speech by Emmanuel Macron, 27 August 2019.

⁹⁵ Romanova 2018, p. 66.

⁹⁶ See for instance, Saari and Secieru 2020, pp. 90–96.

⁹⁷ Schmidt-Felzmann 2016, p. 120.

EU-Russia relations are dominated by a divisive narrative that in the EU points at democratic versus authoritarian, developed versus backwards, normative power versus realpolitik, good versus evil. This binary understanding has become common among scholars, practitioners and the general public in the West. The EU sees and presents itself as a force for good on the continent, spreading democracy and progress through the process of integration. By contrast, Russia is seen as a competitive power intent on hampering human progress and peace; since the Ukraine crisis, Russia is “the de facto example of what is not ‘EU’-ropean”.⁹⁸ **This depiction of competing entities locked in a battle of opposite values leads to the inability to compromise and reach an agreed political settlement.**⁹⁹ As Diesen notes, there is no conceptual space for compromise, because any move towards Russia “is equated to a betrayal of the EU’s values”.¹⁰⁰ Some of the criticisms levied against Borrell for his visit to Moscow were that he did not punch back at Lavrov’s harsh comments, but Borrell pointed out to the MEPs calling for his resignation that for certain of them “the problem seems to be that the visit happened” altogether.¹⁰¹ In other words, good-versus-evil narratives in the EU make it impossible to discuss (and possibly achieve) peace and security on the European continent.

Moreover, the constant equation of Europe with the EU is in itself a way to cut Russia from the continent to which it also belongs. The resulting picture is a zero-sum game between an EU keen on expanding and transforming its close neighbours and a Russia determined to maintain its identity as well as its sphere of influence.

In addition, this situation creates problems for the EU’s eastern neighbours, which are forced into difficult either/or choices. As Flenley and Mannin note, “asking them to ignore the reality of their geopolitical position or entrenched domestic power structures or external/internal threats to stability in the name of prioritising the relationship with the EU can be counterproductive. **Neighbours clearly prefer ‘both/and’ rather than ‘either/or’ choices**”.¹⁰² Furthermore, Casier and DeBardeleben point out that in a “binary Europe of exclusive allegiances, any choice ultimately gets perceived as a geopolitical one, which will in turn enhance negative images of the counterpart and undermine trust”.¹⁰³

Multilateralism and – most urgently – security in Europe require an end to this zero-sum game attitude and a change in the narrative, self-perception and communication, which should include the points indicated below:

- The EU is not a synonym for Europe. Europe includes other countries, among which is Russia, and it includes models that may differ from those of the EU and its member states.
- All countries on the European continent have the right to participate in defining the rules of co-existence on that continent. (This was very much the approach of the Helsinki CSCE, its process and the ensuing OSCE; not by chance are decisions taken there by consensus).
- Acceptance that some countries may not espouse EU (or Western) values in their domestic policy and should not be diminished for this. (It is of course due and legally correct that an

⁹⁸ Siklodi 2018, p. 35.

⁹⁹ Diesen 2017, p. 178.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, p. 190.

¹⁰¹ *Politico*, ‘Bested by Lavrov, Borrell faces fury in Brussels’, 10 February 2021.

¹⁰² Flenley and Mannin 2018, pp. 216.

¹⁰³ Casier and DeBardeleben 2018, p. 243.

organisation such as the Council of Europe apply sanctions to a member state not complying with the rules and values of that organisation).

At best, modifying the EU narrative will start a process of overcoming mistrust and will induce a parallel change of narrative on the Russian side; at worst – if the Russian narrative does not change – it will reveal the Russian government’s rhetoric as mere propaganda. In either case, the EU gains something and has nothing to lose.

Modifying the narrative will not forestall further rounds of EU enlargement. Quite the contrary, the EU’s enlargement to new members would not be seen as protection from the Russian threat or as containment of Russia, and could not be conflated with the expansion of NATO.

Changing the EU narrative does not require and does not reduce the EU’s commitment to its values – democracy and human rights above all; it would only remove the civilising mission image. Pointing the finger at Russia for its flaws has not improved the democratisation of the country. It also damages the image of the EU, which looks hypocritical when it plays teacher to Russia on matters of democracy and human rights while remaining incapable of dealing with the Hungarian and Polish governments’ dubious domestic policies. Adopting a more inclusive definition of Europe would also mean recognising that human rights and democracy “are part of the tradition – often of resistance and revolution – across the Continent both East and West, that the end of communism and the Cold War and the process of democratisation was initiated and promoted within Russia and Ukraine”.¹⁰⁴ This approach would allow revival of the idea of a “common European home” as something that is actually built together rather than by extending EU norms eastwards. Furthermore, in a process of cooperative effort, the EU could be more effective in socialising neighbouring countries into its values and standards.

Finally, changing the EU narrative will not mean appeasement vis-à-vis Russian breaches of international law and its fundamental principles (eg, Russia’s annexation of Crimea). Indeed, under international law the EU has the legal right to adopt economic countermeasures and retortions in such kinds of situation. Moreover, the EU has a political interest in not tolerating flagrant violations of territorial integrity on the European continent both *per se* and for the sake of not sending the wrong message elsewhere (eg, Israel with regard to the West Bank; China with regard to Hong Kong, Taiwan and islands in the Yellow Sea).¹⁰⁵

c) Diffuse reciprocity implies the promotion of compromise and the willingness to take into account the sensitivities, concerns and interests of all parties involved.

By definition, effective multilateralism cannot exist in a context of zero-sum-game attitudes and practices. The key to having Russia effectively involved in multilateralism is to make sure that, every now and then, Russia benefits from it. In particular, **the European space “should be re-conceptualised as involving overlapping rather than exclusive spheres of interest”**.¹⁰⁶

Due consideration for Russian interests highlights the need for the EU to clearly identify its *own* interests – not to be confused with those of *the West* or the United States. **The EU has no interest in participating in the power struggle between Washington and Moscow, and no interest in duplicating that dynamic**, as this has only led to acute tensions and actual conflict on the European continent. The Putin administration is intent on demonstrating that

¹⁰⁴ Flenley and Mannin, p. 217.

¹⁰⁵ Bultrini 2020.

¹⁰⁶ Casier and DeBardeleben, p. 242.

Russia should be respected and consulted, and that the West would ignore it at its peril. The EU's key interest on the European continent is to achieve and guarantee stable and secure peace, and that requires Russia's participation in multilateralism. This might not necessarily be the view of the White House – and in several cases has not been so. On the matter of relations with Russia, views and interests across the Atlantic have differed on many occasions, particularly during the Cold War. From the mid-1960s onwards the member states of the European Communities (EC) pioneered a policy of *détente* (relaxation of tensions) with the Soviets and their allies, to which they remained anchored until the end of the Cold War. The EC governments were convinced that entangling the Soviets in a web of cooperation, exchanges and treaties would reduce the risk of war, de-escalate tension and make the USSR a responsible power on the European continent. Interdependence, dialogue and cooperation in multiple fields were the key means to guarantee peace, and also to subtly diffuse democratic values in the countries beyond the Iron Curtain. The EC members continued to promote their values openly yet not confrontationally, and to encourage a freer circulation of people, ideas and news across the continent, in the belief that in an open and fair competition the superiority of the Western democratic model would eventually win. “Change through rapprochement” – the idea at the core of the new Ostpolitik of Willy Brandt and Egon Bahr that was launched in the late 1960s – became the approach of the EC polity, which largely shaped the CSCE along the same lines.¹⁰⁷ The EC members openly refused to follow the US administration on a policy of harsh rhetoric, sanctions and economic warfare that was adopted partly in response to serious Soviet violations of territorial integrity (Afghanistan 1979), deployment of new missiles pointing towards Western Europe, and alleged pressure on the Polish government. Facing the heightening of tensions, the EC countries chose to reject the trap of the Manichean narrative. Historians now recognise the important transformative and destabilising effects that this approach had on the socialist regimes, with its widening of intra-European web of human contacts, social and political interactions, economic exchanges and mutual treaty obligations. Historians also acknowledge the positive role of the multilateralism of the CSCE, which the EC members preserved with determination as a forum for both frank discussion and cooperation precisely when confrontation revived between Washington and Moscow. In sum, EC members were successful in engaging the Soviets in a multilateralism that was effective and constructive.

There are many similarities with today's situation. It is time for the EU to adopt the approach of the Ostpolitik *in full*, starting with the fundamental step of rejecting Manichean views and narratives. Borrell was right in his reading of the situation and approach. The mistake has been in hastening its implementation. A high-profile diplomatic visit should be carefully prepared with the counterpart in advance, and in any case should be the endpoint – not the start – of a process of narrative de-escalation. The latter should be delivered in small doses and through the continual use of a series of contacts in several fora – eg, the OSCE, UNECE, UN, and Normandy Group – via the classic bilateral diplomatic channels, as well as in purposefully designed remarks in speeches etc. highlighting points of convergence and shared experiences (cultural, historical, and of successful cooperation such as in space).

¹⁰⁷ Romano 2009; Romano 2013.

Conclusions

The Russian government is committed to multilateralism but emphasises state sovereignty and state interests. This approach follows from the perception that Russia is disregarded and cornered by the West. While Russia wants to enhance its role and break the normative hegemony of the West, it does not necessarily aim at overthrowing existing international structures but rather at making them more representative of a multipolar world (where Russia is one of the poles). There are therefore reasons to believe that the Russian government would be interested in a European security and cooperation framework, provided it can participate in shaping this framework on an equal footing with the EU (and the West).

This paper recommends that the EU should engage Russia in multilateralism, starting with the common European space. A power struggle with Russia would only feed the aggressive attitude of the Kremlin hawks, and thus perpetuate tensions and conflicts on the European continent. It would also reverberate in global relations, where Russia would advance competing multilateralism in an ever-tighter *entente* with China.

We know that it proved possible *and* successful (according to EC values, interests and goals) for the EC to engage the Soviet Union in effective multilateralism during the last decades of the Cold War despite the superpowers' harsh rhetoric and power struggle, and despite several major Soviet breaches of international law and the existence of an actual Soviet sphere of influence in Europe. The key to this success was the EC's renunciation of the Manichean narrative and the zero-sum game that was typical of the Cold War; the willingness to consider the other's sensitivities, interests and concerns; and a clear vision of the interests of the EC and its member states vis-à-vis *any* other country. This new attitude opened the road to cooperation and negotiations in many fields, including military confidence-building measures and, eventually, arms reduction in Europe.¹⁰⁸ It also allowed frank discussions on values, but without descent into confrontational rhetoric that would endanger cooperation.

An EU policy towards Russia along the above-mentioned lines is more likely to succeed today, when the balance of power between the two is much more favourable to the EU. Stepping out of the good-versus-evil approach does not signal weakness. Quite the contrary, only the strong, self-confident side in a relationship that has gone berserk can take that step. This would open the road to discussing – and hopefully designing – a greater/common European space that would overcome the current contested and irreconcilable visions of the EU and Russia. For concrete suggestions of which concessions from both sides could help realise this common European space, this paper points to the excellent proposals made by Joan DeBardeleben,¹⁰⁹ and also to the *Twelve Steps Toward Greater Security in Ukraine and the Euro-Atlantic Region* that were issued in February 2020 by the Euro-Atlantic Security Leadership Group (EASLG).¹¹⁰ And should the Russian government not follow through, the EU would undoubtedly have revealed the full bluff of Russian propaganda, and would have damaged Russian credibility in the world order much more effectively, while proving the genuine willingness of the EU to work with anyone for a truly inclusive multilateralism.

¹⁰⁸ Romano 2017

¹⁰⁹ DeBardeleben, pp. 130–33.

¹¹⁰ NTI, *Fact Sheet on "Twelve Steps Toward Greater Security in Ukraine and the Euro-Atlantic Region"*, 22 February 2020.

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