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Hegemony, Agency and Resistance: a critical analysis of power and security relations in the European Union-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle

Tese de doutoramento em Relações Internacionais – Política Internacional e Resolução de Conflitos, orientada pela Prof. Doutora Maria Raquel Freire e apresentada à Faculdade de Economia da Universidade de Coimbra

Setembro de 2016

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Universidade de Coimbra

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FEUC FACULDADE DE ECONOMIA
UNIVERSIDADE DE COIMBRA

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Orientadora: Prof. Doutora Maria Raquel Freire

Coimbra, setembro de 2016

To the loving memory of my cousin, Miguel, whose love, strength and bravery inspires me every single day

To my parents, Hilário and Paula, for all their love and support

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Where there is power, there is resistance.
Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*

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Abstract

The end of the Cold War incited meaningful changes on power and security dynamics across the broader European space. To the West, the European Union (EU) was propelled to develop a foreign policy dimension enabling it to uphold a stronger role in regional affairs. To the East, the Russian Federation emerged as the most relevant actor in the former Soviet space with undisputable regional ambitions and interests. In between, the newly independent states struggled to undertake internal reforms and define foreign policy strategies aiming at taking the utmost advantage of their geopolitical location.

Since the EU's Eastern enlargement, the EU and Russia share a common neighbourhood. The fact that the Union is extending its power towards Moscow's traditional sphere of influence has further impacted on dynamics of power and security produced by and reflected on the interplay between identities, interests and discursive practices in this area. Both EU and Russian foreign policies are based on the understanding that security starts outside their borders, and thus countries in the shared neighbourhood emerge as linchpins to their regional strategies. As a result, a number of struggles for power over the region have unfolded, gradually conferring an antagonistic tone to EU-Russia relations. This has been a cornerstone cause of tension for their common neighbours, which find themselves torn between the economic attractiveness of the EU's agenda and a cooperative relation with Russia in order to manage their manifold dependences on Moscow.

Reflections on the configuration of power and security relations in post-Cold War Europe have been multiple and diverse. However, it remains absent from the debate a comprehensive understanding of the complex interactions in the EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle looking at all intervenients from an equitable basis of analysis. It is precisely this lacuna that we aim to fill. To do so, the research follows from two assumptions. First, the EU and Russia are political entities with hegemonic regional ambitions, whose survival and security depend on asymmetrical relations with neighbouring countries. Second, Brussels and Moscow share a common sphere of influence over which their identities, interests and discursive practices collide – the shared neighbourhood. Despite this dispute over a common area of interests, it would be an overstatement to label the EU and Russia as enemies as they cooperate on a very significant number of issues. This tension between cooperation and competition opens

important avenues for the countries in the shared neighbourhood to evade powerful manoeuvres by these actors and to influence their hegemonic regional endeavours – ergo underscoring the meaningful role of agency in shaping structures of power.

That brings us to the dual purpose of this research: 1) understand why countries in the shared neighbourhood have agency in the context of confrontation and dispute for influence between the EU and Russia; 2) critically analyse how this agency works in practical terms and whether it influences the constitution of EU and Russian identities, interests and discursive practices. Our initial contention is that countries in the shared neighbourhood are not merely passive reactors to their contextual environment. Instead, they actively resist EU and Russian structural power aiming at dominating them by using their key geopolitical and geostrategic relevance. In doing so, these countries stress the mutually constitutive nature of relations in the EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle.

Critical constructivism – methodologically complemented by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's approach to discourse analysis – provides this research with the framework of analysis to delve into this topic. According to this framework, power implies a relation for it comes across as an imposition of a worldview over another, thus producing shared meanings which in turn constitute the identities, interests and discursive practice of the involved agents. In this reading, power tends towards hegemony and domination, though it is never absolute and agents may resist attempts at controlling their behaviour. Hegemony, agency and resistance are thus mutually implicated and resistance itself can be interpreted as an instance of power.

Overall, the research focuses on instances of hegemony by the EU and Russia, as well as on instances of agency and resistance by Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus – the last stronghold between West and East. The purpose is to deconstruct the manifold dynamics operating in and arising from this triangle in order to produce an independent and critical understanding on how power and security dynamics arise from the mutual constitution of the involved actors, ergo providing an interpretation focusing on hegemony, agency and resistance, something that remains absent from the literature on the topic.

Keywords: European Union, power, Russia, security, shared neighbourhood

Resumo

O fim da Guerra Fria despoletou mudanças importantes nas dinâmicas de poder e segurança no espaço Europeu. A Ocidente, a União Europeia (UE) foi compelida a desenvolver uma dimensão de política externa a fim de assumir um papel mais forte em assuntos regionais. A Oriente, a Rússia emergiu como o principal ator no espaço pós-soviético com interesses regionais bem definidos. No meio, os novos estados independentes debatiam-se com a necessidade de levar a cabo reformas internas e de definir estratégias de política externa que lhes permitissem tirar o máximo proveito da sua localização geopolítica.

Desde os alargamentos a leste da UE, a União e a Rússia partilham uma vizinhança comum. O facto de a UE estar a estender o seu poder à tradicional esfera de influência russa, afetou ainda mais as dinâmicas de poder e segurança produzidas pela e refletidas na interação entre identidades, interesses e práticas discursivas neste espaço. As políticas externas europeia e russa partilham o entendimento que a sua segurança começa fora das suas fronteiras e, portanto, os países da vizinhança partilhada surgem como peças centrais nas suas estratégias regionais. Concomitantemente, tem-se assistido a uma série de lutas pelo poder sobre esta região, conferindo um tom antagónico às relações UE-Rússia. Aqui reside uma importante fonte de tensão para os países na vizinhança partilhada que se encontram divididos entre a atratividade económica da agenda europeia e a necessidade de manter uma relação cooperativa com a Rússia, com vista a gerir as várias dependências que marcam as suas interações com Moscovo.

As reflexões sobre a configuração das relações de poder e segurança na Europa pós-Guerra Fria têm sido múltiplas e diversas. Contudo, permanece ausente do debate uma leitura abrangente das complexas interações no triângulo UE-Rússia-vizinhança partilhada que coloque todos os intervenientes em níveis de análise equitativos. É precisamente esta lacuna que serve de mote a esta investigação, a qual se desenrola a partir de duas premissas. A primeira é que a UE e a Rússia são entidades políticas com ambições hegemónicas, cuja sobrevivência e segurança dependem de relações assimétricas com a vizinhança. A segunda é que Bruxelas e Moscovo partilham uma esfera de influência comum onde as suas identidades, interesses e práticas discursivas colidem – a vizinhança partilhada. Apesar desta disputa, seria exagerado considerar a UE e a Rússia como inimigos, uma vez que ambos cooperam num vasto número de matérias. Esta tensão entre

cooperação e competição gera um espaço que permite aos países da vizinhança partilhada resistir às poderosas estratégias regionais destes atores e influenciar a sua agenda hegemónica, realçando assim o importante papel da agência na transformação das estruturas de poder.

Isto conduz-nos ao duplo propósito desta investigação: 1) compreender como os países da vizinhança partilhada têm agência num contexto de confronto e disputa por influência entre a UE e a Rússia; 2) analisar criticamente a forma como esta agência funciona na prática e se ela influencia a construção das identidades, interesses e práticas discursivas da UE e da Rússia. O nosso argumento inicial é que os países da vizinhança partilhada não se limitam a reagir passivamente ao seu contexto circundante. Ao invés, eles resistem ativamente ao poder estrutural da UE e da Rússia, fazendo uso da sua importância geopolítica. Ao agirem desta forma, estes países realçam a constituição mútua das interações no triângulo UE-Rússia-vizinhança partilhada.

O construtivismo crítico, metodologicamente complementado pela proposta de análise de discurso sugerida por Ernesto Laclau e Chantal Mouffe, constitui o quadro teórico que suporta esta investigação. De acordo com esta abordagem, o poder implica uma relação, já que surge como a imposição de uma determinada visão sobre outra. Desta forma, o poder produz conhecimento que, por seu turno, constitui as identidades, interesses e práticas discursivas dos atores envolvidos. Nesta leitura, o poder inclina-se para a hegemonia e a dominação, embora ele nunca seja absoluto, uma vez que os agentes têm sempre a possibilidade de resistir a tentativas para controlar o seu comportamento. A hegemonia, a agência e a resistência encontram-se, assim, interligadas e a própria resistência pode ser interpretada como uma forma de poder.

De uma forma geral, esta investigação centra-se na análise de manifestações hegemónicas por parte da UE e da Rússia e em formas de agência e resistência por parte da Ucrânia, da Moldova e da Bielorrússia: o último reduto entre o Ocidente e o Oriente. O objetivo é desconstruir as múltiplas dinâmicas que operam neste triângulo, a fim de produzir um entendimento independente e crítico sobre a forma como as dinâmicas de poder e segurança surgem da constituição mútua dos atores nele envolvidos. Desta forma, visamos gerar uma interpretação focada nos conceitos de hegemonia, agência e resistência, algo que permanece ausente da bibliografia sobre o tema.

Palavras-chave: poder, Rússia, segurança, União Europeia, vizinhança partilhada

List of acronyms

AA	Association Agreement
CEEC	Central and Eastern European Countries
CES	Common Economic Space
CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CSDP	Common Security and Defence Policy
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organisation
DCFTA	Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area
EaP	Eastern Partnership
EEAS	European External Action Service
EEC	Eurasian Economic Community
EEU	Eurasian Economic Union
ENP	European Neighbourhood Policy
ENPI	European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument
ESDP	European Security and Defence Policy
ESS	European Security Strategy
EU	European Union
EUAM	European Union Advisory Mission
EUBAM	European Union Border Assistance Mission
EUJUST THEMIS	European Union Rule of Law Mission
EUMM	European Union Monitoring Mission
EUSR	European Union Special Representative
FTA	Free Trade Area
GFNIF	Governance Facility Neighbourhood and Investment Fund
GUAM	Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova
INOGATE	Interstate Oil and Gas Transport to Europe
IR	International Relations
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
OSCE	Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe
PCA	Partnership and Cooperation Agreement

TACIS	Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States
TRACECA	Transportation Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
USA	United States of America
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WTO	World Trade Organisation

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1. Introduction

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War prompted momentous changes on power and security dynamics across the broader European space. In December 1991, the Minsk Summit made official the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and its replacement by fifteen newly independent states, including the Russian Federation. Even though Moscow inherited most of the former Soviet Union's structures of power – including those relating to nuclear power and representation in international organisations such as the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) –, this transformation triggered a complex process of internal transition. Besides important measures on the political, economic and social fields, Russia engaged in an internal debate on what were to be its core national interests (Freire, 2014: 29; Sirbiladze, 2015). After a short period when the need to develop close relations with the West featured prominently, Moscow made clear that the development of bilateral and multilateral cooperation with its vicinity was to be the main priority of Russian foreign policy (Russian Federation, 1993). The underlying rationale was to guarantee the maintenance of friendly regimes in the post-Soviet space for Moscow perceives the amity of its neighbours as well as the harmony of their political choices with Russian interests as paramount to preserve its regional influence and security. For that purpose, it developed regional strategies combining active hard power moves with the advantages of the Soviet legacy to persuade neighbouring countries to comply with Russian rules and worldview (Judah *et al.*, 2011: 23; Radchuk, 2011: 29).

From the 2000s onwards, this focus on the post-Soviet space as Russia's orbit of influence and top foreign policy priority became more pronounced. As a consequence, Moscow has not hesitated to combine hard and soft power[1] mechanisms to reassure its supremacy in this area (Isakova, 2005: 17-18). This stance on regional affairs was sustained by a considerable economic growth along with the increasing assertiveness and pragmatism of Russian domestic and foreign policies. To the greatest extent, the strategy

[1] Joseph Nye has been ground-breaking in distinguishing between hard and soft power in the late 1980s. According to the author, soft power is the ability to shape the preferences of others by attraction and co-optation rather than by military and economic coercion, i.e. hard power. Instances of soft power include cultural and normative attraction, as well as lobbying through political and non-political organisations in order to influence social and public opinion. Hard and soft power are complementary rather than antagonistic for they are often combined to achieve one's purposes (Nye, 1990, 2004).

has been to use advantageous political, economic, energy, and military resources to increase Russian neighbours' dependences, therefore allowing Moscow to crystallise asymmetric relations and uphold its leading role in the post-Soviet space (Baev, 2007: 454; Dias, 2014a).

The post-Cold War setting has also provided the context to deepen and widen processes of European integration. On the one hand, new political, economic and security challenges at the regional level propelled the European Union (EU) to developed a foreign policy dimension. Security concerns were at the centre of European integration since its inception (Manners, 2002: 237; Regelsberger *et al.*, 1997). Nonetheless, it was only in the aftermath of the Cold War that member states agreed on deepening the EU's scope of action to include foreign policy and security matters. The institutionalisation of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) by the Treaty of Maastricht in 1993 and the subsequent operationalisation of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) in 2003[2] provided the EU with frameworks for action and mechanisms for gradually affirming itself as a meaningful global actor. On the other hand, the Union focused on widening itself via the policy of Enlargement envisaging to prepare the accession of Central and Eastern European countries (CEEC). States in the post-Soviet Space without membership prospects were engaged in a different manner. During the 1990s, Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCA) were signed to legally frame EU relations with these countries. Due to a number of reasons, however, it was only in the context of debates preparing the new European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in the early 2000s that the Union started to pay greater attention to relations with former Soviet countries in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus (Casier, 2012: 32-33). Ever since, EU relations with the Eastern vicinity can be better grasped as an extension of its internal security concerns for the promotion of prosperity, stability and security in the neighbourhood is seemingly guided by the intention to prevent regional events to contaminate the Union's internal order (Averre, 2009: 1693-1694).

Since the EU's last rounds of enlargement, the Union and Russia share a common neighbourhood in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. The fact that the EU is extending its power towards the post-Soviet space – an area traditionally perceived to be part of Moscow's orbit of influence – has considerably impacted on regional dynamics of

[2] Later renamed European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) by the Treaty of Lisbon.

power and security produced by and reflected on the interplay between identities, interests and discursive practices in this area. Both EU and Russian foreign policies are shaped by the understanding that internal security starts outside their borders and, thus, the countries in the shared neighbourhood emerge as linchpins in their regional strategies. In a mostly competing and mutually exclusive logic, the EU and Russia attempt to keep these countries in their own sphere of influence. Although this perception of competition is transversal to EU–Russia relations overall – even if in different visibilities and intensities across sectors (Casier, 2012) –, it becomes particularly evident in areas concerning the shared neighbourhood. This follows from the fact that commitments to European integration by these countries are usually seen by Moscow as a political loss, in the same way that a rapprochement towards Russia is perceived as having a constraining effect over EU leverage in the region (Averre, 2009; Casier, 2016; Dias, 2013a).

The EU and Russia seem to share a very similar strategy when it comes to relations with countries in their overlapping vicinity. Both attempt to create links of interdependence with neighbouring countries for interdependences produce reciprocal, though asymmetrical, relations that can potentially create sources of influence (Casier, 2012: 497). The goal is to extend their power over this region and impose their worldviews via a number of policies, initiatives and strategies. By doing so, they establish the game's rules and persuade their common neighbours to accept asymmetrical relationships in which the latter are expected to contribute to the security and survival of EU and Russian internal projects. These rather similar though conflicting approaches are a cornerstone of tension and vulnerability for EU and Russian common neighbours which often find themselves torn between the attractions of Brussels' agenda – promising technical aid, financial assistance and, eventually, a stake in the Union's single market – and a cooperative relationship with Moscow – from which these countries are still overwhelmingly dependent on (Gower and Timmins, 2009: 1685-1686).

Even though the shared neighbourhood constitutes an area of disputed influence between the EU and Russia, it should by no means be addressed as a homogeneous space. After the end of the Cold War and the subsequent dismantling of the USSR, countries in this area went through rather complex processes of transition, including democratisation, marketisation, state-building, and identity-building (Kuzio, 2001). Simultaneously, they engaged in the arduous task of defining their national interests and foreign policy

priorities. Each one of these countries responded to the aforementioned challenges in a very specific manner, gradually affirming themselves as individual political entities with differentiated identities and interests. Despite these singularities, their geopolitical location in an overlapping area of influence by the EU and Russia has often led these countries to balance between Brussels and Moscow in order to maximise benefits from relations with their most significant neighbours, even if the capacity and political will to do so varies considerably among them. Although the ultimate goal of this balancing is not to drag the EU and Russia into direct confrontation (Tumanov *et al.*, 2011: 129), it has the potential to aggravate competition over a common area of interests, thus transforming the EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle into a space of complex and intertwined power and security dynamics.

Reflections on the configuration of power and security relations in the broader European context have been multiple and diverse. Research accounts addressing EU and Russian foreign and neighbourhood policies have been particularly prominent in the field of International Relations (IR) from the late 1990s onwards. Rising tensions in the EU-Russia bilateral agenda largely motivated by their competition over a common area of influence and interests, along with the occurrence of significant regional events – e.g. the coloured revolutions, the Georgia-Russia War and the Ukrainian crisis –, have only made these topics trendier in the academic community. As a result, reviewing and categorising literature on the topic has become a rather herculean task. Nonetheless, we identified three lines of research that are particular relevant and preeminent in this area. The first one is dominated by studies delving into EU foreign and neighbourhood policies. Research works located under this overarching umbrella often fit into one of four major trends. The first descriptively analyses the institutional evolution of EU foreign and neighbourhood policies and the gradual development of competences and frameworks for action in these fields (see e.g. Bache *et al.*, 2005; Bretherton and Vogler, 2006; Howorth, 2007; Hurd, 1994; Jones, 2007; Kaski, 2011; Keukeleire and Delreux, 2014; Lippert, 2006; Missiroli, 2003; Regelsberger *et al.*, 1997; Smith, 2008). The second trend is constituted by accounts exploring vulnerabilities and incoherence in EU foreign and neighbourhood policies (see e.g. Ágh, 2010; Bosse, 2009, 2010; Emerson, 2014; Korosteleva, 2011a; Pinelli, 2007; Schoutheete, 2004; Schroeder, 2006; Stewart, 2008). Within these accounts, it is common to find important debates referring to the EU's capability-expectation gap (see e.g. Börzel

and Lebanidze, 2015; Ginsberg, 1999; Hill, 1993; Langbein and Wolczuk, 2012; Nielsen, 2013; Toje, 2008) and the lack of convergence between EU words and deeds on foreign policy matters (see e.g. Bengtsson, 2008; Boedeltje and van Houtum, 2011; Christou, 2010a; Edwards, 2008; Emerson, 2011b; Freire and Simão, 2013; Korosteleva, 2011b; Schumacher, 2016; Tocci, 2005). On a third sub-group we situate analysis emphasising the EU's external governance of internal security, resulting from the blurring distinction between internal and external security, and the EU's understanding that the survival of its internal project depends on a secure surrounding environment (see e.g. Lavenex, 2004; Lavenex and Schimmelfennig, 2011; Lavenex and Wichmann, 2009; Lutterbeck, 2005; Monar, 2010; Shepherd, 2016). Finally, a fourth trend features critical analyses studying the consequences of EU foreign and neighbourhood policies, reading them as interventionist and imperial performances, particularly when it comes to relations with the neighbourhood (see e.g. Behr, 2007; Cebeci, 2012; Chandler, 2006, 2007, 2010; Dias, 2014c; Diez *et al.*, 2008; Diez, 2013; Dimitrovova, 2010; Gravier, 2009; Kølvraa and Ifversen, 2011; Kostadinova, 2009; Kustermans, 2008; Leca, 2013; Nunes *et al.*, 2008; Zielonka, 2008, 2013).

The second line of research matches what is commonly addressed as post-Soviet studies. Here two specific trends deserve to be emphasised. The first one devotes itself to the analysis of transition processes of post-Soviet countries. This trend usually focus on these countries' core choices and quarrels on the political, economic and social fields, as well as on identity-building issues (see e.g. Astrov and Havlik, 2007; Crowther, 2011; Galeotti, 2010b; Karaganov, 2010; Korosteleva, 2011c; Korostelina, 2013; Kubicek, 2009; Kudelia and Kuzio, 2014; Kuzio, 2001; Lannon, 2011; Liabedzka, 2008; Light, 2003; Tudoroiu, 2011; White, 2011). The second trend delves more specifically into foreign policy matters. Russian foreign policy is by far the most analysed case amongst all the post-Soviet states. Most studies tend to shed light on the pragmatism and assertiveness of Russian foreign policy from the 2000s onwards and the asymmetrical nature of its relations with the near abroad (see e.g. Baev, 2003; Connor, 2007; Dias, 2014a; Freire, 2014, 2016; Freire and Kanet, 2012; Götz, 2015; Lynch, 2002; Mankoff, 2009; Morozova, 2009; Rywkin, 2003, 2008; Saari, 2014; Spechler, 2010; Trenin, 2009; Tsygankov, 2006). It is increasingly usual to find studies reporting how Moscow has been exploring its neighbours political, economic, energy and security vulnerabilities in order to pursue its regional

interests – maintain Russia's leading role in the post-Soviet space and dissuade the interference of external actors in this area, in particular the EU and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) (see e.g. Delcour and Wolczuk, 2015; Denisov and Grivach, 2008; Finkel and Brudny, 2012; Krickovic, 2014; Laenen, 2012; Makarychev, 2008; Morozova, 2009; Popescu and Wilson, 2009; Popov, 2008; Stent, 2007; Tolstrup, 2009; Trenin, 2007; Tsygankov, 2006). In this setting, analyses underlining Moscow's usage of energy leverage as a foreign policy tool and an important instrument in its strategy to tie its neighbours into its orbit of influence are particularly abundant (see e.g. Arakelyan and Kanet, 2012; Biersack and O'Lear, 2014; Bouzarovski and Bassin, 2011; Feklyunina, 2012; Kropatcheva, 2011a; Mangott and Westphal, 2008; Milov, 2006; Mohsin Hashim, 2010; Nygren, 2012; Perovic, 2008, 2009).

The third pinpointed line of research examines intersections of power and security dynamics in the broader European space. Within this group there is a noteworthy body of work analysing EU-Russia relations on different dimensions, including in the political, economic and security fields (see e.g. Akatov, 2004; Averre, 2005; Blockmans, 2014; Gowan, 2001; Gower, 2008; Gromyko, 2015; Haukkala, 2015; Kuzembo, 2013; Nilsson and Silander, 2016; Nitoiu, 2011, 2016; Potemkina, 2010; Tassinari, 2005). Since the mid-2000s, it is also noticeable the exponential growth of literature addressing the competing nature of EU and Russia foreign policies towards their common vicinity, as well as their capacity to attract neighbouring countries into their respective orbits of influence (see e.g. Averre, 2005, 2009, 2010, 2016; Barysch, 2004; Casier, 2012, 2016; Dias, 2013a; Freire, 2008b, 2012; Gromyko, 2015; Korosteleva, 2016; Massari, 2007; Simão and Dias, 2016; Tassinari, 2005; Tsygankov, 2015; Tumanov *et al.*, 2011). Under this framework of perceived competition between the EU and Russia, some authors have devoted their attention to the countries in the shared neighbourhood. It is fairly common to find analyses delving into the evolution of these countries foreign policies, their strategic relevance to EU and Russian foreign policies, as well as their balancing between Brussels and Moscow (see e.g. Blaj, 2013; Dangerfield, 2011; Danii and Mascauteanu, 2011; Dias, 2014a; Gromadzi and Kononczuk, 2007; Ioffe, 2011; Kascian, 2014; Korosteleva, 2010, 2016; Korosteleva and White, 2006; Kropatcheva, 2011b; Lebduska and Lidl, 2014; Light *et al.*, 2000; Marples, 2014; Molchanov, 2016; Pustelnyk, 2009; Rotman and Veremeeva, 2011; Rywkin, 2014; White *et al.*, 2001). This literature confirms that the shared neighbourhood

should not be understood as a homogeneous space since political identities, interests and foreign policy choices differ considerably amongst these countries. Regarding the shared neighbourhood between the EU and Russia in Eastern Europe – i.e. Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus –, the following mapping is widely accepted. Ukraine balances between the EU and Russia, without ever fully breaking ties with either of them. The goal is to maintain a certain equilibrium in relations with Brussels and Moscow for benefit-maximisation (see e.g. Dimitrova and Dragneva, 2009; Härtel, 2010; Kuzio, 2005; Langbein, 2016; Rywkin, 2014; Samokhvalov, 2007; Stent, 2007). Moldova has been perceived to be the steadiest in affirming its European choice, even if it remains vulnerable to Moscow's pressures, especially regarding the Transnistrian conflict (see e.g. Boonstra, 2011; Bosse, 2010; Cantir and Kennedy, 2015; Dias, 2013b; Korosteleva, 2012; Tudoroiu, 2011; Vahl and Emerson, 2004). Finally, Belarus comes across as a traditional ally of Moscow and a supporter of its leading role in the post-Soviet space. The idea of rapprochement to the EU is used by Minsk in specific contexts as a bargaining chip to reinforce its geopolitical importance and to gain advantages in its relationship with Russia, but integration into the EU is not a tangible foreign policy priority (see e.g. Frear, 2010; Heinrich, 2006; Jarábik, 2010; Korosteleva, 2016; Marples and Padhol, 2011; Rontoyanni, 2005; Trenin, 2005; White *et al.*, 2001). However, only seldom are the countries in this region analysed on an equitable basis with their significant neighbours. Most often than not, such analyses tend to put an emphasis on either the EU or Russia and to use countries in the shared neighbourhood merely as an illustration of their policies, interests and discursive practices.

Despite the plethora of studies regarding EU and Russian foreign policies towards their common neighbourhood, insights on the dynamics of power and security arising from this triangle remain undertheorised and over-simplistic, thus failing to provide a comprehensive and critical analysis on the subject. There has been little convergence between studies focusing on EU and Russian foreign policies and 1) how they affect dynamics of power and security in the broader European space, and 2) how they simultaneous induce change in and are transformed by the discursive practices of countries in the shared neighbourhood. A remarkable exception is the article written by Browning and Christou (2010) which explores the neighbourhood constitutive power over EU foreign policies and their ability to constrain the EU's transformative power at its borders. Nonetheless, the authors limit their analysis to the cases of Ukraine and Moldova, and

integrate Russia only occasionally, thus falling short to grasp the complexity of these interactions. As such, it remains absent from the literature a critical reading of dynamics of power and security in the EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle looking at all intervenients from an equitable basis of analysis. It is precisely this lacuna in the literature that the current research seeks to address.

1.1. Research Design

Our reflection departs from the above-identified absence in the literature and the need to open new avenues into the analysis of dynamics of power and security in the EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle. In order to fill in this gap, the present work is developed based on two important assumptions.

On the one hand, it assumes the EU and Russia to be political entities with hegemonic regional projects, whose survival and security depend on their relation with neighbouring countries. Seemingly, the EU and Russia are two different actors – the EU is a regional organisation, whereas Russia is a traditional sovereign state. Despite this essential difference, these two political actors deploy regional strategies aiming at achieving rather similar goals – expand and reinforce their power over the neighbourhood in order to guarantee their internal security and survival. This not only makes EU and Russian foreign and neighbourhood policies comparable, but also sheds light on the hegemonic nature of their regional endeavours for their own security and survival is presented as being contingent upon the domination and normalisation of the neighbourhood. To make this structural exercise of power acceptable and legitimate before their domestic audiences, the EU and Russia often deploy argumentative strategies creating processes of othering and situations of crisis or insecurities. These strategies are not crystallised in a specific time and place; rather they appear as the result of interactions in the broader European space and alterations in these actors' contextual environment. In that regard, EU and Russian foreign and neighbourhood policies are seemingly created in tandem with the construction and reconstruction of their regional projects and identities.

On the other hand, this research embraces the view that these two hegemonic regional projects share a common sphere of influence over which their interests, projection of power and strive for security collide: the shared neighbourhood. In spite of this dispute

over a common area of interests and influence, it would be an overstatement to label the EU and Russia as enemies. Brussels and Moscow cooperate on a very significant number of issues, ranging from economics, political modernisation and energy. Therefore, they are better considered as adversaries whose existence is accepted and tolerated. Seemingly, this tension between cooperation and competition between the EU and Russia opens important ways for countries in their shared neighbourhood to avoid full-domination by their most significant neighbours and, to a certain extent, influence their hegemonic regional projects, thus underscoring the meaningful role of agency in changing and shaping structures of power.

That brings us to the dual purpose of this research. First, it seeks to understand why countries in the shared neighbourhood have agency, in the context of confrontation and dispute for influence between the EU and Russia. Second, it aims at critically analysing how neighbours' agency works in practical terms and whether it influences the constitution of EU and Russian identities, interests and discursive practices. Our initial contention is that, notwithstanding the competition between two hegemonic regional projects, the countries in the shared neighbourhood are not merely passive reactors. Instead, they actively resist EU and Russian structural exercises of power aiming at dominating them by using their key geopolitical and geostrategic relevance. In doing so, these countries stress the mutually constitutive nature of relations in the EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle. This means that if we must bear in mind that EU and Russian regional strategies influence how dynamics of power and security unfold in the broader European space, we should also acknowledge that these strategies and dynamics are also influenced by neighbouring countries' identities, interests and political choices.

Critical constructivism provides this research with the framework of analysis to delve into this topic. By fully embracing the sociological, linguistic and practice turns in IR and by focusing on instances of power and security, critical constructivism emphasises the existence and interaction of structures, agency, identities, interests and discursive practices that form the complex political world. Moreover, it sheds light on the fact that reality is a dynamic construction in which actors adapt themselves to the demands of the moment, redefining interests and perceptions of their contextual environment whenever necessary. As further discussed in Chapter 2, critical constructivism understands policy-making as a social construction resulting from processes of historical, social and political

interaction, which are subject to change and transformation (Hettne and Söderbaum, 2000: 460). Additionally, this approach embraces an understanding of power as being both relational and productive. Power implies a relation for it comes across as the imposition of a worldview over another. As a consequence, it produces shared meanings, which in turn constitute the identities, interests and discursive practices of the involved agents (Adler, 1997: 332-336). In this reading, power tends towards hegemony and domination. However, power is never absolute and agents may resist attempts at controlling their behaviour. Hegemony, agency and resistance are thus mutually implicated and resistance itself can be interpreted as an instance of power, albeit a non-dominant one (Grant, 2010: 227).

By challenging positivist conceptions of the social world, critical constructivism's focus rests on interpreting meanings and grasping the influence of discursive practices on the construction of the social world (Buzan and Hansen, 2010: 197; Laffey and Weldes, 1997; Zehfuss, 2002: 4). Its interpretive and critical dimensions are crucial to the study of foreign policy. For policy-making is a social construction, it can hardly be objectifiable or reduced to causal relations (Farrell, 2002: 56-57). As an interpretative approach, critical constructivism acknowledges the improbability of specifying causes of social events. In that regard, it becomes an intrinsic part of a scientific endeavour that seeks to understand, not explain, the social construction of reality (Adler, 1997: 328; Karacasulu and Uzgören, 2007: 34).

A critical constructivist reading will thus allow us to understand how the EU and Russia bring meaning to their identities, interests and interactions, therefore recognizing the larger inter-subjective context within which both of them act and to draw conclusions based on the analysis of relations between discursive practices by these actors and their outcome. By adding a third layer of reflexion, the analysis of the position of the shared neighbourhood in these processes certainly contributes to a better and more comprehensive understanding of such dynamics. This also enables the recognition that the neighbourhood plays a meaningful role in the interplay between two sets of discursive practices that aim to become hegemonic, i.e. EU and Russian foreign policies towards the shared neighbourhood.

Methodologically, we make the argument that this theoretical approach leans towards discourse analysis as proposed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. All in all, discourse analysis is useful for it assists the researcher in identifying the broader social

scenario within which relationships take place and to critically analyse the pinpointed discursive practices. It is particularly suitable to analyse political discourse and understand how a given discourse is articulated by political elites in order to formulate guidelines for action and constitute the social world. Discourses produce social reality by defining who is authorised to speak and to act, and create a common sense between authorised agents and their audiences that legitimates the former's actions (Milliken, 1999: 229). Furthermore, discourses are themselves structures of power reflecting a hegemonic understanding of social reality and they have a constitutive effect, disciplining and making interaction and decision-making possible (Adler and Pouliot, 2011). Laclau and Mouffe (2001) take a comprehensive approach towards discourse analysis for they claim discourses encompass not only language as such, but rather all social phenomena. Their approach takes the form of a deconstructive genealogy aiming at shedding light on: the context in which discursive practices are created and/or transformed; how certain discursive practices become hegemonic; and how discursive struggles unfold within a certain field.

For the sake of deconstructing and analysing dynamics of power and security in the EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle, the research relies on information gathered through books, academic articles, policy papers, secondary data from media, and official documents and statements by interlocutors with authority on foreign policy and security matters. The analysis of the latter sources is pivotal for they represent a means through which foreign policy actors attempt to produce shared meanings about the self and the other, their respective policies and strategic issues, and the international system in which they are situated. Nonetheless, this analysis brings important challenges to the researcher. Such sources of information often disguise struggles for power and instances of either hegemony or resistance that are at their core. The deconstructive genealogy suggested by Laclau and Mouffe focusing on the analysis of discursive practices – i.e. the linguistic and non-linguistic features of discourse – opens important avenues to identifying these struggles for power and sheds light on relational aspects of identity and interests, thus contributing to an in-depth understanding and interpretation of intricate power and security relations in the EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle.

Considering our research purpose we have opted for a comparative case-study approach in order to conduct our reflection and the discourse analysis as suggested by Laclau and Mouffe. This method is consistent with the holistic dimension of this research

and its focus on providing a new interpretation of a specific subject rather than testing hypothesis (Druckman, 2005). Given the fact that our aim is to unveil dynamics of power and security arising from the confrontation of two hegemonic regional projects – the EU and Russia – over their shared neighbourhood, the available case-studies are limited to countries in Eastern Europe – Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus – and the South Caucasus – Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. Countries in Eastern Europe appear in this research as the selected case-studies due to three main reasons. First, as claimed by Barry Buzan and Ole Waever (2003: 416), it is in this region of key strategic relevance that power and security dynamics are more intense resulting from the fact that it represents the last stronghold between the EU and Russia, i.e. West and East. Second, countries in the South Caucasus are obviously caught in between EU and Russian hegemonic projects but they are also affected by other significant neighbours with strong regional interests, namely Turkey and Iran. The fact that, seemingly, the EU and Russia do not have further regional competition in Eastern Europe turns this region into a perfect canvas to delve into the hegemonic nature of these two regional projects, the struggles for power arising from the clash of competing interests and the agency of the shared neighbourhood. Third, these countries share a common historical and cultural heritage, and were subject to similar post-communist transition challenges thus making their foreign policies comparable. In particular, it enables the researcher to identify patterns of similarities and differences in the way these countries chose to relate themselves with the EU and Russia. This comparative dimension is not limited to the selected case-studies, however. It is also applicable to EU and Russian policies and strategies of power towards their common neighbourhood. By deconstructing these policies and by highlight the discursive practices they produce and reproduce, we establish a ground for comparing the EU and Russia hegemonic regional projects and understand their similarities, differences, unfolding and practical consequences for the dynamics of power and security in the identified triangle.

These complex dynamics are subject of analysis under the period starting from 1991 until 2015. Although this is a considerable time-frame, it is of foremost importance to deconstruct how these actors have defined their identities, interests and discursive practices from scratch. The end of the Cold War and the dismantling of the USSR represent a turning point in the configuration of power and security in the broader European space, and the moment from which both the EU and Russia started to give shape to their hegemonic

regional projects. It is rather difficult to trace an end to an analysis that sheds light on dynamics that are on permanent evolution and transformation. However, by extending the analysis until 2015 we are able to include events leading to the Euromaidan movement in Ukraine in late 2013, as well as its subsequent consequences to power and security relations in the region. Even if this is an internal movement, circumscribed to one of the selected case-studies, its repercussions crossed borders. It had considerable impact on the way the EU and Russia relate to each other, and to their shared neighbourhood alike. Furthermore, events in Ukraine also triggered important changes in discursive practices by countries in the shared neighbourhood between the EU and Russia, which are worth analysing in the context of complex and intertwined power and security dynamics in the broader European space.

According to IR dominant theories, there is a predominance of structures (of power) over agents, meaning that structures overwhelm agents by constraining their decisions and actions. This research aims at proving otherwise. By focusing on the critical analysis of dynamics of power and security in the EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle, it envisages to shed light on the fact that agents have the ability to act against and resist the hegemonic power of structures and practices of domination usually associated with them. That does not mean that these agents engage in permanent struggles for power with their hegemonic counterparts, but instead that they have the choice and ability to act (and not merely react), in order to protect their identities and interests. Why these countries have agency and how this agency works in practical terms is the puzzle this research aims at understanding. In doing so, this thesis contributes to fill an important gap in the literature and to bring a new and more comprehensive perspective on the dynamics arising from the EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle by: 1) highlighting relations of hegemony, agency and resistance; 2) critically analysing EU and Russian foreign and neighbourhood policies; 3) focusing on the countries in the shared neighbourhood as active agents in this triangle; and 4) stressing the interaction and mutual constitution of agents and structures without the pre-given bias that some actors matter more than others.

The purpose is, thus, to deconstruct the manifold facets of the EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle by answering a set of riddles: which endogenous and exogenous reasons trigger processes of change and transformation in this triangle?; which identities and interests can be identified?; how to they interplay?; how do structures of power

manifest themselves?; are agents capable of resisting these structures of power?; how so?; has agency triggered processes of change and transformation in structures of power themselves? After mapping these dynamics, it is up to the researcher to triangulate them, to understand how they are mutually constituted and critically analyse their practical consequences, thus creating a ground for a more unbiased knowledge on the subject. Of course, this implies several challenges. On the one hand, dynamics of power and security in the EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle are in permanent flux, which turns the analysis into a complex and time-demanding process. On the other hand, such complexity calls for a rigorous methodological approach comprising a careful deconstruction and analysis of discursive practices in this triangle, in order to unwrap interests and identity issues influencing the decision-making and discursive practices of the actors involved in these dynamics. In this regard, this research aims at first and foremost to contribute to the current literature with an independent critical power of analysis, rather than to come across with new data. By doing so, this research opens important avenues to understand how power and security dynamics arise from the mutual constitution of the actors involved in this triangle and provides an interpretation focusing on hegemony, agency and resistance, something that remains under-explored in the literature on the topic.

1.2. The Structure of the thesis

Delving into power and security dynamics in the EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle and framing relations between the involved actors in terms of hegemony, agency and resistance represents a rather complex challenge. As a consequence, the gradual understanding and interpretation of these dynamics will take place in five differentiated moments, matching the five chapters contained in this thesis. This introduction is followed by Chapter 2 which addresses the theoretical and methodological approaches that frame the research. It starts by presenting the state of the art on critical constructivism. The goal is to identify its core premises and analytical tools to understand the interlinkages between identities, interests and discursive practices, as well as their influence on power and security. The chapter proceeds by claiming that epistemologically critical constructivism leans towards discourse analysis as suggested by

Laclau and Mouffe – a fundamental tool to map the social scenario in which relationships take place and to interpret discursive practices.

The subsequent chapters apply the stated theoretical and methodological framework of analysis to power and security dynamics in the EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle. Chapter 3 engages with the deconstruction and discourse analysis of EU and Russian foreign and neighbourhood policies in post-Cold War Europe. It starts by analysing the evolution of EU foreign and neighbourhood policies, devoting particular attention to EU policies and initiatives towards the shared neighbourhood with Russia, e.g. PCAs, the ENP and the Eastern Partnership (EaP). On a second moment, the same analytical exercise is used to shed light on the evolution of Russian foreign policy towards its neighbourhood with a special emphasis on strategies aiming at exploring manifold vulnerabilities in the post-Soviet space, and on Russian-led regional integration initiatives – e.g. Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). The goal is to map how the EU and Russia have been defining themselves as foreign policy actors and how their hegemonic regional projects have been edified since the end of the Cold War. On a third moment, the chapter delves into the evolution of EU-Russia relations and the tensions arising from increasing levels of competition over a common area of interests and influence. After this deconstruction, the chapter engages with the discourse analysis of EU and Russian hegemonic regional projects. The goal is to provide a comparison between these two actors and to shed light on the mutual constitution of their identities, interests and discursive practices. Furthermore, it identifies the nodal points and related hybrid discourses structuring EU and Russian foreign policies practices and their relations with the shared neighbourhood, as well as the struggles for power imbedded in their discursive practices. By doing so, it illustrates how EU and Russian hegemonic regional projects create structures of power aiming at dominating the countries in the shared neighbourhood and how the resulting competition over this common area of interests enables instances of agency and resistance by the subjects of their domination.

Chapter 4 deals with the foreign policies of the selected case-studies – Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus. The purpose is to provide an informed context to situate the development of their foreign policies and their relations with the EU and Russia. As such, the way these countries related themselves with their significant neighbours will be crucial

to stress instances of agency and resistance against EU and Russian hegemonic power. Overall, this chapter maps the broader scenario and field of discursivity in which interactions among these actors take place by focusing on how they define their identities and interests via relations of power and security. Furthermore, it provides a comparison of foreign policies of the selected case-studies as unveiled by the deconstruction of their discursive practices.

Chapter 5 concludes by critically analysing the identified instances of hegemony, agency and resistance operating in the EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle, in order to understand why countries in the shared neighbourhood have agency, in the context of confrontation and dispute for influence between two hegemonic regional projects; how this agency works in practical terms and whether it influences the constitution of EU and Russian identities, interests and discursive practices. To do so, it proceeds with a triangulation of the identified dynamics of power and security along the nodal points and hybrid discourses pinpointed in Chapter 3. The chapter finishes with some final considerations regarding power and security relations in the EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle and insights on future lines of research.

2. Critical Constructivism: framing power and security relations in the EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle

Starting from the late 1980s, social theories have been applied to IR studies in order to provide an alternative reading from rationalist approaches to world politics. This sociological turn in IR envisaged breaking with the view that undifferentiated rational actors, whose relations are structured by the balance of material power, occupy the world. Social constructivism played a particularly important role in this move by providing an analysis that locates agents in a social structure that both constitutes those agents and is constituted by their interaction (Carta and Morin, 2014: 300-301; Farrell, 2002: 50). In doing so, it challenged the rationalist notion of an unchanging reality of world politics; a reality which social constructivism claims to be socially constructed rather that given. This did not mean denying that political entities have particular identities and interests, but instead that these attributes are constructed through interaction and therefore may change across time and space (Karacasulu and Uzgören, 2007: 37-38; Zehfuss, 2002: 3-4).

However innovative in its claims, conventional social constructivism seemed unable to move beyond a middle ground position between rationalist approaches and interpretative approaches (Adler, 1997). One problem seemed to be that social constructivism assumed a rather ambitious goal of providing theoretical explanations of social events without ever proposing an alternative to the methodology applied in traditional rationalist approaches to IR. Despite the clear sociological influence, social constructivism has refrained to assume a clear social ontology and a post-positivist epistemology out of fear of being ignored by mainstream debates in IR. Instead, it opted for a less controversial approach aiming at creating channels for discussion with other theories, therefore avoiding its marginalisation in the discipline's major debates.

Critical constructivism – a strand of social constructivism inspired by canonical figures of critical social theory, notably Anthony Giddens, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida – has sought to overcome this conundrum and the overall inability of both conventional and positivist epistemologies to grasp complex subjects such as the construction and evolution of political identities, interests and power relations. All in all, it challenges the positivist conception of the social world and knowledge about it by

interpreting meanings and grasping the influence of changing discursive practices, which become central to this approach (Buzan and Hansen, 2009: 197; Laffey and Weldes, 1997; Zehfuss, 2002: 4). This is due to the fact that, in order to understand these dynamic subjects and their impact on the social world, the researcher has to pay particular attention to the historical and discursive processes whereby agency and structure are constituted. This, as below argued, implies deconstructing social events in order to shed light on the formation and evolution of actors' identities, interests and power relations. The goal is to reconstruct a sequence of events leading to a specific outcome in order to understand which key moments have empowered a given discursive practice and contributed to the production, reproduction or transformation of the status quo.

Seemingly, conventional constructivism and critical constructivism do share some theoretical fundamentals. Both: 1) aim to denaturalise the social world by revealing how institutions, practices and identities that people take as matter of fact are socially constructed; 2) believe that intersubjective reality and meanings are critical data for understanding the social world; 3) insist that all data must be contextualised (i.e. it must be related to, and situated within, the social environment in which it is gathered); 4) accept the power-knowledge nexus and the restoration of agency to human individuals; 5) and stress the reflexivity of the self and society, that is, the mutual constitution of agents and structures (Hopf, 1998). In sum, both strands of constructivism challenge rationalist conceptions of human nature and action, stressing instead the social construction of reality and the importance of intersubjectivity in the constitution of identities, interests and discursive practices (Price and Reus-Smit, 1998: 261).

The major difference between conventional constructivism and critical constructivism is the fact that the latter is not searching for an intelligible scientific explanation of international politics, but rather to provide interpretations based on the analysis of words and deeds, while fully accepting and embracing the subjective nature of social sciences and the role of human agency in world politics phenomena. Furthermore, critical constructivism takes the (positivist) continuing focus on creating categories for hypothesis testing as contradictory and conflicting with the goal of mapping change in identities and interests, and therefore makes the constitution of meaning and practice in the world its point of departure (Fierke, 2002: 343). Critical constructivism envisages finding how subjects, objects and interpretive dispositions of world politics were socially

constructed such that certain discursive practices were made possible. Such an approach implies a stronger focus on the link between agents and their social context, as well as a broader understanding of foreign policy. According to this reading, the latter becomes a practice producing a social order through which both actors and discursive practices are produced and reproduced (Doty, 1993: 298-301). Political decisions depend on individual preferences and interests, which are a matter of shared knowledge, collective meanings and discursive practices attached to a given situation (Adler, 1997: 321).

Methodologically, this leans towards discourse analysis: a fundamental tool to map the social scenario in which relationships take place, and the interpretation of patterns of behaviour. In intertwining discourses and practices, critical constructivism supported by discourse analysis addresses conventional constructivism's inconsistency in combining a social ontology with a positivist epistemology, thus tackling dynamics that would otherwise remain invisible and opening important avenues into the study of international politics.

To delve into these issues, this chapter starts by presenting a literature review on critical constructivism, focusing on two central concepts to this research: power and security. On a second moment the chapter addresses methodological issues by claiming that is possible and desirable to combine critical constructivism's social ontology with a post-positivist epistemology, in particular discourse analysis as proposed by Laclau and Mouffe. The chapter finishes with some final considerations regarding the discussed topics and highlights the advantages of applying the analysed theoretical and methodological framework to a specific topic: the critical analysis of power and security relations in the EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle.

2.1. Critical Constructivism: challenging the mainstream in IR

A review of the relevant literature on the topic reveals that social constructivism is a meta-group that includes a range of distinct varieties defined by their methodological choices and disagreements (Adler, 1997). Despite sharing a common ground, these strands rely on different intellectual traditions, from social theory and political philosophy to *Wittgensteinian* thought (Zehfuss, 2002: 9).

Critical constructivism is a strand of social constructivism strongly influenced by critical theory and inspired by postmodern authors such as Foucault and Derrida (Fierke and Jorgensen, 2001: 5). It shares with other strands of social constructivism the assumption that the human world is an artifice, i.e., a social construction resulting from human interaction in specific historical, cultural, and political settings (Dunne *et al.*, 2010: 179). However, it is distinguished from them by having embarked on a triple – sociological, linguistic and practice – turn and assumed itself as an interpretative post-positivist approach (Laffey and Weldes, 1997).

Overall, critical constructivism makes a significant breakthrough in defying the methodological conventionalism that imprints the works based on other strands of social constructivism and IR theories in general. It challenges particularly all studies attempting to explain how norms shape agency in world politics through a modernist/positivist scientific approach consisting on testing and falsifying theories against evidence and finding causal relationships between social phenomena (Farrell, 2002: 56-57). Given the ubiquity of norms in the political realm and the complexity and mutual constitutiveness of social reality, it seems rather difficult, if not completely impossible, to measure the strength of a given norm or to predict which norm will be most influential in different scenarios. As argued by Price and Reus-Smith (1998: 282)

> instead of wrestling with the quantitative connotations of 'how much' a norm or institution or ideational structure mattered, [critical] constructivist arguments have often taken the form of demonstrating that a given phenomenon was an indispensable/necessary condition for a particular set of practices or events, and pacing focus on tracing the processes of how it mattered.

In that regard, critical constructivism's main concern is to uncover the intended and unintended meanings of political action focusing on instances of power and to explore political continuities and discontinuities – i.e. occurrences of change and transformation – that conventional theories have often neglected.

The main contribution of the so-called sociological turn in IR for the development of critical constructivism is the notion that reality is mutually constitutive, i.e. a two-way process between agents and structures (Bache *et al.*, 2005: 43; Berger and Luckman, 2004; Fierke, 2007). This means that actions cannot be fully understood in isolation from agents' social field, and that both interests and identities are shaped and re-shaped by the social setting in which they exist. This social setting is open, changes over time and relies

intrinsically on a historically derived system of shared meanings, which defines agency and makes action intelligible. Social change thus results from the duality of structure, i.e. the recursiveness of social life, as constituted in social discursive practices (Guzzini, 2000: 165-166).

The power of agency is emphasised in this framework, as agents are able to transform their social environment through words and deeds. They are the social constructors of their own practices and structures; they act according to institutionalised rules and behavioural practices – i.e. structures –, but also according to their interests (Adler, 1997: 325; Goldstein and Keohane, 1993: 9). Agents come across as reflexive beings insofar they adapt their behaviour in accordance to their perception of the social structure in which they are located. The contention here is that human capacity for reflexion and learning influences the meaning actors attribute to the material world and, thus, collective understandings provide them with the strategic view to use their power and material capabilities (Adler, 1997: 341). Agency, however, is not always intentional. Actors may have power they never exercise, and their power can have unintended effects, which may result from action, inaction and failure to act (Hayward and Lukes, 2008: 7). Although critical constructivism assumes actors to have more agency than other IR theories, this does not mean that agency is unrestrained. To the contrary, choices are constrained by webs of understanding practices, identities, and interests of other actors that prevail in particular historical contexts (Hopf, 1998). However, agents do have the potential to transform structures by thinking about them and acting on them in new ways (Jackson and Sorensen, 2012: 161). As a consequence, structures are both the medium and outcome of social practices and agents' conduct (Bieler and Morton, 2001: 7-8; Farrell, 2002; Giddens, 1984; Wendt, 1987). This focus on the mutual constitutiveness of agents and structures enables a richer understanding of state agency and a more dynamic conception of international relations (Price and Reus-Smit, 1998: 267).

According to this approach, identities are shaped and constructed over-time. They are relational and dynamic rather than pre-given (Hansen, 2006: 17). Identities cannot be appraised apart from the social structures that constitute them as acquiring an identity is a profoundly social phenomena (Bache *et al.*, 2005: 43). Moreover, identities are constructed through practices of othering that generate difference; they are foundationally linked to the other (Epstein, 2010: 330; Weldes *et al.*, 1999: 11). A common strand in international

politics is the representation of the self as civilised, peaceful and secure, and the other as barbarian, inferior and dangerous. Nonetheless, constructions of identity can take several degrees of otherness based on political, geographical or even temporal representations of the other. In all cases, even if the self is portrayed as existing prior to the other, both are in fact socially and discursively constructed in tandem (Diez, 2004: 320-323; 2005: 627; Laclau, 2007: 3). Processes of identification through practices of othering are often reciprocal. As each subject consolidates its identity, it threatens other, which in turn consolidates its own identity in response. It is in the clash between those different identities that the social production of political antagonism and insecurities is to be found (Mouffe, 2005: 2-3; Weldes *et al.*, 1999: 15-19). Identity is thus something relational; it is always given in reference to something it is not (Hansen, 2006: 6-7). This process of identification based on practices and discourses of othering is deeply powerful for it establishes categories of normalcy and deviance thus constructing a hierarchical and asymmetrical world (Epstein, 2010: 337).

Identities can thus be understood as a ground for social or political action: a collective phenomenon denoting some degree of sameness among members of a group or the product of multiple and competing discourses. Hence, one same agent can have multiple fluid identities. No identity is ever definitive for there is always a certain degree of uncertainty and ambiguity in the way subjects relate to themselves and to others. Power is essential to maintain, even impose, identity and produces hierarchies whose primary function is to safeguard and spread certain discourses of identity, while suppressing or marginalizing those who question its essence (Laclau, 2007: 99; Lebow, 2008: 474-476; Mouffe, 2005: 12).

As far as state identity is concerned two dimensions deserve particular attention: the internal dimension, which refers to the representations and corresponding understandings held by ruling elites and general public within the state itself; and the external dimension encompassing representations and understandings about that state among elites and general public in other states. State identity requires interpretation and linkage to particular actions and decisions. States are social beings that cannot be separated from the broader social setting that shapes who they are and the possibilities available to them (Dunne *et al.*, 2010: 181). As a result, it is only through the broadly understood process of identification that the state can shape the articulation of interests and actual

policies. State processes of identification thus refers to various attempts by political actors to reinforce, weaken, or redefine the present held representations of the state and understandings about proper behaviour, in order to influence its foreign policy (Alexandrov, 2003: 39). Diplomacy and foreign policy thus take place through the mobilisation and expression of particular cultural, social and political identities (Hansen, 2006: 3). However, foreign policy itself plays an important role on the state processes of identification for it serves, at least in part, to construct its identity through the representation of an other without which national identities would be meaningless (Cebeci, 2012: 565; Diez *et al.*, 2011: 61). In that regard, we can claim that changes in self-perceptions and perceptions from abroad regarding a state identity can eventually lead to changes in its interests and political practices and vice-versa, thus highlighting the mutual constitution of identity and foreign policy.

Furthermore, as claimed by Ted Hopf (1998: 175), "[i]n telling you who you are, identities strongly imply a particular set of interests … with respect to choices of action in particular domains, and with respect to particular actors". Interests thus exist in parallel with identities: neither is ontologically prior to another. Interests are produced by identities, but then again identities are chosen due to certain interests (Alexandrov, 2003: 39). For what is more, "our ideas about ourselves and our environment shape our interactions and are shaped by our interactions; thereby they create social reality" (Zehfuss, 2001: 55).

This understanding of identities and interests as dynamic social products that evolve according to agents' perceptions (Guzzini, 2000) leads critical constructivists to problematise their constitution, evolution, as well as their discursive and practical consequences (Doty, 1993: 315-316). By assuming that identities of the self and the other are inextricably bound up in a relation of power, critical constructivists can offer theoretically informed accounts of processes of identification along the following dimensions: hegemony, agency and resistance (Hopf, 1998). In this regard, critical constructivism problematises both agents and structures; it explores the dynamics of change as well as continuity moments thus calling into question established understandings of world politics and challenging the mainstream in IR (Fierke, 2001: 123; Price and Reus-Smit, 1998: 288).

The linguistic turn adds to this framework the understanding of language as constitutive of the social world. Inspired by *Derridean* and *Wittgensteinian* thoughts this turn introduced language in IR as a system of differential signs that create meaning through a simultaneous construction of identity and difference (Hansen, 2006: 17). Systems of meaning (i.e. structures of shared knowledge) are important for they define how agents interpret their surrounding environment and adapt their actions accordingly (Price and Reus-Smit, 1998: 266). As such, language is always intersubjective; it is fundamentally social for human beings are socialised into it. In this process, human beings simultaneously learn what words are and what they convey, and how they themselves should behave (Dunne *et al.*, 2010: 188). Language exists in systems of shared meaning and it is reproduced through agents' practices. On their turn, these practices are patterned and structured by the rules embodied in language (Doty, 1993: 305). Therefore, language is bound up in the world rather than a mirror of it (Dunne *et al.*, 2010: 185). Language is itself performative – i.e. it does things – and it is inherently powerful (Adler and Pouliot, 2011: 15; Austin, 1975: 6). It comes as a central feature of an agent relation to itself, to others, to its social environment, and to the practices and traditions informing this environment (MacKenzie, 2000: 10). Discourses produce social reality and create certain forms of organisation while excluding other possible modes of identity and action. They define who is authorised to speak and to act and create a common sense between authorised agents and their audiences, which legitimates the former actions (Milliken, 1999: 229). Hence, language plays the pivotal role of linking agency, structure and process in meaningful ways (Farrell, 2002: 50).

On the other hand, language is itself a structure reflecting a hegemonic understanding of social reality and it has a constitutive effect, disciplining and making interaction and decision-making possible. In this process, discourses turn out to be crucial for it is the ability to communicate that makes possible to socialise and imprint actions with meaning: diffusing perceptions of the self and the other, establishing relations of power and redefining interests (Adler and Pouliot, 2011: 20-30).

Critical constructivism claims world politics to be constituted by discursive structures. These structures discipline the communicative interaction among agents by providing the social foundation for policy making. In this context, political agents discursively struggle for the prerogative of interpretation over political events and adequate

policies at different levels. Discursive structures channel how the context of a given situation is intersubjectively constructed, what options appear feasible and what arguments count as legitimate to participating actors. In providing such an argument critical constructivism seeks to move away from any hidden bias favouring structures or agents, since reality is socially constructed and both agents and structures matter in producing it (Dunne *et al.*, 2010: 182; Hansen, 2006: xvii; Simmerl, 2011: 3-6). This follows from a reflexive understanding of reality, which by no means implies denying that a material world exists outside our heads; it merely adds that this world cannot be known without our intersubjective frameworks and interference (Aalberts and van Munster, 2008: 724). Methodologically, this linguistic turn brings to the study of international politics the added value of leaving behind the insolvable task of getting into agents' minds in order to speculate about their motivations and preferences focusing instead on the problematisation of core assumptions within foreign policy discourses (Diez *et al.*, 2011: 61; Simmerl, 2011: 5). Furthermore, to look at foreign policy as a set of discursive practices is to claim that the relationship between identities, interests and policies is mutually constitutive, rather than causal (Hansen, 2006: xvi).

Despite its added value, analysis of international phenomena based solely on discourses cannot fully grasp the complexity of the social world. In order to address this shortcoming, critical constructivism engaged in an additional turn: the practice turn. The advantage of this move to the study of IR is the understanding of the social world as the result of *praxis*. It implies a stronger focus on political practices, which is helpful for it broadens the scope of analysis beyond text and meaning. It interweaves together the material and discursive worlds insofar practices are understood to be both material and meaningful. This move further allows to engage with structure–agent interactions in IR in a more profound fashion (Guzzini, 2000: 164). As argued by Wittgenstein (2009: 15) what does not get expressed in language is shown by its application; what language conceals, practices declare. Therefore, looking at practices is to go beyond language and to expose the non-linguistic moment, opening horizons into a broader way of thinking about foreign policy (MacKenzie, 2000: 22).

Like discourses, practices are supposed to structure international interaction and fully embrace the paradoxical, though simultaneous, processes of stability and change that imprint the social and political realms. Furthermore, this approach makes possible to look

at discourses as actions themselves through which agents become aware of reality, therefore imprinting their practices with meaning (Kratochwil, 2001: 16-20). The practice turn thus complements the *Derridean* and *Wittgensteinian* thoughts incorporated in the linguistic turn in IR aiming at exposing the abstract, but meaningful, binary oppositions imbedded in discursive structures, thus allowing the researcher to map and understand how politics actually work (Adler and Pouliot, 2011; Stern, 2003: 188).

This move towards the integration of practices into the analysis of social events was already proposed by Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu (Balzacq *et al.*, 2010), but becomes now fully integrated and coordinated with the analysis of context and discourses in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of social phenomena. Deeply rooted in their social and linguistic setting, practices can be defined as

> socially meaningful patterns of action, which, in being performed more or less competently, simultaneously embody, act out, and possible reify background knowledge and discourse in and on the material world. Practices […] are not merely descriptive 'arrows' that connect structure to agency and back, but rather dynamic material and ideational processes that enable structures to be stable or to evolve, and agents to reproduce or transform structures (Adler and Pouliot, 2011: 4-5).

This understanding of practices as being simultaneously material and meaningful becomes useful to analyse certain moves in international politics, which do not involve discourses as such. It helps to understand actors' strategic options by addressing issues of power, interests, hierarchy and legitimacy. The power of social practices lies in their capacity to reproduce the intersubjective meanings that constitute social structures and actors alike. Despite the inherent power of structures, they do not exist independently of the knowledgeable practices of social agents (Price and Reus-Smit, 1998: 267). Intersubjective meanings have structural attributes that do not merely constrain or empower actors; they also define their social reality (Adler, 1997: 327).

To the extent that practices are often patterned and repeated in space and time, they simultaneously produce and reproduce a socially organised and structured context, which in turn provides them with meaning. In fact, practices are both agential and structural. They are ultimately performed by individual actors, thus relating directly to human agency; but they also create shared patterns and diffuse background knowledge that structure actions and compel individuals to behave in a socially acceptable fashion (Adler

and Pouliot, 2011: 4-5). Because practices are inextricably linked to meaning, they have an autonomy that cannot be reduced neither to agency nor structures thus making them suitable to analyse the manifold forms in which they interact and shape each other (Bieler and Morton, 2001: 15-16; Doty, 1997: 377).

One may infer from this rationale that foreign policy actions are constrained and empowered by prevailing practices at home and abroad. In this sense, foreign policy becomes a social practice that at once constitutes and empowers the state, defines its socially recognised competences, and secures the boundaries that differentiate the domestic and international spheres of practice. In doing so, they define the appropriate domains in which specific actors may secure recognition and act competently (Hopf, 1998).

By assuming this triple turn, critical constructivism underlines the endogenous and exogenous factors that inform processes of decision-making and influence agent–structure interactions, while emphasising the social, linguistic and practical dimensions of international relations (Andreatta, 2005: 31; Dunne *et al.*, 2010: 179). Although the impact of structures on decision-making is acknowledged, structures are not reified but instead interpreted as social, historical, and discursive constructions (Copeland, 2006: 7). Structures exist only through the reciprocal interaction of actors. Unlike realist accounts of international relations, the practice turn embodied in critical constructivism implies understanding change, and not continuity, as the main trend in world politics. True, change is never total for there are always elements of continuity that prevail over time and space (Croft, 2000; Terriff, 2000: 239). However, by adapting their words and deeds, agents can transform their surrounding social environment, thus resisting to situations reproducing conflictual practices and effectively changing structures (Jackson and Sorensen, 2012: 167). A focus on discourses, practices and the social nature of world politics as suggested by critical constructivism allows to better grasp the manifold facets of international relations. To fully understand this idea, it is necessary to bring to the discussion two important concepts: power and security. Critical constructivism defines both concepts as dynamic social constructions where discourses, practices and interactions perform leading roles (Fierke, 2007: 6-7). Due to their relevance to the understanding of critical constructivism's added value to the study of IR and the awareness of international phenomena these concepts are now discussed in greater detail.

2.1.1. Power, Hegemony and Resistance

Outwardly, international relations and foreign policy convey a significant dimension of power. As such this concept assumes a central role in the analysis of international phenomena. Overall, critical constructivism embraces a nuanced *Foucauldian* concept of power. Michael Foucault argues that power always carries a dimension of productiveness and possibility based on ideas and norms that becomes meaningful through discursive practices (Bache *et al.*, 2005: 42; Burke, 2008: 363; Foucault, 1982; Guzzini, 2000). In his reading, power is more than the capacity of one agent to use material resources in order to get another agent to do what it otherwise would not do as claimed by realist approaches to IR (Barnett and Duvall, 2005: 2). It is the ability to reproduce, discipline, and police. It is the imposition of a worldview over another, defining shared meanings, which in turn constitute the identities, interests and discursive practices of a given state or political entity. As a consequence, power is to be found everywhere.

Powerful agents establish game rules, what is normal and acceptable, and persuade others to accept these predicates, thus producing asymmetrical social orders (Adler, 1997: 332-336; Guzzini, 2000: 156). When such power is realised, change in world politics is quite hard indeed. Intersubjective structures, however difficult to change, are not impregnable. Alternative agents with alternative identities, discursive practices and sufficient material resources are at least theoretically capable of effecting change. As long as there is difference, there is potential for change (Hopf, 1998).

Even if this potential for change exists, power tends to lean towards normalisation – a dominating practice aiming at perpetuating power relations (Foucault, 1997: 38-39). Power is always about including and excluding; legitimising and authorizing (Adler, 1997: 336). In this regard, all alternative knowledges or forms of social organisations are perceived as a threat to be fought at all cost. The outcome is a repressive relation prone to preserve and reproduce the status quo (Foucault, 1997: 15). Power is irreducibly social thus assuming a relational nature, which depends on the existence of groups of resistance or alternative models subject to being dominated. Implicit is a binary definition of society, of an entity that can only be defined when in confrontation with a lesser other (Hekman, 2009: 446). The more successful the projection of this other as an abnormal, inferior and dangerous subject, the more justifiable becomes the usage of all means to normalise its

existence. What is at stake is not the destructing of the other, but control over it while guaranteeing powerful agents' status and security (Arfi, 2010: 42).

Normalisation is closely related to the socialisation of actors and their (more or less voluntary) acceptance of knowledges and values promoted by a given subject of power. Socialisation is an evolutionary process that grows out of interaction over time and by which shared understandings find expression in new patterns of action moulded by their specific context (Adler, 1997: 336; Barkawi and Laffey, 2006: 336-337). Here international institutions work as privileged spaces of socialisation, for they stimulate practices that affect agents' identities and interests. By endorsing specific worldviews and ways of behaving they tend to normalise and, thus, cannot be dissociated from the exercise of power. The norms diffused by international institutions are not neutral. They are actively built by agents having strong notions about appropriate or desirable conduct in their community (Fierke, 2002: 348-349). Norms convey power as well as a worldview consonant with agents' interests, thus acting as powerful mechanisms of social construction (Finnemore and Sikkink, 2001: 402). In this regard, they may also be interpreted as social structures consisting of shared knowledge and intersubjective understandings, and constituting interests and identities (Björkdahl, 2002: 20).

As a consequence, socialisation can be better grasped as a dominating mechanism. However, it is often a disguised form of domination, which works through persuasion. The mission of the socialising agent is to convince other actors to change their ideas, interests and conduct in a non-violent fashion (Adler, 1997: 345; Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998: 902). The very same argument can be made about conditionality mechanisms. Conditionality is a significant foreign policy instrument used both in the context of international organisations and in bilateral or multilateral frameworks for relations. Assuming different forms, conditionality mechanisms represent a long-term and often disguised method for shaping how other actors behave in the international fora (Hurrell, 2005: 39). When that does not happen a number of sanctions can be applied. The idea of sanction implies that powerful agents are willing and able to use coercion to enforce a given norm or behaviour, thus highlighting the power in which norms and institutions are embedded (Björkdahl, 2002: 14). Even if institutions tend to provide many power-levelling possibilities for weaker states, it is also true that powerful states play a particular role in shaping norms by arguing at critical moments and by modelling understandings of what

should count as an international norm or practice. This sheds light on two unsurmountable features of international interaction: decision-making is part of a greater power-political game, and interdependence is more often than not uneven (Hurrell, 2005: 41).

In order to properly understand these powerful dynamics, it is pivotal to bring to the discussion another key concept behind critical constructivism thinking – hegemony. In IR there are multiple definitions of hegemony, however two of them mark the extreme poles of the debate. On the one hand, a neorealist notion of hegemony emphasises the role of a great power as a regional hegemon that provides order through setting up institutions and providing norms and certain frames from proper behaviour. This definition relies on the economic and military capabilities of the hegemon to enforce its norms and assure regional order. On the other hand, a concept of hegemony inspired by the work of Antonio Gramsci stands at the other end of this spectrum. This approach takes hegemony as a relation in which those subject to it consent, more or less willingly, to the same conceptions of society, broad problem definitions and principled solutions (Diez, 2013: 199-200).

The concept of hegemony under a critical constructivist framework builds up on the latter approach though it incorporates the theoretical refinement of the Gramscian concept made by Laclau and Mouffe (2001). For these authors hegemony is indeed the key concept in understanding every social and political formation. Hegemony is understood as a temporally fixed way of interpreting the discursive formations of different fields shared by a majority of agents. It provides a form of common ideological framework constitutive of perceptions of legitimacy and common sense. Hegemony is the deep foundation for social order to be possible and political decisions to be made and enacted without relying on force, since it ensures the cooperation and consent of a network of agents on different levels of world society. It provides the discursive condition for the shared perception of social reality and the horizon of possibility for specific political articulations to become dominant. Through the construction of meaning, power relations can become so naturalised that they can hardly be questioned. Hegemony is thus a structural condition reproduced through agency and cannot be simply reduced to a single political project. It is never absolute or total and necessarily produces political conflict and counter-hegemonic discursive articulations. Social forces are engaged in permanent struggles over hegemony, but they do not own it: they can acquire hegemonic status, but they cannot become

hegemons in the neorealist sense. As such, specific hegemonies can be gradually undermined and changed in the course of political events (Diez, 2013: 200; Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002: 32-33; Simmerl, 2011: 10-11).

These specific hegemonies are necessarily built on the articulation of a negative difference and demarcation from an antagonistic outside. They can never be total because meaning can only be temporally fixed in a discursive field while being incapable of determining the identity of all speaking positions (Simmerl, 2011: 25). If the dominant power – i.e. the hegemonic agent – intends to maintain its prevailing position within a given structure, then it should act strategically to prevent the emergence of potential rivals. A great deal of this strategy is the quest for authoritative control that avoids costly reliance on brute force and coercion. True, hegemonic power depends on coercion, but its stability and endurance are unattainable without consensus and collaboration. This implies the nuanced and often disguised construction of collaborative strings in which weaker states come to see themselves as having a stake in the hegemonic project, and in the diffusion of economic, cultural and political ideas. Despite being powerful tools, these indirect methods for achieving cooperation leave it to the weaker agents the decision of if, when and how they want to collaborate with the hegemonic power. Accordingly, their decision, though limited to a circumscribed set of options, remains strictly voluntary. In this regard, hegemony can assume a strong character – when cooperation with the hegemonic power comes as the result of genuine conviction or rational choice – or a loose form – when it flows from resignation and the belief that there is no better alternative (Gruber, 2005: 105; Hurrell, 2005: 45-52).

This concept of power is deeply interconnected with knowledge and discourses, both of which provide social phenomena with content and meaning, thus influencing their practical consequences (Foucault, 2000: 7-8). Every interpretation is based on a shared system of codes and symbols; of languages and social practices that human beings use to make sense of the world. Knowledge and discourses are rarely value-free but often enter in the creation and reproduction of a social order that benefits some in detriment of others (Adler, 1997: 336). It is the exercise of power that creates new knowledges and discourses, which in turn affect power itself shedding light on their mutual constitution (Foucault, 2000: 55-56). Shared knowledge is powerful for it provides agents the framework to interpret their surrounding environment, as well as indications on why and how they

should use their capabilities and power (Adler, 1997: 322). For it helps to order the world, knowledge shapes agendas, strategic interactions and their outcome. It guides social behaviour under conditions of uncertainty and provide new social views, which in turn can have a stake on the change of interests and preferences (Goldstein and Keohane, 1993: 12-16). In this framework, discourses go beyond a purely linguistic definition, incorporating practices reproducing and transforming reality. They simultaneously (re)produce normality and enable the emergence and affirmation of subjugated knowledges, thus making visible dynamics and divisions that define power relations (Guzzini, 2000: 159-160). Discursive processes are sites of social relations of power for they situate everyday practices, define possible social fields of action, and produce social identities and practices insofar they give meaning to them (Barnett and Duvall, 2005: 21).

In this sense, discursive practices are nothing but the realm of possibility (Foucault, 1997: xix-xxi). There is always a power/exclusion dynamic in any discursive practice. In the same way, discursive practices always carry an inherent struggle between hegemony and resistance (Adler, 1997: 336). Hence, they imply binary relations of domination that tend to work to the advantage of those structurally empowered. This is not to say that the underdogs are removed from their agency and autonomy as there is always a potential for resistance and change in all power dynamics. However, neither does this mean that actors are totally free to choose their circumstances, but rather that they make choices in the process of interacting with other actors, which bring distinct historical and political realities into being (Dunne *et al.*, 2010: 180; Laclau, 2007: 70). Discourses always entail internal contradictions and lacunae, which make possible both resistance to a prevailing discourse and the transformation of discursive structures (Gusterson, 1999: 326-327; Weldes *et al.*, 1999: 16). Power and resistance are thus mutually implicated and resistance itself comes across as an instance of power, albeit a non-dominant one (Grant, 2010: 227). A distinction should thus be made between hegemonic power – i.e. that power attempting to control or impose its will upon others – and resisting power – i.e. that power aiming at setting up actions to resist the impositions of the hegemonic power and change the status quo (Sharp *et al.*, 2005: 2-3). By this view, agents may resist attempts at controlling their behaviour, and may also have some leeway to instigate change. Even when resistance may appear futile, the possibility of agency within power relations is always present, even if delimited by prevailing structures (Adler and Bernstein, 2005:

296). Resistance thus comes across as attempts by weaker agents to reduce inequalities in social relations and potentially to transform the broader social structures in which they are situated. By this account, we are emphasising non-violent and non-revolutionary forms of resistance, which can be better grasped as nuanced discursive and practical processes rather than an event circumscribed to a given space and time. In the international realm, non-violent resistance may include how reflexive agents use their knowledge of social reality and dynamics of power in strategic ways to increase their stake on international affairs, remake or strengthen their identities and conquer political power. In this respect, states and other international agents do not merely react as rational individuals, but interact in a meaningful world (Dunne *et al.*, 2010: 180). Resistance is complex and multifaceted, ranging from direct actions against powerful agents and structures to more subtle practices aiming at altering or challenging dominant discursive understandings (Barnett and Duvall, 2005: 21-23).

The contention here is that power is both structural – for it concerns the constitution of social capacities and interests of agents in direct relation to one another – and productive – for it produces subjectivities in systems of meaning and signification (Barnett and Duvall, 2005: 3). The political realm might thus be better grasped as the stage of permanent struggles for establishing hegemonic shared intersubjective knowledge within the structured discursive fields of a given social group (Simmerl, 2011: 7).

2.1.2. Security and Securitisation

As previously noticed, in the light of critical constructivism security can be better understood as a process. Security is not an objective condition, nor is it stable or unchanged. Likewise, feeling insecure or threatened is not simply a matter of accurately perceiving an assemblage of material forces (Krause and Williams, 1996: 242). Any attempt to define security is necessarily constrained to an agent and a context or social environment (Renouf, 2011: 77). In this regard, security is always contingent upon something; it is always a social construction (Adler and Barnett, 1998: 12; Smith, 2000: 87).

Security is part of a particular set of historical discursive practices that rest upon shared understandings (Krause and Williams, 1996: 243). As a result, threats arise as the

output of discursive practices produced in a given social setting and not as natural or pre-social elements (Weldes *et al.*, 1999: 1-2; Zehfuss, 2006: 97). Changes in perceptions and events allow to track changes in actors' (in)securities, as well as different dynamics in relations with other actors (Bilgin, 2010). Indeed, changes in the broader social setting can influence preferences and decisions about security, with a consequent impact on perceptions related to threats and political struggles (Stern, 2006: 187-188; Terriff, 2000: 245). Furthermore, both security and insecurity are closely related to processes of identification and the formulation of interests. In this regard, security becomes an ontological necessity for the state, not because it needs to be protected from external threats but because its identity-building depends on them (Hansen, 2006: 34; Muppidi, 1999: 124-125).

Based on the so-called Copenhagen School (see e.g. Buzan, 1997; Buzan *et al.*, 1998; Waever, 1998), many authors have argued that processes associated with the construction of security (i.e. processes of securitisation) are speech acts. In that logic, the solely utterance of security is the act to be taken into account. By saying it something is done. Security becomes then an illocutionary act, a self-referential practice. There are several theoretical and methodological shortcomings with this formulation, however (see e.g. Balzacq, 2011; Guzzini, 2011; McDonald, 2008; McSweeney, 1999). At one level, it ultimately reduces security to a conventional procedure: the speech act. While speech acts are important in explaining how some security issues came into being, many develop with little if any discursive design. Security issues can be discursively constructed, but they can also arise out of different – intentional or unintentional – practices, whose aim was not to create a security problem in the first place (Balzacq, 2011: 1-2). At another level, it downplays the role of agency, power relations and context in the process of securitisation for the sake of methodological clarity (Simão and Dias, 2016: 98). By focusing on security as a speech act, the Copenhagen School confines the analysis to securitizing actors – i.e. actors who securitise issues by declaring something –, referent objects – i.e. what is to be secured – and the audience of the speech act. This narrows the approach by neglecting: 1) the specific social and historical context in which certain designations of security become possible; 2) the question of how particular agents are empowered or marginalised in speaking security; as well as 3) the complex and uneven power relations that predispose

political discourses and the receptivity of audiences to certain political moves (Guzzini, 2011: 335; McDonald, 2008: 580).

Security is better grasped as a pragmatic act – a political practice that can be either linguistic or non-linguistic. As contended by Balzacq (2009) securitisation stands as

> a sustained argumentative practice aimed at convincing a target audience to accept, based on what it knows about the world, the claim that a specific development is threatening enough to deserve an immediate policy to curb it.

Securitisation is an argumentative process, rather than a pure speech act as claimed by the Copenhagen School. Understandably, language is an essential component of interaction. In the specific case of securitisation processes, the aim of interactions, constituted or based on language, is to convince or persuade an audience to see the world in a specific way and thus act as the situation commands. In order to fully understand the underlying rationale of a securitisation process one must devote attention to the context in which it occurs (Balzacq *et al.*, 2010). Furthermore, unlike the Copenhagen School, this understanding of security/securitisation does not necessarily lead to the adoption of exceptional measures. Security is thus not simply exceptional; it has constitutive effects upon social reality (C.A.S.E, 2006: 456). The critical question is not whether discourse does things, but instead under which conditions the social content and meaning of security produces threats that claim for particular measures of containment (Balzacq, 2009). In that regard, foreign and security policies come across as practices contingent upon representations of the threat, country, security issue or crisis they seek to address: they are mutually constitutive (Hansen, 2006: 6).

Processes of securitisation are crucial to understanding all these discursive practices. This focus on security practices highlights the fact that security is indeed the result of processes of securitisation. Furthermore, it allows understanding not only the intention behind the use of power, but also its manifestations and effects, and how security practices distinguish themselves from other practices. Finally, it enables the mapping of the broader social field in which these practices occur instead of focusing exclusively on the linguistic dimension. This broader understanding of security opens avenues for an analysis centred on the construction of threats, referent objects, securitisation actors, security measures and the meaning of security itself (Ciută, 2009: 317; Simão and Dias, 2016: 98). Balzacq (2005: 178) further argues that

> securitisation is a meaningful procedure, in a field of forces, carried out through linguistic impulses, that strives to establish an unravelling course of events as shared concern aimed at recommending an immediate political action.

However, it can also be defined in terms of a field of struggles where different discourses permanently compete with one another aiming at achieving a hegemonic status (Balzacq *et al.*, 2010: 4). Therefore, in order to understand processes of securitisation one has to identify the referent object of securitisation, but also to analyse power struggles, argumentative procedures and multiple tactics performed by agents through a detailed empirical analysis of the social processes by which issues get securitised (Bigo, 2011: 234; Buzan, 2000: 3; Croft, 2000: ix). This focus on context and power struggles opens important avenues to understand international relations as a product of historical processes and interaction over time.

In this formulation, agency, context and discursive practices are pivotal features of every process of securitisation (Balzacq, 2011: 8), something that is fully consistent with the claims made by critical constructivism. Agency comes as a central aspect of securitisation processes, which carries an important power dimension that needs to be taken into consideration in the analysis of these processes. This, however, cannot be fully understood without the inclusion of contextual factors, simultaneously affecting and being affected by agency and power. To analyse security issues one has to explicitly and reflexively understand how external contexts affect securitisation, as the definition of security depends on specific cultural and historical experiences. Therefore, one needs to take into consideration the broader discursive and pragmatic setting from which the securitizing agent gains its power (Balzacq, 2011: 11-15; Simão and Dias, 2016: 99-100; Wilkinson, 2011: 96). In this sense, one can only grasp the full meaning of a process of securitisation by looking at the internal structure of the event – including the stage on which it is made, the audience to which it is addressed and its respective acceptance of that process – and the broader context in which it is embedded (Wilkinson, 2011: 98).

Given this reading of security and of processes of securitisation, foreign policy can be understood as an important practice of security. It not only helps to produce and reproduce the political identity of a given state, but it also constitutes itself through the combat against external threats, which might endanger the survival of the state or perceptions about it (Campbell, 1998: ix-x). To locate threats in the external realm – i.e. to relate them to an other outside our boundaries – is essentially a political attempt to give

coherence and consistency to an internal order. Foreign policy, including politics of security, thus comes across as a system of discursive practices that are global in scope but local in its legitimation (Campbell, 1998: 70). Understandably, all these practices convey a significant dimension of power.

By focusing on instances of power and security, critical constructivism emphasises the multiple interactions and articulations between agency, structures, identities, interests and discursive practices. It sheds light on the various and multifaceted struggles that constitute the social and political realm. Needless to say that each one of these struggles has often more than one meaning and they cannot be analysed in isolation from other social dynamics and relations for political struggles are deeply entangled among themselves. In order to better grasp such a complex scenario this research makes the methodological choice of using discourse analysis as proposed by Laclau and Mouffe to analyse instances of power and security in the EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle, as disclosed in the next section.

2.2. Discourse analysis meets Critical Constructivism: a discursive and practical methodological approach to the study of IR

Critical approaches to IR have traditionally refrained from engaging in methodological discussions because they tend to consider methodology as relating closely to positivism. By this view, it would seem unwise or at least incoherent to combine methodological approaches with post-positivist theoretical frameworks, such as critical constructivism. However, we concur with Lene Hansen (2006: 2) when she argues that a post-positivist "methodology is not only possible, but also desirable". True, it would be troubling to bring together critical constructivism with positivist methodologies emphasising causal relations, for the relationship between power, security, identities and interests is mutually constituted. However, for this very same reason, critical constructivism seems to fit properly with interpretative methodologies, such as discourse analysis. Discourse analysis enables us to identify the broader social scenario within which relationships take place and to critically interpret the identified trends and patterns of conduct. It acknowledges the improbability of cataloguing, calculating, and specifying causes of social events, concerning instead with the considerations of the manifest

consequences of political practices (Milliken, 1999: 225-226). Interpretative methodologies thus become an intrinsic part of a scientific enterprise that seeks to understand, not explain, and shed light on the social construction of reality (Adler, 1997: 328; Hansen, 2006: xix; Karacasulu and Uzgören, 2007: 34).

The argument made here is that, methodologically, critical constructivism leans towards discourse analysis as proposed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. Deeply rooted in the tradition of Foucault and Derrida, their approach to discourse analysis is powerfully analogous to what we might call a deconstructive genealogy, where the apparent normalisation of a society – what seems to be the natural order of things – is shown to be the consequence of the operation of hegemonic articulations, traces of power that are always political and socially constructed (Hansen, 2010: 101; Hansen, 2006: xviii).

Laclau and Mouffe's contention is that all social phenomena can be analysed using discourse analytical tools because social processes are always about the creation and fixation of meaning. However, they take a comprehensive approach towards discourse analysis for they claim discourses encompass not only language as such but all social phenomena. Understanding discourses involves both the ideational and the material, the linguistic and non-linguistic, thus meaning that discourses are performative and enact meaning, social relations, identities and political assemblages (Dunne *et al.*, 2010). In fact, they claim that everything is discourse, but only in the sense that our access to both social actions and physical objects is mediated by systems of meaning in the form of discourses (Diez *et al.*, 2011: 40; Foucault, 2010: 25; Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: 108). In arguing so, Laclau and Mouffe emphasise that every object is constituted as an object of discourse and that there is no other way of understanding social reality except through discursive practices (Dunne *et al.*, 2010: 226). Discourse analysis incorporates both material and ideational factors in the sense that all discursive structures have a material character. That is to say that discourses are made both of language and the actions interconnected with it (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: 106-108). By incorporating both material and ideational factors, discourse analysis enables us to look at how discursive practices are put to use by social actors as they construct and change their social environment (Hansen, 2006: 23). Here it is important to take into account that discourses are structures of signification, which construct social realities and binary oppositional relations of power where one member tends to be – or aims at being – privileged or hegemonic, thus creating

asymmetrical relationships (Milliken, 1999: 229; Zehfuss, 2002: 197). Discursive structures designate positions for people to occupy as subjects and produce certain expectations about how to act, what to say, and what not to say, thus constraining (not determining or eliminating) agency. Therefore, discourses do not reflect neutrally our social environment, identities and power relations, but rather play an active role in creating and changing them (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002: 25-26; 41). Furthermore, we should be aware that discursive practices always have consequences, some of which may be unintentional (Austin, 1975: 107).

Laclau and Mouffe further argue that just as social reality, identities and interests are flexible and changeable, so are discourses. The goal of discourse analysis is thus to map out the processes in which we struggle about the way meaning is to be fixed in such a way that it becomes taken-for-granted. It explores how we create situations that appear objective and natural through the discursive production of meaning, thus emphasising the process whereby social reality is constructed (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002: 33-35).

The authors do not provide much detail on how to conduct empirical discourse analysis. They are more interested in abstractically analysing how structures, in the form of discourses, are constituted and changed. However, by reading and interpreting their approach we can collect useful concepts and create a guideline to conduct empirical discourse research. In our opinion, Laclau and Mouffe's approach revolves around four central elements that constitute four stages of discourse analysis. First is the notion of nodal point, which is a privileged discourse around which other discourses are ordered. On a different wording, nodal points organise and structure discourses (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: xi). This means that other discourses acquire their meaning from the relation to the nodal point. For instance, in foreign policy discourses security is a nodal point around which many other meanings are created and crystallised. Often nodal points become floating signifiers. i.e. discourses that are subject to ongoing struggles for the fixation of meaning in a particular way. Thus, nodal points are temporary signifiers resulting from political competition (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002: 28-29; Laclau, 2007: 35, 43). Let us take the example of security once again. In the course of discursive struggles, the meaning of security has changed in a number of ways to reflect the enlargement of the security field to encompass threats other that the pure military ones or to project the specific interests of certain agents at specific moments. Therefore, it is a nodal point whose content has been

filled with different meanings across time and space. Furthermore, nodal points can be articulated with other discourses creating hybrid discourses that reinforce the power and hegemonic status of the nodal point (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002: 166-167). For example, security discourses can be articulated with economic, environmental or societal discourses, in order to enlarge the scope of implementation of the former and take the latter higher in the political agenda. The identification of nodal points implies pinpointing which discourses have a privileged status and how they are defined in articulation with other discourses and social practices. This articulation is meaningful because discourses are never fully established, they are always in conflict with other discourses that define social reality differently and provide other guidelines for social action. This is a fundamental step to discursively analyse social processes for it allows the researcher to identify the discursive struggles and to gradually map the structuring power of prevailing discourses (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002: 26; 47).

The second element is what Laclau and Mouffe call "the field of discursivity" – i.e. the "terrain for the constitution of every social practice" (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: 111-112). Discourses are constituted as an attempt to dominate this field, to construct a centre projecting a sense of unity. However, discourses are subverted by the field of discursivity which overflows it. The creation of discourses always involves a reduction of possibilities – i.e. the exclusion of all other possible discourses that could have been created instead – in order to create a unity of meaning. This seeds light on the powerful nature of discourses insofar they create some meaning by excluding and repressing other. Nonetheless, even if prevailing discourses aim at removing ambiguities by fixing meaning, this move is never completely successful. The possibilities of meaning displaced to the field of discursivity always threaten to destabilise its fixity. Different discourses will attempt to dominate the field of discursivity and create nodal points by articulating themselves with other discourses, but they can only succeed in temporarily fixing meaning for the discursive field is permanently inhabited by antagonistic forces (Mouffe, 2005: 52-53). Specific articulations with other discourses and social practices can thus reproduce or challenge prevailing discourses by fixing meaning in new ways. The formation of discourses is thus based on permanent discursive struggles for the transformation of structures and the fixation of meaning (Diez, 2014: 320-321; Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002: 27-28).

This brings us to articulation: the third central element in Laclau and Mouffe's discourse analysis. Articulation is a decisive point in discourse analysis for it implies the linking of something within a broader discursive frame, so that the being of the discourses articulated is modified as a result of the articulation. Articulation is a practice and not any given relational complex. Articulation involves a moment of undecidability without which there would be no articulation, only reproduction (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: 93-94). Articulation implies newness and modification, that is, a construction. This means that every being and object is articulated, i.e. it has been given a specific form within a meaningful system – a discursive structure – and since all discourses are characterised by an irreducible undecidability, all beings are necessarily contingent constructions. As a consequence, every agent and social relation is constituted by unstable discursive structures, which are submitted to a variety of articulatory movements that transform them (Mouffe, 2005: 78). To look at discourses as structures implies analysing discursive practices in order to draw out a more general picture of relations between agents and the chain of hierarchies established amongst them. Furthermore, the open-endness and instability of discourses means that they are liable to slip and slide into new relationships via resistances that their articulation and operationalisation may engender (Milliken, 1999: 230-231, 242). All in all, these discursive structures are articulatory practices that constitute and organise social relations. Nonetheless, these articulatory practices take place not only within given social and political spaces, but between them (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: 96, 140). Individual discursive practices are always intertwined with other discursive practices forming a complex web of discursive articulation and rearticulation. Discourses build their arguments and authority through references or interlinkages to other discourses but they always produce new meaning (Epstein, 2010: 342). This is to say that discourses can perform the role of structures, but they cannot be reduced only to that specific role because they also provide the constitutive context for political articulations and consist themselves of articulatory practices that both reproduce and transform this very same context (Diez, 2014: 321).

These three elements are intertwined in Laclau and Mouffe's approach. They represent specific stages of the process of constructing social reality, and yet one cannot take place without the other. As the authors claim

> the practice of articulation, therefore, consists in the construction of nodal points which partially fix meaning; and the partial character of this fixation proceeds from the openness of the social, a result, in its turn, of the constant overflowing of every discourse by the infinitude of the field of discursivity (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: 113).

Along the logic developed by Laclau and Mouffe everything is contingent for if one thing is articulated, then everything else must also be articulated, i.e. discursively constructed. One main consequence of this understanding is that the by-products of undecidability and contingency are both decision and power. An articulated object is one whose links to the other object are contingent, i.e. they could have been different. Hence, the object owes its presence to the exclusion of other possibilities. Accordingly, contingent objects are power-objects, based on the minimal use of force it takes to exclude other possibilities, which at a certain moment were possible and pursued but that for some reason never prevailed. Undecidability is overcome by decisions, and decisions always involve the suppression of alternatives, so that other possible articulations are ruled out. In the same way, a decision is always taken between actually existing alternatives, i.e. it is situated (Hansen, 2010: 98-100; Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002: 28-30; Muppidi, 1999: 125). However, it is the very contingent nature of social reality that opens room to challenging and resisting prevailing discourses and practices. Of course this resistance can assume multiple forms and only in specific cases they become political struggles directed to putting an end to relations of domination as such. It is much more common to pinpoint more nuanced types of resistance aiming at transforming social relations which construct agents in a relation of domination (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: 152-153).

This is not to say that change comes easy. Furthermore, change is never absolute. Even when a nodal point is replaced by another, as a result of the multiple discursive struggles that take place in the political field, this does not mean that a completely new discursive structure has taken place. It means that a general transformation of relations has occurred, but it does not necessarily alter all social elements. Even in change and newness there are always elements of continuity that prevail. The idea of sudden radical break is not coincident with this reading of change, which can be better grasped as dispersed discontinuities caused by distinct transformation resulting from discursive political struggles (Foucault, 2010: 173-175). Laclau and Mouffe further acknowledge that not all agents have equal possibilities for doing and saying things in new ways and for having

their articulations accepted as prevailing discourses (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002: 55). Nor are all discourses equal; some are much more powerful than others (Diez *et al.*, 2011: 168). The property of discourse – i.e. the right to speak, to legitimise discourses and to have them invested into decisions, institutions, or practices – is in fact confined to a specific group of individuals – e.g. political elites when it comes to foreign policy matters (Foucault, 2010: 68). In order to dig into these particularities, the researcher has to pay special attention to contextual factors.

To do so, it is important to undertake a deconstruction: the fourth central element in Laclau and Mouffe's approach. It is at this stage that the influence of Derrida becomes more pronounced. Laclau and Mouffe believe deconstruction and hegemony – the ultimate power struggle – to be two facets of the same process. Deconstruction reveals the undecidability inherent to all hegemonic interventions and tries to show that a particular social organisation is the result of a political process (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002: 48; Laclau, 2007: 23, 88-90; Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: xii). Deconstructing discourses implies revealing the hierarchical oppositions in which discourses rely and then displace them by proposing different readings or interpretations about these very same discourses (Laclau, 2007: 55-57; Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: xi; Mouffe, 2005: 53). Here it is important to pay particular attention to hegemonic relations for social agents occupy different positions within the discourses that constitute the social realm. In identifying the particularities of these social agents we are able to better grasp and understand the configuration of power relations (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: xiii-xvi). The goal of deconstruction is therefore not to expose the weaknesses of a given discourse but to grasp its meaning by moving beyond the text itself and including an analysis of the context in which that discourse was created, its purpose, its direct message but also what the text does not speak to us, for it may well be what is silenced and excluded that tell us most about the "real". In order to understand the meaning of discursive practices, we must consider the total situation in which it is situated (Austin, 1975: 52). For instance, we know that crisis and interventions are premised on insecurities. But how have these insecurities come into being? To answer this query, we need to deconstruct the event under analysis and to look at how it was constructed through discursive practices. In that regard, we need to map those discursive practices that are constitutive of strategic interaction and to uncover the constitutive mechanisms at work. Here one should be looking at where discursive practices come from and how they become

established, i.e. its contingent processes of evolution and transformation. In this analysis, the researcher must bear in mind that discursive practices also interact with one another, creating constellations of discursive practices that are constantly overlapping and evolving (Zehfuss, 2002: 200-201).

Context then becomes an important level of analysis for meaning, power struggles and change, which cannot be fully grasped outside the broader field in which they are embedded (Laclau, 2007: 51). Deconstruction envisages, therefore, an interpretation of events that reveal why and how discursive practices politicise or depoliticise a given issue, while presenting these moves as unable of being neutral for they always reflect agents' identities and interests. Thus, we must grasp the context in which discursive practices take place, fix their limits, establish relations with other discursive practices that may be connected with it and show what other forms of discursive practices it excludes (Foucault, 2010: 28). The underlying idea is that meaning, and thus discursive structures, is based on prior events or discourses. If we disregard context or practices, it becomes hard to understand which structures exist and what can change them. No matter how far we go, structures are always a product, a social construction, rather than something pre-given. As a result, meaning depends on the context, and can never be clear unless this context is circumvented (Finnemore and Sikkink, 2001: 914). By using deconstruction as a stage of discourse analysis, we collect a powerful tool to reveal and make visible power structures, oppressing discourses and ideologies, as well as the way power is used, by whom it is used and for which purpose.

Laclau and Mouffe's approach devotes particular attention to the discursive construction of political articulations for they believe politics has primacy over all other social processes (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: x). Politics occupies the role of what Laclau (2007: 103) calls to be "an ontology of the social". In fact, it is at the political level that social relations take shape and are ordered. All systems of social relations imply to a certain extent relations of power, since the construction of social identity and interests is ultimately an act of power (Mouffe, 2005: 141). Politics should be understood in a comprehensive manner since it refers to the organisation of society in a particular way that excludes all other political ways. Permanent tensions and antagonistic forces that compete over hegemony thus form the political realm (Mouffe, 2005: 69). The concept of power embraced by critical constructivism makes particular sense within this view. The

understanding of power both as relational and productive emphasises the contingency of the political and social realms. It is power that creates our knowledge, identities, interests and the way we relate to one another as groups or individuals. It produces social reality while precluding alternative possibilities. Thus power and politics are two sides of the same coin. However, this production is never absolute. Everything social is contingent. This does not mean that everything changes all the time, but rather that there always a possibility for transformation in all social events (Muppidi, 1999: 132).

The analysis of political discourse is inherently reflexive due to its ambiguous nature. Political discourse attempts to generate specific forms of consensus and unity among different interests by relating them to a common project and by establishing a frontier to define the forces to be opposed: the other (Mouffe, 2005: 50). It often revolves around general issues such as power, conflict, control and/or domination and is concerned with formal/informal political contexts and utterances by political actors, i.e. politicians, political institutions, governments, political media, and political supporters operating in political environments to achieve political goals (Wilson, 2001: 398). It also attempts to demonstrate how the coordination of policies is made possible between different state elites and how some policies are taken higher in the international agenda whilst others are excluded from it. Analysing how policies are implemented (and not just formulated) means studying the operationalisation of discursive categories in the political field, and their practical consequences (Milliken, 1999: 236-241). Here, it is important to focus on key events, i.e. those events where important facts manifest themselves on the political agenda and influence the official political discourse, thereby influencing political practices (Hansen, 2006: 32).

Unlike conventional approaches, this framework combining critical constructivism and discourse analysis provides important avenues into the study of relational aspects of identity and the possibilities for change and transformation that enables us to map dynamics that would otherwise remain invisible. Using critical constructivism as a framework for analysis and the concepts of nodal points, field of discursivity, articulation and deconstruction suggested by Laclau and Mouffe, it is possible to identify, interpret and critically question discursive practices at stake in power and security relations in the EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle and to understand how processes of change in discursive practices have actually come about.

2.3. Final Remarks

Cynthia Enloe (1996) has made a strong argument in criticising the generalised tendency in IR to study only the powerful on the assumption that such a focus will provide insights into and explanations of world politics. With some remarkable exceptions, that appears to be the current state of the art. To challenge this enshrined tendency, she further argues, we should focus on the margins and silences for they will enable us to see the multiple forms and instances of power that are required for the system to exist at all. In this research we take up that challenge by including the countries in the shared neighbourhood into the analysis of the intricate nature of power and security relations in the broader European and Russian social spaces by resorting to critical constructivism and discourse analysis as suggested by Laclau and Mouffe as a framework for analysis.

This chapter has made the claim that by fully embracing the sociological, linguistic and practice turns and by focusing on instances of security and power, critical constructivism emphasises the existence and interaction of structures, agency, identities, interests and discursive practices that form the complex political world. Critical constructivism, thus, provides a wide-range of tools to understand the interlinkages between interests, identities and discursive practices, as well as their influence on power and security. Moreover, it sheds light on the fact that reality is a dynamic construction in which actors adapt themselves to the demands of the moment, redefining interests and perceptions of their contextual environment whenever necessary.

Critical constructivism contends that social reality involves contingency. It involves the possibility that the topic under analysis could have been different. In that sense, it is prepared to explore “how possible” as well as “why” questions; to find why something has happened instead of something else; to understand and to critique (Phillips, 2007: 67). By doing so, critical constructivism assumes itself as an intersubjective, post-positivist and interpretative approach thus breaking with the middle ground position of conventional constructivism. The focus on the mutual constitution of reality, discourses and practices broadens the scope of analysis beyond text and meaning and weaves together the material and discursive realms. Leaning towards discourse analysis, this approach tackles dynamics and dimensions that are often disregarded in IR and opens important avenues into the study of world politics. In conformity with critical constructivism, Ernesto

Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's approach to discourse analysis claims that all being is contingent, because objects can only acquire a substance by being articulated within a certain meaningful system (Hansen, 2010: 97). Although the authors do not engage into concrete methods for analysis, the interpretation of their work provides the researcher with a useful grid of analysis. What are the nodal points of discourse? What discourses are articulated? What meanings are established and what meanings are excluded? Do different discourses define the nodal points in different ways, so that there is a discursive struggle aiming at achieving a hegemonic status? What continuities and discontinuities are there to be grasped in the broader field of discursivity? (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002: 165-166).

Thus, this theoretical and methodological straddling is crucial to comprehending and unmasking the ongoing struggles, contends, and discursive practices – both intended and non-intended, visible and invisible –, and to getting behind simplistic understandings of power and security dynamics in the EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle. To do so, the following chapters are devoted to deconstruct and analyse power and security discursive practices in the EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle. Whereas Chapter 3 focuses on discursive practices by the EU and Russia, Chapter 4 pays particular attention to the foreign policies of the countries in their shared neighbourhood – Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus. The goal is to map the broader scenario in which interaction among these actors takes place by focusing on how they define their identities and interests via relations of power and security. Moreover, this exercise will allow to identify relevant nodal points, the broader field of discursivity and articulatory practices operating in this triangle. After exposing such elements, Chapter 5 will critically analyse the identified instances of hegemony, agency and resistance operating in the EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle in order to solve the riddles behind this research: why countries in the shared neighbourhood have agency, in the context of confrontation and dispute for influence between two hegemonic regional projects; how this agency works in practical terms and whether it influences the constitution of EU and Russian identities, interests and discursive practices.

3. Post-Cold War Europe: analysing EU and Russian foreign policies towards the shared neighbourhood

The end of the Cold War and the ensuing dismantling of the USSR carried important changes to the geopolitical configuration of the wider European space. To the West, the EU was propelled to develop its foreign policy dimension and assume a stronger role in regional affairs. To the East, the Russian Federation emerged as the most relevant actor in the former Soviet space. Reborn from the ashes of the USSR, it assumed itself as a new political player with clear regional ambitions and interests. In between, the newly independent states struggled to undertake internal reforms at the political, social and economic levels. Concurrently, these countries engaged in the definition of their foreign policy agenda, the delineation of their identities and the design of strategies envisaging to take the utmost advantage of their geopolitical location in order to satisfy their interests. These processes impacted on the dynamics of power and security and patterns of relationship across Europe.

Since the EU's Eastern enlargement, the Union and Russia share a common neighbourhood in Eastern Europe. This extension of the EU's power towards an area traditionally perceived to be part of Moscow's sphere of influence, along with Russia's more assertive and pragmatic foreign policy, has further impacted on regional dynamics of power and security simultaneously produced by and reflected on the interplay between identities, interests and discursive practices in this area. The resulting geopolitical transformation in the region has also affected understandings regarding the geostrategic importance of the shared neighbourhood to EU and Russian regional endeavours and their security overall. As a result, a change in the EU's and Russia's understandings of each other as regional actors is noticeable, thus bringing additional challenges and a higher level of complexity to EU-Russia bilateral relations.

Within this broader framework, this chapter envisages to deconstruct EU and Russian foreign policies towards their common vicinity since the end of the Cold War. The goal is to reveal how these actors have defined their identities, interests and discursive practices via relations of power and security, how their regional endeavours have gradually assumed a hegemonic nature and how these two actors have conceptualised the shared

neighbourhood in order to stress its indispensability to their internal security and regional projection. The discursive analysis of political statements will be particularly relevant here as they contribute to elucidate how these actors have been producing shared meanings about them, their surrounding environment, and their policies and strategic initiatives. Overall, the argument is made that both EU and Russian foreign policies are anchored upon the belief that security starts outside their borders and, thus, the countries in the shared neighbourhood emerge as linchpins in their regional strategies. In this sense, both the EU and Russia attempt to keep these countries in their own sphere of influence for security reasons, in a mostly competing and mutually exclusive logic.

To do so, the chapter starts by mapping the evolution of EU – on a first moment – and Russian – on a second moment – foreign and neighbourhood policies. On a third moment, it takes the additional challenge of understanding how the evolution of EU and Russian hegemonic regional projects and relations with the shared neighbourhood have impacted on EU-Russia bilateral relations. On a final moment, the chapter focuses on the mutual constitution of EU and Russian identities, interests and regional ventures by identifying nodal points and related hybrid discourses, as well as the broader field of discursivity and articulatory practices operating in their hegemonic discursive practices as disclosed by the deconstruction of their foreign policies towards the shared neighbourhood. In doing so, the chapter sheds light on how the interplay between clashing identities, interests and discursive practices, as well as the competition over a common area of influence have affected dynamics of power and security in post-Cold War Europe.

3.1. EU foreign and neighbouring policies: towards regional hegemony

The post-Cold War geopolitical landscape posed momentous political and security challenges to the EU thus encouraging the development of a range of policies designed to prevent eventual scenarios of political volatility and economic chaos to contaminate the Union's political and economic stability. In this context, the institutionalisation of the CFSP in 1993 by the Treaty of Maastricht provided the EU with the legal and institutional background to develop a foreign policy dimension. This framework was reinforced by the CSDP which came into force in 2003 as a response to conflicts in the former Yugoslavia and the consequent awareness that the EU had to create mechanisms to cope with conflict

prevention and conflict management (Howorth, 2007; Kamov, 2006; Reis, 2008: 172). Along with more structural approaches such as the policy of Enlargement developed throughout the 1990s and the ENP launched in 2003, these policies provided the EU with the political and institutional frameworks to affirm itself as a meaningful global and regional actor.

Traditionally, the EU has preferred to deploy foreign policy strategies based on economic integration and the export of its normative agenda over more robust and security-driven approaches. From their inception, EU foreign policies rested upon the liberal principle that interwoven economies diminish the likelihood of conflict escalation (Diez *et al.*, 2008: 2). Furthermore, economic cooperation is usually seen as a domain of low controversy, thus facilitating the agreement of both EU audiences and its external partners on the establishment and deepening of bilateral and multilateral relations. All in all, the EU uses its economic attractiveness as a carrot to engage its partners into conditionality and socialising mechanisms prone to attract them into its sphere of influence. Conditionality and socialisation serve the purpose of promoting the interaction of EU norms and values – e.g. human rights, democracy, rule of law, transparency, accountability and market economy – with the domestic structures of its partners. The intended goal of such interaction is to trigger internal reforms in those countries responding to the institutionalised practices at the EU level (Manners, 2002: 240). Likewise, these mechanisms work as a platform for the EU to expand its economic and normative power beyond its borders and promote the compliance with a set of values and regulations that both project and disseminate its worldview and work to satisfy its core interests.

For security threats have been usually defined at the national level (Waever, 1995), it is more problematic for the EU to convince its audiences on the need to reinforce its scope of action on security-related matters than on economic and normative issues.[3] Nevertheless, the EU has been challenging this centrality of the state in defining security threats in many regards. The Union's management of security overlaps across different governance levels and institutional constellations. These include the intergovernmental level in the framework of the CFSP and the CSDP, and the communitarian level where the

[3] EU relevant audiences are mainly constituted by elites, such as policy and decision-makers working in EU institutions and its member states, for they are the ones capable of offering the "formal support necessary for the adoption of extraordinary measures aiming to tackle a security issue" (Léonard and Kaunert, 2011).

European Commission has assumed a significant role in promoting a more holistic approach to regional and global security (Webber *et al.*, 2004). Over time, there has been an increased process of "brusselisation" of EU foreign policies that has restricted their control by EU member states (Allen, 1998; Juncos and Pomorska, 2006; Simão and Dias, 2016: 99). This trend is particularly noticeable within the scope of the ENP, where the European Commission has gradually fostered the politisation of EU structural power in regional matters (Kelly, 2006). The appointment of Jean-Claude Juncker as President of the European Commission in 2014 both crystallised and confirmed the ongoing politisation of the Commission's initiatives and its executive power, which represents a constraint to the role of EU member states in defining the Union's regional and global strategies (Burnay, 2015; Juncker, 2014a).[4] Despite this rising "brusselisation" of EU foreign policies, successful processes allowing the EU to extend its scope of action on foreign and security matters depend on its power to construct a threat, and define the necessary discursive practices to deal with them.

It was indeed the EU's ability and power to construct a threat that gradually paved the way for its increasing role in regional affairs and the development of its neighbouring policies. After the dissolution of the USSR, former Soviet states found themselves in complete disarray. Political instability, economic unsustainability and conflicts in the region added to the perception of these countries as a security threat and prompted the EU to engage with them by establishing a number of channels for bilateral and multilateral relations. The post-Cold War contextual environment was thus seen by the EU and its audiences as a historical opportunity to influence former Soviet states' domestic and foreign policies, as well as to shape friendly relations with them while assuring a scenario of regional stability (Svyetlov, 2007: 529).

Within this context, relations with countries in the region without membership prospects were legally framed by PCAs signed during the 1990s. Based on common values and a commitment to promote international peace and security, PCAs provided a framework for cooperation in several areas from political dialogue and economic

[4] For the first time a direct link between the outcome of the European Parliamentary elections and the proposal of the president of the European Commission was established. This inserted a dose of democratic legitimacy into the European decision-making process and provided grounds for reinforcing the Commission's executive power. The fact that Jean-Claude Juncker was appointed President of the European Commission against the will of one of the EU's most powerful member states – the United Kingdom – further impacted on the balance of power between European institutions (Burnay, 2015).

cooperation to culture and science. They also institutionalised relations between Brussels and these countries by creating Cooperation Councils, Cooperation Committees and Parliamentary Committees for Cooperation. These institutions focused on reforming specific sectors in order to harmonise these countries' legislation with the *acquis communautaire* (European Commission, 2004b), thereby promoting the transformation of their political and socio-economic environments. To support this process, in the early 1990s, the Commission launched the Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS) programme consisting of financial contributions that should be allocated to develop new legal frameworks, institutional structures and regional initiatives in different areas (Lussac, 2010: 610; Sodupe and Benito, 1998: 55-59). Among the latter, TRACECA (Transportation Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia) and INOGATE (Interstate Oil and Gas Transport to Europe) are considered to be the most relevant and successful initiatives promoting greater integration with the EU (Andreev, 2008: 100).

At a first glance, PCAs are essentially technical and economic documents. However, a deeper analysis reveals its entrenched political nature. They contain a number of evolutionistic and conditionality-driven clauses that foresee increases in the levels of economic and technical assistance to EU partners, whenever they accomplish certain benchmarks in their processes of political and economic transition, thus making reforms along the EU's liberal agenda more appealing (Zagorski, 2002: 2). Along with a socialising stance that promotes the internalisation of EU norms and values, PCAs had the potential to become a powerful tool shaping the Union's vicinity and exporting its worldview (Börzel *et al.*, 2010: 140-142; Svyetlov, 2007: 531). Nonetheless, this potential was never fully reached. PCAs remained largely identical and failed to acknowledge specific needs and demands by partner countries. They lacked clear incentives to promote change and transformation at a time when these countries were struggling with several difficulties and very much focused on their internal transitions (Dias, 2015b; Joenniemi, 2007b: 147). Furthermore, at this point the EU's foreign policy dimension was at a very embryonic stage and the great bulk of attention on regional issues was devoted to the Enlargement process, which represented a major security and institutional test to the Union. For these reasons, EU political and economic relations with post-Soviet states were essentially kept at a technical level and security issues rarely figured on the agenda. As a consequence, the

PCAs signed during the 1990s were seldom enforced therefore failing to achieve their political and economic goals (Ghazaryan, 2010: 226).

Despite the initial impetus to develop channels for relations with countries in the post-Soviet space, the EU remained a low-profile player in the region until the launch of the ENP in 2003. The Eastern enlargement changed the EU's geopolitical and geostrategic setting and demanded for a redefinition of the Union's foreign policy, interests and neighbours' hierarchy.[5] This change becomes visible in discursive practices preceding the actual announcement of the ENP. As accession procedures came to completion, the idea that the Eastern enlargement posed challenges and opportunities to the EU that need to be dealt with preventively was widespread amongst EU institutions and member states. The design of a new framework for relations with the EU's new vicinity became paramount to cope with "the dual challenge of avoiding new dividing lines in Europe while responding to needs arising from the newly created border of the Union" (Patten and Solana, 2002: 1). This challenge revolved around fears that the new geopolitical configuration of the European continent could hinder previous cooperation between CEEC and the post-Soviet space, thus creating sources of tension between insiders and outsiders (Joenniemi, 2007b: 143). In order to address post-Enlargement challenges the EU needed to assume its responsibility as "a real global player" by developing a "proximity policy" centred on the Union's power of attraction (Prodi, 2002). The goal was to secure the environment at the EU's new borders because "stability, prosperity, shared values and rule of law along our borders are fundamental for our own security" and therefore "[f]ailure in any of these areas will lead to increased risks of negative spillover on the Union" (Patten and Solana, 2002: 1-2).

This line of argumentation reasoned to convince European audiences on the need to reinforce EU foreign and neighbourhood policies, and extend its scope of action on security matters. Progressively, a trend emphasising the relevance of the new neighbourhood for the Union's own security became more pronounced in its foreign policy agenda (Cimoszewicz, 2003). This link was clearly assumed in the European Security

[5] Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, the EU's immediate neighbours were at the top of this hierarchy, reflecting the new post-Cold War priorities of integrating CEEC into the EU, stabilising South Eastern Europe, and spreading security to the Southern Mediterranean (Smith, 2003). As accession procedures of CEEC came to completion, the EU's perceived contextual environment and the definition of the neighbourhood itself were transformed. Now, EU neighbours and the focus of its regional endeavours are essentially those countries at the Union's borders that do not have a membership perspective within the EU.

Strategy (ESS) in 2003. The document argues that “the internal and external aspects of security are indissolubly linked” (European Council, 2003: 2) and, ergo, the EU’s security interests cannot be untied from its approach to the neighbourhood (Browning and Joenniemi, 2008: 520). In that regard, the security argument becomes one of the most important rationales of EU neighbouring policies (Higashino, 2004: 347). This is particularly clear in the ESS when it states that

> It is in *the European interest* that countries on our borders are well-governed. Neighbours who are engaged in violent conflict, weak states where organised crime flourishes, dysfunctional societies or exploding population growth on its borders *all pose problems for Europe*. […] *Our task* is to promote a ring of well governed countries […] with whom we can enjoy close and cooperative relations. […] The *best protection for our security* is a world of well-governed democratic states (European Council, 2003: 7-10).[6]

Seemingly, there was nothing significantly new or different about the identified problems in the region. What occurred was a transformation of the Union’s perceived context and threats which was triggered by the redefinition of its borders. As a result, the importance of the new neighbourhood has grown in scope and depth leading to changes in discursive practices aiming at encouraging and legitimising a stronger role by the EU on regional matters. Hence, the European Commission produced the *Wider Europe – Neighbourhood: A Framework for relations with the Eastern and Southern Neighbours* communication in 2003, which after the commitment by the European Council created the ENP.[7] Along with the ESS, the ENP frames the Union’s post-Enlargement diplomacy and represents a shift from passive to active engagement in the neighbourhood with clear security purposes (Dias, 2014c; Joenniemi, 2007a: 145). The ENP provides a framework for relations with neighbouring countries based on mutual commitments, shared values, broad political contacts, economic integration and the development of regional cooperation. Largely inspired by and drafted upon the Enlargement process, the ENP’s intention is to create a “ring of friends”, “avoid new dividing lines in Europe” and

[6] Emphasis added. Similar discourses have been often produced by EU institutions to justify the need to extend its competences on security related areas and to develop a stronger approach towards the neighbourhood (see e.g. European Commission, 2010a; 2014a, 2015; European Council, 2003; 2008d).

[7] Initially, this framework for relations included Russia, Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus in Europe and Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestinian Authority, Syria and Tunisia in the Southern Mediterranean. However, Russia denied taking part in this policy and demanded a differentiated cooperation with the EU, whereas the European Commission has later recommended Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia to be included within this policy.

"promote stability and prosperity" across the broader European space, thus protecting the EU from external security threats (European Commission, 2003a; Gebhard, 2010: 92; Rossi, 2004: 10). The very idea of building a ring of friends is embedded with a security-related meaning. The goal is to gradually construct a security community between the EU and its neighbouring countries (Attinà, 2004: 16; Prodi, 2002). This should be based on the establishment of a net of privileged relations promoting political and economic stability at the EU's borders, but also on the export of its political and economic liberal model which neighbouring countries are persuaded to embrace (Boedeltje and van Houtum, 2011; Gravier, 2009). Already in 1999, former European Commissioner for External Relations, Chris Patten has contended that the EU should structure its foreign relations on the basis of the liberal principles it upholds. This has become an intrinsic element of EU foreign policies adding to the understanding of the Union as a normative power aiming at civilising its neighbourhood and at diffusing a model of proper behaviour to promote normalisation at its borders (Nilsson and Silander, 2016: 46-47).

However, the European Commission clearly announced that this policy "offers a means to reinforce relations between the EU and partner countries, which is distinct from the possibilities available to European countries under Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union" (European Commission, 2004c: 3), i.e. membership. Although being considered the strongest and most successful foreign policy instrument, EU membership is no longer sustainable in the context of the recently enlarged Union (European Commission, 2003a, 2003b; Prodi, 2002). The intention is "sharing everything […] but institutions" and extending "to this neighbouring region a set of principles, values and standards which define the very essence of the European Union" (Prodi, 2002). A sharp distinction is hereby made between EU membership – a formal legal and political act – and Europeanisation – a wider process of political, economic and social transformation via the adoption of European standards (Averre, 2005: 178).

Differentiation between and joint ownership by partner countries is at the basis of the ENP along with a step-by-step approach through which EU neighbouring countries are required to gradually engage with EU integration (Rossi, 2004: 11). While PCAs concluded during the 1990s remain, legally and structurally, the basis of the EU's cooperation with the Eastern neighbourhood, the ENP is operationalised through Action Plans, a new political instrument establishing benchmarks to be fulfilled within a given

period (European Commission, 2003a: 16). Action Plans are politically binding, specific and oriented towards the particularities of each neighbour (Freire, 2008a). They rely substantially on positive conditionality and socialisation mechanisms (Headley, 2012: 428). Positive conditionality foresees that neighbouring countries will be offered a stance in the EU's internal market and additional financial support to stimulate economic, political and social reforms whenever certain benchmarks are accomplished (European Commission, 2003a: 10-15). Socialisation is deeply related to the establishment of a series of bilateral channels between the EU and each neighbour, where the latter is expected to come into a gradual harmonisation with its political and economic norms and values, and to take the reforms that best suit EU security interests (Armstrong, 2007: 5; Dias, 2014c: 79-80; Joffé, 2007: 97-98). This framework is complemented by trade and assistance programmes, such as the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) and the Governance Facility Neighbourhood Investment Fund (GFNIF) (Andreev, 2008: 93). The funding under the ENPI and the GFNIF not only makes the process of internalisation of EU norms, values and political practices more attractive by reducing the socio-economic costs of engaging in complex political and economic reforms, but also supports the development of confidence and trust building initiatives that quietly drag the EU's neighbours deeper into its sphere of influence (Korosteleva, 2010).

For it aims at creating a shared understanding of proper behaviour, the ENP can be better grasped as a structural foreign policy seeking to influence and transform the political, economic and social settings of the EU's neighbours, while (re)producing a status quo favourable to the Union's interests (Barrinha, 2008: 11-15; Emerson, 2011a: 56-57; Gravier, 2009). Within this context, appeals for political dialogue, mutual learning and joint ownership come across as rhetorical strategies. Despite claims for further cooperation and joint ownership, the ENP is essentially a unilateral policy as neighbouring countries have only a marginal role in the elaboration of Action Plans, even though the EU foresees their collaboration through meetings prior to the elaboration of these documents where they can manifest their receptivity, or lack thereof, to the proposed measures (European Commission, 2004c). Their limited influence in the definition of this policy means that more that taking joint ownership of this process neighbouring countries are merely expected to passively import European norms and values. This unveils an important contradiction in EU neighbouring policies, whereby the Union projects itself as the

guardian of European security and a force for good – for it is in a superior stage of evolution when compared to its neighbours –, and simultaneously recognises the interdependent nature of relations with the neighbourhood, even if its partners lack real room for manoeuvre to mould the ENP (Behr, 2007; Bengtsson, 2008; Dias, 2014c; Pace, 2008; Zielonka, 2008). Overall, the EU projects itself as a benevolent actor aiming at helping neighbouring countries in the process of capacity-building necessary to the internalisation of a European-inspired model they could not implement otherwise (Kuus, 2004). As such, the ENP is projected as a virtuous circle through which the EU fulfils the duty to protect itself and its neighbours, whereas in practice it conveys a significant dimension of power aiming at satisfying the Union's security interests (Boedeltje and van Houtum, 2011). This virtuous dimension is visible in the ENP since its inception, namely when the EU affirms that it

> *Has a duty* […] towards its present and future neighbours to ensure continuing social cohesion and economic dynamism. The EU *must act* to promote the […] preconditions for political stability, economic development and the reduction of poverty and social divisions in *our shared* environment (European Commission, 2003a: 3).[8]

What becomes noticeable is the construction of discursive practices that project instability in the neighbourhood as a threat to be fought in order to protect European interests and identity (Bengtsson, 2008), thus bringing confusion to the definition of the neighbourhood itself. As the EU identifies the lack of democracy, poverty and armed conflicts as threats both to itself and to neighbouring societies (European Council, 2003), the neighbours are simultaneously perceived as an extension of the EU's self – thereby requiring protection – and as the EU other, posing a threat to its security and survival. This, of course, carries important power notions as it portrays the Eastern neighbourhood as a lesser and frantic region that ought to be pacified and normalised by the EU, namely through the adoption and acceptance of the liberal agenda it represents and exports. Simultaneously, this contributes to creating processes raising neighbouring issues higher in the EU's security agenda and claims for strong cooperative strings, something that is paradoxical in this context and contributes to reveal the ENP's fragilities and inconsistencies. Together, this contradictory conceptualisation of the neighbourhood and

[8] Emphasis added.

the ENP's inherent complexity – in its management, coherence and the benefits available to neighbours – has contributed to a mostly negative view of this policy by EU neighbours (Boedeltje and van Houtum, 2011). Tensions arising from the mismatch between EU words and deeds, the conceptualisation of the neighbourhood and the practical operationalisation of this policy have hampered its implementation and the EU's attractiveness to its neighbour alike. The outcome is a diminished capacity to transform the political environment in the vicinity and the achievement of relatively marginal and apolitical results under this framework for relations, thus falling short on both the EU's and its neighbours' expectations (Andreev, 2010).

Limited political achievements under the ENP and a series of events undermining regional security – e.g. the lack of democracy improvements in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, the Russian-Georgian war in 2008, the severe economic crisis experienced by the Eastern neighbourhood in 2009, as well as the vulnerability of energy supplies from the region exacerbated from the mid-2000s onwards – reinforced EU claims that security, stability and economic development remain key challenges in its vicinity (Boonstra and Shapovalova, 2010: 1). Against this delicate contextual environment, the EaP initiative was endorsed in Prague in 2009, based on a Polish-Swedish proposal, in order to enhance the EU's relationship with Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus – i.e. Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine (European Council, 2009d). This regional venture aimed at providing the EU with the framework to reinforce its footprint in the neighbourhood and convince its partners on the need to develop a closer relationship with Brussels via stronger political and economic integration structured around "shared values" (European Council, 2009d: 6; Tumanov *et al.*, 2011: 130). Borrowing much of the argumentative rationale supporting the ENP, the EaP comes across as a security-oriented approach as the ESS implementation report in 2008 and the Joint Declaration of the Prague Eastern Partnership summit in 2009 testify.

> The Eastern Partnership foresees a real step change in relations with our Eastern neighbours, with a significant upgrading of political, economic and trade relations. *The goal is to strengthen the prosperity and stability of these countries, and thus the security of the EU* (European Council, 2008d).

> The main goal of the Eastern Partnership is to create the necessary conditions to accelerate political association and further economic integration between the European Union and interested partner countries. [...] This serves the *shared*

> *commitment to stability, security and prosperity of the European Union*, the partner countries and indeed the entire European continent (European Council, 2009d: 6).[9]

These security ambitions are to be achieved through the development of relations based on further differentiation, joint ownership and a more ambitious partnership between the EU and its Eastern neighbours (European Commission, 2008b). Overall, the EaP envisages to provide greater coherence and consistency to the Union's approach towards its Eastern vicinity, suggesting a greater role for the EU in the region and thus increasing its ability to transform the political, economic and security environments at its borders (Ágh, 2010: 1255). For that purpose, it provides a dual-track approach combining bilateral relations – foreseeing EU neighbours' political association with and economic integration into the EU – with a multilateral track that supports regional cooperation and the development of closer ties among EaP partners (European Council, 2009d: 6).

At the bilateral level, the EaP introduced a new political instrument – Association Agreements (AAs) aiming at superseding the PCAs as the legal basis for EU relations with the Eastern neighbourhood – and assumed the goal of negotiating deep and comprehensive free trade areas (DCFTAs), visa liberalisation, enhanced cooperation in the field of energy security and support to reforms with the EU's partners. The underlying purpose was "to create a closer relationship between the EU and each of the partner countries to foster their stability and prosperity in our mutual interests" (European Commission, 2008b: 3). However, this new framework for relations reproduced the ENP's conditionality-based approach without accommodating neighbours' demands for the inclusion of a membership perspective. As a result, this initiative was perceived by EU partners as too vague, distant and costly (Boonstra and Shapovalova, 2010: 3), ergo hampering its transformative potential.

Whereas the EaP's bilateral track can be interpreted as a reproduction of the mechanisms already in place in the ENP framework, the multilateral track, run by the European External Action Service (EEAS), represents a novelty in the context of relations with the Eastern neighbourhood. It is projected as one of the main strengths of the EaP providing for high-level political support and a number of expert meetings, aiming at reinforcing processes of socialisation of the neighbourhood and its Europeanisation

[9] Emphasis added.

(European Commission, 2008b). This is based on the assumption that support to the Eastern neighbours' "democratic and market-oriented reforms [...] serves the […] security […] of the EU" (European Commission, 2008b: 2). Even though this idea is not a novelty, the EaP voices unequivocally the Union's ambitions of becoming a more "proactive and unequivocal" actor in the region for security reasons (European Commission, 2008b: 2).

The EU's own evaluation of progresses made under the EaP framework is rather positive and it is projected as "the way ahead" for closer relations with the Eastern neighbourhood, even if the EU recognises that "much remains to be done to tackle the persisting challenges posed to democracy" in the region (European Council, 2013: 2). Nonetheless, what is projected as a significant success by official statements conceals important dynamics of power and security unfolding in the broader European space. There were already some political dynamics in the EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle suggesting a less optimistic setting for the deepening of EU relations with its Eastern neighbours, as previously stated. This became clearer in the EaP Vilnius summit in 2013 when Armenia and Ukraine performed a U-turn, withdrawing from signing the AA/DCFTAs with the EU following non-transparent meetings with Russian President Vladimir Putin, thus inflicting a severe wound on EU foreign and neighbouring policies.

What was officially projected as a strategic advance in Eastern Europe's Europeanisation, was in practice a failure of the EU's transformative power in the region (Nilsson and Silander, 2016: 45). Reasons are twofold. On the one hand, the EU failed to address criticism on its neighbouring policies regarding its inability to accommodate neighbouring partners' interests and to present adequate incentives – i.e. realistic membership prospects – to foster the reforms these countries were expected to implement as a requirement for further integration with the EU. As a consequence, the political will necessary to advance with this process and to absorb its political and economic costs fell short of expectations, thus hindering processes of Europeanisation in the Eastern neighbourhood. On the other hand, the EU failed to understand that one of the most significant costs of further integration with the EU is the deterioration of Eastern neighbours' relations with Moscow. Given that many of these countries are still overwhelmingly dependent on Russia, sensitive relations with the Kremlin have the power to seriously affect their political and economic stability. As such, these countries often tend to prefer to preserve a cooperative string with Moscow than to invest in a process of

integration, whose benefits are only to be experienced in the (very) long run (Emerson, 2014).

The ensuing rise of conflict and instability in Ukraine further exposed the limited ability to promote transformation in the neighbourhood and seriously damaged the idea that the Union is the guardian of European peace. In order to repair the wound inflicted to its neighbouring policies, the EaP Riga summit in 2015 reaffirmed the sovereign right of each partner to freely choose the level of ambitious and the goals to which it aspires in its relations with the EU. As such, the bilateral dimension of the EaP was reinforced, even if the multilateral approach continues to be presented as a means to develop closer ties among the EU's partners, therefore creating a stronger sense of belonging to a common project (European Council, 2015: 6). By doing so, the EU detaches itself from Russian assertive and muscular approach towards the region and projects itself as a more benevolent and reliable partner (European Council, 2015: 5). At the same time, the EU draws the conclusion it would likely be more successful in its regional endeavours on a bilateral basis, thus increasing its transformative power and the likelihood to pursue its security-driven interests.

Awareness of limited political achievements in the neighbourhood and the fragility of the idea of a perpetually peaceful Europe further led the EU to engage in a review of the ENP. This process culminated in a "new" ENP, issued in 2015 by the European Commission and the EEAS, aiming at providing "a new approach, a re-prioritisation and […] new ways of working" with the neighbourhood in order to address root causes of instability (European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2015: 2).[10] More effective and differentiated partnerships in the neighbourhood will serve the EU in its goal to

> Pursue *its interests* which include the promotion of universal values. *The EU's own stability* is built on democracy, human rights and the rule of law and economic openness and *the new ENP will take stabilisation as its main political*

[10] A previous review of the ENP was presented in 2011 in order to "provide greater support to partners engaged in building deep democracy", "support inclusive economic development", and "strengthen the regional dimensions of" this policy. The core of the ENP remained unchanged, however. Relations with partner countries continued to be structured by conditionality and socialising mechanisms. The main alteration introduced by this review was the more-for-more approach – "the more and the faster a country progresses in its internal reforms, the more support it will get from the EU" (European Commission and High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2011: 2-3).

> *priority* in this mandate (European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2015: 2).[11]

The "new" ENP moves forward in assuming the security-oriented nature of relations with the neighbourhood. Stabilisation is focused as being the most urgent challenge at the EU's borders. This is something that was already reproduced in previous debates on the ENP and official documents concerning the neighbourhood, including the European Agenda on Security. This document reinforces the importance of security to the survival of the European project for "Europeans need to feel confident that […] their freedom and security are well protected, in full compliance with the Union's values" (European Commission, 2015: 2). Many of the threats identified in this document are claimed to originate from instability in the EU's neighbourhood and changing forms of radicalisation, violence and terrorism. Although these so-called new and complex threats have for long defined the security environment across the globe, they are now discursively constructed as presenting an immediate threat to EU security demanding further synergies and cooperation at all levels.

The Juncker Commission reinforced this process by voicing that the neighbourhood remains "shaky and unstable", despite the EU's continuous efforts to promote security at its borders. To address challenges in the neighbourhood Juncker plainly affirms that

> We cannot and will not sweep these mounting problems under the carpet. We cannot and will not turn a blind eye. That is why I insist that the time for European action is now. That is why I state loud and clear […] that Europe's problems cannot be put on the back burner (Juncker, 2014b).

Practical effects of this discursive mapping of intentions are yet to be seen. However, if successful in his endeavours, Jean-Claude Juncker may well be the precursor of a renewed trend in EU foreign and neighbourhood policies; a more assertive approach aiming at defending the EU's interests abroad, very much in line with Russia's regional strategies. In a moment of internal and external crisis, the European Commission was successful in reinforcing its political role and the security dimension of relations with the neighbourhood, claiming that "recent events have confirmed the urgent need for such a political approach in the European Union" (Juncker, 2015: 5). These new discourses

[11] Emphasis added.

collide with previous normative focus on regional democracy-promotion and development by creating new narratives projecting the neighbourhood as a "ring of fire", ergo replacing the reference to the "ring of friends" that was at the core of the initial ENP (Schumacher, 2016: 1-2). As a consequence, discursive practices framing relations with the neighbourhood now refer straightforwardly to the security-driven intention to contain external crisis from contaminating the Union's internal stability, whereas more benevolent discourses referring to the need to promote the sustainable development of neighbouring societies occupy a secondary place in political statements. True, recent conflicts and tumultuous events in both the Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods reinforced this perception of the EU's vicinity as a source of regional instability. However, as claimed by Tobias Schumacher

> external volatilities, crises, conflicts and the violation of territorial integrity, have been key characteristics of the EU's periphery already at the time when Brussels decided to label the immediate space beyond its external borders 'neighbourhood' and in fact ever after (Schumacher, 2016: 2)

Even though the Juncker's Commission assumes a commitment with doing "different things" and doing "things differently" (European Commission, 2014b: 2), what we are witnessing is the vocalisation of discursive practices that have been into place in EU foreign and neighbourhood policies since the end of the Cold War. This is not a new start, but the production of new discourses envisaging to legitimise the Union's growing scope of action in security matters in its relations with the neighbourhood. Seemingly, the fact that stabilisation, ownership and differentiation continue to be cornerstones of the ENP, whereas references to conditionality as the main driver of changes in the EU's vicinity are now absent from official documents, suggests a loss in the EU's transformative power and ability to reinforce its hegemonic regional status. Tobias Schumacher (2016) argues that this establish almost a pick and choose approach whereby neighbouring countries can establish cooperation with the EU in certain domains without responding to the EU's traditional demands for democracy compliance, economic sustainability and respect for human rights. The EU thus prioritises its security agenda aiming at containing instability in the neighbourhood over its traditional normative agenda and force for good approach to regional matters. For neighbouring countries have for long voiced their aversion to engage in costly and time-demanding processes of adaptation to EU norms and

values, such approach may well have the perverse effect of rewarding neighbouring countries with more-for-less, i.e. rewards will be granted but appeals for transformation in the neighbourhood favourable to EU security interests will be less and less attractive. Furthermore, the EU offer of more flexible partnerships with neighbours reluctant to internalise norms and values can trigger the unintended consequence of perpetuating the root causes of instability in the EU's vicinity, i.e. the absence of democratic rule and continuous violations of human rights.

Whereas this seems to be an accurate reading of the "new" ENP towards the Southern neighbourhood, the situation is considerably different in the case of relations with the Eastern neighbourhood. For those neighbours committed to European integration, and that voiced membership aspirations, relations with the EU remain mostly unaltered (Dworkin and Wesslau, 2015). This is particularly true for neighbours who already signed AAs and DCFTAs with the EU, namely Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia. Conditionality and socialisation aiming at transforming the environment at the EU's borders continues to be the main drivers of EU relations with these countries. As such, this move by the Commission and the EEAS inserts a considerable dose of realpolitik in the ENP and reaffirms its security-driven ambitions by establish grounds for cooperation with neighbouring countries not keen to internalise European norms and values in order to pursue the Union's security interests. Alongside, its transformative power and hegemonic stance in regional matters remains very much present – if not even reinforced – in relations with countries willing to deepen its ties with the EU. In this regard, the ENP now assumes its security ambitions in a more pragmatic fashion and puts into force a framework for action aiming at stabilising the neighbourhood – where the EU normative agenda is not attractive – and transform the EU's periphery – where the EU remains an attractive partner. This transformative power, however, is no longer visible in the ENP's structural documents and it is only by analysing its related instruments and mechanisms than it becomes noticeable. The AAs and DCFTAs continue to establish the approximation with the EU's *acquis communitaire* as a requirement for political association and economic integration into the EU internal market, thus reproducing the traditional mechanisms that the EU has deployed to frame relations with neighbouring countries (Blockmans, 2015: 3).

The analysis of EU foreign and neighbouring policies reveals that gradually the EU post-Cold War regional project has assumed a hegemonic nature based on security

concerns. Slowly it becomes conspicuous the construction of discursive practices that allowed the EU to extend its scope of action and influence towards the Eastern neighbourhood. The main goal is to secure the environment at its borders in order to guarantee the survival and security of the Union itself. The EU is not interested in accommodating its neighbours' identities and interests, rather it promotes asymmetrical relations that come across as important sources of power, allowing the EU to normalise the political, economic and security setting in the neighbourhood as a mean to project its identity and satisfy its interests. The EU's hegemonic ambitions are clear when Juncker affirms that the EU has something very meaningful to offer to its neighbourhood – "it is our knowledge and leadership" (Juncker, 2015). By exporting its worldview and by fostering asymmetrical relations the EU assumes itself as the leader; the front-runner guiding its neighbours towards proper behaviour. However, there are several constraints to this exercise of power by the EU, including Russia's foreign policies and hegemonic approach towards the shared neighbourhood with the EU, which are now analysed into further detail.

3.2. Russian foreign policies towards the neighbourhood: regaining a hegemonic status in the post-Soviet space

The Russian Federation is one of the fifteen newly independent states that emerged from the dismantling of the USSR. During the 1990s, it engaged on a process of complex political, economic, and social transition. This process implied the development of mechanisms and strategies to deal with the loss of a unified ideology supporting the Soviet Union, the definition of Russian identity and the redefinition of relations with an unstable and shaky neighbourhood (Freire, 2009). Overall, Russia emerged as the legal successor of the USSR, but much diminished in territory, population and political power (Herd, 2010: 8). As such, a series of identity issues and political, economic and social problems had to be dealt with at this point. In the domain of foreign policy, it is noticeable the unfolding of an internal debate regarding the delineation of Russia's national interests and of its regional and global role in the post-Cold War context (Dias, 2013a: 261). This implied an intricate process of reasoning with internal audiences by Russian political elites. Being a traditional power, the process of decision-making in Russia is far less complicated

than on the EU case. When developing lines of argumentation to justify its internal and external policy choices, Russian political elites seek mainly to convince public opinion and to accommodate diverging views by different elite clusters regarding the country's foreign policy orientations.[12]

Russian post-Cold War foreign policies can be grouped into three major stages.[13] The first period in the early 1990s is characterised by aspirations to develop close relations with the West and adopt a cooperative and aggregating tone in foreign matters. At this point, Russia kept a mostly introspective attitude towards the post-Soviet space (Trenin, 2009: 8). However, mutual disappointment and distrust in Russia's relations with Western powers and institutions and the latter failure in accommodating Russia's regional and global ambitions led to a redefinition of Moscow's foreign policy strategies.

In this context of perceived betrayal and humiliation by the West, then Minister for Foreign Affairs Andrey Kozyrev adopted a more assertive stance in which relations with the near abroad featured as the main focus of Russia's foreign policy and a key strategy in the persecution of its national interests (Alexandrova-Arbatova, 2008: 254; Igumnova, 2011: 257). The second stage of Russian foreign policy is thus marked by a redefinition of the country's regional and international interests and the revival of Russia's role as the hegemonic agent in the post-Soviet space (Russian Federation, 1993; Flenley, 2005: 437-438). All in all, Russia undertook efforts to reaffirm its power in its traditional sphere of influence and to become the guarantor of stability in the region. As a consequence, the influence of external actors in this area was not welcomed out of fear of undermining Russian leverage and, hence, the persecution of its interests (Freire, 2006: 8). Following these structuring lines, two key axis were clearly defined in the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation of 1993. On the one hand, Russia was to counterbalance Western powers' influence in regional and global affairs and dissuade their interference in

[12] We can distinguish between Euro-Atlanticists favouring closer ties with the West – i.e. the United States of America (USA) and the EU –, Eurasianists claiming for strategic allegiances to the East, including China and India, and Russia-first advocates favouring the country's affirmation based on its imperial legacy, political power and economic leverage (Freire, 2006: 5; 2009: 77). For a different interpretation of Russian foreign policy orientations see e.g. White (2012: 305-318).

[13] The literature review on the topic reveals a plethora of definitions and typologies concerning the evolution of Russian foreign policy. Richard Sakwa, for instance, proposed a reading based on four stages of foreign policy – liberal interventionism (1990-1993), pragmatic competitiveness (1993-2000), new realism (2000-2007) and neo-revisionism (2007-) (Sakwa, 2012). However, we considered that the latter two stages have so much in common that they can be better grasped as a single stage in which initial contents and dynamics have been subject of reinforcement and refinement. As such, we present here a tripartite reading of the evolution of Russian post-Cold War foreign policies.

its traditional sphere of influence. On the other hand, it was to consolidate its power and leverage over the post-Soviet space (Russian Federation, 1993; Pavliuk, 2005: 191). Regarding the latter, preserving Russian military power in the region, protecting ethnic Russians and pursuing economic advantages with its vicinity appeared as Moscow's most relevant regional strategies (Tsygankov, 2006).

These trends were consolidated from 1996 onwards. The new Minister for Foreign Affairs Yevgeny Primakov developed a pragmatic and multi-vector foreign policy. He pushed for a more vigorous defence of Russia's national interests and for an equal partnership with the West within a foreign policy that would itself be more diversified. Despite the end of the Cold War, Russia was still a great power and should have a foreign policy corresponding to its status (White, 2012: 277). This meant that without disregarding relations with the West, Russia was to reinforce its allegiances to the East by developing strategic partnerships with China, India and countries in the Middle East. Simultaneously, Moscow aimed at reinforcing its hegemonic status in the post-Soviet space by supporting cooperation between CIS countries and promoting the stabilisation of regional conflicts in this area. These structuring lines of action precluded the definition and unfolding of Russian foreign policies in the 21st century.

The third stage of Russian foreign policy is developed under the administration of President Vladimir Putin from 2000 onwards. Putin was very much convinced that any meaningful role by Russia in regional and international affairs had to comply with classic notions of international politics, i.e. the persecution of national interests, the principle of territorial integrity and sovereignty. These principles became cornerstones of Russian foreign policy and led to an approach whereby Russia envisaged gaining greater autonomy and pragmatism in the formulation of its foreign policy agenda. Contrary to its posture in the early 1990s, Russia was no longer afraid to hamper relations with the West in order to pursue its national and regional interests. However, this did not mean an absolute detachment as Moscow was willing to promote more cooperative initiatives whenever that implied a reinforcement of Russia's regional and global status. This is all the more visible in the context of the global fight against terrorism post-9/11, when Russia aligned with the West and projected itself as an indispensable partner in addressing rampant regional and global security challenges. The mix of cooperative and competitive strings in Russia's relations with the West is an element of continuity at this stage. This, of course, has

important implications in the way Russia is perceived in the international arena – simultaneously an important ally in addressing security issues and an increasingly authoritarian state aiming at rebuilding and reinforcing its hegemonic role in the post-Soviet space. At the regional level, it becomes noticeable the centrality of fostering relations with the neighbourhood in Russia foreign policy agenda. Reinforcing the country's leverage in the post-Soviet space represents an extension of Russia's internal power for it is widely perceived that domestic and regional security work in tandem and therefore Russia can only reach its full potential if surrounded by friendly states, regardless of their political orientations (Averre, 2009: 1696-1697; Joenniemi, 2008; Selezneva, 2003: 26). This idea is explicit in the National Concept of the Russian Federation when it states that

> *Russia's national interests are a totality of balanced interests* of the individual, society and the state in economic; domestic political, social, international […] and other fields. […] Russia's national interests in the international sphere lie in upholding its sovereignty and strengthening its positions as a great power and as one of the influential centers of a multipolar world, in *development of equal and mutually advantageous relations* with all countries and integrative associations and *primarily with the members of the Commonwealth of Independent States* (Russian Federation, 2000b).[14]

Similarly, and reinforcing this idea, the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation refers that

> Differences between domestic and external means of ensuring national interests and security are gradually disappearing [… and thus the] development of bilateral and multilateral cooperation with the CIS member states constitutes a priority area of Russia's foreign policy (Russian Federation, 2008).

As these quotes suggest, internal and external dimensions of security appear to be indissolubly interconnected in Russian foreign policy, something that is also present in the formulation of the EU's foreign and neighbouring policies. Furthermore, they clearly prioritise the post-Soviet space as Moscow's sphere of privileged interests. There are various reasons for this prioritisation. First, its historical past and geographical location make it a geopolitical and strategic area between West and East, where Russia seeks to play a meaningful role (Freire, 2012). Second, due to strong patterns of economic, political

[14] Emphasis added.

and security interdependence among countries in this area, Russia believes that events in the region have a direct impact on its internal development. In this regard, partnerships with the CIS countries support national security and economic prosperity, thus encouraging great convergence between Russian business interests and foreign policy activities (Flenley, 2005: 440; Radchuk, 2011: 29). Third, Russia considers that only a clear sphere of influence can enable it to play a significant role in a multipolar world and, therefore, external interferences in the region raise serious concerns about changes in political loyalties that might undermine its regional leverage (Judah *et al.*, 2011: 23). Such understanding lays at the core of Moscow's reluctance before the EU's increasing involvement in the region, as it fears that Brussels has the power to persuade countries in the shared neighbourhood to gravitate around the EU (Dias, 2013a: 262; Massari, 2007: 11). This collides directly with Russian interests which lean towards the maintenance of a monopoly of strategic influence in its vicinity (Herd, 2010: 14). Together, these reasons both justify Russia's right to intervene and control events in the neighbourhood, and legitimate its foreign policies before its domestic audiences. The structural standpoint of Russian foreign policy from 2000 onwards is accurately portrayed by Dmitri Trenin when he claims that

> Russian foreign policy has again become assertive. Loudly and frankly, it talks about what Russia wants, not about some abstract interests of the international community or world peace. […] Conversely, Moscow uses economic sanctions to press its don't-mess-with-us message where other forms of persuasion do not work (Trenin, 2007: 198).

It is not so much that security moved back into the heart of Russian politics – it was always there –, but Russia's more comprehensive and consistent political approach from 2000 onwards sustained by a period of substantial economic growth based on revenues from the energy sector opened new opportunities to reinforce its security agenda on regional matters (Galeotti, 2010a: 2; Hanson, 2009; Perovic, 2009: 1). This course of action represents an element of continuity in Russian politics having underpinned the presidential mandates of Vladimir Putin (2000-2004; 2004-2008; 2012-present) and Dmitri Medvedev (2008-2012) and has been continuously affirmed in the various reformulations of the Russian Foreign Policy Concept (1993, 2000a, 2008, 2013) – the most important document framing Russian foreign policy. This is an important source of structural power by Russia shedding light on the hegemonic nature of its regional project and on its attempts

to preserve a dominating tone in bilateral relations with countries in its sphere of influence (Pavliuk, 2005: 195). As security-oriented regional strategies became more pronounced, Russia emerged as a hegemonic regional power, simultaneously a competitor and a partner to the EU, and a mighty neighbour to countries in its near abroad (Trenin, 2008: 104). Russian relations with its vicinity are based on the country's comparative advantages and on strategies seeking to maximise economic gains, while minimizing perceived geopolitical losses resulting from the expansion of Western institutions – i.e. the EU and NATO. For that purpose, Russia has not hesitated to use its military, economic, energy and political resources to increase the manifold vulnerabilities and dependences of its neighbours, allowing Russia to preserve asymmetric relations favouring the maintenance of these countries in its orbit of influence (Baev, 2007: 454; Dias, 2014a; Isakova, 2005: 17-18).

In the military field, the presence of its troops across this region of strategic interest and Russia's preeminent role in protracted conflicts across the post-Soviet space have put a long strain on decision makers in this area (Trenin, 2009: 11). In accordance, Moscow has reinforced its position in the neighbourhood through bilateral defence agreements allowing it to deploy military bases in Armenia, Azerbaijan,[15] Belarus, Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia), Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova (Transnistria), Ukraine and Tajikistan (Igumnova, 2011: 258-259). This is particularly relevant regarding the ongoing protracted conflicts in Moldova (Transnistria), Georgia (South Ossetia and Abkhazia) and the Karabakh dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Based on the alleged need to maintain regional security, Russian military deployments are projected as peacekeeping mechanisms aiming at mediating and resolving these conflicts (Morozova, 2009: 671). The country does indeed play a crucial role in all protracted conflicts in the region, but Moscow has no elaborated regional perspective on the matter nor does it have a policy of dealing with these conflicts tied to a vision of desired outcome. Seemingly, it persists an interest in supporting separatist movements close to Moscow relating to the fact that these conflicts provide Russia with significant leverage over its neighbouring countries (Matveeva, 2008: 190). Furthermore, Russian military presence in the post-Soviet state

[15] Russian Aerospace Defence Forces operated the Gabala Radar Station in the country until 2012. In 2013, the station facilities were transferred to Azerbaijani authorities and its equipment dismantled and transported back to Russia. Currently, Moscow has no military deployments in the country.

represents a limit to its neighbours' sovereignty, denying them full control over their territories and indirectly constraining their foreign policies (Trenin, 2011: 11).

Economically, Russia has developed several bilateral and multilateral attempts to integrate the markets in its vicinity, namely via customs and economic unions. In 2003, former Deputy Prime Minister and important businessman, Anatoly Chubais (2003) claimed the development of economic integration and interdependence in the post-Soviet space to be a hallmark of Russia's mission to build a liberal empire in the region. This mission was described in official statements as a natural development of Moscow's leading role in the CIS area and of its duty to transform the economic environment in the region. Simultaneously, it has steadily taken a share on the main economic sectors in its vicinity (Tsygankov, 2006: 147-148) increasing levels of transactions and interdependence between Moscow and its neighbours, while requiring the maintenance of a political and economic secure environment pivotal to the success of Russian business and corporate activism. Russia has also accentuated its economic attractiveness to neighbouring countries by projecting itself as a preferential market to their products and by reinforcing its stance as the major employer of labour migrants in the post-Soviet space (Popescu and Wilson, 2009: 3). This represents an important form of economic dependence as labour migrants send back home billions of remittances every year. However, economic challenges felt by Russia in the last years increased difficulties in obtaining legal status and anti-migration attitudes, whereas the rouble crisis has contributed to a drop in remittances, thus diminishing the Russian labour market attractiveness to neighbouring countries (The Guardian, 2015b). Despite this general current of affairs, Russia is still the most relevant employer of (legal and illegal) labour migrants in the post-Soviet space, whose countries are also struggling with many economic challenges and currency devaluations, something that helps Russia to preserve significant economic leverage over its neighbourhood.

On the energy dimension, Moscow has often made use of positive and negative conditionality – including price reductions to friendly neighbours and gas embargoes to unfriendly regimes –, to project its power and explore the vulnerabilities of its neighbours, in order to reinforce its regional influence and increase the economic and political revenues to the Kremlin (Denisov and Grivach, 2008: 96; Wolczuk, 2016: 3). Revenues from energy trade are the basis of Russia's economy and Moscow's grip on energy companies has been tightened since the 2000s (Mangott and Westphal, 2008: 152). Energy became central to

Russian politics and has been used as a political tool to influence its neighbours' policy choices. Energy crises in the region, especially with Ukraine and Belarus, illustrate Russia's political use of its energy leverage (Closson, 2009: 93). The fundamental politisation of energy by Moscow occurred in 2005, when Gazprom dropped price subsidies for CIS costumers, started charging prices more market-oriented, insisted on the replacement of in-kind payments for gas transit by cash and demanded paybacks of energy debts. This was a politically-driven move triggered by the perceived loss of Russian influence in its near abroad following the coloured revolutions in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004) and Kyrgyzstan (2005) and the consequent need to deploy harsher regional strategies. In this context, energy supplies to Europe are used as a political tool to tie the neighbourhood into its orbit by manipulating and constraining their foreign policy choices (Perovic, 2009: 3). Even though Moscow often deploys a discourse based on economic reasons to justify energy quarrels in the post-Soviet space, the match between these crises and political moments of tension between Russia and its neighbours whenever the latter take political decisions contrary to its national interests, the differentiation of energy prices and the lack of transparency in negotiations (Makarychev, 2008: 54), suggest that energy crises cannot be reduced to a commercial dimension. Moreover, the fact that contract renegotiations in the energy industry normally do not involve cutting off supplies and the Russian president often appears as the main interlocutor in these processes, offering an exit to the involved countries based on political concessions, strengthens the idea that Gazprom is a political proxy used to reinforce Moscow's regional power (Closson, 2009: 97). This is facilitated by a pattern of asymmetric energy dependence in the post-Soviet space enabling Russia to simultaneously benefit from energy-related revenues and to exert political power over its neighbourhood. The fact that Moscow has preferred to frame energy relations in the region on an informal manner, refraining from institutionalising energy arrangements or to include them in multilateral legal agreements, adds to the understanding of energy as a political tool used to reinforce Russia's leading role in the CIS area (Wolczuk, 2016: 1-5).

Last but not least, in the political realm Russia has been keen to provide its support to pro-Russian political parties and non-governmental organisations in its vicinity opposed to deeper integration into both the EU and NATO (Stent, 2007: 12; Tolstrup, 2009: 932-933). Russia has also promoted several regional initiatives aiming at preserving

Russia's leadership in the post-Soviet space and assuring a political environment favourable to Russian interests. Since the end of the Cold War, it is noticeable a stronger commitment to processes of regional integration (Stent, 2008) which are understood to be important vehicles exporting Russian standpoints and promoting its interests (Cameron and Dománski, 2005: 6). Given the fact that Russia has fallen short of achieving the desired level of integration and recognition in international forums during the 1990s (Andréani, 2010: 237), Moscow has been eager to develop frameworks for regional integration allowing it to regain a hegemonic status and affirm itself as a meaningful regional power in the international arena. These frameworks are pivotal to Moscow's regional strategy, which consists of reinforcing its presence in and supremacy over the post-Soviet space.

The first initiative of sorts was the CIS, established in 1991 at the Minsk Summit that made official the dismantling of the USSR.[16] The post-Cold War environment in the former Soviet space confronted Russia with the necessity of presenting a well-thought strategy vis-à-vis its zone of vital interests. The assembling of the CIS under the aegis of Russia is the first response to this need aiming at building special relationships in the socioeconomic and security fields between former Soviet states (Kuzio, 2003a). Its core purposes are the

> accomplishment of cooperation in political, economic, ecological, humanitarian and other spheres, the all-round balanced economic and social development of member states within the framework of common economic space [… and] cooperation among member states to ensure work peace and security (Commonwealth of Independent States, 1993: Article 2).

The commonwealth emphasises the existence of common threats that require joint action by its member states and that stability in the region can only be achieved by cooperation between former Soviet states and the coordination of their foreign policies and economic activities (Commonwealth of Independent States, 1993: Article 4). In practical terms, Russia became the donor of countries in the region in exchange for their political

[16] Initially founded by Russia, Belarus and Ukraine, this organisation is currently constituted by nine member states – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan – and two participating states – Turkmenistan and Ukraine. Ukraine never ratified the CIS Charter thus failing to become a full-member of this organisation. The country withdrew from participating in the CIS in 2014, as a consequence of the Euromaidan movement and the illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia, though it later announced its will to continue to participate in the organisation on a selective basis. Georgia joined the CIS in 1993, but abandoned its participation in this institution in August 2008, as a consequence of the Georgia-Russia War.

loyalty, something that provided Moscow with the leverage to take a stronger stance on regional affairs (Alexandrova-Arbatova, 2008: 307-308). Over time, the CIS competences have gradually grown in scope and depth. This institution has now supranational powers – however limited – in areas concerning commercial, financial, technical, legal and security cooperation. Among these, military cooperation developed by the CIS Council of Defence Ministers is one of the most significant. The Council's main tasks are to develop conceptual approaches to the defence policies of its member states; develop proposals to hamper the clash of armed conflicts in the post-Soviet Space; and to promote legal harmonisation in military and defence matters amongst the CIS member states. Furthermore, cooperation under the CIS framework has made possible the creation of a joint system of air defence, which illustrates the level of military integration in the region. In the economic field, it is noteworthy the creation of a Free Trade Area (FTA) between Armenia, Belarus, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine in October 2011. In the political field, one of the CIS most relevant instruments is the Europe Monitoring Organisation, institutionalised in 2002 to observing electoral proceedings in the post-Soviet space. Notwithstanding, this organisation is seemingly privileging Russia's interests in the region by neglecting the promotion of and compliance with good electoral practices, whenever the election of pro-Russian parties is at stake. It is common to find reports by this organisation claiming for the legality of elections that have raised concerns over its legitimacy to independent international electoral observers. The most relevant cases where such trend was observable were the presidential elections of 2004 in Ukraine – leading to the Orange Revolution –, the parliamentary elections of 2005 in Uzbekistan, Moldova, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, and the local administration elections of 2010 in Ukraine (Dias, 2015c).

A far-reaching concept for the development of the CIS was approved in October 2007, extending its responsibilities to migration, terrorism, crime and drugs trafficking, although only four members – Russia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan and Armenia – signed all the documents relating to this extension of competences (White, 2012: 293). This concept reinforces the idea that the CIS is driven by the will to promote long-term political and economic integration between its member states, strengthen good-neighbourly relations in the post-Soviet space, foster joint action to fight security threats and challenges, as well as to encourage the harmonisation of political activities and legislation in the region (Commonwealth of Independent States, 2007).

Even if one of the CIS initial goals was the facilitation of processes of transition after the dismantling of the USSR, authoritarianism, clientelism and nepotism have been gradually reinforced in the region (Beichelt, 2004; Kuzio, 2007: 38; Nilsson and Silander, 2016). In that regard, intended goals by this organisation can be better understood as a disguise to its real mission – assure security at Russia's borders and reinforce its regional power. Overall, the CIS has been central to Moscow's strategy of promoting a *de facto* assimilation of its neighbouring countries. As such, the CIS can be better understood as an institution attempting at restoring the USSR greatness without claiming sovereignty over the post-Soviet space nor officially acknowledging Russia's hegemonic ambitions (Kuzio, 2002). Given this manifestation of structural power by Moscow, some of its neighbours – e.g. Ukraine, Georgia and Uzbekistan – have been very vocal in defending a system of regional integration based on effective economic cooperation and the respect for the sovereignty of each former Soviet state, ergo refusing to take part in initiatives envisaging cooperation on military and security matters. However, weaker states in the region are often compelled to participate in these initiatives promoted by Moscow because they have reduced leverage and ability to react to its hegemonic regional endeavours ("Relations between Russia and Ukraine," 1997).

Despite the evolution of CIS competences and scope for action, this organisation remains a loose and ambiguous framework unable to deliver levels of integration strong enough to comply with Moscow's regional interests. Its intergovernmental institutions provide opportunities for discussion rather than executive action and its decisions are often disregarded. Its political relevance has also been compromised by the inability to produce common positions by its member states on central issues, e.g. the recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia independence in 2008 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Simão, 2015: 118). Cooperation along the CIS has been further hampered by continuous tensions between member states suspicious of any form of supranational authority under the aegis of Russia – e.g. Ukraine and Georgia – and member states more enthusiastic about a greater degree of integration – particularly in Central Asia (White, 2012: 292). To compensate for the lack of unity on a CIS-wide basis, Russia has opted to promote smaller integration projects at different, though related fields, namely in the security and economic domains, such as the CSTO and the EEU (Dias, 2015c; Freire, 2016: 43).

The CSTO is a security organisation created in May 2002 to replace the CIS Collective Security Treaty. It assumes itself as a political-military alliance relying on the basic premise of collective security, i.e. mutual cooperation and defence in the event of an external attack to any of its member states. Its purpose is to strengthen "international peace and regional security and stability", and protect its member states' independence, territorial integrity and sovereignty on a collective basis (Collective Security Treaty Organisation, 2010: Article 3). In 2007, the CSTO's member states – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan – agreed to expand the organisation's competences to the domain of peacekeeping. This means that the CSTO has now the ability to deploy missions in the case of violent outbreaks throughout the territory of the entire organisation, with or without a UNSC mandate (Collective Security Treaty Organisation, 2010: Article 7). This agreement made easier for member states to obtain Russian military equipment at domestic prices for their own armed forces and special services (Putin, 2007a). With clear security and military goals, this organisation foresees to become Russia's regional armed branch with the support of countries in its sphere of influence (Freire, 2011: 56). The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation of 2008 along with declarations by then President Dmitri Medvedev shed light on the CSTO paramount relevance as a motor of cooperation within the CIS area (Russian Federation, 2008; Medvedev, 2008). The CSTO is portrayed as "a key instrument to maintain stability and ensure security" in the region and should be ideally transformed "into a central institution ensuring security in its area of responsibility" (Russian Federation, 2008: 15). In the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation of 2013 this message is further reinforced by recognising the CSTO as "one of the key elements of the modern security system in the post-Soviet space". Due to its regional relevance, the organisation is expected to become "a universal international organisation capable of counteracting current challenges and threats under the growing influence of diverse global and regional factors" in this area (Russian Federation, 2013: 13).

The EEU roots can be traced back to a FTA agreement established in 1996 between Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia. Based on this FTA, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan have further agreed to create a Eurasian Economic Community (EEC) in 2000. Its core goal was the creation of a customs union and a single economic space, managed at the supranational level, open for accession to all former

Soviet states. The ECC intended to guarantee the free movement of goods, services, capital and labour; the creation of favourable conditions for the development of these countries socioeconomic infrastructures; cooperation amongst its member states in financial, economic and commercial matters; and the development of working transportation, energy and information infrastructures. Russia's abundance of energy resources and the multiple economic interlinkages between countries in the post-Soviet space provided an obvious basis for cooperation. Within this framework, it was accepted that an inner core constituted by Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan might advance more rapidly towards a common customs area, allowing other members to follow as they find it suitable (White, 2012: 294).

Indeed, in 2012, a formal agreement was celebrated by countries in this inner core on the creation of a Common Economic Space (CES), constituting the basis for a more inclusive project – the EEU. The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation of 2013 further recognised the establishment of the EEU as a priority in the country's agenda "aiming not only to make the best use of mutually beneficial economic ties in the CIS space but also to become a model of association open to other states" (Russian Federation, 2013: 13). Overall, the EEU would serve the purpose of turning Russia into the centre of regional integration in the post-Soviet space, a rule-maker and an active part of global economic processes (Freire, 2016: 45).

In October 2014, the initial signatories of the CES, decided to take economic integration a step further and made official the creation of the EEU, which is in effect since January 2015.[17] The Union is formalised as

> an international organisation of regional economic cooperation […] ensuring free movement of goods, services, capital and labour within its borders, as well as coordinated, agreed or common policy in the economic [field] (Eurasian Economic Union, 2015: Article 1).

Benefits arising from this model of economic integration raise many questions. Michael Emerson (2014: 6-7) claims this initiative to be largely contrary to Russian economic and political interests. It adds no value to Russia's modernisation path and offers no significant economic opportunities to its member states due to the small size of non-Russian economies. Furthermore, by forming a customs union with non-World Trade Organisation (WTO) countries, Russia locks itself out of entering into any FTA with major

[17] Armenia and Kyrgyzstan joined the EEU in 2015.

global economies. In this context, cooperation under the EEU is first and foremost about protecting Russia's hegemonic status and bolstering Russian identity – an identity constructed on its undisputed and historical leadership over the post-Soviet space (Morozov, 2015: 9). If successful, the EEU has the potential to increase cooperative strings and levels of interdependence in the region, and may even become a counterpart to the EU thus luring other neighbours (Haukkala, 2015: 32; White, 2012: 294). This comparison with the process of European integration is all the most visible in the words of then President Dmitri Medvedev after a meeting of the EEC Interstate Council, in 2009

> As you know, the European Union was a long time in the making, and required efforts to effect its integration over an extended period. As everybody knows, it began life as the European Coal and Steel Community and finally became a full-fledged European Union. [...] Today's decisions really do mark a milestone: as a result of them there will be a Customs Union [...], that will come into existence on January 1, 2010. […] [I]t is [...] important that we use the development of the Customs Union to prepare for the transition to a common economic space. This will represent a fundamentally new form of integration for our economies (Medvedev, 2009).

Accordingly, as Tsygankov (2015: 291) contends, the EEU is "not strictly an economic arrangement, but also an alternative means of defending sovereignty and national identity from political encroachment by the EU". With time and the unfolding of relations within this framework, Russia can indeed reinforce its leverage and attractiveness in its area of vital interests. Furthermore, it has the potential to promote formal integration allowing to regroup the post-Soviet space under the rule of Russia and reaffirm Moscow's regional ambitions, without the vagueness and looseness of other regional initiatives, e.g. the CIS (Simão, 2015). The increasingly close cooperation between the EEU and the CSTO opens the possibility that the two might at some time in the future become a single organisation with a common membership, thus reinforcing Russia-led regional integration.

These frameworks for integration envisage not only to create links of interdependence amongst countries in the post-Soviet space, but also to increase Moscow's economic competitiveness and political projection at the regional level. In this process, Russia is seemingly reproducing the EU model for regional integration by creating opportunities for cooperation spillover into new areas, thus increasing the legal harmonisation of countries in the region and fostering the transference of powers from the

national to the supranational level – a level where Russia has a stronger bargaining chip than its neighbours. In that regard, Russia perceives the EEU as an opportunity to highlight and reinforce the potential of both the CIS and the CSTO, while contributing to expand its hegemonic regional power (Camba, 2012). It also aims at reverting the generalised perception that, contrary to the EU, Russia does not provide an attractive model for integration and modernisation (Averre, 2005: 187).

Russian mimicry of EU approaches towards the neighbourhood is not a novelty and has been expressed in other areas. Even if Moscow tends to deploy a more assertive strategy towards its vicinity than the EU, it has become gradually visible a trend whereby Russian authorities have been resorting to their soft power to enhance its economic attractiveness to promote stability and security in the region, especially in the post-coloured revolutions regional environment. The colour revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan represented a tilting point raising concerns in Russia about Western-sponsored movements for forced change in its vicinity and the danger this represented to Russian politics and hegemonic ambitions (Baran, 2008: 95; Sakwa, 2011: 962; Simão, 2016: 493; Trenin, 2008: 108). As a means to counterbalance Western influence in the region, Russia has been paying more attention to its normative agenda. This has been reflected in Moscow's increasing promotion of and support to pro-Russian youth groups and non-governmental organisations in Russia and abroad, while presenting its own concept of democracy and freedom – sovereign democracy – as an alternative to the liberal model enforced by the EU (Popescu and Wilson, 2009).

Over time, sovereign democracy became Russia's national ideology and an important part of its identity combining a style of authoritarian rule with a minimalist understanding of democracy – which is reduced to the electoral act and lacks any meaningful systems of checks and balances –, and the ability to take foreign policy decisions without deferring to the views of other powers (Freire, 2011: 37; Herd, 2010: 9; White, 2012: 358). It has also become Russia's flagship in relations with the neighbourhood and the basis of its normative agenda, which aims at undermining the idea of liberal democracy promoted by the EU (Finkel and Brudny, 2012; Flenley, 2008: 200; Nitoiu, 2011: 466-471). Here it is important to stress that the concept of sovereign democracy became a powerful argumentative strategy, a rhetorical move to legitimise Russian neighbouring initiatives and reinforce the hegemonic nature of its regional

endeavours. Overall, the notion of sovereign democracy is a response to the EU's regional hegemonic power, which Russia rejects, and a means to reinforce non-interference by other actors in its area of influence (Casier, 2016: 29). In a similar reading, Viatcheslav Morozov (2010: 6-7) interprets Russian discursive practices and this particular definition of democracy as a challenge to Western hegemony by providing an alternative system of meaning and values, something that is crystallised in the Russian Foreign Policy Concept.

> It is for the first time in the contemporary history that global competition is acquiring a civilisational dimension which suggests competition between different value systems and development models within the framework of universal democratic and market economy principles (Russian Federation, 2008).

Discourses relating to the common civilisational, historical, linguistic and cultural legacy of the Soviet Union further stresses Russia's greatness and right to intervene – directly and indirectly – in the near abroad (Russian Federation, 2008: 14; Makarychev, 2009: 55), thus working as structures of signification aiming at reinforcing its power in the region. In these debates, Russia emerges as a civilisational alternative to the EU and the centre of a new security system in the post-Soviet space (Tsygankov, 2008). Paradoxically, this ideology-building aiming at differentiating Russia from other regional and global powers and contest their hegemonic ambitions is based on Western rules. Russian policy making and the argumentative processes used to justify its foreign policy often revolve around key universal values, such as democracy, freedom and market economy. More than presenting a radical change to the established Western-dominated normative order, Russia appropriates these concepts and provides new interpretations suiting its political ambitions and worldview. As such, Morozov (2010, 2015) claims that Russia assumes the role of a subaltern hegemonic power simultaneously defying Western power and institutions but not fully able to detach from its rules, thus shedding light on the unstable and shifting nature of struggles for power between antagonistic forces.

By deconstructing Russian foreign policies and its overall strategy towards the post-Soviet space it becomes clear that patterns of relationship in the region conceal a number of complex power and security dynamics resulting from the strategic relevance of this area to Russian interests. Overall, it combines an active hard power strategy with the advantages of the Soviet legacy and deploys different instruments to promote its foreign policy agenda and persuade neighbouring countries to comply with Russia's rules and

worldview. In that regard, Russia has been promoting asymmetrical relations with its vicinity by taking advantage of its military, economic, energy and political resources. This is all the most relevant when many of its neighbours are politically weak and economically dependent from Moscow, thus increasing the latter ability to influence their political choices. When combined with a strategy aiming at reinforcing regional cooperation in the post-Soviet space, Russian performance in its neighbourhood allows it to gain important leeway to pursue its national interests and dissuade the interference of external actors in its traditional area of influence (Baev, 2007), ergo corroborating the hegemonic nature of its regional project.

Slowly, Russia came to perceive regional integration as a means to affirm its power in the post-Soviet space and to project itself as a hegemonic power in the region. Even though levels of integration in the region are far from being uniform (Bogdanovich, 2005), Moscow has been promoting economic and political cooperation and harmonisation amongst its neighbours in key areas to its interests. However, regional integration is a sinuous and complex process pinpointed by various obstacles as the process of European integration has illustrated. Deep levels of integration in the post-Soviet space are yet to be fulfilled, and depend on Moscow's ability to mould its assertive discursive practices in the region to accommodate the identities and interests of its neighbouring countries. This of course has important consequences in the unfolding of regional dynamics of power and security, especially in the context of EU-Russia relations which are now analysed.

3.3. EU-Russia relations: balancing between strategic cooperation and rising antagonism over the shared neighbourhood

The EU and Russia are two different political entities with distinct – and occasionally incompatible – agendas. The EU is post-sovereign actor; a regional organisation with a multilevel system of decision-making where national and supranational interests are not always compatible nor easy to reconcile. Russia is a traditional power and an upholder of sovereignty and non-interference with well-defined and focused foreign and regional interests, which are perceived to be vital for the country's internal cohesion and international projection (Casier, 2016: 27; Freire, 2006: 4; 2011: 139). As a result, EU-

Russia relations have not always been easy, and certainly not tension-free, as they are affected by Brussels and Moscow's different identities, interests and discursive practices.

EU-Russia relations were initially framed by the PCA ratified in 1997, which established the structures for the development of relations of partnership and political dialogue on issues of common interest and cooperation on the economic, social and cultural fields (European Union-Russia PCA, 1997). However, the PCA had minor practical impact on the development of economic ties and political dialogue between the EU and Russia. Reasons underlying this failure are manifold. At this point, Russia remained low in the EU's agenda due to its focus on the Enlargement process, whereas Moscow remained focused on rebuilding its internal stability in the troubled period following the dismantling of the USSR. Other issues hampering the unfolding of EU-Russia relations were the second Chechen war in 1999 – negatively perceived by EU member states –, the limited nature of administrative and financial instruments available to the EU to promote the PCA's effective implementation, and the lack of a common voice on EU foreign policy matters, as its member states continued to develop their own initiatives towards Russia, hence weakening coordinated initiatives (Barnaházi, 2006: 13-16). Perceptions of lack of real commitment by the EU and general dissatisfaction with the framework for relations with the Union led Russian political elites to look at the PCA as an obsolete document in need of heavy amendment or substitution by a new agreement altogether. Moreover, Moscow understood this agreement as a unilateral imposition of the EU's liberal agenda; a compulsory conditionality-based approach insufficiently accommodating its needs, particularly in the domain of economic assistance, and colliding with Russian foreign policy interests (Haukkala, 2015: 27-28).

The next instrument dealing with Russia was the EU Northern Dimension, a Finnish-based initiative launched in 1999 to promote trans-border cooperation between EU and non-EU regions on issues relating to environment, energy, nuclear safety, and socio-economic cooperation (Krok-Paszkowska and Zielonka, 2005: 157). One of the main concerns of this initiative was the integration of Russia in regional initiatives. At that point, the Baltic states perceived Russia as a strategic partner and exerted significant pressure at the EU level to develop a more inclusive framework for relations with Moscow (Joenniemi, 2008: 132).

Nonetheless, cooperation within the Northern Dimension was rather limited in scope and depth leading the EU to approve the Common Strategy on Russia in June 1999 – which expired in 2004. This document stresses Russian strategic importance to European security and the need to maintain a positive and constructive dialogue between Brussels and Moscow (European Council, 1999a).[18] The Common Strategy voices the EU's vision for its partnership with Russia – a partnership with a "stable, democratic and prosperous Russia, firmly anchored in a united Europe free of new dividing lines" which is essential to "lasting peace on the continent" (European Council, 1999a). Demands for a proximity partnership are anchored on the fact that European challenges cannot be properly addressed without Russia's cooperation and its "return to its rightful place in the European family". EU-Russia cooperation is projected as essential to "maintaining European stability, promoting global security and responding to the common challenges of the continent". As such, the EU offers to share with Russia its experiences in building modern political, economic, social and administrative infrastructures, due to its recognition that the future of Russia constitutes a "strategic interest" to the Union (European Council, 1999a). But why is Russia so important for the EU? First, Brussels is convinced that a politically stable Russia, fully integrated in international fora and with a flourishing civil society is pivotal to preserve peace in the European continent and prevent the outbreak of conflicts in the wider European space. Second, Russia is one of the largest trading partners of the EU and a significant energy supplier (Perovic, 2009: 1), though levels of economic and energy dependence vary substantially amongst EU member states (Closson, 2009: 95-96). Finally, due to its regional status and influence over the post-Soviet space, Russia plays an essential role on the maintenance of regional stability and security, as well as on the fight against common scourges, including organised crime, illegal immigration and illegal trafficking. As such, it is in the Union's best interest to foster close cooperation with Russia and promote a positive and cooperative tone in its relations with Moscow based on an approach promoting capacity-building and socio-economic development measures (Biscop, 2010: 83).

However, the Common Strategy did not go into details regarding its purpose. It provided only general aims, such as the consolidation of Russian democracy and its integration into the European social and economic architecture. More than a plan for

[18] EU Common Strategies are foreign policy tools introduced by the Amsterdam Treaty in 1997, to be implemented by the Union in areas of common interest to its Member states.

reinforcing EU-Russia partnership, the Common Strategy on Russia remained a list of intentions without specifying tangible steps to be taken by both sides to achieve a closer relationship, something that limited from the beginning any likelihood to produce meaningful changes in EU-Russian relations. Due to its looseness and indefinition, the Common Strategy on Russia failed to fulfil initial expectations and did not become a significant political instrument in EU-Russia relations (Barnaházi, 2006: 14-15).

As a response to the EU Common Strategy, in October 1999 Moscow presented the Medium Term Strategy for Development of Relations between the Russian Federation and the European Union that, in a very pragmatic tone, projects the image of Russia as a reliable partner, its commitment to European security and the role the EU can perform in the country's modernisation, democratisation and economic development (Russian Federation, 1999; Freire, 2011: 141-142). This is the first official document referring to Russia's position regarding cooperation with the EU, and although it stresses areas of common interest demanding joint action by the EU and Russia, it is also very clear in voicing that Moscow has different priorities (Krok-Paszkowska and Zielonka, 2005: 159). Furthermore, the discursive analysis of both documents reveals a misalignment that is permanent throughout EU-Russia relations. Whereas the EU uses a mostly vague tone and keeps pushing for its normative agenda – implying its civilisational superiority and aiming at transforming Russia –, Moscow puts in place a more realistic, specific and pragmatic discourse emphasising national interests and sovereignty. Russian political elites have repeatedly stressed that "in spite of all positive achievements […] we have not yet developed mechanisms for working together" (Putin, 2001). From Moscow's point of view, mechanisms for proper cooperation have to include Russia in the processes of drafting and decision-making on issues referring to European security. Therefore, Russia's exclusion from the design of initiatives on that domain and the fact that these same initiatives are presented to the country as something already under course or established is subject of heavy criticism by Moscow (Putin, 2001). This normative vs pragmatic tension has significant impact on the way Russia and the EU understand each other, and on the expectations they bring to the table in this bilateral format, something than has been obstructing the achievement of politically meaningful progresses in EU-Russia relations.

Despite the limited frameworks for EU-Russia relations developed during the 1990s, thematic dialogues on economic issues, energy, space and science and technology

were established (Akatov, 2004: 84). At this point, however, EU-Russia relations remained rather low profile and very much focused on economic and technical issues. In the main, the EU was regarded by Russia as an economic organisation, and the EU itself was too concerned with its internal developments and the Enlargement policy to pursue the relationship with Russia in a coherent and systematic manner (Flenley, 2005: 436).

The completion of the EU's Eastern enlargement and Russia's political assertiveness and economic growth in the 2000s added a level of complexity to EU-Russia relations. Initially both the EU and Russia saw the Union's enlargement as an opportunity to strengthen their strategic partnership and to reach new levels of interdependence in the political, economic and social fields. Then Russian President Vladimir Putin declared its support to the process of European integration, given that it would not result in new dividing lines in the continent (Putin, 2001). At the EU level a range of agreements aiming at compensating Russia for eventual negative economic costs and at guaranteeing free access to the Kaliningrad enclave were celebrated to facilitate the adaptation of Moscow to the post-enlargement geopolitical environment (European Union and Russian Federation, 2004).

Gradually, however, the escalation of levels of tension between Moscow and Brussels became more evident. Russia started to stress very vocally that relations with the EU would have to accommodate Moscow's interests and that any element of conditionality, imposed Europeanisation or interference in Russian internal affairs would have Moscow's veto (Headley, 2012: 428). This reflects the understanding that the EU-Russia PCA and the EU Common Strategy on Russia were camouflaged attempts to Europeanise Russia and to assign it the position of a semi-insider in European affairs under the pretext of promoting structural economic reforms in the country and to bind Russia into a more productive relationship with the West (Joenniemi, 2008: 148). Russia demanded to be treated as an equal partner and not as the object of a civilising influence exercised by other regional actors (Averre, 2005: 179; Barnaházi, 2006: 12; Kølvraa and Ifversen, 2011: 59). The EU's normative agenda and conditionality-based approach is not fruitful towards Moscow, which against demands for further democratisation and compliance with human rights reasserts its cultural specificity and distinctiveness, its right to have a different interpretation of democracy – sovereign democracy – and an independent foreign policy (Fernandes, 2008: xiii; Flenley, 2005: 441).

The Kremlin's self-exclusion from the ENP based on demands for a distinctive status in European affairs and the very concept of shared neighbourhood – which Russia rejects and perceives to convey the EU's extension of power over its traditional sphere of influence, ergo representing a direct threat to its regional ambitions – contributed to the creation of a competitive agenda between the EU and Russia over the region (Dias, 2013a: 264; Gower and Timmins, 2009: 1687; Joenniemi, 2008: 133). As a consequence, Moscow reinforced its perception that the post-Soviet space should not become an area of rivalry and that Russian influence over the region was a matter of national security. It further opposed the erection of new dividing lines in Europe and became acutely sensitive to any pro-European leanings in the post-Soviet space to the detriment of Russia's political influence and the prosecution of its national interests (Averre, 2005: 179-184). However, there was also widespread perception that the EU enlargement eastwards implied a range of issues concerning the future shared neighbourhood that had to be dealt with through a working relationship (Flenley, 2005: 435; 2008: 198-199). This conferred a more pragmatic and practical dimension to EU-Russia relations.

Reflecting a more pragmatic and security-focused tone, the 2003 St. Petersburg Russia-EU summit established the goal of building four common spaces under the PCA framework: (1) economy; (2) freedom, security and justice; (3) external security; and (4) research and education (EU-Russia Summit, 2003). To some extent, this sheds light on the unique character of EU relations with Russia – one of its most significant neighbours – regarding its special place in the neighbourhood when compared to other smaller states. Such difference is based on Russia's own demands for a privileged framework for relations and the recognition by EU leaders of the strategic relevance of "closer relations with Russia" for joint "security and prosperity" (Barnaházi, 2006: 9; European Council, 2003: 14). Additionally, in 2005, Russia and the EU adopted Road Maps for implementing these common spaces and creating the "infrastructure of a genuine strategic partnership" (Marsh, 2008: 185). However, this so-called strategic partnership remains too vague in its description of EU-Russia relations for the actual strategy behind it (strategic for whom? according to what parameters and whose perceptions?) and the exact understanding of partnership (is this an asymmetric or equal partnership?) remains unclear (Dias, 2013a: 264).

Summits and official speeches by relevant actors have repeatedly reinforced both Brussels and Moscow's commitment to this partnership. EU-Russia relations high institutionalisation – including two annual summits at the highest level, regular ministerial contacts in several areas for cooperation, and contacts at the parliamentary level – is remarkable and contributes to the development and intensification of their bilateral arrangements. Nonetheless, this partnership is based more on structure than on substance and a closer look at the discursive practices in interplay in EU-Russia relations reveals this relationship to be based on a charter of intentions that rarely leads to meaningful political progresses in areas of alleged mutual concern (Barnaházi, 2006: 9-10; Freire, 2006: 16; Krok-Paszkowska and Zielonka, 2005: 161).

The four common spaces established between the EU and Russia in 2003 lack practical content and remain largely a rhetorical commitment, though there are noteworthy exceptions. In the Common Economic Space, which has the ultimate goal of creating an open and integrated market between the EU and Russia (EU-Russia Common Spaces Roadmap, 2005), dialogue has been launched in a number of areas, especially in trade and energy that remain the central points in EU-Russia relations (European Commission, 2008a: 2-3). Cooperation in freedom, security and justice affairs seems the most promising though. The EU and Russia have signed agreements on visa facilitation, the fight against organised crime and terrorism. Furthermore, the EU started supporting border management and judiciary reform in Russia, and Moscow has established technical cooperation with EU bodies, such as FRONTEX, EUROPOL and EUROJUST (Potemkina, 2010). Cooperation under the fourth common space has so far been translated into a few concrete steps, such as the creation of a co-funded Moscow Institute of European Studies and a number of exchange programmes – e.g. Erasmus Mundus – which widen the professional and personal contacts between both societies (European Union and Russian Federation, 2009a: 45).

Cooperation is particularly difficult and limited under the Common Space of External Security. Despite Russia's contribution to the EU's operation in Chad and Somalia (European Union and Russian Federation, 2009a: 3) and the creation of the EU-Russia Political and Security Committee in 2010 (Dettke, 2011: 128), in the external security field, the EU-Russia strategic partnership reveals a level of competition resulting from their divergent positions regarding the shared neighbourhood (Nitoiu, 2011: 462).

Since 2004, EU policies towards this area have been growing in number and scope strengthening the perception of the EU as a political and strategic actor in the region, whereas Russia understands the shared neighbourhood as its privileged sphere of influence and believes that EU foreign and security policies should not interfere in its vital area of interests (Massari, 2007: 9). For that reason, Moscow has rejected EU proposals concerning cooperation in the resolution of protracted conflicts in the post-Soviet space and has refused to comply with the commitments made in the Istanbul Declaration at the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) summit in 1999 relating to troop withdrawal from Georgia and Moldova (Cameron and Dománski, 2005: 16).

Notwithstanding the plethora of agreements, strategies and initiatives underpinning EU-Russia relations and the emphasis by both sides on the need to address common challenges across a broad range of foreign and security policy issues, there are fundamental difficulties facing Brussels and Moscow (Averre, 2005: 175-176). One main problem is that both the EU and Russia want different things from this relationship. That is not only clear in the case of the strategic partnership but also in the case of more recent initiatives such as the Partnership for Modernisation launched in 2010 aiming at modernizing Russia's economy and political institutions, and at fostering interdependence between the EU and Russia (European Council, 2010). Whereas for Moscow modernisation is, above all, a matter of importing Western technology, know-how and investments, the EU conceives this partnership as a way of influencing and transforming Russian institutions (Judah *et al.*, 2011: 53). As such, Moscow perceives its relations with the EU as an economic issue largely technical in its nature, whereas the EU is focusing on its political dimension. This mismatch in goals and understandings combined with Russian perceptions of the EU diplomatic machinery as something complex and lacking unity fettered the evolution of EU-Russia relations, limited its political achievements and led Moscow to prefer to interact with EU individual member states in many occasions (Krok-Paszkowska and Zielonka, 2005: 156, Nitoiu, 2016).

Along with these general areas of cooperation, it is important to mention one specific area which has a very significant place in EU-Russia relations. Both sides have realised the importance of cooperation in the field of energy. This is a situation of mutual interdependence – Russia is one of the EU's major energy suppliers and the Union represents one of the largest markets to Russian energy. Therefore, finding a working

means of cooperation is in the best interest of both sides (Barnaházi, 2006: 18-19). The management of this interdependence is essentially a political one (Fernandes, 2008: xiv) and was initiated in 2000 with the establishment of the EU-Russia energy dialogue. Nonetheless, cooperation in the energy field has been hampered by energy crises between Russia and its neighbours sharing a similar pattern of battling over prices and transit fees between Russia and post-Soviet states (Mangott and Westphal, 2008: 151). Event though these crises raised a number of questions regarding Russia's reliability as an energy supplier, perceptions of mutual dependence conducted to the signing of a Memorandum on an Early-Warning Mechanism in 2009, which was further updated in 2011. This Memorandum set out modalities of joint work on crisis prevention and crisis management in the field of energy supplies with the participation of transit countries. The goal was to ensure "unhindered and uninterrupted energy supply, preventing and overcoming emergency situations in the energy sector with minimal negative consequences" (European Union and Russian Federation, 2009b). In spite of this vocalisation and demand for joint cooperation, EU-Russia dialogue on energy issues has been marred by different positions regarding the evolution of this partnership. For long the EU envisaged to enforce a scheme of energy integration based on its norms and values, whereas Russia was more interested in a pragmatic partnership devoted to technical questions and common interest day-to-day issues. The unattractiveness of EU normative agenda to Russia and the Union's own reinterpretation of security issues, gradually carved a more pragmatic dimension to EU-Russia energy cooperation. This trend is all the most visible in the 2010s, when the European Commission's reconceptualisation of energy security translated itself into a more interventionist and norm-free positioning in this field, namely by reinforcing investments in energy infrastructures in the common neighbourhood with Russia. More than removing tensions from the EU-Russia energy dialogue, this transformation increased competition in this field (Kuzemko, 2013). The EU promotes regulatory frameworks based on the diversification, market principles and energy efficiency. The goal is to limit its neighbours dependences on Russia, ergo limiting the later regional leverage, something that has increased levels of wariness and suspicion in Moscow (Wolczuk, 2016).

Another issue of paramount importance in the evolution of EU-Russia relations is the new political configuration of the post-Enlargement Union. The EU's new member states were eager to take an active role in the design of EU foreign policies and the

reinforcement of the Union's footprint in Eastern Europe, where their interests lie. Due to their geographical location and historical memory, these countries came to the Union with a different perspective on Russia from most older member states. In the immediate aftermath of the enlargement, EU new member states advocated the need to promote a more coherent and consistent approach towards Russia overriding uncoordinated ambitions and initiatives of individual member states (Barnaházi, 2006: 21-26). Claims from new member states were reinforced by the European Parliament, which stressed that

> The lack of a consistent approach and rhetoric by member states has been very damaging. The EU member states must cease acting on a bilateral basis towards Russia and agree on a common comprehensive approach in order to be credible (European Parliament, 2005).

This impetus was hindered by Moscow's refusal to take part on the ENP framework, something that caused growing criticism and defensiveness amongst EU new member states vis-à-vis Russia. Together with Russian increasing assertiveness towards foreign affairs this made more difficult to reach common strategic decisions regarding Russia (Akatov, 2004: 85; Massari, 2007: 1). Whereas EU new member states were now willing to reinforce the Union's footprint towards the East, older member states such as France, Germany, Great Britain and Italy kept pushing for a Russia-first policy when dealing with the shared neighbourhood, blocking initiatives to strengthen the Eastern dimension of the ENP or to include a membership perspective within the EaP (Nitoiu, 2011: 463-465). These diverging approaches within the EU have hampered the effective promotion of its norms and values in both Russia and the shared neighbourhood, affecting perceptions concerning the coherence and effectiveness of EU foreign and neighbouring policies (Judah *et al.*, 2011: 50).

EU neighbouring policies caused widespread distrust in Russia regarding EU impetus to develop a more active cooperation with former Soviet states and thus extend its power towards Russia's area of privileged interests. As Russia is itself eager to strengthen its power and influence over the region, the ENP and the EaP are cornerstone causes of tension and have the potential to make more visible EU and Russian antagonistic hegemonic regional aspirations. Corroborating this understanding is the negative reaction of Moscow to the ENP and its related initiatives, and Brussels negative attitude towards Russian regional endeavours aiming at fostering political, economic and military

cooperation amongst former Soviet states (Akatov, 2004: 86), namely the CSTO and the EEU. Then President Vladimir Putin's speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007 illustrates an increasing level of tension between Russia and the EU. Expressing its dissatisfaction with the existing situation in Kosovo and the USA-led anti-missile defence system in Europe, he criticised the civilisational discourse that often supports Western interventions and the hegemonic ambitions underpinning EU and NATO enlargements and extension of power towards Russia's traditional sphere of influence (Putin, 2007b). This caused an almost unanimous uproar in the West that was keen to label his discourse as Cold War rhetoric.

A new source of tension in EU-Russia relations was the 2008 war in Georgia. The EU-Russia summit of that year reflected this tension and negotiations on the new PCA to be celebrated with Moscow were immediately suspended. However, political dialogue was soon resumed as the EU assumed a mediating role in the conflict (Freire, 2014: 44). This reflected the Union's intention to preserve a cooperative voice in EU-Russia bilateral relations – even if it remains largely declaratory –, mirroring the fact that European peace and security is complex and implies the interconnectedness of both Moscow and Brussels. Accordingly, the cost of negative attitudes towards Russia or the EU is significant and could further increase in the future (Baranovsky, 2010: 44), as security threats become more transnational, highlighting the blurring of internal and external dimensions of security. At this point, negotiations on a New Basic Agreement were launched with the intent of replacing the existing PCA in legally framing EU-Russia relations and provide a more comprehensive framework for cooperation between the two neighbours. This rationale is evident in the speech of the former European Commissioner for External Relations and European Neighbourhood Policy, Benita Ferrero-Waldner

> A strong Russia is positive for the European Union. If we are to tackle problems such as uncontrolled migration, climate change, drugs trafficking and cross-border crime, we need to do so with a prosperous and stable Russia. […] Greater instability in the region is clearly not in our mutual interest. [...] We want to do this together with Russia (Ferrero-Waldner, 2008b).

Despite this attempt to revive EU-Russia cooperation in regional security matters, competing trends and discursive practices were now clearly voiced by both Brussels and Moscow. At the EU level, we see the gradual construction of Russia as a threat to European security leading to the adoption of a harsher discourse by the Union. The *Review*

of EU–Russia relations after the Georgian–Russian war provides interesting insights on how the EU perceives power relations in the region.

> The EU can approach its relationship with Russia with a certain confidence. Economically, Russia needs the EU. The EU is an important market for its exports of raw materials, notably energy. [...] The recent financial crisis has underlined how acutely Russia needs to modernize and diversify its economy. The EU is a natural partner for this process, and the main source of its foreign investments (European Commission, 2008a: 2).

What this quote suggests is that EU-Russia relations are essentially asymmetrical and that the EU should assume the role of front-runner not only due to Moscow's economic and energy dependence, but also because the Union envisages to play a meaningful role in civilising the country and guiding it into proper behaviour. The document clearly states that the EU should actively pursue its own interests in this relationship, including in the fields of energy security and regional stability. A blatant condemnation of the "disproportionate Russian reaction" in Georgia is also noteworthy (European Commission, 2008a), acknowledging a contested field in the shared neighbourhood. This was further reinforced by statements by then Commissioner for External Relations and European Neighbourhood Policy Benita Ferrero-Waldner claiming that the violation of Georgia's territorial integrity with the use of force and the unilateral recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia

> remain unacceptable, and we [the EU] cannot share the principles of foreign policy recently articulated in Moscow, including the resurgence of spheres of influence. So, the ongoing review [of EU-Russia relations] has to make a rather sober assessment of the EU's own self-interest in this relationship (Ferrero-Waldner, 2008a)

Russia itself became more outspoken in the condemnation of EU neighbouring policies and the extension of the EU's power and influence towards their common neighbourhood. Regarding the EaP initiative launched in 2009 as a response to the events in the region, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov revealed his suspicion by accusing the EU of carving out a new sphere of influence in Russia's own backyard and creating new dividing lines in Europe (Ria Novosti, 2009). The EU-Russia summit of 2009 exposed even further the mistrust and disagreement between the two sides, when President Medvedev suggested that "the EU itself did not know yet why it needs the Eastern

Partnership”, even if stressing that he did not want the initiative “to turn into a partnership against Russia” (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2009). This echoed in the EU and consolidated a trend labelling Russia as a hostile power relying on the Cold War notion of spheres of influence, particularly whenever it tries to block EU neighbouring policies and initiatives (Trenin, 2009: 3-4).

Competition over a common area of influence was revived in March 2012, when Vladimir Putin announced its ambition of creating a Eurasian Union as an alternative to European integration and a means to obstruct the Union’s growing engagement in its near abroad (Emerson, 2014: 5). This competition reached its high point in the context of the Ukrainian crisis. Ukraine’s last minute withdrawal from signing the AA/DCFTA with the EU at the EaP summit in Vilnius in November 2013, following a non-transparent meeting with President Vladimir Putin, was mostly perceived in the EU as a flagrant interference by Russia on the country’s process of European integration. This caused great frustration in Ukraine’s civil society triggering the Euromaidan movement and ultimately leading to the dismissal of President Viktor Yanukovitch and the election of a more pro-European government (Sotiriou, 2016: 58). This crisis was perceived by Moscow as Western-driven “anti-constitutional takeover, an armed seizure of power” (Putin, 2014b) directed against Russian interests in the region. Fierce dissatisfaction in Moscow regarding the Euromaidan movement and claims for further engagement with the EU in Ukraine were translated into increasing support to separatist movements in Eastern Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea in March 2014. To a perceived loss of influence in its neighbourhood, Moscow countered by taking full military control of Crimea, which was followed by a hastily organised referendum on March 16. As a result of this referendum, the peninsula was incorporated into Russian territory thus making Ukraine’s loss of this region a *fait accompli*. A series of uprisings in Eastern Ukraine followed, contributing to the ongoing destabilisation of the country, which was accompanied by an international campaign whereby Russia constructed and spread the image of Kiev as a source of regional insecurity with the intended aim to make EU support to and investments in the country less attractive (Haukkala, 2015: 34). These events were received in Brussels with both shock and massive disapproval, instigating the application of a three-tier strategy of sanctions against Russia, thus sparking the following reaction.

It is primarily those who intend to apply them that need to consider their consequences. I believe that in the modern world, where everything is interconnected and interdependent, it is possible to cause damage to another country, but this will be mutual damage and one should bear this in mind. […] And what motivates our partners [i.e. the EU]? They supported an unconstitutional armed take-over, declared these people legitimate and are trying to support them. […] [A]ny threat against Russia is counterproductive and harmful (Putin, 2014b).

I consider the first package of sanctions an unlawful and hostile act against Russia, and a step that will definitely damage […] Russia-EU relations. But as for the second package of sanctions, it is not even clear exactly what they are all about, because they have no cause and effect link to what is happening now in Ukraine and in Russia (Putin, 2014a).

The Ukrainian crisis seriously undermined EU-Russia relations and translated into the suspension of bilateral cooperation, irregular EU-Russia summits and the interruption of negotiations on a New Basic Agreement superseding the PCA. As stated in the website of the Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the European Union the

EU's actions on the eve and in the course of the Ukraine crisis have called into question its reputation as a reliable partner of our country. Our relationship has been seriously undermined by unilateral sanctions imposed by the European Union. […] Events of recent months have demonstrated that burgeoning trade and economic ties between Russia and the EU have not yet attained the level of a true strategic partnership based on the principles of equality, indivisibility of security and mutual respect for each other's interests. Obsolete confrontational stereotypes from the times of the Cold War continue to linger. The Ukraine crisis has highlighted the urgent need to jointly elaborate a model of Russia-EU relations in the region of our "common neighbourhood". […] We should learn from self-evident mistakes made during the implementation by the EU of its Eastern Partnership initiative, the unilateral nature of which largely provoked the current crisis (Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the European Union, 2016).

More than expanding Russia's effective control beyond its borders, more muscular initiatives in the neighbourhood – e.g. the Russian-Georgian War of August 2008, the ensuing recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and the annexation of Crimea in 2014 – are sending a clear message to the EU that Moscow will not tolerate any interference in its traditional sphere of influence (Laenen, 2012: 26).

Against this scenario of increasing tension in its neighbourhood putting to ground the argument that the Nobel awarded EU has been successful in maintaining peace in Europe, the European Commission was keen to adapt its discursive practices. The trend has been to reinforce the EU's hegemonic regional role, for it believes this is the only route to strengthen its global actorness and to preserve regional security essential to its internal prosperity. Tumultuous events in the neighbourhood are now portrayed not as a failure of EU foreign and neighbourhood policies, but as the result of lacking and insufficiently strong engagement in the EU's vicinity – "if we want to promote a more peaceful world, we will need more Europe and more Union in our foreign policy" (Juncker, 2015: 20). The EU's commitment to promoting peace and security across Europe, assumes now a more confrontational tone regarding Russia's interventions in the shared neighbourhood. The European Commission makes clear that "the security and the borders of EU Member States are untouchable" and that this should "be understood very clearly in Moscow" (Juncker, 2015: 21). Whenever Russia endangers the European political environment, the EU will be prepared to show it the cost of confrontation, namely via sanctions. With this bold and pragmatic line of action, the EU envisages to take a leading role on regional matters and reinforce the Europeanisation of its neighbours. The latest review of the ENP consolidated the understanding of Russia as a threat to European security and takes notice of the deterioration of EU-Russia relations as a result of the illegal annexation of Crimea and the destabilisation of Eastern Ukraine. However, it leaves the door open for further dialogue with Moscow, for

> There are several issues pertaining to the region on which constructive cooperation would be helpful in terms of addressing common challenges and exploring further opportunities, when conditions allow (European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Policy, 2015: 19).

In general, EU-Russia relations have been characterised by a dichotomy between strategic cooperation and rising antagonism over their common neighbourhood (Averre, 2009; Nitoiu, 2016). Political dialogue appears to be trapped on Russian accusations of EU interferences in its internal affairs and its traditional area of influence, and EU uneasiness about Russian undemocratic practices and muscular approach towards its near abroad. The mixing of competing and cooperative strings in EU-Russia relations means that both Russia and the EU acknowledge the relevance of the other and strategic benefits from

mutual understanding and cooperation, but they also recognise entrenched differences and incompatibilities on their understandings and regional approaches (Freire, 2008b: 54). One of the greatest causes of tension between Brussels and Moscow is the shared neighbourhood which appears as a field of struggles for power and the ultimate stage of competition between their respective regional endeavours.

The competing discursive practices analysed here emerge as structures of action and signification whereby the EU and Russia try to reaffirm their – moral and political – superiority and prove the other as an unreliable partner. In this way, they project the other as a threat and use that constructed image to attract the countries in the shared neighbourhood into their sphere of influence and persuade them to accept their exercise of power, as well as the terms of asymmetrical relationships, in exchange for protection from this threatening other.

Contentions over the shared neighbourhood do not mean that the EU and Russia have their backs turned on each other permanently, for both sides recognise the need to cooperate in strategic fields due to the intricate nature of security threats (Freire, 2011: 143; Headley, 2012: 445). However, struggles for power and security dynamics between the EU and Russia have often been more visible in forms different from a cooperative one, whenever their privileged interests – the need to secure their regional setting as a condition for internal security and stability – are on the table, revealing that EU-Russia relations result from the sensitive and difficult balance between a strategic partnership with a cooperative tone and a regional competition for power and security. This is particularly conspicuous in the post-Ukrainian crisis context which triggered a move from tense but cooperative relations to a much more antagonistic and even conflicting pattern of relations. To some degree, events in Ukraine can be interpreted as a proxy conflict between the EU and Russia (Haukkala, 2015: 37). This sheds light on the interconnectedness and multiple – and often clashing – articulations of power and security dynamics in the EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle, not without consequences to the unfolding of EU and Russian hegemonic agendas and the broader European security.

Confrontation and competition over a common area of influence does indeed impact on dynamics of power and security in Europe. But it has broader effects affecting the evolution of EU and Russian processes of regional integration and ultimately their identities and interests. The next section delves into these processes in more detail

unveiling the mutual constitution of EU and Russian neighbouring policies and changes in their identities and interest resulting from their interaction, which also impacts on the transformation of dynamics of power and security in the region.

3.4. Struggling for power in a common neighbourhood: a discourse analysis of EU and Russian hegemonic regional projects

The deconstruction of EU and Russian foreign policies towards their shared neighbourhood and the analysis of discursive practices by these actors reveals the hegemonic nature of their respective regional endeavours. The fact that both the EU and Russia are better portrayed as regional hegemonic powers is hardly contested in the literature (see e.g. Diez, 2013; Laenen, 2012). We argue now that the hegemonic nature of EU and Russian foreign policies towards their common neighbourhood is a process evolving along the transformation of their respective contextual environment and the sensitive unfolding and articulation of power and security dynamics in a common area of influence simultaneously resulting from and impacting on interlinkages between identities and interests of these two regional actors.

From their inception, EU and Russian regional initiatives reveal a security commitment to the management of their respective external borders and the political and socioeconomic harmonisation of their neighbours with their regional goals and worldviews. Therefore, we are standing before two competing and mutually exclusive regional rationales and strategies that affect EU-Russia bilateral relations. This of course affects their respective understandings regarding the importance of the shared neighbourhood to their security. The EU understands the neighbourhood as an area where stability is fundamental for its own security, whereas Russia understands that being surrounded by friendly states will contribute to a more secure regional setting (Freire, 2016: 38). At the EU level, this commitment to security rests mostly on the export of its normative and regulatory frameworks, whereas Moscow's relations with the neighbourhood involve a complex process of bargaining aiming at promoting and cementing political allegiances at its borders.

Security thus emerges as the main nodal point in EU and Russian discursive practices regarding their shared neighbourhood. The fact that EU and Russian regional

endeavours have a clear security dimension is widely disseminated in the literature (see e.g. Cameron and Balfour, 2006; Christou, 2010a; Galeotti, 2010b; Gänzle, 2007; Lynch, 2005; Mankoff, 2009), but our contention is that security assumes a hegemonic role in these processes and that it cannot be displaced from the broader framework underpinning EU and Russian foreign policies. This nodal point operates as a field of meanings producing social relations of power through the production of distinctive identities and interests. Security thus performs a dual-role constituting the field of interpretations and a field of social relations of power. It further structures a mutually constitutive relationship with EU and Russian social identities and, derivatively, with their interests (Muppidi, 1999). The deconstruction of EU and Russian foreign and neighbouring policies has also shed light on the fact that this nodal point is also a floating signifier that has been gradually articulated with other meanings creating hybrid discourses, which reinforce its power and status. Together, the nodal point and its articulations structure EU and Russian approaches towards the shared neighbourhood. Security thus comes across as the main nodal point in EU and Russian discursive practices, but also as a floating signifier in the sense that it has been subject of struggles for the fixation of meaning – and power altogether – in new ways. Overall, we identified four different discourses articulated to the nodal point – political security, economic security, energy security and military security –, resulting in hybrid discourses both reflecting and structuring the hegemonic nature of EU and Russian neighbouring policies. Gradually, initial security concerns underlying the need to develop closer relations with the neighbourhood spillover into new domains. Here, it is important to stress that this spillover is motivated by EU and Russian hegemonic ambitions but it also depends on the contextual environment at their borders. It was the gradual construction of perceived threats that allowed them to create argumentative strategies reasoning with their internal audiences, enabling them to reinforce their scope of action and extension of power towards their common neighbourhood. As such, it can be argued that processes of securitisation have underpinned the evolution of EU and Russian neighbouring policies. The unfolding of relations with the neighbourhood fails, however, to present any meaningful processes of securitisation based on the utterance of security, i.e. the speech act, as defined by the Copenhagen School. It is through a broader understanding of discursive practices of securitisation, including the process of institutional development and political prioritisation, that we understand how an evolving process of securitisation of

the neighbourhood has taken place. As addressed in the previous chapter, securitisation is a pragmatic act; an argumentative process that does not necessarily lead to the adoption of exceptional measures, but rather transforms social reality by putting an emphasis on security issues or on the security dimension of certain matters based on representations of threats or crises (Balzacq *et al.*, 2010; Hansen, 2006: 6). It is exactly this gradual transformation of the social reality via more or less subtle moves by the EU and Russia that, we contend, provided the basis for security issues and ambitions to become more pronounced in the context of relations with their common neighbourhood. These moves result both from the construction of EU and Russian identities and interests, and the evolution of complex power and security dynamics in intricate web of interactions, which underpin EU and Russian broader field of discursivity with an important role played by the neighbourhood itself as the next chapter reveals.

As such, it is noticeable that during the 1990s both hegemonic powers kept mostly a low-profile approach towards the area that was to become the shared neighbourhood between the EU and Russia. Security issues did feature in the proposed frameworks for relations with these countries. However, concerns relating to their internal consolidation and the preparation of the Eastern enlargement, in the case of the EU, led to a mild approach towards the region, mainly focused on political stabilisation, economic integration and technical issues. At this point, political and economic discourses are the most visible articulations to the nodal point defining EU and Russia approaches towards the shared neighbourhood and stimulating processes of securitisation in the region.

Political security relates to the stabilisation of the contextual environment at EU and Russian borders and the guarantee that countries in the neighbourhood embrace these actors' worldview and remain politically loyal to them. This is something presented as being crucial to promote regional security and thus assure the internal stability and security of both the EU and Russia. At the EU level, it provides grounds to promote political reforms in the neighbourhood in order to encourage the development of liberal and peaceful regimes of governance at its borders. Even if political stabilisation has always been a flagship of EU foreign policies, in its relations with the Eastern neighbourhood there were important contextual factors allowing the EU to assume a stronger role in the region. On the one hand, the Eastern enlargement and the ensuing redefinition of the Union's borders posed the EU with opportunities to develop new frameworks for political

cooperation with its new neighbours and reasoned with its audiences on the need to extend its scope of action in the political security domain. Furthermore, the coloured revolutions in the post-Soviet space signalled a significant shift in terms of the EU support to democracy promotion policies. These events provided the justification necessary to make liberal political reforms in the region a priority (Gromadzki *et al.*, 2005: 15), thus raising security issues higher in the agenda. The imposition of its liberal values – the only conceivable basis for an agreement with foreign partners – is the first expression of the EU's structural power, as it implies transforming countries in the neighbourhood and leading them to embrace its model for proper behaviour. Furthermore, political cooperation with the EU promotes the integration of European principles and values by neighbouring countries. In practice, this triggers a process of political homogenisation favourable to the maintenance of the EU's own security (Joenniemi, 2008; Terriff, 2000: 235-236).

EU support to these movements was perceived in Moscow as a revival of the Cold War geopolitical thinking in Europe. Moreover, EU perceptions of Russia as a corrupt and semi-authoritarian regime aiming at controlling events in the post-Soviet space (Barysch and Grant, 2004) acted as a strategy of reasoning to convince EU audiences about the need to increase the Union's security role in the region. The construction of a perceived threat associated with political instability in the neighbourhood and the role of Moscow as a catalyst of this scenario was the basis of a wider consensus in the EU regarding the response to give to these events. In this sense, by appealing to EU audiences, the colour revolutions and the construction of Russian foreign policies as a security threat ended up justifying and legitimising EU neighbouring policies and raised the promotion of stability at its borders as a top priority on regional matters (European Commission, 2014b: 10). Overall, processes of securitisation of the neighbourhood by the EU were triggered, which sought to facilitate and justify the expansion of European integration as a stabilisation mechanism and a means to convey its hegemonic power at the regional level (Browning, 2003; Higashino, 2004; Waever, 1996).

This European response changed Russian perceptions about the EU and contributed to a widespread understanding of its neighbouring policies as a source of new challenges and rivalry in the post-Soviet space. These events spread a cynical view of the EU as imposing a certain model of governance that suits its interests – the promotion of its own security and the extension of its economic leverage over the Eastern vicinity – which

clashes directly with Moscow's own normative discourse about the shared neighbourhood, increasing competition over this area (Flenley, 2008: 200). Therefore, the EU's growing engagement eastwards was regarded with distrust and interpreted as a challenge to Russian influence in the region (Averre, 2009: 1691; Freire, 2011: 159; Kulhanek, 2010: 56). Overall, Russia perceives geopolitical changes in its near abroad as weakening its regional leading role (Celikpala, 2010: 295; Glebov, 2009: 356; Haukkala, 2015: 32). In this context, Russian political elites have been very clear in expressing their views that a greater NATO and EU presence in the region – consolidating their own spheres of influence, which do not take into consideration Russian interests – would be a source of regional instability, rather than of increased security (Lavrov, 2009; Putin, 2007c). This reasoned with Russian audiences to reinforce its policies towards the near abroad – defined as a top priority in Russian foreign policy agenda – and led to the adoption of more assertive and pragmatic approaches towards the region (Trenin, 2008: 106). In this process, Russia has been eager to promote its own norms and principles of political organisation in the region as an alternative to the EU's political and economic values. In that regard, Russia rejects the politicisation of the Union's normative agenda because it believes that it is at least as much about power and security-oriented interests as about values (Averre, 2009: 1699; Flenley, 2008: 200; Götz, 2015: 4).

Economic security was also an important field where EU and Russian exercise of power became gradually more noticeable. Stabilisation of the economic regional environment and the promotion of frameworks for economic integration along the liberal agenda are considered by the EU as being of foremost importance to the maintenance of security in Europe since prosperous societies and intertwined economies are less likely to engage in violent conflicts. This justifies the whole EU strategy of economically integrating its neighbours and promise them financial aid as well as a stake on the EU market in exchange for political and economic reforms. Russia has also developed an important economic strategy in its vicinity. Initially, this implied dominating key economic sectors in the neighbourhood and exploring economic vulnerabilities and interdependences in the post-Soviet space resulting from the Soviet legacy. Slowly, however, Moscow recognised the advantages of promoting economic interdependence in the region and has been developing several bilateral and multilateral arrangements that compete with the EU mechanisms to promote economic integration in the neighbourhood. Amongst these, the

EEU performs a significant role colliding directly with the EaP's goal to establish DCFTAs with the EU's Eastern neighbourhood. Here, Ukraine's imposed choice between closer integration with either Moscow or Brussels in 2013 took a symbolic dimension. Although both sides denied they were exerting any pressure on Kyiv, in practice a clear and mutually exclusive choice was put to the country: closer European integration meant losing Russia; and closer integration with Moscow meant losing the path of European integration (Casier, 2016: 21; Nilsson and Silander, 2016: 55). This is all the most visible in Russian President Vladimir Putin statement when questioned about the possibility of Ukraine simultaneously joining the DCFTA with the EU and the Customs Union with Russia

> No, it would not be possible. It would be impossible because that association assumes the creation of a free trade zone between the European Union and Ukraine. Within the framework of that zone, Ukraine takes on the responsibility to implement the European Union's trade rules and trade policy within its territory (Putin, 2013).

Another area that gradually took a stronger place in discursive practices relating to EU and Russia hegemonic projects was energy security. In Moscow, it is noticeable the politisation of energy from the mid-2000s meaning that energy was to be used to punish its neighbours for political choices contrary to its national interests – and rewarding those loyal to Russia. In this regard, the first meaningful energy crises in the region represent a punishment to its neighbours' seemingly European choices. This caused serious concerns in Europe relating to the negative consequences to EU energy supplies and economic stability leading the Union to raise energy issues higher in its security agenda. In 2002, the Commission had already drew attention to the dangers of high dependence on energy exports from Russia – a dependence that increased after the EU's Eastern enlargement –, and to the need to promote diversification of energy sources as well as greater integration of energy markets (European Commission, 2002). However, at that point there was no fierce political will to promote further integration in that area nor to include energy security related matters in EU foreign policy strategies.

This only changed with the Russian-Ukrainian crisis in the 2005-06 Winter. Following the Orange revolution in 2004, Moscow harshened its position towards Ukraine. Even if the official rhetoric by the Kremlin presents this event as a natural development resulting from marketisation of the energy sector in the region, this crisis comes across as a

punishment for the country's political choices. When Russia shut down deliveries to Ukraine in January 2006, there were immediate supply shortages for a number of EU countries, reminding them how dependent they were on Russian energy (Perovic, 2009: 9). Ever since, energy security was raised higher in the EU's political agenda. A series of debates on physical aspects of deliveries from Russia unfolded and the energy partnership with Russia has come under great scrutiny (Alexandrova-Arbatova, 2008: 314; Mangott and Westphal, 2008: 150). Since then, slowly, but steadily, processes of securitisation of energy unfold at the EU level very much anchored on the image of Russia's as a threat to European energy security and an unreliable partner. As a consequence, the EU also denounced the use of energy by Russia as a means to deepen asymmetric relations with countries in the shared neighbourhood (Baev, 2007: 454).

As a consequence, not only did the EU bring energy issues increasingly under communitarian competences, but it also fostered cooperation with the Eastern neighbourhood on energy security matters. As confirmed by the former Commissioner for External Relations Ferrero-Waldner (2006), "energy has been an important component of the ENP since its inception [yet] the events at the beginning of the year between Russia, Moldova and Ukraine were a wake-up call, reminding us that energy security needs to be even higher on our political agenda". To achieve these goals in a highly competitive regional context, the EU promoted greater energy integration among its member and partner states (Barroso, 2010; European Commission, 2010a). Following the Russian-Ukrainian gas dispute in 2005-2006, the EU produced a Green Paper on energy policy, which was followed by a proposal from the Commission stressing the need to develop a common external energy policy. The main goal of this policy is the creation of a pan-European energy community between the EU and its neighbouring countries (Mangott and Westphal, 2008: 154-155). The overall idea is to extend the energy network and common market to the region and to achieve convergence by gradually applying the Energy Community Treaty, which entered into force in 2006. By doing so, the EU offered the region an alternative framework of integration on energy matters to Russian predominance. This framework is explicitly addressed in the ENP and the EaP, which envisage broad cooperation in the areas of energy dialogue, convergence of energy policy, harmonisation of legal frameworks, participation in EU energy programmes and regional cooperation.

The importance of developing a secure and reliable grid infrastructure occupies a particularly relevant role in this context, as stressed by the European Commission

> The construction of new interconnections at our borders should receive the same attention and policies as intra-EU projects. *Such links are essential not only for our neighbours but to ensure the EU's stability and security of supply*. There will be specific emphasis on the Southern corridor and the effective start of projects of European interest, in particular Nabucco and ITGI [Interconnector Turkey-Greece-Italy] (European Commission, 2010a: 10).[19]

The fact that EU Eastern neighbours have an interest in cooperating with the EU to reduce their energy dependence on Russia further provided the Union with the momentum to extend its scope of action in the neighbourhood to include energy security matters. Since energy infrastructures constitute a long lasting link between regions and countries, it does have a strong geopolitical dimension and, thus, plays an important role in the extension of the EU's hegemonic power over the shared neighbourhood with Russia.

The EU's growing involvement in energy security issues in its vicinity was perceived with great distrust in Moscow as it represented a constrain to the country's leeway in the region and ergo a threat to its national interests (Perovic, 2009: 10). Russian elites denounced EU strategy of reinforcing its energy competences by relying on the construction of Russia as a threat to secure energy supply in Europe. From Moscow's point of view, serious debates relating to the security of energy supplies to the EU should not only be evaluated based on the reliability of Russia as an energy supplier, but also on the reliability of its neighbours – namely Belarus and Ukraine – as transit countries, something that remained absent from EU debates on the topic (Mangott and Westphal, 2008: 150). This is particularly astonishing to Russian elites due to their perception of both Ukraine and Belarus as unreliable transit countries. As a response to this contextual environment Russia undertook several initiatives to develop infrastructure grids to circumvent its neighbouring countries[20] and also to diversify its customer base, as a means to decrease its dependence on the EU energy market (Closson, 2009: 96). Besides, the development of such infrastructures aims at undermining the economic and financial viability of EU

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[19] Emphasis added.

[20] These include the Yamal Pipeline – crossing Belarus and Poland – that broke Ukraine's gas export pipelines to the European market monopoly in 1999, the Blue Stream Pipeline – connecting Russia and Turkey via a Black Sea underwater pipeline – and the Nord Stream Pipeline – a sea based pipeline linking Russia to Germany.

pipeline plans[21] and monopolise gas supplies for South-Eastern Europe, thus preserving energy supply as a bargaining chip against the EU and a resource for leverage in its immediate neighbourhood. Soon energy interdependence and competing infrastructure plans assumed the dimension of a pipeline arms race between the EU and Russia, shedding light on the fact that energy quarrels are not driven by economic considerations but by geopolitical rivalry and struggles for power over a common area of interests, which has taken the form of a fierce antagonism over the region (Alexandrova-Arbatova, 2008: 314-315). This also sheds light on the competing objectives of EU and Russian energy agenda in the shared neighbourhood. Russia envisages to preserve these countries structural energy dependence, due to the political leverage this provides over their governments; whereas the EU aims at promoting security of supplies to lower its neighbours dependence on Russia and at circumscribing Russian regional influence (Wolczuk, 2016).

Simultaneously, Russia reinforced the usage of energy as a political tool punishing its neighbours' pro-European political choices. As far as energy security is concerned, Russia has seemingly the upper hand due to its status as one of the EU's largest energy suppliers,[22] and in some cases the single supplier of energy to countries in the shared neighbourhood – e.g. Belarus –, as well as to the fact that Russia holds a significant share of energy companies in the post-Soviet space. This confers Russia with the power to structure energy relations in the region along its interests. As such, the EU increasingly stronger stance in energy matters can be better grasped as a means to counterbalance Russia's energy power in the region and to reduce its energy dependence, thus increasing competitive patterns of relations in its shared neighbourhood (Mangott and Westphal, 2008: 156).

Military security related to conflict management and conflict resolution has been taking a stronger role in the definition of EU and Russian hegemonic regional projects. Russia has always upheld an important role in military dynamics on the post-Soviet space

[21] The Nabucco Pipeline is one of the most relevant plans in this regard for it was at the very centre of the EU's route diversification effort. This infrastructure was supposed to link Turkey to Austria and provide a means for the EU to access Caspian gas resources without bypassing Russia. However, competing energy projects from Russia, misunderstandings among members of the Nabucco Consortium and the inability to contract sufficient gas to assure the viability of the project have taken a deadly tool on this initiative, which has been continually delayed (Mangott and Westphal, 2008: 161-163).

[22] Figures from the Eurostat reveal that in 2014 the EU imported 53% of the energy it consumes, from which roughly one third of energy imports were supplied by Russia. Estonia, Finland, Latvia and Lithuania are 100% dependent on Russian gas supplies, but their gas imports represents only an average of 12% of their total energy consumption (Eurostat, 2015).

and on protracted conflicts in the region. However, perceptions relating to the EU extension of power eastwards led Moscow to gradually deploy a more muscular approach towards military security in its vicinity. At the EU level, conflict resolution has been a unexpectedly under-securitised issue by the EU (Simão and Dias, 2016: 106). Although it is frequently referred to in official documents as a source of instability and an obstacle to regional development (European Commission, 2003a: 12, 2004c, 2007a; European Parliament, 2010), EU foreign and security policies have failed to address conflict resolution as a priority through tangible policy decisions. Overall, political stabilisation and economic integration have been presented as the main tools to transform conflicts and maintain peace and stability in Europe (Dias, 2013b; Diez *et al.*, 2006: 565). As a result, the EU has been mainly reactive to conflict-related developments in the Eastern neighbourhood focusing mostly on preventing the spillover of negative outcomes into the Union. This conservative position by the EU enabled Russia to maintain a dominant role in conflict resolution in the region, in spite of Moscow's clear interests and active interventions in these scenarios – carefully legitimised through international mandates and bilateral agreements –, something that makes it at least as part of the problem as part of the solution (Cornell and Jonsson, 2008: 242-243; Simão, 2016: 498). Overall, the EU has not challenged the status quo in the region and its role has been a preventive and transformative one, concentrating on building capacities for peace (Matveeva, 2008: 203).

However, small changes in the EU approach to conflict resolution can be witnessed from the mid-2000s onwards. The appointment of the EU Special Representative (EUSR) to the South Caucasus, in 2003, and Moldova, in 2005, represented a clear sign that the EU was ready to undertake a stronger and more active approach towards the region. Gradually, under the framework of the CSDP and the ENP, the EU managed to become more active on security issues in the region. It inaugurated the EU Rule of Law Mission to Georgia in 2003 (EUJUST THEMIS), the EU Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) in cooperation with Moldova and Ukraine in 2005, and the EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM) in Georgia in 2008 following the Russian-Georgian war. The war between Georgia and Russia marked a turning point in EU perceptions of its role in regional security. By reinforcing the image of Russia as a regional threat, it allowed for a greater prioritisation of the conflicts in the Eastern neighbourhood in the EU's agenda. Reflecting these changing perceptions, EU member states were finally comfortable with

deploying the EUMM and taking a leading mediating role in the Geneva peace talks. Besides these high profile moves, the Council was also more willing to support the strategy developed and promoted by EU institutions, of "engagement without recognition" with the separatist states of Eurasia. This is an important step by the EU, aiming at undermining Russia's strategy of isolating these entities and consolidating what the former EUSR Peter Semneby (2012) called a "European footprint" in the region. The Ukrainian crisis further reinforced the contextual environment allowing the EU to extend its scope of influence on conflict resolution and conflict management issues. Against a scenario of increasing instability at its borders the EU responded with mechanisms of political stabilisation and economic aid but also with the deployment of an Advisory Mission (EUAM) on civilian security reform under the framework of the CSDP (European Council, 2015: 8), although the EU overall response to the Ukrainian crisis can be interpreted as too little, too late as analysed in the next chapter.

EU growing influence in the region and deeper levels of integration in its vicinity have a domino effect, triggering more assertive Russian responses in the region. This is particularly visible in the context of military security and conflict resolution in the shared neighbourhood. Over time, Moscow has been firm in blocking Western-led proposals for conflict resolution in the post-Soviet space. The aim is clear. Russia is not interested in promoting conflict resolution but rather to preserve a situation granting it significant leeway to mould the political choices of its neighbouring countries. Alongside, protracted conflicts in the post-Soviet space provide Moscow with significant power to punish its neighbours for their pro-European choices and to send to the West a strong message of non-interference in its traditional area of interests (Erkomaishvili, 2014). This strategy reached its high point with the Georgian-Russian War in August 2008 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014. The Georgian-Russian War followed the NATO Bucharest Summit, in which future membership was offered to both Georgia and Ukraine – even if membership Action Plans were not actually signed –, escalated Russian perceptions of increased influence and interference by Western institutions in its backyard. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov warned that everything would be done to stop Ukraine and Georgia from joining NATO and President Putin emphasised these countries could do little against Moscow's determination to oppose NATO's enlargement process (Trenin, 2008: 108).

The war with Georgia also reverberated Kosovo's declaration of independence, which was vehemently objected by Russia. Political elites in Moscow perceived this event as an attack to the status quo in Europe and as a disrespect for the principles of national sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-interference in internal affairs. For Russia, severing a province of a UN member state against that state's wish created a very unwelcome precedent – a precedent that could be used in the future to support claims in Chechnya and the North Caucasus for independence from the Russian Federation. It further created a new situation for Russia with respect to breakaway territories in the post-Soviet space (Karagiannis, 2014). However, instead of recognizing the independence of these territories, Russia handled each situation in accordance with its regional interests.

On Transnistria, Russia promoted a confederal solution and provided rulers in the region more recognition. It also encouraged the resuming of top-level negotiations with Chisinau and eased economic restrictions imposed to Moldova in 2005. This facilitating and mild approach to this protracted conflict reflected Russian willingness to maintain a bargaining chip in processes of decision-making in Moldova as a means to keep the country in its sphere of influence and halting processes of Moldova's integration in Western institutions. The situation was very different regarding Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Moscow opted for recognising their independence as sovereign states, while promoting a de facto, though not formal, integration of these territories (Trenin, 2008: 103-107). The Ukrainian crisis was also different in the sense that there was no previous protracted conflict in the country prior to the events leading to the Euromaidan movement in 2013. Perceiving these events as a EU-led coup aiming at undermining Russian influence in the region, Moscow took an active role in the internal conflict between pro-Europeans and pro-Russians in the country, and provided support to separatist movements in Eastern Ukraine. This involvement reached its higher point with the annexation of Crimea in March 2014, based on alleged popular demands.[23] By doing so, Russia sent a clear message to their neighbours – full control of their territories can only be achieved by aligning with Russia, whereas further integration in the EU and NATO membership will have serious consequences to their territorial integrity. It also crystallised Russian regional politics of creating instability and then managing it whenever its interests are undermined (Simão, 2016: 505; Sirbiladze, 2015).

[23] For a more in-depth analysis of the Ukrainian crisis see Chapter 4.

Security and the above-identified hybrid discourses resulting from its articulation with other signifiers – political security, economic security, energy security and military security related to conflict resolution and conflict management – remain at the core of EU and Russian hegemonic regional approaches and have been both contributing to and reflecting the ongoing processes of securitisation of their shared neighbourhood. Together the identified nodal point and the pinpointed hybrid discourses contributed to raising regional issues higher in the security agenda and to gradually strengthen EU and Russian hegemonic ambitions. Furthermore, they reveal that security in this context appears as a relational, pragmatic and argumentative process, which is very much in line with the definition provided under the critical constructivist framework of analysis that guides this research. The fact that the EU and Russia highlight the interdependent nature of internal and external security and have extended their exercise of power into new areas suggests that events in their common neighbourhood allowed them to create security continuums that demanded integrated and reinforced action promoting political change and spreading their respective worldviews towards the shared neighbourhood (Simão and Dias, 2016: 109). In this regard, the EU Eastern enlargement and the coloured revolutions in the post-Soviet space were the first meaningful events propelling the EU and Russia to take a stronger stance on security matters in their common neighbourhood. Gradual processes of change and the construction of security threats in the region slowly reasoned with EU and Russian audiences to strengthen their approaches towards their common neighbourhood. Once provided, this window for opportunity spread to related issues on the political, economic, energy and military field thus contributing to the complexification of patterns of relation and dynamics of power and security in the EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle.

This complex scenario marred by antagonistic trends over the shared neighbourhood and by intricate power and security dynamics has also affected EU and Russian identities, interests and perceptions of each other. The EU and Russia act on the basis of what they believe the other has become. In this regard, their identities and interests are not given, but change in the process of interaction itself. Since the end of the Cold War and more visibly since the EU's Eastern enlargement, this process of interaction has resulted in a competitive logic between Brussels and Moscow over their respective roles and policies in the shared neighbourhood. This spread the view of an unsurmountable

incompatibility between EU and Russian regional interests and ambitions that has defined the unfolding and transformations of power and security dynamics in the EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle. Against a contextual scenario increasingly conflictual and competitive, Russia and the EU became more suspicious of each other's intentions, even if pragmatic cooperation continued to dominate large part of the EU-Russia agenda (Casier, 2016: 21-22). After the EU's Eastern enlargement, the Union has come to see itself as a regional power with particular responsibilities in the neighbourhood. This role was driven by security-related concerns relating to instability in the region and the rise of new dividing lines in Europe. To address these issues the EU developed policies and initiatives aiming at exporting its rules, norms and institutional practices to the region. However, the EU's stance as a normative power and a force for good in the neighbourhood is not recognised by Russia that has become increasingly sceptical about the Union's regional endeavours. Moscow understands the EU as a hegemonic and excluding bloc aiming at creating a sphere of influence through the expansion of its liberal agenda, something that collides with Russia's identity and interests in the region. Russia perceives itself as the sole legitimate regional power in the post-Soviet space and has been deploying several strategies to consolidate its hegemonic power in the region. Initially, this involved the creation of links of interdependence through loose multilateral formats as the CIS. The new assertiveness of Russian foreign policies from 2000 onwards provided a new impetus to relations with the near abroad. Since then, Moscow has been resorting to different type of integration initiatives, including the CSTO and the EEU, but also to stronger bilateral relations based on exploiting its neighbours' vulnerabilities.

The EU's extension of power towards its traditional area of interests, namely via the ENP and the EaP, had an important impact on Russian identity by challenging its regional ambitions, constraining its room for manoeuvre in the region and ultimately affecting the narratives upon which Russia has been building its identity traits (Casier, 2012; Judah *et al.*, 2011: 25). In this process, regional integration has become part of both EU and Russian identities – it is what they are, rather than just something they do. These self-images and identities of both the EU and Russia as regional hegemonic powers are insufficiently recognised by their counterpart and both share the perception that the other's regional moves are directed against the self (Casier, 2016: 24-25). EU and Russian understandings of regional power and space differ from each other. Whereas the Union is

primarily concerned with extending its area of influence and reinforcing regional integration, Russia is preoccupied with a loss of identity, processes of disintegration triggered by European integration and loss of leverage in its traditional sphere of influence (Joenniemi, 2008: 157). However, the underlying strategy undertook by these two hegemonic powers is very similar in the sense that both envisage to dominate the countries in their vicinity in order to preserve and spread their worldview, thus leaning towards a regional normalisation suitable to the satisfaction of their interests and the consolidation of their identities as meaningful international actors.

As such, both parties understand their own policies as an inevitable response to the threatening initiatives of the other. EU and Russian policies thus come across as manoeuvres of adjustment to an evolving political, economic and security context at their borders. Consequently, both Brussels and Moscow attempt to block each other strategies in the region because they perceive their approaches towards this space as mutually exclusive. In that regard, EU and Russian foreign policies are created in tandem, resulting from a complex process of cooperation in key sectors and a strategic competition over a common area of influence. This simultaneously reinforces the hegemonic nature of their regional processes, propels the ongoing processes of securitisation of their shared neighbourhood and adds to the competitiveness and mutual distrust that underpins their relations and regional dynamics of power and security. The outcome is a struggle for power in the region resulting from, and intensifying, processes of securitisation in the shared neighbourhood.

3.5. Final Remarks

The deconstruction undertaken in this chapter enabled a broader mapping of the dynamics resulting from EU and Russian foreign and neighbouring policies and revealed that, to some extent, both the EU and Russia want to reach the same goal in the shared neighbourhood – expand their influence and reinforce the exercise of power in the region in order to safeguard their security. This extension of power revolves around a nodal point – security – which has gradually articulated itself with four other signifiers creating hybrid discourses – political security, economic security, energy security and military security – simultaneously structuring their power games and revealing the broader field of

discursivity where EU and Russian hegemonic endeavours operate. Across these discursive platforms the EU and Russia share a common goal of imposing their worldview through a number of policies, initiatives and strategies, in order to establish the rules of the game and persuade the countries in the shared neighbourhood to accept asymmetrical relationships in which they are supposed to contribute to the security of their respective regional projects.

In this complex scenario, the EU's agenda revolves around extending its power eastwards and deepening the economic and political integration of the countries in the shared neighbourhood, whereas Russia seeks to explore vulnerabilities in the region in order to restore its national, regional and global power and to reassert its influence in the post-Soviet space. The result is a competition between two regional rationales and hegemonic ambitions over the shared neighbourhood that has an important impact on EU-Russia bilateral relations. These competing approaches are also a cause of tension for the countries in the shared neighbourhood that find themselves torn between the attractions of the EU's agenda – which promises them technical aid, financial assistance and, eventually, a stake in the EU's single market – and a cooperative relationship with Russia – which many of these countries are overwhelmingly dependent on (Gower and Timmins, 2009: 1685-1686).

Diverging positions and regional ambitions result in the distrust and misunderstanding that imprint the EU-Russia agenda and lead these actors to block each other's initiatives, because they perceive their competition over the shared neighbourhood as being mutually exclusive. However, these dynamics become further complicated by the EU's and Russia's awareness of the need to cooperate in a number of fields. The official rhetoric emphasises the cooperative orientation of EU-Russia relations revealing the European security's complex nature and the need for a joint EU-Russia strategy to address common threats. Therefore, the relations between the EU and Russia are not always mutually exclusive as both actors are willing to cooperate to address common challenges. Ultimately, the cost of negative attitudes towards Russia or the EU is significant and somewhat restrains these actors to compete aggressively and directly over the shared neighbourhood. As a result, EU-Russia relations revolve around a complex, and sometimes preposterous, balance between strategic partnership and regional competition. This reveals the dynamic and changeable nature of this relationship, as well as Moscow and Brussels' ability to adapt their discursive practice and perceptions of the other according to their

contextual environment and perceived interests at a given moment. Even if the Ukrainian crisis imprinted a more antagonistic tone to EU-Russia relations, the need to cooperate on key areas relevant to regional security is still acknowledged by both actors. Notwithstanding mutual accusations and confrontation over the shared neighbourhood, both the EU and Russia leave the door open for future cooperation and recognise the complex and interconnected security dynamics operating at the regional and global levels requiring joint action.

The reconfiguration of the geopolitical European map after the EU's Eastern enlargement and the ensuing increasing competing dynamics of power between EU and Russian hegemonic regional projects raised a number of questions regarding the future of Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus – the three post-Soviet states squeezed between their former master Russia and the enlarging EU. This implied several constraints to these countries abilities to pursue their national interests, affirm their individual identities and define their foreign policy in an independent manner. Against EU and Russian hegemonic agendas, it would be expected that these countries to be wrecked by competing dynamics of power. However, the shared neighbourhood between the EU and Russia is a heterogeneous space constituted by states with different identities, interest and resources, something that constrains the ability of these two hegemonic regional projects to influence their internal and external choices. Despite the clear influence by these two actors in the region, countries in the shared neighbourhood retain leverage and agency in the definition of their political choices. However powerful and structural, EU and Russian hegemonic regional projects will ever be a two-way process. In that sense, the success of their endeavours depends on their ability to promote their attractiveness and legitimacy to the countries in the neighbourhood (Dias, 2014c: 77; Noutcheva *et al.*, 2004: 34). The competition between the EU and Russia over a common area of interest further reinforces the ability of their neighbouring countries to play their bargaining chips against Brussels and Moscow in order to better accomplish their interests and promote a relational framework favourable to them. It is precisely at this intersection between two competing hegemonic regional projects that a space of action emerges; a space that enables the neighbourhood to act against (and not just react to) hegemonic instances of power, thus resisting attempts at dominating their political orientation and constraining their identities and interests. The following chapters analyse how Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus have

preserved their agency in this context of regional competition for power, how this agency has worked in practical terms and its larger impact on the definition and unfolding of EU and Russian foreign and neighbourhood policies and the transformation of dynamics of power and security in the wider European space.

4. Resisting hegemonic domination: a deconstruction of discursive practices by Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus – the shared neighbourhood between the EU and Russia

The evolution of EU and Russian hegemonic regional projects and the unfolding of their bilateral relations, as analysed in the previous chapter, pinpointed the strategic and geopolitical importance of their shared neighbourhood to their regional endeavours. Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus do, indeed, occupy a special place in this regional setting marked by increasingly competing power and security dynamics for they constitute the last stronghold between the EU and Russia.

Historically, this geographic area has been disputed by European and Eurasian states due to its status as a transit point for goods on global East-West and North-South trade routes and as the ultimate *cordon sanitaire* between East and West (King, 2008: 5-8). Recognising the strategic value of this region, the EU and Russia have been developing strategies and frameworks for relations in order to lure these countries into their respective orbits of influence, thus reinforcing their hegemonic regional power. These frameworks for relations either under the aegis of Brussels or Moscow have put into place highly asymmetrical relationships resulting from high levels of interdependence and multi-sectorial vulnerabilities in the region, but also from EU and Russian claimed superiority when compared to these smaller states. In that regard, Barry Buzan and Ole Waever (2003: 416) have already argued that it is in this region that dynamics of power and security in the broader European space are most intense and visible, exactly because these countries are at the intersection of two strong and conflicting regional projects.

Against a scenario marred by competing hegemonic powers, it would be expected that these countries would be unable to act against or resist EU and Russian attempts at dominating their internal orders and foreign policies. This chapter aims at proving otherwise. By using a comparative case-study approach and the deconstruction of discursive practices by political authorities in Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus, it envisages to shed light on the fact that instead of perishing to their contextual environment these countries have been trying to evade complete domination by external powers. For that purpose, they use their relevant geopolitical location to obtain advantages in relations with Brussels and Moscow. Furthermore, they often balance between their most significant

neighbours as they find suitable to assure the consolidation of their specific identities and the accomplishment of their national interests. By making use of competing regional dynamics, countries in the shared neighbourhood have been exploring the vulnerabilities of EU and Russian hegemonic power to their best advantage, thus affirming their agency and ability to resist structural exercises of power by these actors. True, these initiatives constrain these countries' foreign policy, but they do not translate themselves into apathy or mere reaction by Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus to their surrounding environment.

In order to delve into these complex dynamics, the current chapter will comprise three main moments deconstructing discursive practices by Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus, respectively. The goal is to grasp moments of agency and resistance in an attempt to understand how these countries have managed to maintain their agency in such a complex setting and how they have been able to resist complete domination by the EU and/or Russia. The chapter finishes with a comparison of foreign policies of the selected case-studies as unveiled by the deconstruction of their discursive practices and some final considerations.

4.1. Ukraine: balancing between the EU and Russia

Ukraine is seemingly the most strategically relevant country in the shared neighbourhood between the EU and Russia and a cornerstone to European security. This is due to its geographic size, demographical weight, strategic location between Europe and Russia, relevance as an energy transit country, but also because it inherited a vast conventional and nuclear arsenal from the USSR. Ukraine also represents a vast market to EU and Russian products and investment opportunities. For Russia this strategic importance is further strengthened by strong historical and cultural ties (Donaldson and Nogee, 2005: 180-181) and the fact that Ukraine remains the main transit country assuring Russian gas supplies to the European market, despite several attempts to circumvent the country (Closson, 2009: 97). As such, Kiev has occupied a very significant place in EU and Russian post-Cold War regional agendas, leading these actors to develop several initiatives to engage the country as a strategic partner. Despite the manifold constraints to its foreign policy agenda that emerge from this contextual environment, Ukraine has been striving to affirm its autonomy by pursuing a multi-vector foreign policy. The goal was to

ensure the country's independence, to create a scenario favourable to the emergence of a distinctive national identity, and to promote its transition without submitting itself to external powers. This, however, has caused great reluctance in both the EU and Russia, that remain suspicious of Kiev's regional balancing. Brussels has regarded this course of action with great cautious and interpreted the country's political options as manoeuvres to satisfy the interests of corrupt political elites. On its hand, Moscow has seen Kiev's foreign policy and its relations with the EU as a threat to its regional power and ergo has opted for punishing the country whenever it adopts unfriendly strategies (Freire, 2011: 69).

Immediately after the dismantling of the USSR, the EU welcomed Ukraine's independence (1991) and proposed the establishment of official relations in 1992 with the goal of supporting its quadruple transition – democratisation, marketisation, state-building and identity-building (Dias, 2011; Vahl, 2003: 2). For that purpose, the Union provided technical assistance under the TACIS program, promoted cooperation on economic and technical sectors and initiated high level talks on the negotiation of a PCA (Molchanov, 2004: 457). This support had a strong strategic motivation. For the EU, a stable and peaceful Ukraine was seen as a factor of regional stability and cooperation, contributing to guarantee European security. Furthermore, there was widespread perception that the development of Ukraine as a democratic independent state could be a model to Russia, preventing the materialisation of its imperialistic impetus or the transformation of the CIS into a political and military alliance at the service of Moscow's interests (Kuzio and Moroney, 2001: 112-113; Mroz and Pavliuk, 1996: 52-53). In Kiev, the Union represented a reference model to the country's development and a platform to assist its integration in international organisations. In this context, Ukraine was peremptory in declaring the approximation to the EU as a strategic goal and to make its process of internal transition dependent on closer ties with Brussels, as well as on the internalisation of EU norms and standards (Petrov, 2003: 125-126).

Nevertheless, at this point uncertainties about Ukraine's future and its ability to implement meaningful reforms, as well as the fear of antagonising Russia, whose political elites had difficulties to accept the country's independence, led the EU to maintain a rather low profile towards Ukraine. Negotiations on the PCA were made dependent on the fulfilment of certain conditions, namely Ukraine's ratification of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (Vahl, 2003: 2), the engagement with political and

economic internal reforms (Grossman, 2007: 18), and the shut-down of Chernobyl nuclear central (Beichelt, 2004: 123). The reluctance and powerlessness of Ukraine to comply with those conditions caused distrust regarding its capabilities. As a consequence, it was difficult to foster an enhanced cooperation at this initial phase of EU-Ukraine relations, which was marked by a cautioned and hesitant approach often confused with disinterest (Kuzio, 2003c). Besides, in the early 1990s the EU was very much focused on developing its foreign policy dimension in order to deal with post-Cold War security challenges. If this period of internal redefinition was crucial to define its international and regional role, it refrained the EU to give a stronger impulse to its relations with Ukraine, even if it recognised its strategic and security importance. As such, until 1994 EU-Ukraine relations can be better framed in the context of reluctant cooperation.

The decision of the European Council of Corfu (1994) to adopt a Common Strategy on Ukraine, along with the election of Leonid Kuchma – a supporter of integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions – as Ukraine's President and the signature of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons provided a new impetus to EU-Ukraine relations. The European Council of Corfu also defined the development of regional cooperation, the support to political and economic reforms and assistance to Ukraine's denuclearisation as the main axis of this relationship. The PCA with Ukraine – which entered into force in 1998 – legally framed EU-Ukraine relations on the basis of democratic values, political dialogue and support to democratic transition in the country. The PCA has also institutionalised relations between Brussels and Kiev through the creation of bilateral Cooperation Councils and Committees at several levels envisaging to foster political dialogue and convergence on regional and international matters (European Union-Ukraine PCA, 1994b: Title X, article 90º). Although the document does not make any reference to Ukraine's accession into the EU, it underlines the vital interest in deepening cooperation with Kiev. The fact that Ukraine was the first of the CIS states to celebrate a PCA with the EU illustrates the country's strategic relevance to European security (Kubicek, 2005: 277).

Early violations of the PCA implementation by Kiev and the slow commitment to transition processes in the country compromised its ability to transform Ukraine's political and economic environment. Gradually, it became noticeable a growing rhetoric stressing its pro-European choice, whereas in practice its political elites were refraining from

making essential reforms (Grossman, 2007: 19). The result was a widespread feeling of frustration towards this framework for relations on both the EU and Ukraine. Nonetheless, slowly the EU assumed a more pro-active stance towards the country by substituting initial fears regarding Ukraine's future for a steadier support to its democratisation along the EU's normative agenda.

The EU-Ukraine summit, in 1998, qualified this relationship as a "unique and strategic partnership" and announced the support towards the development of Ukraine's energy and transportation sectors through INOGATE and TRACECA programs (European Union and Ukraine, 1998). The goal was to affirm Ukraine's role as a bridge between Europe and the Caucasus, as opposed to a barrier between the EU and Russia. Gradually, political, economic and security advantages from cooperating with the EU also became clearer to Ukraine. The Strategy of Ukraine's Integration with the EU, adopted in 1998, launched the basis to foster closer relations with Brussels and to prepare the country's integration into the Union (Petrov, 2003: 135). This strategy voicing Ukraine's European choice had clear political purposes. By making the success of internal reforms dependent on the country's European integration, Kiev envisaged to secure political and economic support to its transition. Moreover, as the Eastern enlargement was being prepared at the EU level, Ukraine understood cooperation with the Union as a means to prevent that a new iron curtain fell on Europe dividing permanently the group of EU insiders from the outsiders, thus contributing to Ukraine's regional isolation (Kubicek, 2005: 276).

The rising commitment with the establishment of a strategic partnership between the EU and Ukraine led the European Council of Vienna, in 1998, to decide on the elaboration of a Common Strategy on Ukraine. Brussels recognised that EU-Ukraine relations had enormous potential and managed to convince its audiences to celebrate one of its most important political instruments at that point. Formally adopted in 1999, the Common Strategy defines EU-Ukraine relationship as a strategic partnership, establishes new domains for cooperation and commits the EU with some strategic goals, such as

> to contribute to the emergence of a stable, open and pluralistic democracy in Ukraine [...]; to cooperate with Ukraine in the maintenance of stability and security in Europe and the wider world [...]; [and] to increase economic, political and cultural cooperation with Ukraine as well as cooperation in the field of justice and home affairs (European Council, 1999b: 2-3).

The Common Strategy on Ukraine appears as a complement to the PCA in legally framing EU-Ukraine relations. Its implementation was made dependent on working plans defined on an annual basis by the European Council Presidency (European Council, 1999b: 8) stating specific steps towards the rise of a pluralistic democracy with a functional market economy, and the deepening of EU-Ukraine cooperation with the broader goal of promoting European security (Zagorski, 2002: 8).

Despite acknowledging Ukraine's European aspirations, this document makes no mention to future membership. Overall, the EU preferred to offer relations based on conditionality mechanisms whereby the fulfilment of political and economic conditions as identified in the PCA were presented as indispensable requirements to deeper relations with the country. Through the adoption of specific reforms along the EU's liberal agenda, the Union also envisaged to export a set of norms and values aiming at moulding the construction of Ukraine's identity (European Council, 1999b: 2). This is a clear exercise of structural power by the EU aiming at transforming the environment at its borders. However, the EU was keen to avoid assuming responsibilities for its neighbour internal evolution, stressing that the country's internal transition was fully dependent on its own political will.

Overall, in the late 1990s, EU-Ukraine relations were experiencing a positive momentum and their cooperation was spilling over into new domains, including trade, economy, legislation, culture and science (European Commission, 2004a: 3). A qualitative progress in this relational framework was noticeable generating an increasing optimism regarding Ukraine's capability to comply with the EU's requirements. This eagerness to enhance cooperation with Kiev was reinforced at the Göteborg European Council, in 2001, where EU member states included Ukraine in the European Conference (European Council, 2001) – an informal gathering of European states –, suggesting that a new form of privileged cooperation was being planned (Vahl, 2003: 10). The adoption of an Action Plan on Justice and Home Affairs in 2001, further added the strategic nature of this relationship (Dias, 2011; Lavenex and Wichmann, 2009: 83-102). However, this optimism was soon lost due to the EU's disillusionment towards an increasingly authoritarian and multi-vector Ukraine (Kubicek, 2005: 280).

Kiev's commitment with European integration was indeed more rhetoric than effective. Political compromises were not matched by concrete measures and Ukraine's

internal progress were falling short on expectations. Despite the potential provided by the PCA and the Common Strategy to enhance and deepen EU-Ukraine relations, mutual disappointment gave place to a stage of gradual disengagement (Molchanov, 2004: 460-461).

Political elites in Kiev were dissatisfied with the unilateralism of EU initiatives towards the country. Even if Ukraine was involved in the PCA negotiations and was consulted on the elaboration of the Common Strategy, these documents were understood as a proxy to promote EU interests and project its view on what the country should become (Vahl, 2003: 7-8). As such, Ukraine became increasingly disappointed towards the content of these frameworks for relations and the insufficient accommodation of its standpoints and interests. Likewise, the conditionality approach promoted by the EU failed to produce rewards to Ukraine at an attractive pace. In this context, both the PCA and the Common Strategy soon became obsolete frameworks for relations (Kobzar, 2006: 11). Instead of transforming the political environment in the country along European norms and values, what became noticeable was the deterioration of Ukraine's democracy, a growing clampdown on civil society movements and media oppression. In the early 2000s, Kiev was experiencing a period of political authoritarianism and growing influence of corrupt oligarchies in the economic and political fields, which resulted in its isolation from the EU (Kuzio, 2003b: 9; Pavliuk, 2005: 188). EU-Ukraine relations were indeed at a crossroads. As the EU made the update of EU-Ukraine relations and the eventual consideration of its membership conditional on the implementation of internal reforms, Kiev insisted that these same reforms were contingent upon the deepening of relations with Brussels (Svyetlov, 2007: 534).

Facing growing criticism from the EU, then Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma seemingly abandoned its pro-European agenda in order to promote closer relations with Russia. This rapprochement was translated in the motto "to Europe with Russia!" which became visible in Ukrainian political discourse from 1999 onwards (Kuzio, 2003c: 24). Russia, however, had little interest in European integration and was defining its own foreign policy agenda on the basis of a stronger role in the CIS area, as analysed in the previous chapter. In this regard, President Kuchma's discourse can be better interpreted as a rhetorical move suggesting its intention to increase cooperation with Moscow at a point when relations with the EU were very much stagnated, while not fully detaching himself

from opportunities for cooperation with Brussels. This wording also emphasises the multi-vector stance of Kiev's foreign policy which in practice means the country pursues a strategy of intended equilibrium between Russia and the EU envisaging to take the best advantage out of both vectors (Kubicek, 2005: 274).

This realignment of Kiev's foreign policy priorities was only possible in the context of improved relations with Moscow. A very tense political environment marred Ukraine-Russia relations in the aftermath of the USSR dismantling. During the 1990s, this relationship revolved around issues regarding the role the CIS should perform in the post-Soviet space, the future of the Soviet nuclear arsenal in Ukrainian territory and the regulation of energy transit from Russia to Europe (Trenin, 2007: 199). Even if the resolution of some of these matters provided some stability to relations between Moscow and Kiev, major focus of tension persisted regarding control over the Black Sea fleet and the statute of Crimea (Dias, 2014a: 64). Mutual accusations regarding blame for problematic bilateral relations were exchanged by Moscow and Kiev, and it was only in 1997 that the Russian President was able to make an official visit to Ukraine. The establishment of a Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership seemingly place their relations into a more amicable note. This treaty provided the opportunity to partially resolve the future of the Black Sea fleet, which remained in Crimea under Russian control in exchange for the recognition of this region as part of Ukraine's territory and the pardon of great part of the latter energy debt (Donaldson and Nogee, 2005: 188-189; White, 2012: 297). Simultaneously, several political, economic and military agreements were concluded, reflecting Russia's willingness to maintain a certain level of proximity to Ukraine, thus assuring its maintenance in its sphere of influence (Freire, 2011: 70).

Kiev was well aware of its high dependence on Russian politics and resources, but also of its key relevance to Russian regional endeavours and the benefits that could arise from a friendlier relation with Moscow. As such it opted for promoting cooperative bilateral relations and for participating in Russian-led regional organisations in the post-Soviet space (Härtel, 2010: 2). As a result, a number of agreements were celebrated granting Ukraine political support, military and economic cooperation, as well as preferential energy prices. Such arrangements were beneficial to both sides as Ukrainian political and economic elites saw their immediate interests satisfied and Russia assured the maintenance of a friendly regime in its vicinity (Dimitrova and Dragneva, 2009: 858).

Following this context of improved relations with Moscow, in 2004, Ukraine ratified the treaty creating the CES along with Russia and Kazakhstan. This initiative implied the harmonisation of these countries economic policies, the abolishment of custom fees and free circulation of goods, services and people. Such commitments, however, collided with Ukrainian national interests and its ambitions to be integrated in international organisations, such as the WTO. For that reason, Kiev remained reticent to engage in regional initiatives under the aegis of Moscow. Accordingly, then Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovitch made Ukraine's participation in the CES conditional on the country's constitutional laws and national interests, and preferred to keep an observer status withis this framework. Kiev's light engagement within the CES was regarded by Moscow as an offensive measure constraining regional integration in the post-Soviet space for it considers Ukraine's participation as vital to the success of Russian political and economic regional endeavours (Freire, 2011: 72; Pavliuk, 2005: 195; Simão, 2016: 505).

Political events in Ukraine leading to the Orange Revolution, in 2004, added a further layer of tension to relations with Moscow and ultimately implied a realignment of the country's foreign policy agenda. This popular uprising was triggered by alleged illegalities in the Ukrainian Presidential elections of 2004 disputed by Viktor Yushchenko – the pro-European candidate – and Viktor Yanukovitch, who benefited from Moscow's political support. At the second electoral round held on November 23, Yanukovitch was announced the victor.[24] However, the EU along with other international organisations denounced irregularities in the process and the suspicion of electoral fraud. This action by the EU was crucial to support civil society movements flooding the streets of Kiev demanding free and democratic elections. The EU managed this political crisis with great efficiency and on a timely manner, revealing a strong and coherent harmony between EU institutions and member states' interests in addressing this situation (Barysch and Grant, 2004: 2). As a result, a new electoral round was realised and the pro-European Viktor Yushchenko was announced as Ukraine's President. In the EU these events and the peaceful power transference from Kuchma to Yushchenko were portrayed as Ukraine's most important conquest since its independence (Kubicek, 2005: 286).

[24] A first electoral round took place on October 31, but as no candidate managed to secure a majority of votes, a run-off ballot between the two highest polling candidates was scheduled, in compliance with Ukraine's electoral law.

Hopes were raised high in both Brussels and Kiev regarding the possibility to resume the path of Ukraine's European integration and improve EU-Ukraine relations. With a clear pro-European agenda, President Yushchenko was keen to affirm Ukraine as a European country, both geographically and historically, and its rightful place amongst European states. European integration became indeed the main axis of his foreign policy (Härtel, 2010: 3). The purpose was twofold. On the one hand, Yushchenko understood closer relations with Brussels as an indispensable platform to engage the country into effective democratisation and international integration. On the other hand, Yushchenko was trying to offset Russian strategic advances in the country's political and economic spheres and reduce various dependences from Moscow which made the country vulnerable to its influence (Bojcun, 2016: 398; Kubicek, 2005: 287). In this reading, Ukraine's pro-European choices and greater autonomy in the definition of its foreign policy agenda reveal a very pragmatic and strategic approach envisaging to disengage the country from Russia's orbit of influence (Freire, 2011: 87).

The Orange Revolution coincided with the EU's Eastern enlargement and the preparation of frameworks for relations between Brussels and its new neighbourhood. Negotiations on Ukraine's participation in the ENP and the drafting of the EU-Ukraine Action Plan had already started under the Kuchma administration. Frustration regarding the lack of a membership perspective in the foreseeable future triggered strong criticism on this "unfair" policy, as Kuchma labelled it (Delcour, 2007: 131-137). While he recognised the ENP represented a momentous improvement in EU-Ukraine relations, he also stressed that the mechanisms offered did not respond to Ukrainian interests and, thus, refused to sign the Action Plan (Svyetlov, 2007: 535). The election of Viktor Yushchenko reverted this state of affairs and provided a new impetus to relations with Brussels.

However, the political momentum was not the most likely to revise the Action Plan nor to include any accession prospects resulting from Ukraine's European aspirations due to a number of reasons. First, in the post-Orange Revolution context, Ukraine was just taking the earlier steps towards democratisation and its future remained widely uncertain. Second, the EU was still processing the Eastern enlargement and ergo unwilling to include membership perspectives in relations with the new neighbourhood. Finally, the renegotiation of the Action Plan was very technical and time-consuming, something that could hamper not only EU-Ukraine relations but the broader ENP framework. The absence

of a membership prospect attracted much criticism in Kiev, which regarded the ENP as a transitional framework for relations on the way to full-accession to the Union. As analysed in the previous chapter, Action Plans are supposed to be drafted upon consultations with EU neighbours, but in practice they remain unilateral political instruments projecting EU norms and demanding proper behaviour by partner countries. Ukraine, however, did not accept this submissive positioning and pushed to be involved in the drafting of the document. By doing so, it was successful to persuade the EU to amend its Action Plan in order to make note of the country's new political reality (Roth, 2007: 514-518). Ukrainian negotiators thus pressed the EU to turn a very generic document into something more specific, identifying detailed conditions linked to their respective rewards (Langbein and Wolczuk, 2012: 869). This is a very clear example of Ukraine agency as the country did not perish to EU procedures and pushed for a more favourable and comprehensive framework for relations beneficial to its particular interests.

In February 2005, the Action Plan was signed complementing the PCA as the foundation of EU-Ukraine relations and opening new areas for cooperation (European Commission, 2005b). An intensification of political dialogue between Kiev and Brussels was noticeable and at the 2005 EU-Ukraine summit it was decided to start negotiations on a new enhanced agreement envisaging to replace the PCA. At this summit, the EU granted Ukraine market economy status thus making possible its accession into the WTO, as well as the kick-off on negotiations concerning the creation of a EU-Ukraine FTA (European Union and Ukraine, 2005). Cooperation in the energy sector was also reinforced with the establishment of a Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation aiming at fostering energy efficiency and security of energy transit (European Commission, 2005d). The gradual cooperation between the EU and Ukraine on energy matters culminated with the latter integration in the European Energy Community as a full fledged member, as of February 2011 (Energy Community, 2010).

Still in 2005, Ukraine became eligible to cooperate with the EU in the scope of the CFSP therefore reinforcing the Action Plan's commitment to foster cooperation in addressing common security threats (European Commission, 2005b). At this point, Ukraine was also engaged on assuming a more significant regional role. This is visible in its greater involvement in the resolution of the Transnistrian issue in Moldova. Ukraine was already one of the official conflict mediators and has shown direct interest in its

stabilisation. Russian military manoeuvres in the region and the transportation of military equipment through Ukraine's territory requests security measures by Kiev and represents a source of tension to its political elites, who perceive these moves as a menace to Ukrainian territorial integrity. Additionally, the control of illegal activities in Transnistria not only demands several resources, but also impacts negatively on Ukraine's economy and capacity to attract foreign investments (Freire, 2011: 84-85). In order to secure the environment at its borders and affirm its regional role, Ukraine and Moldova requested the EU to deploy the EUBAM, which operates in the region since 2005. This represents an upgrade on EU-Ukraine security cooperation and reinforces the understanding of Kiev as a fundamental piece to maintain regional security, while providing the EU with the contextual environment to assume a stronger role in conflict resolution in the shared neighbourhood with Russia (Sushko, 2007: 87).

The Orange Revolution, the EU's active role in the peaceful settlement of Ukraine's political crisis and Kiev's ensuing rapprochement to the EU was perceived with great animosity in Russia. During Ukraine's presidential campaign, Moscow's support to Viktor Yanukovitch is better understood in the context of assuring the maintenance of friendly regimes in the post-Soviet space and prevent the country's pro-European alignment (Wilson, 2010: 29). In this regard, the inability to secure the election of the pro-Russian candidate was seen as a political loss by the Kremlin. The result was a visible deterioration of Russia-Ukraine relations and the adoption of measures aiming at punishing Kiev's administration for its foreign policy (Hughes, 2006). This is all the most relevant for it occurs in a context of growing competition between the EU and Russia over its common vicinity, as previously analysed. In this setting, the Orange Revolution was perceived in Moscow not as the outcome of popular demands in Ukraine, but as a Western-sponsored political uprising aiming at extending the EU and NATO's power and influence towards Russia's traditional area of interests. As such, political events in Ukraine were understood as a direct strike against Moscow's regional status and leverage (Dias, 2014a: 65; Mankoff, 2009: 250).

As a result, Ukraine-Russia relations gained an increasingly confrontational tone which translated itself into a severe gas crisis starting in the Winter of 2005-2006. This crisis was sparked by Gazprom's decision to raise prices of energy supplies to Ukraine. The latter inability to pay its energy debt resulted in the shut down of gas supplies to the

country. Seemingly, Russia used its energy resources as a political tool to punish Kiev for its foreign policy in spite of arguments relating this crisis to purely commercial issues and the adaptation of Russian energy supplies to market prices (Gromadzi and Kononczuk, 2007: 22). In fact, Moscow is mindful of Ukraine's high energy dependence and has used its energy resources to punish the country for its unfriendly acts, as well as to constrain its autonomy in foreign policy making (Freire, 2011: 69), reinforcing the political dimension of energy relations in the post-Soviet space.

For Ukraine is an important gas transit country, this cut-off affected supplies to European countries that fiercely condemned Russian actions and started questioning its reliability as an energy supplier. True, this was not the first energy-related crisis between Russia and Ukraine, but it was certainly the first to gain an international dimension and to incorporate Russian pragmatism and assertiveness in regional matters (Sherr, 2008: 7). This was a very powerful move by Russia with severe economic consequences for Ukraine. Even so, the latter condition as an important transit country assuring Russian energy supplies to Europe provided the country with significant leeway in negotiations with Moscow. By gambling with the raise in energy transit fees, the country managed to reach a compromise with Russia, thus solving this natural gas crisis (Closson, 2009: 97; Tsygankov, 2006: 1088). Nonetheless, as a result of this process important concessions were made to Moscow that saw its participation in Ukraine's energy sector reinforced and gained control over its internal gas distribution network. Accordingly, Russia was successful in obtaining considerable political and economic advantages working to its favour in deepening Ukraine's energy dependence (Gromadzi and Kononczuk, 2007: 28). Following this rationale, Moscow has also been persistent in reinforcing its participation in other economic sectors in Ukraine. Aware of the vulnerabilities arising from Russian growing power in the country's economy, the Ukrainian Parliament has been trying to put obstacles to the increasing privatisation of key economic sectors thus refraining Russia to obtain additional leverage in the country's internal affairs (Popescu and Wilson, 2009: 33).

This negative tone in Ukraine-Russia relations was marred by negotiations relating to the future of the Russian Black Sea fleet in Crimea and Kiev's hesitation to renew the contract established in 1997. Ukraine's refusal to support Russian intervention in Georgia in August 2008 (Härtel, 2010: 2), followed by the reinforcement of economic and energy cooperation with the EU (European Union and Ukraine, 2008) and the

establishment of a strategic partnership with the USA in defence and security matters (United States and Ukraine, 2008), further aggravated relations with Moscow. Against Kiev's strategic alignment with Euro-Atlantic institutions, then Russian President Dmitri Medvedev accused his Ukrainian counterpart to pursue an anti-Russian foreign policy. In response, Viktor Yushchenko stressed that only Russia was to be blamed for the worsening of relations between the two countries (White, 2012: 298). Ukraine's growing untie from Russia's orbit of influence was crystallised in the Russia-Ukraine energy crisis of 2009, which was once again motivated by energy prices, Ukraine's energy debt and transit fees charged to Gazprom (Malygina, 2010: 8).

As relations with Moscow became more and more tense, the EU launched the EaP in 2009 to reinforce its footprint in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus by providing bilateral and multilateral frameworks for relations with these countries. The EaP bilateral dimension is largely modelled on EU-Ukraine relations. Although in this perspective the EaP has no added value to Ukraine, the initiative is an interesting instrument for promoting and supporting multilateral cooperation with the EU at the regional level, boosting Ukraine's chances for exerting regional leadership and to reinforce its strategic importance to European security (Stegniy, 2011: 55). Furthermore, the EU and Ukraine adopted an Association Agenda preparing the future AA envisaging to provide a new impulse to their relations (Solonenko, 2009: 722).

Nonetheless, at this point the post-Orange Revolution optimism regarding the evolution of EU-Ukraine relations had faded away. The country's commitment to European integration failed to achieve tangible results. Internal reforms fell short on addressing the rampant levels of clientelism and corruption undermining democratising processes. Furthermore, the political scene was marred by significant events, including a mounting divergence between and inside pro-European and pro-Russian political parties and social movements (Proedrou, 2010); the return of Viktor Yanukovitch as Ukraine's Prime Minister in 2006 after divergences inside the Orange coalition; a constitutional crisis in 2007; the 2007 parliamentary election bringing Yulia Timoshenko – one of the leaders of the Orange coalition – back as Prime Minister; and the failed attempt to revive this coalition due to accusations of treason and attempts to undertake constitutional coups (Kubicek, 2009: 324).

The 2010 presidential election in Ukraine reinforced the levels of uncertainty regarding the evolution of EU-Ukraine relations. The new President Viktor Yanukovitch sought to reinforce its power by surrounding itself of important oligarchs. By importing Russian conception of sovereign democracy, he adopted an authoritarian rule resulting in persecutions to political opposition and independent media (Bojcun, 2016: 400-402). At the foreign policy level, Yanukovitch reconsidered Ukraine's priorities, opting for a realignment with Russia. This, however, did not translate into a suspension of negotiations with the EU on the AA (Korduban, 2011). Quite the opposite, Yanukovitch claimed that Ukraine's future belonged in Europe and assumed the goal to turn the country into "a proud member of the European Union", even if its "historical connection to Russia will continue to be very important" (Yanukovitch, 2011). In practice, however, what became noticeable was a very pragmatic approach towards relations with Brussels envisaging to maximise benefits from participation in EU policies and initiatives, without a real commitment to embrace its norms and values (Stegniy, 2011: 67-68), very much in line with the strategy pursued by Leonid Kuchma from 1999 onwards.

Under Yanukovitch's administration, Ukraine-Russia relations experienced a new momentum of stability. The pro-Russian President was very vocal in his intentions to reinforce cooperation with Moscow and imprint a more pragmatic tone to Ukraine's foreign policy (Härtel, 2010). In the so-called Kharkiv deals, Kiev managed to assure preferential energy prices in exchange for an extension of the Russian Black Sea fleet permanence in Crimea until 2042 (Medvedev and Yanukovitch, 2010). By doing so, it established a gas-for-fleet formula beneficial to Kiev's economic interests, but representing a limitation to its sovereignty over Crimea (Simão, 2016: 500). Simultaneously, Kiev extinguished the governmental commission responsible to prepare Ukraine's accession to NATO and removed integration into this organisation from the country's strategic goals (Weir, 2010). These transformations in Kiev's political agenda created a more positive momentum in Ukraine-Russia relationship and seemingly confirmed Russian strategy of rewarding friendly neighbours and punishing the ones that compromise the persecution of its interests. Moreover, this episode adds to the idea that Moscow's energy policy is not exclusively moved by commercial goals, but rather conceals a delicate articulation between economic and political interests in its traditional area of influence (Vahabov, 2010).

In general, Ukraine-Russia relations improved during the Yanukovitch administration, as illustrated by the establishment of a strategic partnership foreseeing deeper levels of cooperation between the two neighbours in July 2012. This does not mean that relations became completely tension-free. A new energy crisis in 2012 revealed the fragility of political relations between Kiev and Moscow. Divergences revolving around the renegotiation of energy prices as established by an agreement celebrated between then Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Timoshenko and her Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin were at the core of this quarrel. Moscow refused to revise this agreement unless Ukraine gave Gazprom additional control over its internal energy market or joined Russia-led initiatives for economic integration in the post-Soviet space (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2012).

Kiev found both options hard to embrace. On the one hand, it was conscious of the country's strategic importance as an energy transit country and the source of income this status represents to its oligarchies. On the other hand, Kiev had for long been involved in negotiations aiming at establishing a FTA with the EU. These negotiations would be severely wounded by any rapprochement to Moscow in this area. Additionally, Kiev understood its participation in Russian-led regional initiatives as a menace to the country's territorial integrity for these initiatives involved the concession of important prerogatives to Moscow often used as bargaining-chips to mould Ukraine's foreign policy agenda. The arrest of Yulia Timoshenko following accusations of abuse of power in negotiations with Russia in the course of 2009 and ensuing declarations about the illegality of the resulting deals, further hampered Ukraine-Russia relations. In this context, Ukraine refused to succumb to Russian demands and sued Gazprom in the Arbitration Institute of the Stockholm Chamber of Commerce (Shumylo-Tapiola, 2012), in a trial perceived in Moscow as being partial, anti-Russian and politically oriented (RiaNovosti, 2012). Despite President Yanukovitch clear pro-Russian leaning, he was not a completely pliant ally of Moscow, adding to the understanding that Ukraine is an active agent unwilling to comply blindly with Russian hegemonic demands (Götz, 2015: 4).

Relations with Brussels were not easier. The Union understood Ukraine's pragmatism and increasing authoritarianism as a deviation of its European aspirations, thus representing a loss of EU influence in the region and a constrain to its hegemonic initiatives. As such, the EU resorted to its political conditionality mechanisms in 2011 and

2012 by making the signature of the AA dependent on meaningful democratic improvements (Delcour and Wolczuk, 2015: 465). The intention was to persuade Ukraine to return to its European path and commit itself with processes of reform along the EU liberal agenda. After a tense negotiation process, the EU has decided to sign this document at the EaP Vilnius summit in 2013. Then Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovitch, however, performed a U-turn and declined to sign this agreement presenting an enhanced basis for relations with the EU. This decision followed the celebration of a generous, though non-transparent, economic deal with Russia, including a 15 billion USD assistance package, the lowering of energy prices by one-third and various industrial deals, suggesting the country to be abandoning its European path in exchange for closer relations with Moscow (Freedman, 2014), though without any public promise to join Putin's-led EEU (Pridham, 2014: 57-58).

Months before, Russia had started applying economic sanctions to Kiev in anticipation to the negative consequences that Ukraine's European choice would entail to its regional power. The AA with the EU did indeed involve several constraints to Moscow. On the economic level, it would close the Ukrainian market to Russian products, which is very significant in terms of Russian exports. On the military domain, it would disrupt close links between the Ukrainian military and aerospace industries, and Russian enterprises. More important the AA would imply integrating Ukraine into the EU's CSDP with clear strategic repercussions to Moscow's hegemonic ambitions in the post-Soviet space (Götz, 2015: 4). Through a combination of threats and economic prospects, Moscow was successful in swaying President Yanukovitch (Haukkala, 2015: 33). Facing a scenario in which the EU was to reinforce its footprint in its immediate vicinity, Moscow has used its political and economic leverage in the region to reverse this course of events. A number of meetings between Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Ukrainian counterpart Viktor Yanukovitch during the second half of 2013 along with trade sanctions imposed by Moscow worked as a warning for Kiev not to go ahead with the EU (Emerson, 2014: 1-2). Ukrainian President Yanukovitch officially justified the non-signature of the AA with the heavy financial costs of implementing the DCFTA, and the fact that the EU offered insufficient compensation for supporting that economic burden. However, the fact that this decision comes in the aftermath of non-transparent meetings with Russian President Putin and the generous offer of financial assistance suggests that there are far more power

dynamics concealed by these events than the official discourse discloses. As a matter of fact, Ukraine's rapprochement to Brussels directly conflicts with Russian hegemonic regional projects. As analysed in the previous chapter, Russia has been developing a grand project of Eurasian integration and Ukraine is a key piece in this strategy as a result of its geostrategic location and economic potential, but also due to historical reasons. Ukraine has always been at the core of Russian imperialism (Shelest, 2015: 193-194). This historic memory is still very vivid amongst Russian political elites that see the country's breakaway from Moscow's sphere of influence as threatening its hegemonic regional power. Consequently, the Kremlin responded to Ukraine's European aspirations with a stick and carrot approach that was successful in dissuading its European integration in the short-term.

But not everything went smoothly. Ukraine's U-turn regarding the signature of the AA with the EU sparked strong criticism and discontentment amongst civil society movements and political opposition in the country. In November 2013, Kiev's streets were flooded by protesters demanding a clear commitment with the process of European integration and the resolution of structural problems in the Ukrainian political system – e.g. nepotism, corruption, abuse of power and human rights' violations.

The EU's reaction to Ukraine's decision and the political crisis triggered by the Euromaidan movement was a very passive one. Against this scenario of deteriorating EU-Ukraine relations and political instability in Kiev, the Joint Declaration of the EaP Summit in Vilnius did little more than to acknowledge "the decision by the Ukrainian Government to suspend temporarily the process of preparations for signature of the AA and DCFTA between the EU and Ukraine" and "the unprecedented public support for Ukraine's political association and economic integration with the EU" (European Council, 2013: 3). Seemingly, the EU resigned to losing Ukraine to Russia, accepting the situation as a *fait accompli* and not taking much initiative into winning back the country (Haukkala, 2015: 33).

This crisis relating directly with Ukraine's foreign policy choices and its integration with either the EU or Russia (Daehnhardt, 2015) has soon escalated and Kiev turned into a battlefield between Euromaidan protestors and police forces. After three months of confrontations, the conflict escalation and a dreadful management of events on the ground, in February 2014, then President Viktor Yanukovitch and opposition leaders

signed a deal envisaging to put an end to the Ukrainian crisis. However, shortly after, Viktor Yanukovitch fled the country to seek refuge in Russia, and the Ukrainian Parliament voted to oust the President and elect an interim government to rule the country until new legislative elections.

Perceiving these events as a EU-backed anti-constitutional coup (Putin, 2014b) to promote changes contrary to its interests, Moscow soon became involved in the Ukrainian crisis. The goal was to revert pro-European dynamics under course and assure the maintenance of Ukraine in its sphere of influence. For that purpose, Moscow deployed a whole range of economic and diplomatic resources, including attempts at destabilising the provisional government in Kiev and the announcement that Gazprom would charge Ukraine world market prices for natural gas supplies, i.e. nearly the double Ukraine payed so far (Götz, 2015: 6). Nonetheless, the annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and the political and military support to separatist movements in Eastern Ukraine constitute the most visible moments of Russian strategy towards this crisis (Dias, 2015a).

The situation in Crimea resulted in the intensification of conflicts in Eastern Ukraine, the reinforcement of Russian military apparatus in the border with Ukraine – including the militarisation of the Crimean peninsula and the reactivation of a submarine base in Sevastopol – and several efforts by Moscow to further destabilise the economic situation in the country (Freedman, 2014; Gardner, 2016: 8-9). Russian active role in these events was officially sustained under a supposed responsibility to protect Russian citizens and compatriots living abroad from aggressions perpetrated by the new government in Kiev (Nitoiu, 2016: 10). The usage of the presence of ethnic Russians in Crimea and Russia's historical connection to the region provided Moscow with the arguments to legitimise Russia's intervention. This is an argumentative process that borrows much of the claims sustaining Western-led interventions across the globe; the very same argumentation that Vladimir Putin was so keen to criticise in the Munich Security Conference in 2007. However, more than co-opting Western discursive practices or pursuing a paradigmatic shift in its foreign policy strategies, Russia is making full use of a grander plan delineated by Moscow since the end of the Cold War (Tsygankov, 2015). Russia's Foreign Policy Concept of 1993 already referred to its responsibility to protect Russian citizens abroad, thus emerging as a cornerstone of tension between Moscow and CIS countries. Reinforcing the outreach of this policy, Moscow has for long engaged in a strategy of attributing

Russian passports to citizens of other countries in the post-Soviet space. This is not merely a neutral response to demands by pro-Russian groups, but rather a powerful strategy loaded with political, territorial, and legal significance, constraining neighbouring countries' sovereignty and full control over their territories and population (Simão, 2016: 501-502). In this regard, Russian annexation of Crimea and confrontational policies vis-à-vis Ukraine are best understood as powerful moves aiming at preserving some form of control over Kiev's policy-making in the context of increasing rapprochement to the EU. It further convey an strong message to former Sovier states – whenever Russian interests are disregarded substantial risks and costs will follow, including the very present threat of territorial dismemberment (Götz, 2015: 3-6).[25]

Conflicts in Donbass added a level of complexity to events in Ukraine. Until then, conflicts in the country assumed a hybrid character, integrating simultaneously voluntary and irregular combatants. With the escalation of tension in Eastern Ukraine, the conflict was transformed into a conventional warfare between Ukrainian regular armed forces and the Russian army. Contrary to what happened in Kiev, there is no conclusive evidence that the takeover of public infrastructures in this region had its origin in Ukrainian civil society. Even though Moscow denies officially any intervention in the conflict, the analysis of the situation on the ground makes clear that pro-Russian forces in Eastern Ukraine have been using military equipment supplied by Moscow, and that Russian has been providing these forces with economic support and regular armed troops (Delcour and Wolczuk, 2015: 469; Galeotti, 2016; Götz, 2015: 6; Molchanov, 2016: 2).[26] Against these evidences Russian

[25] Russian reaction to and active role in events in Ukraine has raised intense debate in the academic community. Robinson (2016) undertakes an interesting literature review on the topic and identifies four main lines of argumentation in this debate. On the extreme side, he locates authors claiming Russia to be pursuing a revisionist agenda aiming at reorganising European geopolitical and security configuration along new lines. Less extreme insights frame Russian foreign policies as being driven by territorial expansion ambitions envisaging to create a new Russia. A more moderate opinion, very much in line with the argument provided by our own interpretation of events, perceives Russian actions as the outcome of two interrelated strategies: 1) to destabilise Ukraine and promote a managed instability constraining processes of decision-making in Kiev, and 2) promoting the decentralisation of these processes with strong political powers attributed to pro-Russian provinces in Ukraine, which are expected to act as a proxy of Moscow's interests. Finally, pro-Russian readings emphasise that there is little evidence of Russian intervention in the Ukrainian crisis and that Moscow's reaction to events in the neighbourhood are solely an attempt to preserve the status quo in the region.

[26] This interpretation is highly contested in the academic community, with several voices stressing that conflicts in Eastern Ukraine are a home-grown phenomenon and that Russian intervention on the ground cannot be accurately verified (Robinson, 2016: 6). Even if reliable information is indeed hard to obtain and both the outbreak and management of such events is still subject of heavy speculation, we share the understanding that Russia has been playing an active role on the ground since the very beginning of the Ukrainian crisis.

President Vladimir Putin recalled that military uniforms in the post-Soviet space are very similar and that anyone can go into a store and buy any kind of uniform, but forces on the ground are local self-defence units (Putin, 2014b). Pro-Russian separatists, however, admit the involvement of Russian military forces in the conflict both in the supply of war machinery and manpower (Katchanovski, 2016: 8). Nevertheless, Russia positioning towards these conflicts remains ambiguous. As separatism movements voiced their willingness to achieve greater autonomy, Russia showed its respect for popular claims but has cautiously refrained from recognising their autonomy or independence from Kiev. This suggests that Moscow's main goal in these events is not to foster Ukraine's dismantling. It is more interested in a decentralised Ukraine and in nurturing a belt of pro-Russian provinces along its borders with an effective veto power over Kiev's foreign policies, allowing Moscow to block the deepening of relations with Brussels (Götz, 2015: 6). This is backed by official statements by Russia stressing that although the people of Donbass are indeed Ukrainian they will only feel secure – and therefore cease conflicts – if and when they their interests are accommodated by the political leadership in Kiev, and that state of affairs can only be achieved within a decentralised Ukraine (Robinson, 2016: 4). What seems to be at stake is Russia's exercise of structural power punishing Kiev for its European choices and promoting instability – and then managing it – so as to constrain processes of policy-making in the country (Dias, 2015a: 51). Despite sporadic concessions relating to the decentralisation of decision-making processes in Ukraine in order to accommodate demands for greater autonomy by Eastern Ukrainian regions, Moscow's ability to influence Kiev's foreign policy agenda has been, however, rather limited (Charap, 2014).

Petro Poroshenko was formally inaugurated as Ukraine's President on June 7 based on a clear political agenda – to honour popular demands expressed by the Euromaidan movement, assume European integration as "one of the most important foreign policies priorities of Ukraine", undertake the necessary steps to obtain full membership in the Union, and start negotiations with the Russian Federation in order to resolve the situation in Eastern Ukraine, albeit making clear that "there will be no compromise on Crimea" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 2014c). This represents a fundamental change from the previous administration aiming at transforming Ukraine' development model in terms of democracy, human rights, economic development and

fighting corruption along EU standards, and a greater detachment from Russian sphere of influence.[27] In this regard, it is noteworthy a set of structural reforms starting from June 2014 envisaging to increase democracy and accountability in the country (Charap, 2014). By the end of June, Ukraine had signed all the provisions of the AA with the EU, including a DCFTA.[28] The persecution of Kiev's national interests despite Russian attempts to limit its foreign policy choices became clear in the words of then Prime Minister Arseniy Yatseniuk.

> The agreement on free trade zone with the EU will come into force. Russia, like any other country, has no veto on our bilateral relations with the EU. The Agreement is aimed at developing relations between Ukraine and the EU, and is not relevant to relations with Russia. […] We have determined: the Ukrainian economy will meet the European standards (Yatseniuk, 2015c).

The new government in Kiev considered tumultuous events in Eastern Ukraine to be "a direct and undisguised interference of Russia with internal affairs of Ukraine" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 2014d). It further disputed Russian claims on the legitimacy of Crimea's decision to join the Russian Federation for this procedure resulted from a referendum whose legality and transparency is highly contested. Political manipulations and the presence of Russian military forces on the ground are considered to have put severe constraints on popular free will and to have misled the international community by creating a false sense of self-determination. Furthermore, the official discourse projects events in Crimea to be contrary to the Constitution of this autonomous Republic, the Constitution of Ukraine and norms of international law enshrined in the UN

[27] During its presidency, Petro Poroshenko undertook a number of measures aiming at reducing Ukraine's political, economic and cultural dependence on Russia. Amongst those it is noteworthy the adoption of laws prohibiting all public monuments and memories of the communist era, and restricting the usage of Russian language in schools and the media (Molchanov, 2016: 2).

[28] The enforcement of the AA with Ukraine is pending on ratification by the Netherlands. The AA includes competences of both the EU and its member states, and as such it must be ratified by EU institutions and by the EU's 28 member states. This is a very time-consuming procedure that might last several years. In order to circumvent this ratification process, the part of the agreement that falls under EU competences has been provisionally applied (accounting for around 80% of its provisions). The remaining provisions can only be implemented after the successful ratification by all EU member states. So far, all EU member states have ratified this agreement, except the Netherlands. The Dutch government decided to held a referendum on the subject, resulting in an outcome unfavourable to the ratification of the AA with Ukraine. The legal implications of this referendum remain unclear, especially because the AA does not mention explicitly which provisions fall under the exclusive competences of EU member states. Whether the Netherlands will ratify the AA against a non-binding referendum is yet uncertain. What seems to be assured is that the lack of ratification by all EU member states, will not affect the provisional application of the agreement (which do not include provisions on defence cooperation, conflict prevention, taxation, public finances, the fight against terrorism, migration and border control) (Van der Loo, 2016).

Charter (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 2014d). It further represents a severe economic constraint to Ukrainian economy. Since their inception, events in Eastern Ukraine have taken a heavy toll on the country's economy and caused it to lose most of its industrial areas which are now controlled by pro-Russian rebels (Yatseniuk, 2015a).[29] In fact, Russia interests relate little with the seizure of extra territory. The main goal is to destabilise Ukraine at the political, economic, energy and military levels. By freezing conflicts in Eastern Ukraine, Russia envisages to ensure that its neighbour loses momentum in the process of European integration and that pro-Russian informal military forces remain in Ukraine's territory, thus providing Moscow with significant levers to influence processes of policy-making in its vicinity (Shelest, 2015: 198-199).

Likewise, Kiev has emphasised the fact that the Crimean issue comes at odds with previous foreign policy discursive practices by Russia, being the opposition to the independence of Kosovo and the defence of its own right to territorial integrity in the context of Russian North Caucasus separatist movements the most pressing examples in this regard (Ambrosio, 2016: 473-474). This, Ukrainian authorities claim, is proof of Russia's policy of double standards and the political usage of regional strategies to its best interest (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 2014d). Discourses undermining Russian influence and attempting at damaging Russia's reliability as a regional power gain now a preeminent place in Ukrainian political speeches. Overall, Kiev portrays its neighbour's actions as hysterical reactions to changes in its contextual environment, while denouncing severe human rights violations that should be a matter of grave concern to the "civilised world" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 2014b). It is also noticeable a line of discourse accusing Russia of pursuing a strategy of misinformation aiming at undermining the country's reputation before the international community (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 2014a). At the centre of this strategy of misinformation is the labelling of conflicts in Ukraine as a civil war, a classification rejected by Kiev. From Ukraine's perspective

> The essence of the conflict is aggression of the Russian Federation against our country, occupation of Crimea and impudent interference in internal affairs,

[29] The official rhetoric in Ukraine projects an estimated economic loss of 20% since the clash of tumultuous events in the East (Yatseniuk, 2015a). Data from the World Bank, however, is less pessimistic estimating a loss of 7% in Ukraine's real GDP in 2014, and of 12% in 2015. Over this period the national currency lost more than 60% of its value against the dollar and the annual inflation rate was put at 44% (Molchanov, 2016: 2).

> accompanied by support for terrorist against Ukrainian citizens and territorial integrity of the state (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 2014f).

It becomes clear that Ukraine's administration is discursively constructing the image of Russia as a "threat to the entire Western civilisation" (Yatseniuk, 2015b) and as a lesser political actor trapped in its imperial and Soviet past of greatness and domination. This argumentative strategy by Kiev reasoned with both the EU and Russia and impacted on dynamics of power and security in the broader European space, including discursive moves by other countries in the shared neighbourhood between the EU and Russia. At the EU level, the Ukrainian crisis and the pro-European alignment of Kiev's new government provided grounds for the EU to reinforce its security agenda and regional hegemonic power as illustrated by the review of the ENP and a more aggressive discourse by the European Commission regarding regional matters. The new impetus of EU neighbouring policies is based on its neighbours' demands and the Union's responsibility to protect both these countries and the very process of European integration from a threatening other – i.e. Russia.

Support to a stronger engagement by the EU in the region and opposition to Russia is clear in the words of then Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatseniuk after the EaP Riga summit in 2015.

> Act boldly and wisely, do not be scared of Russia. It is for Russia to be scared of all of us. Don't be scared of the word enlargement. The larger we are, the stronger we are, and the more successful we are, and the more opportunities we get, all our nations. […] It's important for the EU to realise that Russia poses a threat not just to Ukraine, [but] a threat to the free world, to democracy, to freedoms and liberties, to our peaceful and successful future (Yatseniuk, 2015a).

By framing this issue on such terms, Yatseniuk makes a powerful move clearly identifying Russia as a common threat and its regional endeavours as clashing directly with EU interests. Simultaneously, he stresses the fundamental role of Ukraine to assure European security and counterbalance Russian muscular regional approaches. As such, the country reaffirms its European aspirations and willingness to be recognised as part of the European family since enlarging the Union to former Soviet states would only strengthen the EU (Yatseniuk, 2015a). However, Yatseniuk's political statements conceal a critique to the EU's response to events in its neighbourhood. Despite initial support to the Euromaidan movement and later to the post-Maidan Ukrainian government, Brussels

response to events in Kiev and the escalation of conflicts in Eastern Ukraine remained for long limited to a rhetorical dimension.

The European Parliament and the European Commission were very vocal in supporting Ukraine and its territorial integrity, as well as to strongly condemn the annexation of Crimea as an act of aggression by the Russian Federation undermining regional peace and security. EU institutions rejected Russian claims that intervention in Crimea was motivated by the responsibility to protect ethnic Russians in this region, for there were no evidences that the Russian-speaking population in Crimea was threatened or subject of abuse by Ukrainian authorities. However, tangible measures to address this conflict were harder to produce. The EU limited its response to the application of political and economic sanctions to Russia, whose impact is limited in the short-term, and the deployment of the EUAM in December 2014. The latter is a non-executive EU mission established in Kiev to assist the reform of the civilian security sector in the country based on EU standards, at the request of Ukrainian authorities. The EU has also provided support to strengthen institutions in Ukraine, including macro-financial assistance, extension of autonomous trade preferences and humanitarian aid (European Council, 2015: 8).

This mild response by the EU was heavily criticised by former Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko, who compares the situation in Ukraine to World War II and blames Europe of refusing, once again, to realise it and react accordingly. “Europe has paused” and “Putin will not pause” for “his mission in this life is to restore the USSR”, claims Yushchenko. He further argues that “Crimea is not about Crimea”. It is part of a larger plan revolving around Russia’s hegemonic seizure of power in the region, in which Ukraine has a central role (Yushchenko, 2014).

> When Russia builds an empire, it starts with Ukraine. In other words, to build a new empire, the success of Putin’s policy rests on the war in Ukraine. His mission is not complete without it. […] Six times Ukraine has declared its independence. […] Five times, we have failed, due entirely to Russian aggression (Yushchenko, 2014).

Whereas that might not be an issue this time, Yushchenko considers that Ukraine’s independence and European security are only possible if the EU presents tougher responses to Russian aggressive regional manoeuvres. The former President was very straightforward in stating that Russia has engaged war in the post-Soviet space for

many years now, if not through clear acts of aggression, at least via subtler moves relating to political, economic and diplomatic pressure (Yushchenko, 2014).

These discourses and Ukraine's increasing rapprochement to the EU raised great animosity in Russia. Perceptions of the new Ukrainian government as a proxy of the EU in its traditional area of influence reinforced Russian understanding of European neighbouring policies as conflicting directly with Moscow's interests and regional ambitions (Marples, 2016). Feeling its power threatened, Moscow reinforced its robust discursive practices in this area and further focused on the consolidation of models for regional integration as an alternative to the EU, with particular emphasis on the EEU. The overall goal is to affirm Russia's regional hegemony and block the EU to further extend its power in their common vicinity.

After several attempts to put an end to the Ukrainian crisis, in February 2015, Russia, Ukraine, Germany and France managed to secure a cease-fire agreement with separatist movements in the country, though a diplomatic settlement on Crimea was not possible to conclude at this point (Gardner, 2016: 5; Gressel, 2015). The clauses of this agreement compelled Kiev to provide some form of autonomy to its Eastern regions, something that satisfied Russian interests relating to the promotion of decentralisation in Ukraine's processes of decision-making. The so-called Minsk Agreements[30] were, however, compromised by successive Ukrainian rebels' offensives and reports testifying the entry of Russian heavy machinery in the country (Jornal de Notícias, 2015). So far, no successful crisis resolution was reached and levels of tension in Eastern Ukraine remain high (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2016).

The deconstruction of Ukraine's discursive practices in Europe's post-Cold War regional setting has produced interesting insights. Against a regional scenario marked by competing power and security dynamics resulting from the increasing competition between the EU and Russia and structural moves aiming at attracting Ukraine into their respective orbits of influence, Kiev has been actively resisting succumbing to the diktat of their most significant neighbours. A large deal of Ukraine's strategy to preserve its autonomy and specific identity – its ultimate national interests – has been put into practice through a

[30] Previous agreements were signed in Minsk on 5 and 19 of September 2014 and representatives of Ukraine signed a working document on the implementation of those agreements' provisions on November 13, 2014. However, no meaningful steps towards the Ukrainian conflict resolution were successfully achieved under this framework.

multi-vector foreign policy agenda envisaging an intended equilibrium between relations with Brussels and Moscow. In practice, this has translated into a balancing between the Union and Russia aiming at maximising political, economic and security benefits to Kiev. The argument can be made that this balancing comes as the result of different views and interests by pro-Russian and pro-European political elites in Moscow. Such explanation, however, ignores the fact that these diverging understandings and interests have never resulted in the monopolisation of public discourse in foreign policy matters. Furthermore, both pro-Russian and pro-European administrations in the country undertook relatively moderate and strategic policies. Those who preferred closer relations with Moscow dared not to oppose Ukraine's European path and were careful not to allow the Russian vector to become dominant, while those who assumed themselves as pro-European always kept a strategic relation with Moscow (Shelest, 2015: 192-193). This is all the most visible in former Prime Minister and later Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovitch reluctance in taking an active participation in Russian-led regional initiatives for he understood them as a strong limitation to Ukraine's autonomy. In the same way, during the administration of pro-European coalitions several economic and energy agreements were celebrated with Moscow despite tense political relations.

Of course, EU and Russian foreign policies and neighbouring strategies combined with the country's many vulnerabilities represent a constrain to Ukraine's political choices. Nonetheless, the country has been undertaking a very pragmatic approach to its contextual environment and playing with the EU and Russia to its best advantage, while avoiding full domination by external powers. As such, during the 1990s, relations with the EU were seen as an opportunity to gain support to processes of transition pivotal to affirm Ukraine's independence and autonomy in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union. During the same period, tense relations with Moscow resulted from Ukraine's intention to affirm its independence and to detach itself from its former Soviet ruler. Perceptions regarding the time-consuming nature of relations with Brussels and the lack of attractive rewards led to a rapprochement to Russia, which offered the country more immediate economic incentives, though at the exchange of important prerogatives undermining the country's autonomy. From the 2000s onwards, relations with both Brussels and Moscow experienced several fluctuations, ranging from high rapprochement to grave divergences.

In these processes, Ukraine has made use of its strategic condition to gain important leeway in negotiations with Brussels and Moscow and to make their respective frameworks for relations with Kiev to contribute to the satisfaction of its specific interests. In that setting, it is noteworthy Ukraine's ability to pressure the EU to accommodate the country's demands in the ENP Action Plan and its ability to push the EU to assume a stronger role both in the Transnistrian issue and in the Ukrainian crisis, in order to assure regional security along Ukrainian interests. The most pressing examples of Ukrainian agency regarding Russia are the usage of its energy transit condition to minimise energy retaliations by Moscow and its reluctance in taking part in Russian-led regional initiatives in order to block its growing influence in the post-Soviet space. In this sense, an interesting conclusion is that Ukraine perceives European integration as a protection against Russian regional interventionism. Accordingly, Ukraine's relations with Brussels are better framed in the context of resisting attempts by Russia to dominate the country. Ukraine seemingly does not perceive the EU as an aggressive external power, but rather as a platform for development and a means to reduce the country's multiple vulnerabilities from Moscow. This is not to say that the country is willing to blindly follow EU requirements. Pro-European aspirations and discourses are more rhetoric than effective. Their goal is to reinforce Ukraine's attractiveness to Brussels and affirm its indispensability to assure European security in order to generate important revenues and investment opportunities in the country. The Ukrainian crisis, nonetheless, revealed that interchanges with the EU have had a socialising effect on civil society which is demanding for a clearer European commitment. Russia's intervention, on the other hand, shed light on the country's manifold dependencies on Moscow and produced a situation that has potential to further constrain processes of decision-making and foreign policy in the years to come. Whether Ukraine will be able to continuing exercising its agency against domination of external powers and balancing between the EU and Russia to its best advantage or not is something that remains to be seen.

4.2. Moldova: towards European integration

Moldova is the smallest and poorest country in the shared neighbourhood between the EU and Russia. Since its independence in 1991, the country was unable to completely

revert a political setting marked by high levels of corruption and severe socio-economic inequalities. Apparently, this places the country into a position of little strategic value to EU and Russian regional projects. However, the Transnistrian issue and its security dimension granted this small country an important place in EU and Russian hegemonic agenda.

The Moldova-Transnistria conflict is one of the regional legacies of the end of the Cold War and the most pressing issue in the country's relations with both the EU and Russia. Slightly before Moldova declared independence in 1991, questions related to the unification between Moldova and Romania and the adoption of language legislation propelled tensions between the right and left banks of the river Dniester (Botan, 2009: 118). In that same year, Transnistrian authorities took under control all public institutions on the left bank. While Chisinau tried to regain control of Transnistria through coercion, violent clashes took place in 1992. As the conflict between Transnistrians and Moldovans escalated, the intervention of the 14th Soviet army stationed in Moldova played a decisive role, contributing to the de facto partition of the country (Berg, 2006: 224; Dura, 2010: 5). Despite Moscow's official position of neutrality in the conflict, after direct intervention its army provided arms and ammunition to Transnistrian paramilitary groups, trained its Republican Guard and supported the Transnistrian leader Igor Smirnov (Bobick, 2011: 249; Vahl and Emerson, 2004: 6-7), thus playing a significant role in the conflict preservation.

A ceasefire between Russia and Moldova was signed in 1992, legitimising Moscow's intervention in the conflict and its military presence on the ground. Indeed, it defined the creation of a security zone and the deployment of 6000 peacekeepers from six Russian, three Moldovan and three Transnistrian battalions under a Joint Control Commission. Accordingly, Chisinau was put in a 2-to-1 disadvantage regarding its decisions and missions carried out by peacekeeping forces (Sanchez, 2009: 163-164). This is a paradigmatic example of Russian intervention in its vicinity to assure the maintenance of post-Soviet states in its sphere of influence (Tudoroiu, 2011: 239).

In 1997, the Presidents of Moldova and Transnistria signed a Memorandum on the principles for the normalisation of relations, in which Ukraine, Russia and the OSCE assumed the role of guarantors (Berg and Toomla, 2009: 39). Practical improvements on the conflict resolution resulting from this Memorandum were minimal and after a long

suspension in the negotiation process, in 2005 it was extended to a 5+2 format: Moldova, Transnistria, Russia, Ukraine, the OSCE plus the EU and the USA as observers. However, no tangible results were reached under this format, which has soon frozen highlighting its inability to either transform the conflict or to change perceptions about it (Dias, 2013b).

So far, de facto secession and non-recognised independence describes the status quo in Transnistria. Since the 1992 ceasefire, Moldova and Transnistria developed separate economic, social and political systems and international orientations. Whereas Moldova envisages a rapprochement to the EU, Transnistria is politically oriented towards Russia and the CIS (Freire, 2002: 75; Istomin and Bolgova, 2016: 170). Changing formats of negotiation and the growth of the international dimension did not solve the conflict and led to an endless conundrum where Transnistria claims that its statehood has been accomplished and Moldova refuses to recognise it. Therefore, the complexity of this conflict results from the overlapping, and often contradictory, internal and external dimensions that make its resolution harder (Berg, 2006: 223; Roper, 2001: 119-120).

Moscow has direct interests in the conflict preservation as it represents a unique opportunity to keep Moldova in its sphere of influence and to make harder its rapprochement to the EU (Sanchez, 2009: 165-168). Despite its reduced geographic dimension, when compared to Ukraine and Belarus, Moldova occupies a very important place in Moscow's geopolitical reasoning and traditional area of influence (Makarychev, 2010: 3-4). In that regard, Russian military presence assures that Moldova remains a weak state unable to fully control its territory. This provides Russia with significant leeway to influence the country's policy choices and refrain Moldova of pursuing the path of European integration (Boonstra, 2007: 3-4; Tolstrup, 2009: 936). For that purpose, Moscow provides political support, and generous economic and energy subsidies to the regime of Tiraspol, thus allowing for its survival (Karniewicz *et al.*, 2010: 5; Korosteleva, 2010: 1279). Likewise, it often frustrates any attempts to resolve the conflict, refusing to agree on a common solution. Instead, Russia has been promoting solutions to the conflict on its own terms (Boonstra, 2007: 3-4). One of such solutions was the Kozak Memorandum, in 2003, which proposed the federalisation of Moldova and the attribution of veto powers to Transnistria over all policies, including the possibility of EU integration (Kamov, 2006: 54). Ultimately, the Kremlin has little interest in pursuing a lasting solution for a conflict that allows it to keep a steady leverage in the region and maintain Chisinau in

its backyard (Lynch, 2006: 61). For the same reason, Russia is not strongly advocating for Transnistria's independence, preferring the maintenance of the status quo or a negotiated settlement with Moldova in return for its permanent neutrality status and the preservation of its military forces on the ground as guarantors of any settlement (Dura, 2010: 6; Karniewicz *et al.*, 2010: 5). This proposal was rejected by Moldovan political authorities, who perceived it as an attempt to dissuade Moldova's European integration and to reinforce Russia's influence on its domestic affairs (Berg, 2006: 232). As an alternative, in 2004 then Moldova's President Vladimir Voronin demanded the replacement of Russian peacekeeping forces by an international civilian mission, based on the alleged support by Moscow to Transnistrian separatist movements (Freire, 2011: 86-87). This proposal has, however, been denied by both Tiraspol and Moscow (Rodkiewicz, 2012). Although these events did not change dramatically the situation on the ground, they made clear that Russia is not willing to lose its strategic positioning in Moldova.

Moscow's active role in the Transnistria conflict has impacted on the Moldova-Russia bilateral relations in a broader manner. During the 1990s, Moldova attempted to preserve friendly relations with the Kremlin and, simultaneously, to evade its political, economic, energy and military domination. Chisinau acute external dependence, hampered by the Transnistrian conflict, was for long seen as a fragility favouring Moscow's leverage in the country. Even so, Chisinau has managed to constrain this leverage by limiting its participation in Russian-led regional initiatives, such as the CIS (King, 2003: 75-76). In the same way, it attempted to counterbalance Russian regional power and influence by engaging with the EU.

The EU has itself a clear-cut interest in the conflict resolution as it would help reducing the illicit activities that have been flourishing in the region, thus turning the neighbourhood into a more secure environment (Bosse, 2010: 1302-1303). Notwithstanding EU's growing concern with regional security since the end of the Cold War, it played a marginal role in the Moldova-Transnistria conflict resolution during the 1990s and relations with Moldova were very much limited to the celebration of a PCA in 1994, economic assistance and technical cooperation (European Union-Moldova Korosteleva, 2010: 1268-1269; PCA, 1994a). As a consequence, EU-Moldova relations were often characterised by missed opportunities rather than by strategic engagement (Danii and Mascauteanu, 2011: 100-101). From the mid-2000s onwards, however, the EU

has becoming gradually committed to the conflict transformation through the ENP framework and the establishment of the EUBAM. The frustration of the Moldovan Communist government regarding Moscow's will to preserve the status quo in the region and the lack of progress within the 5+2 negotiation process, gradually leaned Moldova towards the EU (Boonstra, 2007). Moldova was for long seeking to enhance its relations with the EU and it had already prompted EU membership as a key strategic goal of Moldovan foreign policy in 1998 (Vahl and Emerson, 2004: 21). Despite Vladimir Voronin election in February 2001 under a wide pro-Russian support platform, soon the President opted for turning European integration into one of the central axis of Moldovan foreign policy agenda. This political prioritisation was officially consecrated by the European Strategy of the Republic of Moldova in 2003, shedding light on Moldova's pragmatic positioning and willingness to overcome its strong dependence on Russia by seeking new partnerships (International Crisis Group, 2007: 78).

Reflecting the post-enlargement geopolitical configuration and demands by Moldovan political elites, the EU became more interested in enhancing relations with Chisinau. The EU-Moldova ENP Action Plan signed in 2005 stated clearly the Transnistrian issue, which the EU now perceives as a serious security threat on its immediate neighbourhood. The document stressed EU support for its settlement and the importance of Moldova's commitment to adopting EU norms and values (European Commission, 2005a). For that purpose it established cooperation on foreign and security policy, the promotion of economic growth and poverty reduction as the main goals of relations between Brussels and Chisinau (European Commission, 2007b). An additional sign of closer cooperation is the opening of a European Commission diplomatic mission in Chisinau and the appointment of the first EUSR for Moldova during that same year. Furthermore, the EU has generously sponsored border management and border control projects in the country that has become the top aid recipient per capita in the region (Bosse, 2010: 1302; Korosteleva, 2010: 1276-1277)

In its quest for new allies, Chisinau – together with Ukraine – managed to persuade the EU to provide assistance to the Transnistrian conflict resolution. This comes across as an important instance of agency whereby Moldova acted to increase ties with Brussels and to raise its strategic value to European security with a dual purpose: increase levels of interdependence to generate political benefits and economic revenues; and to

counterbalance Russia's regional leverage. EUBAM started working in the region in November 2005. The mission is a civilian and technical assistance project with no executive powers taken under the scope of the European Commission and funded under the ENPI. The underlining idea was that monitoring the border between Moldova and Ukraine would facilitate the conflict transformation by undermining Transnistrian sources of wealth, due to further control over illegal practices, thus making local leaders less intransigent towards a settlement (Isachenko, 2010: 11-12; Verdun and Chira, 2008). Its mandate allows EUBAM to "promote coordinated action", "support activities" and "provide advise" to Ukraine and Moldova "in areas involving border customs and fiscal matters" (European Commission, 2005c). A strong limitation to this mission is its inability to operate within the Transnistrian territory. Furthermore, it can only give recommendations to Moldova and Ukraine on areas for improvement on border management. Its activities consist essentially on training Moldovan and Ukrainian customs and border personnel, patrolling the border and making unannounced visits to check their performance (European Commission, 2005c), which is revealing of EUBAM's limited contribution to the conflict transformation and resolution.

Although there is no direct intervention of EUBAM on the left bank of the river Dniester, its presence in the region may have propelled some changes in Transnistrian public opinion. Appeals for political and economic reforms slowly became more visible on the ground (Isachenko, 2010: 20). The Renewal movement has since 2005 been affirming itself as the opposition to the regime in Tiraspol. Against odds and without Moscow's support, the leader of the Renewal party was elected the new President of Transnistria in December 2011 ending the 20-year's rule of Igor Smirnov.

Russia understood Moldova's pro-European aspirations as a threat to its regional power and leeway. In order to assure the maintenance of this neighbour into its sphere of influence, Russia has been using its economic, energy, political and military leverage to increase the country's vulnerabilities. Besides its military deployments in Transnistria – representing a severe political constrain over Chisinau –, Russia has been resorting to its economic resources to influence Moldova's foreign policy. In this sense, particular attention should be devoted to multiple embargoes to agricultural products, following more visible moments of tension between Moscow and Chisinau, and the energy crisis in the Winter of 2005-2006 as a response to the failure of the Kozak Memorandum and

Moldova's greater engagement with the EU (Stent, 2007: 15; Tolstrup, 2009: 938). After a cut off of natural gas supplies to Moldova, in January 2006, Russia did not only double gas prices to Moldova, but it also secured control over its domestic gas infrastructures (Woehrel, 2009: 11).

In spite of these moves aiming at constraining the evolution of EU-Moldova relations, Chisinau remained committed to deepening relations with Brussels. This highlights Moldova's active role in the persecution of its foreign policy agenda, notwithstanding Russian retaliations; an agenda where the EU emerges as its most significant neighbour and an important partner to resist Moscow structural manoeuvres. Overall, the EU has made a positive evaluation of reforms in the country. However, it recognised the need for improvement in sensitive areas relating to "fundamental freedoms of citizens", "market and regulatory issues", the enforcing of "national strategies in areas such as the fight against corruption, drugs and trafficking in human beings", and reforms in the energy sector (European Commission, 2009: 2-3). As a result of an increasingly close cooperation, the EU and Moldova established a Mobility Partnership, in force since 2008, and in 2010 Moldova became a full-fledged member of the Energy Community Treaty contributing to the EU's aim to promote a secure energy supply system in the neighbourhood (European Commission, 2010b: 2-6).

This increasing rapprochement to Brussels had clear political and economic advantages to the country. Nonetheless, Chisinau's regional setting pressed political elites to, simultaneously, maintain friendly relations with Moscow. After the Georgian-Russia war, political authorities in Chisinau became more cautions in their relations with Moscow. This event sent a clear message that Russia was willing to intervene directly in its neighbourhood whenever its interests were threatened and showed countries in the former Soviet space how not to proceed. In the aftermath of the Georgia-Russia war, then President Voronin expressed greater availability to accept Russian mediation out of fear of echoes of this robust approach by Russia in Transnistria (Dyomkin, 2008), suggesting that the formulation of Moldovan foreign policy agenda results from a careful reading of its contextual environment at different moments. This attitude was received with great satisfaction in Moscow and then Russian President Dmitry Medvedev even expressed his will to promote the Transnistrian conflict resolution.

This seemingly interest in fostering more amicable relations with Moscow has soon faded away. Moldova's parliamentary elections in 2009 resulted in the defeat of the Communist Party and the victory of the Alliance for European integration. This outcome was perceived in Russia as a political loss. On the one hand, it reinforced Moldova's path of European integration which collides with its regional interests. On the other hand, it represented the failure of a long tradition of influencing Moldova's electoral proceedings. Since the 1990s, Russia has indeed played an active role in this domain providing political and economic support to friendly candidates. Aware of Russia's leverage, President Voronin played this situation to his advantage. In the eve of elections, it was noticeable a closer proximity to Russia and more friendly discursive practices towards this important neighbour, even if after elections Moldova's leader would resume integration into the EU for considering it to be more profitable to the country's national interests. Such moves are particular visible in the context of parliamentary elections in 2001 and 2009, and local elections in 2003 (Haukkala, 2008: 40-42; Korosteleva, 2010: 1281). In 2009, however, Russia was unsuccessful in securing the election of its candidate. Perceptions of loss of public support to relations with Russia to the detriment of a closer approximation to the EU led Moscow to adopt a strategy promoting the intensification of contacts and initiatives with pro-European elites and think tanks in the country (Makarychev, 2010). The goal was to reinforce Russia's soft power and normative agenda as a complement to its more robust strategies in order to encourage pro-Russian initiatives in the country thus influencing Moldova's internal affairs. Results from this strategy were limited as Russia failed to secure the election of the pro-Russian Socialist candidate in Moldova's parliamentary elections in 2014 and pro-European parties managed once again to secure a narrow victory (The Financial Times, 2014a).

Against Moscow's interests, Moldova reinforced its process of European integration. In 2009, it was included in the EU's EaP. At first, political elites in Chisinau did not welcome this initiative due to the lack of membership perspectives and blamed this framework for relations to be derogatory and unclear (Korosteleva, 2011a: 252). Nonetheless, the maintenance of a cooperative tone in relations with Brussels resulted in the recognition of Moldova's European aspirations as a success story and the most pressing case of dynamic evolution of cooperation with the EU under the EaP. During negotiations on the AA envisaging to replace the PCA as the legal basis of EU-Moldova relations,

Chisinau was eager to confirm its interest in the Comprehensive Institution Building Programme envisaging to provide assistance to neighbouring countries in the field of institution-building as a means to prepare the implementation of the AA and the DCFTA (European Commission, 2011: 8). To the greatest extent, Chisinau has been persistent in criticising the EaP due to insufficient accommodation of its interests and expectations but has preferred to cooperate with Brussels. The EU remains an attractive partner for it provides political elites in the countries with considerable political benefits and economic assistance.

In an attempt to regain its influence over Chisinau, in July 2012, Russia proposed a new formula to solve the Transnistrian conflict based on the federalisation of Moldova and the attribution of veto powers to the region on foreign policy matters, as well as on subjects related to the maintenance of Russian troops in the region (Rettman, 2011). The Russian proposal coincided with the election of Yevgeny Shevchuk as Transnistria's leader and his commitment to promote free circulation of people and goods between Chisinau and Tiraspol, thus suggesting a political momentum to reach a compromise on the Transnistrian issue (Barry, 2012).

Events related with the killing of a Moldavan civilian by a Russian soldier, Russian declarations revealing less and less respect for Moldavan territorial integrity and the nomination of Dmitry Rogozin as Russian Special Representative to Transnistria imprinted a tenser tone to Moldavan-Russian relations. Rogozin was well known for his support to Transnistria's independence suggesting that the Russian proposal was nothing but a strategy to reinforce Moscow's power in the region. Understanding this positioning as a political manoeuvre, Chisinau declined to accept Russian terms and reinforced appeals to the international community demanding the withdrawal of Russian troops from its territory (Socor, 2012).

Chisinau refusal to accommodate Russian interests regarding the Transnistrian issue and its European choices triggered a number of retaliations by Moscow, particularly on the economic and energy fields. Embargoes on Moldovan products by Russia became more regular, something that was perceived in Chisinau as a politically-driven unfriendly act aiming at punishing the country's foreign policy options. In fact, such embargoes come at odds with previous Russian initiatives fostering favourable conditions to the import of Moldovan goods to generate revenues to the country's economic elites and thus grant their

support to a pro-Russian leaning in Chisinau's foreign policy (Rodkiewicz, 2012). Simultaneously, Russia has been investing in the country and promoting the privatisation of key economic sectors (Fokina, 2005: 81-82), thus suggesting that these economic moves are part of a grand strategy aiming at accentuating the country's dependencies and augmenting its leverage and ability to influence political decisions in this neighbour. The same applies to the energy sector. As a result of its inability to pay energy debts to Russia, Moldova had to make important concessions to Russia that gradually assumed full control of its gas network and a significant participation in the electricity sector thus aggravating its high energy dependence (Gromadzi and Kononczuk, 2007: 20).

Against these powerful moves, Moldovan President Nicolae Timofti reassured the country would take meaningful measures to diversify its energy supplies and economic partners so as to reduce Russian leverage in the country and, thus, its ability to influence its political decisions (Timofti, 2013c). In his opinion, in order to reduce Russian influence in the country

> The only solution is to diversity the energy resources. One of the achievements of the present government is the construction of the Ungheni-Iasi gas pipeline, inaugurated in 2014, that will allow connecting the country's energy system to the European one. The pipe will have a transport capacity of 1.5 billion cubic metres per year, a volume fully covering the country's gas needs. The next stage is the construction of this pipeline up to Chisinau. The strategic importance of this project is that we will have possibility to ensure Moldova's energy security, without depending only on the suppliers from the East (Timofti, 2015).

This, however, did not mean a complete breakaway from Russia and the post-Soviet space. Moldova remained a participant in the CIS and stressed that its European path would not jeopardise its cooperation under this framework, which Moldova perceives to be an important forum promoting economic, energy and social ties amongst former Soviet states (Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, 2013). In this context, Timofti contended that the prospect of establishing a DCFTA with the EU should not be faced by the CIS with animosity for "the two economic areas are complementary", rather than opposite.

> Moldova's European choice does not mean hostility towards our partners from the Commonwealth of Independent States, including Russia. I believe that these

> countries, with which we have traditional cooperation ties, will have only to gain together with a stronger and more prosperous Moldova (Timofti, 2014b).

He further added that no incompatibility results from economic integration with the EU for Russian constant embargoes on Moldovan products de facto place the country outside the free trade area with the CIS countries (Timofti, 2014c). Besides this participation in the CIS, Moldova has seemingly no interest in joining other regional initiatives under the aegis of Moscow. The country does not take part on the CSTO and does not envisage to join the EEA (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2011). Moreover, Moldova has participated in the Organisation for Democracy and Economic Development, also known as GUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova), formally established in 2001 arguably to counterweight Russia's domination in the post-Soviet space.[31] However, this initiative has brought limited practical results as far as reducing Russian hegemonic regional power and freeing post-Soviet countries from dependencies on Moscow is concerned (Alexandrova-Arbatova, 2015: 131; Rywkin, 2014: 122; Solonenko, 2014: 4).

Events in Ukraine, from late 2013 onwards, raised the Transnistrian issue higher in the international agenda as the conflict became an integral part of tense relations between Kiev and Moscow. Aiming at reinforcing its leverage in the region and discredit Ukraine as a viable partner in the process of the conflict resolution, Moscow accused Kiev of blocking deliveries of supplies to Russian peacekeeping forces in Tiraspol. These claims were rejected by Kiev that saw this move as part of Russia's provocative rhetoric and policy of regional destabilisation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 2014e). Analogously to the situation in the aftermath of the Georgian-Russian war, Chisinau became fearful that echoes of the conflict in Ukraine could undermine stability in the country, as well as its territorial integrity. This time, however, political elites in Chisinau opted for a more confrontational positioning regarding Russian robust regional strategies. Moldova was keen to support Ukraine's pro-European choice and defend the country's territorial integrity. It further stressed the need to use international mechanisms to resolve the crisis by diplomatic means and its non-admittance of violations of international law principles undertaken by Moscow (Timofti, 2014c). Political developments in Ukraine are seen as an example that countries in the shared neighbourhood between the EU and Russia

[31] Uzbekistan was initially included into this organisation, but decided to withdraw from it in 2005.

should remain firm in their political choices despite retaliations by Moscow (Timofti, 2014e). Overall, this political deviation, when compared to Chisinau's reaction to the Georgia-Russia War, was backed by a harsher condemnation of events in Ukraine by the international community. Moreover, the proximity of conflicts demanded Moldovan political elites to reinforce their resistance against Moscow and to clarify its positioning regarding instability in the post-Soviet space.

President Timofti intensified his opposition to Russian regional strategies by admitting to revert Moldova's neutrality status so as to start procedures to join NATO. In a regional context marked by increasing tension and instability, closer cooperation with the EU and NATO are presented as the country's only chance of survival. Reinforcing previous claims to the international community, he was also very vocal in denouncing the presence of Russian military forces in Moldova as a flagrant violation of its neutrality statute. Timofti further conceded to promote the resolution of the Transnistrian issue and even granting this region a special statute, but always on the basis of respect for Moldova's territorial integrity. The withdrawal of Russian manpower and machinery from this region is presented as a sine qua non condition to the conflict resolution for

> Moscow backs politically, by military means and financially the separatist Transnistrian regime. At the same time, by creating a tension hotbed in this region of Europe, they intend to block Moldova's European integration process. All these actions torpedo the Transnistrian conflict settlement. The present five-plus-two regulatory mechanism, with involvement of international actors, over the past years, has proved to be inefficient. I believe that it is opportune to think about the possibility to optimise negotiations (Timofti, 2015).

Moldova is also very clear in reaffirming its intention to pursue the path of European integration despite "the reluctance of country's inner and outer forces [i.e. Russia] to the policy of rapprochement with the European Union" (Timofti, 2013d). Approximation to the EU is widely perceived to be the path to "freedom, prosperity and security". "Europe supports us politically, financially and economically. All that remains is for us to confirm our adherence to the European course, to be consistent; […] to stand united against those that do not wish us well" (Timofti, 2014e). These words by President Timofti in the eve of parliamentary elections in the country clearly discursively construct Russia as a threat to the country's European integration – and to European security altogether. This threat is not only visible through direct actions aiming at undermining the

country's economy, but also in Moscow's support to opposition political movements in Moldova. These movements, the President claims, are being manipulated by the Kremlin and act as a proxy of Russian interests rather than as defenders of Moldova's development (Timofti, 2014e).

In this context of increasing detachment from Moscow's influence, the EU and Moldova signed the AA, including the DCFTA, which was promptly ratified by Moldova and applied provisionally from 1 September 2014. President Timofti refers to this moment as a "turning point in the destiny of our country and it means that we are no longer alone in our aspiration, in the wish to live better in a civilised and prosperous society" (Timofti, 2013a). These discourses construct the image of Russia as a security threat; as an uncivilised neighbour whose aggressive foreign policies have to be contained. The goal is to reason with EU audiences in order to obtain more advantageous frameworks for relations, ergo enabling Moldova to reduce its manifold dependencies on Moscow and gain additional leverage to resist its hegemonic power. The head of state further untied itself from Russia and stressed Moldova's pro-European path by claiming that "during the last two decades we have wasted enough time on experiments and illusions. But we can no more oscillate between two directions, because we have seen that this has harmed us" (Timofti, 2013b).

Brussels takes a positive note of achievements on a bilateral basis, including the increase of trade between the EU and Moldova since the application of the DCFTA, and the meetings held by the Association Councils to review and guide the implementation of the AA (European Council, 2015: 5-6). For Moldova, the AA represents a momentous step towards European integration, but does not represent a final goal as the country has always expressed its will to request the status of candidate country for EU accession (Timofti, 2014d). This is not based on some naïve interpretation of European intentions and interests, nor is it the result of a submissive reaction to EU hegemonic power. In fact, President Timofti does make a comparison between the EU and past empires to which the country belonged, i.e. the USSR (Timofti, 2014b). The structural difference is that the EU provides a framework for political and economic association that is widely perceived to be advantageous to the modernisation of the country, the persecution of its national interests and the reassurance of its independence against Russian hegemonic discursive practices in the post-Soviet space.

The signature of the AA and closer relations with Brussels have, however, triggered the rise of radical pro-Russian rhetoric in the country, particularly by local authorities that see EU standards as a threat to their power, pro-Russian minorities and pro-Russian media supported by Moscow. Analogies between Ukrainian conflicts and Transnistria are becoming more common among local politicians and the media. Among the latter it is possible to find news stating that "Moldova could have its own Donbass". Seemingly, the goal is to escalate levels of tension in Gagauzia,[32] a Russian-speaking autonomous region in Southern Moldova, and to empower separatist movements preferring closer ties with Russia, as expressed in a referendum held on February 2014 on the foreign policy preferences of the autonomous region revealing an overwhelming majority supporting closer relations with Russia against European integration (The Economist, 2014; Tudoroiu, 2015). Similar reactions are noticeable in Moscow, which announced its intention to foster closer ties with Transnistria for "tying Moldova closer to the EU violated the rights of the people" in this region. This announcement was followed by the establishment of several agreements between Dmitry Rogozin – Russia's Deputy Prime Minister and special envoy on Transnistria – and Yevgeny Shevchuk – the head of Transnistria – aiming at redirecting the production manufactured in the region to Russian markets (EurActiv, 2014). Perceiving the AA as a menace to Russian regional interests and the development of the EEU, Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev expressed its dissatisfaction with Moldova's European choice by announcing a levy on customs duties on key imports from Moldova and warned similar measures would be taken if other countries in the post-Soviet space followed a similar path (The Moscow Times, 2014c). The AA has also sparked countermoves in Transnistria, which has for long preferred to align with Russia than to support Moldova's European aspirations. As a consequence, military relations with Moscow were strengthened and in 2015 a joint exercise in Transnistrian soil raised intense speculation about a possible annexation of the breakaway region, analogously to Russia's reaction in Crimea (Nilsson and Silander, 2016: 53). Retaliations from Moscow did not reverberated in Chisinau, which remained fierce in its European choice and committed with the AA, which fully entered into force in 1 July 2016, after ratification by all 31 signatories, i.e. Moldova, EU institutions and all 28 EU member states.

[32] For an interesting analysis of the situation in Gagauzia see Tudoroiu (2015).

The deconstruction of discursive practices by Moldova in the framework of relations with the EU and Russia has revealed a very pragmatic foreign policy by Chisinau and important moments of agency aiming at avoiding domination by external powers. Despite its reduced geographic dimension when compared to other states in the shared neighbourhood and its vulnerability from Russia resulting not only from highly asymmetrical political, economic and energy relations, but also from the latter active role in Transnistria, Chisinau has soon assumed integration in the EU as the main axis of its foreign policy agenda. The country is regarded as one of the EU's best pupils due to its readiness to adopt EU recommendations and foster cooperation on several sectors (European Commission and High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2013: 4). This, however, has never implied a complete breakaway from Russia's orbit of influence as Moldova remains involved in the CIS and reinforces its cooperation with Moscow when important advantages are at stake. As such, Moldova has been making use of its regional setting to maximise benefits from relations with the EU and Moscow. This reveals a strategic vision that has refrained Moldova to be squashed by its most significant neighbours and allowed the country to be taken higher in their respective security agendas. In this context, European integration is attractive to Moldova for two main reasons. On the one hand, it provides for the modernisation of the country through financial assistance and know-how transfer. On the other hand, it is an important support in the country's strategy to reduce its dependence on Moscow for "the money provided by the European Union allowed the Moldovan authorities to initiate projects needed to ensure the country's energy independence" and the EU market liberalisation for Moldovan products in the context of the Russian embargoes helped the country to resist Russian attempts to dominate the country and define its foreign policy (Timofti, 2014a). Overall, Moldova's demands regarding a stronger commitment by the EU and the recognition of its European aspirations come across as the most significant instances of agency. They simultaneously encompass Moldova's resistance to Russian hegemonic power, which is widely understood to be a threat to Moldovan identity and interests.

Perceptions about the EU and European integration remain widely positive. However, the country is still heavily dependent on Russian resources. Along with harsher discursive practices by Moscow and Russian-supported opposition movements and media

diffusing messages relating to potential focus of instability in the country, it is highly unpredictable if Moldova will be able to keep exerting its agency and to further detach itself from Russia's orbit of influence.

4.3. Belarus: the Russia-first neighbour

Belarus is usually perceived to be Moscow's friendlier regime in the shared neighbourhood with the EU and the two countries have enjoyed particular close relations since the end of the Cold War. The presidential election of Aleksandr Lukashenko in 1994 imprinted an authoritarian tone to Belarus domestic affairs and allowed the state apparatus to control the totality of national political and economic sectors, as well as to repress internal opposition to the regime. At the foreign policy level, Lukashenko defined an agenda presenting Minsk security and survival contingent on a symbiotic relationship with Moscow (Donaldson and Nogee, 2005: 218). In that regard, Belarus has for long seen the need to maintain friendly relations with Russia as being more profitable than the diversification of its external partners or an approximation to the EU. Rhetorically, Lukashenko acknowledges the importance of maintaining cooperative relations with the EU, but in practice both sides recognise the existence of structural problems in this relationship (Freire, 2011: 75). The EU is very critical of the country's authoritarian path which collides with its liberal agenda, whereas Belarus is not willing to accept Brussels' conditionality mechanisms. Lukashenko (2010) is also very vocal criticising Europeanisation processes for he is not willing to take lessons or to be dominated by anyone.

Moscow understands Belarus to be of foremost strategic relevance to its regional endeavours, representing the last shield dividing Russia from the West. Furthermore, its geographical location enables Russia to have access through a friendly neighbour to the Kaliningrad enclave. This strategic positioning is also favourable to Russian air defence schemes and thereby has prompted the integration of their defence systems (Buzan and Waever, 2003: 416). In 1995, Lukashenko and then Russian President Boris Yeltsin signed a treaty of partnership and cooperation reflecting this strategic relationship, which was accompanied by declarations stating the future of Belarus to be dependent on a deeper integration with Russia (White, 2012: 299).

Relations between the two countries moved forward in March 1996, with the conclusion of a treaty between Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan foreseeing economic integration and the harmonisation of their foreign policies. This treaty has also established the grounds for the creation of the CES, which could eventually lead to a community of integrated states. In April, Belarus and Russia further agreed on the creation of a Community promoting political, economic and military integration between Minsk and Moscow, in respect with principles of sovereignty and equality. This project was transformed into a formal Union in 1997 and in 1999 Belarus and Russia signed a deal establishing a Union state, to be fulfilled in stages and under which both parties retained full sovereignty but coordinated their economic and military policies (Allison *et al.*, 2005). This was a strategic move by Lukashenko who saw economic advantages resulting from this arrangement as a valuable means to economically funding its rule and to secure popular support.

Cooperation under the Russia-Belarus Union highlights the extreme relevance of security and military matters in the two neighbours' bilateral agenda. Security and defence relations under this Union have indeed been the most promising and the only sectors where Russia-Belarus partnership has been successful in moving beyond rhetorical commitments to present tangible results (Deyermond, 2004: 1191). Amongst these results it is noteworthy the creation of common defence structures and the presence of Russian troops in Belarus' territory, thus stressing the strategic relevance of this country to Moscow (Martinsen, 2002: 404).

As a consequence, Minsk has become defensively and military dependent on its most significant neighbour, something that represents a constrain to its sovereignty for it constitutes a perceived threat to the country's stability and security in case of any wrangles regarding its foreign political orientation or its support – or lack thereof – to Moscow's regional endeavours (Tolstrup, 2009: 935). This increasing dependence on Russia has always had Lukashenko's support, however. Belarus' President has been taking advantages of its strategic geopolitical location to promote schemes for further integration in security-related domains in exchange for economic advantages that have allowed its regime to survive over the years and to control internal opposition in the country (Oldberg, 1997: 114).

If military cooperation has been relatively smooth and fruitful, economic cooperation between Minsk and Moscow has been more problematic. Despite Belarus participation in Russian-led initiatives for regional economic cooperation, limited achievements have been translated into increasing suspicion by Belarus regarding the potential of these projects (Allison *et al.*, 2005: 496). Furthermore, it stimulated criticism by Belarus' political elites regarding their geopolitical nature, as they were seemingly reinforcing Russia's power and leverage over its vicinity under the pretext of economic integration (Sushko, 2004: 128). Belarus is a strong supporter of closer economic cooperation with Moscow, but not at all costs; whereas Russia is more interest into political and economic arrangements under its domination (White, 2012: 300). Belarus participates in regional initiatives, such as the CIS and the CSTO, where it plays a supporting role to Russian regional hegemonic projects and ambitions. However, this is not a submissive support. Lukashenko often persuades Russia to offer major economic benefits and to contribute to the achievement of Belarus key foreign economic goals – increase the country's exports, to expand its commodity distribution network and to attract more Russian investment (Belarus, 2016b) – in exchange for its allegiance. In 2015, Belarus joined the EEU together with Russia and Kazakhstan. The country regards economic integration in this framework as an opportunity to promote its national interests and the creation of conditions to promote "modernisation and sustainable development of the Belarusian economy" (Belarus, 2016d). Minsk has indeed undertaken every opportunity to gain economic advantages from its support to and participation in Russian-led organisations in the post-Soviet space. Among them it is noteworthy the celebration of generous political agreements between Minsk and Moscow, a growing overture of the Russian market to Belarus' products and the concession of privileged energy prices (Leshchenko, 2008: 1427). However, Lukashenko clarified that cooperation in the framework of the EEU would not reach levels of integration envisaged (though never reached) by the State Union. Behind this idea is a growing concern about a possible reconstruction of Russia's Soviet greatness in the post-Soviet space implying strong limitation to his authority (Alexandrova-Arbatova, 2015: 135-136). Moreover, Belarus participation in and support to Russian-led organisations in the CIS area carries an important dimension of resistance to Moscow's hegemonic power. For instance, by making its participation in these organisations contingent upon the participation of other former

Soviet states – being the most pressing example in this regard Belarus' refusal to join the CES unless Ukraine joined this community – Lukashenko reveals his awareness that regional initiatives under the aegis of Moscow have to include other powerful states in the region in order to counterbalance its power and hinder its hegemonic moves.

Despite this strategy of aligning with Russia, Belarus' heavy energy dependence and strong politisation of the energy sector leave it vulnerable to Moscow. As a consequence, disturbs in relations with Russia have the potential of inflicting severe wounds in its political and economic stability (Gromadzi and Kononczuk, 2007: 14-15). Russian political elites are well aware of Belarus' fragilities and have been keen to use the politically motivated raise of energy prices whenever Minsk takes political choices contrary to its interests.

Although political elites in Belarus recognise the importance of maintaining Russia as a strategic ally, Moscow's growing influence in the political, economic, energy and military sectors has raised concerns about the perceived loss of national independence and autonomy (Freire, 2011: 78). As such the country has been careful to recognise the strategic nature of its relations with Moscow, due to multiple dependencies, while affirming its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

> The Republic of Belarus is eager to use in full the potential of strategic partnership of relations with the Russian Federation, both bilaterally and in the framework of Union State and integration structures in the post-Soviet area. The comprehensive bilateral agenda is necessitated by geographical, geopolitical, historical and other factors, mutual complementarity of economies of both states, and close cooperation among enterprises. While developing mutually beneficial cooperation with Russia, Belarus strictly follows the principle of unconditional preservation of sovereignty and territorial integrity of the parties (Belarus, 2016d).

From 2000 onwards it is noticeable a period of growing disagreements between Russia and Belarus. A regional context defined by more assertive regional policies pursued by Moscow and EU growing influence in the post-Soviet space, together with dissatisfaction regarding benefits from pursuing a symbiotic relationship with Moscow, made Lukashenko sensible to the limits of its isolationist foreign policy. This has resonated in Moscow, as President Putin engaged into more robust regional strategies and showed no

willingness to sacrifice Russian national interests for any kind of Soviet solidarity (White, 2012: 301).

In that sense, Belarus slowly started to show its willingness to pursue a more differentiated foreign policy, including collaboration with the EU in strategic areas relevant to the persecution of its national interests. By doing so, Belarus is being active in managing its dependencies and assuring its autonomy. This involves affirming the country's national choices and its geostrategic regional positioning, without disregarding its partnership with Russia. This strategic ponderation was not welcomed in Moscow. The most visible moments of tension between the two neighbours were translated into energy crisis, revolving around energy prices charged to Belarus and the control over the Yamal pipeline, which transports 15% of the gas Russia exports to Europe (Bruce, 2005: 2-4). These crises have a clear political message, meaning that Moscow is slowly withdrawing its support to Lukashenko. Belarus depends almost entirely on Russia for its energy and has an obvious interest in paying preferential prices. Furthermore, the country has an interest in maintaining ownership of its distribution network and maximising revenues from the oil and gas pipelines that ran across its territory.

The first meaningful energy crisis between Russia and Belarus took place in 2004 revealing Russia's power over the country and Belarus' limited ability to challenge Moscow's structural power. The raise in gas prices imposed by Gazprom and Minsk's inability to pay its energy debt made clear the country's energy dependence. Given this contextual setting, Lukashenko had no alternative than to submit himself to Russia's diktat and increase its energy dependence (Freire, 2011: 79). In December 2006, following another gas crisis, Moscow managed to increase its leverage over Minsk by consolidating its participation in the country's energy sector. Gazprom acquired 50% of Beltransgaz in exchange for a transitional period of adaptation in gas prices charged to Belarus, which were supposed to reach market levels by 2011 (Gromadzi and Kononczuk, 2007: 24). As Belarus' economy is heavily dependent on energy revenues, this transformation of the balance of forces in this sector led to a deterioration of the country's economic situation and to uproar popular discontentment, which has negatively affected Lukashenko's public support (Lindner, 2007).

Despite the internal political and economic fragility, Lukashenko has been persistent in taking measures antagonising Moscow, unveiling that he will not passively

capitulate to its hegemonic power. Discourses relating to the intention to charge Russia for its military basis in Belarus' territory and the gradual construction of Russia as a threat to the country's territorial integrity slowly became more preeminent in official statements. Furthermore, Lukashenko's boycott to the CSTO summit in 2008, the non-recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia independence, along with the gradual approximation to the EU and its inclusion in the EaP in May 2009, both reflected and further hampered a very delicate moment in relations with Moscow (Tumanov *et al.*, 2011: 130-131).

Discontentment with Belarus' political choices led Russia to impose an embargo on the country's dairy products in 2009 and a new energy crisis in 2010 (Shapovalova and Zarembo, 2010: 2). The ensuing energy negotiations allowed Moscow to further reinforce its participation in Belarus' energy market (Yafimava, 2010). Simultaneously, Russia has been keen to support movements of political opposition to Lukashenko and to denounce the oppression and human rights' violations of its regime. The goal is to weaken President Lukashenko room for political manoeuvre and to convey the message that his regime cannot survive without Moscow's support (Frear, 2010).

Mindful of the danger this represents to the endurance of his regime, Lukashenko promoted a strategic approximation to the EU. However, this approximation was to be made on his own terms. Referring to Belarus' inclusion in the EaP, then Foreign Minister Sergei Martynov stressed that it was not a matter of benefits for Belarus but also for the EU. Stressing the country's strategic importance, Martynov reaffirmed the indispensability of Belarus to European security and to the success of the EaP initiative altogether (Martynov, 2009). In a meeting with then EU Commissioner for Foreign Relations, Benita Ferrero-Waldner, Lukashenko made explicit his intention to reinforce relations with the EU, but stressed that he was not willing to hamper relations with Moscow and that any rapprochement to the EU would only be successful with the inclusion of Russia. This is a contradiction in terms for Russia has no intention to pursue any processes of Europeanisation and has been very vocal in demanding differentiated frameworks for relations with Brussels based on its distinctive status amongst EU neighbours. By making the enhancement of relations with the EU contingent on Russia, Lukashenko reveals that he has no substantial interest in complying with EU standards and requirements. In July 2009, Lukashenko made an official visit to an EU country – Italy – for the first time in eleven years to sign arms and energy deals. The EU took this opportunity to foster

relations with Belarus and demanded a series of conditions to be met before the development of a more inclusive framework for EU-Belarus relations, including improvements in the country's electoral law, freedom of expression and association, as well as the abolishment of the death penalty.

Against these conditions, Belarus affirmed that it was not willing to be intimidated and the pace of reforms in the country was a matter of domestic management. For Belarus "a dialogue between partners may not be based on preconditions, otherwise this dialogue will fail altogether, or will not be effective" (Martynov, 2008), conveying its unwillingness to embrace the EU's conditionality-based approach. Belarus play with European rhetoric has also been very interesting. Faced with EU offers of new frameworks for relations based on its alleged regional responsibility, Belarus affirmed that it is the country which is offering cooperation with the EU, nor the other way around.

> We are not begging anything for ourselves, for Belarus. Yes, we make no secret that Belarus is interested in deepening the relations with the EU. [...] [But] the idea of putting forward preconditions to holding negotiations is unacceptable for us (Martynov, 2008).

By doing so, Minsk envisaged to reinforce its regional status and affirm its indispensability to assure European security, but simultaneously to make clear that it was averse to any form of submission to external powers. This attitude faded the brief optimism in EU-Belarus relations, which could have signified a new impetus in a framework for cooperation that has been unable to detach itself from rhetorical commitments since the early 1990s (Furtado, 2010). True, the EU and Belarus negotiated a PCA in 1995, but its ratification has been frozen ever since due to the political situation in the country. In the aftermath of the EU's Eastern Enlargement, Belarus was included in the ENP, but no Action Plan was ever put into place. The same happened in the framework of the EaP, where Belarus participates only in its multilateral track. This anaemic pattern of evolution in EU-Belarus relations led Elena Korosteleva (2015: 679) to label this relationship as a spasmodic one as "for every intention to cooperate, there always seems to be a counter-action to thwart it". Nonetheless, the country has benefited from economic and trade assistance provided under these frameworks in order to promote the development of a democratic and pluralist environment (European Council, 2008c). Issues hampering Belarus-EU relations often revolve around growing authoritarianism in the country,

fraudulent elections, human rights' violations and crackdowns on civil society and the media (European Commission, 2013; European Council, 2008b). These issues generated great concern amongst EU member states that agreed on a Common Position concerning restrictive measures and sanctions against Belarus in 2004, and successively reaffirmed it ever since (see e.g. European Council, 2004, 2006, 2008a, 2009a). It was only in 2009 that the EU-Belarus Human Rights Dialogue was initiated (European Council, 2009c). Notwithstanding, besides the sporadic release of political prisoners (European Council, 2009b) the EU's ability to change the political environment in Belarus has been rather limited.

In 2010, in the context of aggravated relations between Minsk and Moscow, there was a window of opportunity to develop closer relations between the EU and Belarus. Lukashenko agreed to invite international observers to the Presidential elections due that year and to give the opposition some space during the electoral campaign. The EU responded by suspending sanctions and by presenting a generous offer of conditional political dialogue, economic cooperation and financial assistance. With the re-election of Lukashenko everything changed. Brussels' concerns over electoral processes in the country and the clampdown of oppositional movements, along with a harsher position of Lukashenko derailed EU-Belarus foreseeable cooperation (The New York Times, 2010).

Belarus is very outspoken when stating that

> With the EU espousing an intransigent approach vis-à-vis Belarus on most issues, Belarus adheres squarely to the principles of equality, mutual respect and good neighborhood as the only possible basis for maintaining partnership relations and intensifying dialogue with the European Union (Belarus, 2016d).

Lukashenko further emphasised that Belarus-EU relations are a two-way process and the country is not willing to submit itself to Brussels' exercise of structural power or any kind of imposed Europeanisation.

> This is a two-way street after all, and we have no need to always be the ones fretting about how we are going to adapt to others, build our ties with others. Let others also think about how they are going to adapt to us, work with us (Lukashenko, 2010).

Following Lukashenko's re-election several opposition activists were detained leading thousands of protesters to converge to Minsk. A very repressive response was

triggered by Belarusian authorities (The Guardian, 2010). Then EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton, condemned the events in Belarus and demanded a more active role by the EU in assuring democracy and respect for human rights and freedom of association in the country. The political situation in Minsk was represented as a direct "affront to our vision of respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and democracy". Unable to promote political change in Belarus and to foster political dialogue, the EU redirected its stabilising efforts towards Belarusian civil society and voiced its responsibility to protect Belarusians from an oppressive regime. As such the EU has provided direct assistance to non-governmental organisations, the media and students, and made an increased effort to enhance mobility for citizens wishing to travel to the EU, in addition to the restrictive measures applied to officials from Belarus (Ashton, 2011).

In 2012, the EU launched the European Dialogue on Modernisation with representatives of Belarusian civil society and political opposition. The goal was to promote a shared understanding of democracy and good political practices, thus promoting the Europeanisation of the country via its civil society (European Commission, 2012). Seemingly, this produced a momentous shift of preferences towards the EU as the levels of support to European integration as a means to overcome structural challenges in the country have grown steadily in the last years and are, for the first time since the end of the Cold War, matching levels of support to relations with Russia (Korosteleva, 2015: 685). As political dialogue failed to produce meaningful results, the EU reinforced its normative agenda and its image of force for good aiming at transforming Belarus from the bottom up. The Union blamed Belarus for the long-term stagnation of bilateral relations and underlined that a more attractive framework for relations was impossible to conclude exclusively due to the authoritarian and repressive nature of its political administration (Füle, 2013). This posture by the EU accusing Lukashenko's rule and supporting civil society in the country was seen by Belarus' strongman as a coup targeted against his regime and a source of political instability in the country (Der Spiegel, 2011).

Meanwhile relations with Russia became again friendlier following a meeting between Belarusian President and his Russian counterpart, where they agreed on the abolishment of oil custom taxes and compromised to maintain unaltered gas prices in 2011. In exchange, Lukashenko agreed to join the CES. Once again, Moscow offered

Lukashenko a political exit benefiting its regional interests and allowed the latter to assure its presidential power (Marples and Padhol, 2011: 7).

Lukashenko has revealed himself a master in managing political alliances. Strategically, he placed Belarus into a position of gaining advantages in relations with Moscow and the EU to its own benefit and according to the contextual momentum. The tense articulation of national interests, relations with Moscow and the EU is conveyed in the following terms

> Belarus started the development of its own foreign policy course under difficult conditions. The world has entered the process of drastic geopolitical, economic, social transformations characterised by high intensity and dynamism. The formation of new centers of power has come along with escalation of state rivalry and intensifying competition among future development models. [...] Despite the objective complications following independence, the Republic of Belarus has managed to develop its international relations without giving up its national interests. Thus, Belarus has been able to promote and protect with confidence its foreign policy objectives and priorities. Today Belarus is a sovereign European state pursuing an independent and peaceful foreign policy [...], and making a significant contribution to strengthening of international security and stability (Belarus, 2016a).

This balancing, however, does not imply an equilibrium between the EU and Russian foreign policy vectors, as relations with Moscow have always come across as more important, whereas relations with Brussels seemingly emerge as an emergency alternative and a source of investment (Rotman and Veremeeva, 2011: 80-83).

> Among [Belarus'] priority partners are the neighbouring states, first of all, the Russian Federation as the member of the Union State of Belarus and Russia, as well as the participating states of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Consistent pursuing the idea of integration, Belarus is an active member of unification formations on the post-Soviet area – Eurasian Economic Union, CIS and Collective Security Treaty Organisation. The European Union is objectively an important trade partner and a source of investments for Belarus (Belarus, 2016d).

Nonetheless, the country expresses that the long-term objective of its foreign policies is "to secure a balanced and mutually beneficial cooperation with both Russia and the European Union" (Belarus, 2016b). In practice, Belarus has opted for a pragmatic

foreign policy aiming at preserving its sovereignty and satisfying its national interests by cooperating closely with Russia – though consistently resisting its overbearing influence (Korosteleva, 2015: 679) – but always leaving the door open for further contacts with the EU. Belarus sees itself as "an integral part of Europe" and an active part in the process of guaranteeing European security, including in the domain of energy security (Belarus, 2016c). Confronted with the opportunist nature of Belarusian foreign policies then Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Martynov framed the situation in the following terms

> First of all, I would like to say that the foreign policy of Belarus and its main vectors are not of an opportunistic nature and are not a weathercock. Secondly, I would like to underline that it is wrong to contrast Russia with the European Union as vectors of foreign policy of Belarus. [...] Belarus has two most powerful neighbours. [...] Russia is our indisputable and main strategic partner [...]. No one doubts that both Belarus and Russia will continue the course of the most profound and priority strategic partnership. At the same time, the European Union continues to remain for us what it used to be: it is the community which has become our main export partner, we share the most extensive border with the European Union, we have to settle a number of problems jointly with the European Union, which are the matter of equal and important interest for both of us. Therefore, Belarus, as before, intends to continue the course to develop and intensify the dialogue with the European Union to the extent where our partners will be ready to go (Martynov, 2008).

In the wake of the Ukrainian crisis and Moscow's annexation of Crimea, several moves by Belarusian President Lukashenko appear to be drifting away from its traditional ally. In 2014, for the first time in twenty years, Lukashenko addressed his nation in Belarusian rather than Russian. This move sparked intense speculation and suggested the President to be seeking to assert his autonomy from Russia (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2014). Although Belarus sided with Moscow and voted against a UN resolution denouncing Russia's annexation of Crimea as illegal, Lukashenko declared the situation as a bad precedent, even if the peninsula was now de facto Russian territory. He also stressed that Russian policies in the post-Soviet space could not help but arouse suspicion (The Moscow Times, 2014b). In a very ironic tone, Lukashenko detached himself from Russia's strategy and attempted to save his reputation in the West by claiming: "I'm not Europe's last dictator anymore. […] There are dictators a bit worse than me, no? I'm the lesser evil already" (Bloomberg, 2015). These reactions raised great suspicion in Moscow that

retaliated with a ban on meat imports from Belarus (International Business Times, 2015a), undermining its already fragile economic situation.

Seeing the Ukrainian crisis as an important momentum to revert Belarus isolationism and improve relations with the West, Lukashenko showed himself ready to send military contingents to Eastern Ukraine in order to help solving the conflict and admitted Russia's active role on the ground – "if not for Russia [conflicts in Ukraine] would have been over a long time ago". He further conveyed its inadmissibility of violations on territorial integrity and demonstrated his solidarity to Ukraine by stressing that he himself has Ukrainian roots (Euromaidan Press, 2014). These are not innocent declarations and, together with a growing pro-independence rhetoric in Minsk, they come across as instances of resistance to Russian muscular approach in its vicinity and as a clear message stressing that Belarus will not be easily dominated by Moscow. Moreover, this argumentative process provided grounds to improve relations with the EU and to forge a position favourable to assume Belarus as a neutral actor holding Ukraine-Russia peace talks (Russia BBC, 2015; Russian Insider, 2016). Although Lukashenko does not take part in peace negotiations, the hosting of such talks is a major victory for Belarusian diplomacy and places the country in the core of power and security dynamics arising from the clash between EU and Russia regional hegemonic endeavours. This adds great value to Belarus geostrategic relevance and Lukashenko is mindful of that. For many years, Belarus remained of little interest to the West for it was perceived as an extension of Russia. Lukashenko's recent role as a peacemaker changed his importance to Brussels, which is now more interested in avoiding a Russian takeover in the country (The Guardian, 2015a). It this context, Brussels has stressed the importance of Belarus and its key geostrategic location in Europe and reminded the benefits that would result from greater integration into the Union. It is also noticeable the creation of conditions to ease Belarus' access to EU financial markets so as to address its economic crisis and diminish its dependence on Russia (EUobserver, 2015). This move is also directed at securing Lukashenko's domestic support as over the last few years a new pro-European narrative has become stronger in public opinion (Korosteleva, 2015: 686). By reading its contextual environment and evaluating its available options, Minsk managed to raise its attractiveness to the EU and secure its strategic value to the West, something that provides it additional leverage to counterbalance Russian hegemonic regional power. The Ukrainian crisis and the gradual

construction of Russia as a threat to Belarus' independence paved the way for a rising detachment from Moscow breaking the understanding of the country as being its closest ally. As such, proximity with Russia is better framed in the context of the satisfaction of interests of political elites in the country. Whenever these interests are threatened, Belarus is ready to adapt its foreign policy accordingly, adding to the unpredictability of articulations between power and security dynamics, and discursive practices in the shared neighbourhood between the EU and Russia.

On the whole, the Ukrainian crisis posed both challenges and opportunities to Minsk. Sure it emphasised Russian power and Belarus' fragility to oppose its traditional ally attempts to dominate the post-Soviet Space. Furthermore, a conflict not far from its borders posed clear dangers to stability and security itself, not to mention the economic hazards it brings along for Belarus is heavily dependent on Eastern Europe's markets. However, the conflict has also provided economic and diplomatic openings for Lukashenko. Belarus managed to earn the good will of its neighbours and the EU by providing a natural venue for talks on Ukraine, thus improving its geostrategic visibility and its regional status, and helping to bring the country out of its isolation. However, little has been done to improve the country's economic and political situation, something that has for long constrained closer relations with the EU, thus hampering the likelihood of meaningful developments in its balancing between the EU and Russia (The Moscow Times, 2015b).

Since his election in 1994, Lukashenko has been a fierce advocate of greater integration with Russia. The deconstruction of discursive practices by Belarus has revealed, however, that there is much more to Belarus' foreign policy that an apparent symbiotic relationship with Moscow suggests. Over the years, Lukashenko has seemingly put the breaks on cooperation with Russia. If initially, relations with Russia were seen as essential to assure the country's independence and economic sustainability, gradually, Russian more assertive stance on regional matters raised concerns in Minsk. Russia is increasingly seen as a potential threat to the country's autonomy and, perhaps more importantly, to Lukashenko's rule. As Russia gained significant levers in the country's political, economic, energy and military sectors, Belarus has played with its support to Russian regional initiatives, its condition as an energy transit country and with hypothetical fees to be paid by Russia for the presence of military forces in its territory to gain leeway

in negotiations with Russia. Similarly, Lukashenko has used the intended approximation to the EU, whenever relations with Russia assume a more negative tone, in order to stress the country's geostrategic importance and to remind Moscow that it retains sovereignty to freely choose its foreign policy orientation. In this reading, Belarus' approximation to the EU can be better grasped as a political strategy aiming at compensating for moments of deterioration in relations with Moscow. In exchange for technical and financial assistance to overcome political and economic constraints imposed by Russia in moments of more noticeable tension, Belarus makes sporadic and rather limited political concessions to the EU (Jarábik and Rabagliati, 2010: 3). Gradually, Belarus' President courted the EU with some success to counter Moscow's influence though the political situation in the country and his unwillingness to embrace frameworks for cooperation based on Brussels diktats derailed a more substantial rapprochement (The Telegraph, 2010). The Ukrainian crisis triggered several concerns in Minsk regarding Russia's muscular approaches in its vicinity. As a result, Lukashenko undertook a strategy aiming at reinforcing relations with the West and managed to, successfully, represent itself as a reliable partner in the region. The goal is twofold; to secure economic assistance to the country and to resist Russian hegemonic power. Accordingly, he reinforced the message that Belarus is not regionally isolated and that its geopolitical importance allows it to gain negotiable advantages in relations with Moscow. Overall, this reveals a very pragmatic attitude by Belarus which has been using its agency to resist domination by external power and manipulate tensions between Russia and the EU to his best advantage.

4.4. Final Remarks

Power and security dynamics arising from EU and Russian foreign policies are particular visible in their common neighbourhood – Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus. This is an area of crucial strategic importance, since it represents the last stronghold between Russia and the EU. Although each one of these relationships has different levels of intensity and distinct configurations, they all reveal an asymmetrical nature on which the EU and Russia appear as the front-runners imposing their respective worldviews to countries in the shared neighbourhood.

The deconstruction of discursive practices by these actors revealed that, in spite of their geographic proximity and common historical heritage, particular interests, identities and foreign policies in the shared neighbourhood between the EU and Russia are highly heterogeneous. The fact of being "in between" has to a large extend affected the development of these countries since their independence in 1991. Russia's resources and exploitation of these countries' multiples vulnerabilities along with the EU's economic attractiveness and increasing power over the region, particular in the post-EU enlargement geopolitical setting, provided these two hegemonic regional powers with significant leeway to influence these countries foreign policy agendas. Even if EU and Russian structural power is something that cannot be ignored and that severely constrains their neighbours' room for political manoeuvre, it is interesting to notice that countries in the shared neighbourhood do not limit themselves to react to their most significant neighbours exercise of structural power. Instead, they take an active role in the definition of their foreign policies and take advantage of their geopolitical positioning to satisfy their national interests. More often than not, this strategy implies balancing between the EU and Russia, thus reinforcing perceptions in both Brussels and Moscow about the conflicting nature of their respective regional endeavours. By doing so, and by presenting their indispensability to the success of EU and Russian regional strategies, these countries play important bargaining chips working to their advantage. Their privileged geopolitical and geostrategic positioning enables these countries to manage tensions with their significant neighbours so as to avoid complete domination by external powers. However, this very same geostrategic relevance make countries in the shared neighbourhood vulnerable to retaliations by the EU and Russia. This unbalanced balance makes difficult to identify common approaches amongst Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus, and sheds light on the complexity of power and security dynamics operating in and arising from the EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle.

Countries in the shared neighbourhood share the fact that domestic transformations and the definition of their foreign policy agendas have been influenced by relations with their most significant neighbours. However, their responses to EU and Russian structural exercise of power in their common vicinity have been different. Ukraine, the largest and more strategically relevant country in the shared neighbourhood, has been particularly active in managing relations with Brussels and Moscow and has

played an important role in the evolution and transformation of dynamics of power and security in the EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle. Kiev opted for promoting an intended equilibrium between the EU and Russia, balancing between its most significant neighbours in order to maximise benefits arising from both frameworks for relations. It has been persistent in its European aspirations, but has been careful to maintain its autonomy in the definition of the country's foreign policy agenda and does not hesitate to foster ties with Russia whenever a perceived advantage is on the horizon.

Moldova has for long assumed European integration as the main axis of its foreign policy agenda. The country is regarded as one of the EU's best pupils and one of the most engaged countries in the neighbourhood to import EU norms and values. However, this never translated into a complete detachment from Moscow. Reasons are manifold, including high energy and economic dependence on Russia, Moscow's active involvement in the Transnistrian issue and support to political elites in the country.

Belarus opted for a closer relationship with Moscow intending at taking economic and political advantages enabling the consolidation and continuity of President Lukashenko's rule. Relations with the EU never developed extensively and the country uses the idea of a rapprochement with the Union only to gain leverage in negotiations with Moscow at more tense stages of their bilateral relations. EU influence in the country is thus very limited and has focused on directly and indirectly supporting civil society and opposition movements in order to promote the country's Europeanisation from below.

What countries in the shared neighbourhood seem to have in common is a path of gradual detachment from Moscow, though at different levels and paces. It is noticeable a procurement for viable alternatives to reduce these countries' multiple dependencies on Russia. In this context, the EU has often appeared as their best chance to pursue their interests and counter-balance Moscow's regional power. Relations with Brussels are attractive to these countries, for they perceive relations with the Union not only as an important strategy to avoid Russian regional domination, but also as a platform to propel their economic development and modernisation. This does not mean, however, that countries in the shared neighbourhood comply passively with EU standards and demands. To the contrary, they tend to push for a framework for relations favourable to their specific interests at different moments. In this regard, Belarus critical position to EU imposed Europeanisation and unilateral stance on regional affairs is particularly noteworthy.

The Ukrainian crisis accentuated a trend whereby countries in the shared neighbourhood attempt to untie themselves from Russian influence. In this regard, it is noticeable a more active role by these countries in discursively constructing the image of Russia as a threat to their survival and to European security alike. A greater convergence between discursive practices in the shared neighbourhood is also remarkable as Belarus itself – Russia's traditional ally in the region – has been more outspoken and unequivocal in its intentions to reduce its dependence on Moscow and promote closer relations with the EU as a means to counterbalance its hegemonic power – and to secure political and economic concessions from Brussels along the way. This of course has several implications to the production, reproduction and transformation of dynamics of power and security in the broader European space as further highlighted in the concluding chapter.

5. Conclusion: a critical analysis of power and security dynamics in the EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle

The ambition of this research was to provide a critical reading of power and security dynamics arising from the mutual constitution of actors involved in the EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle, focusing on instances of hegemony, agency and resistance. The previous chapters engaged with the theoretical and methodological approaches framing the research, the analysis of EU and Russian post-Cold War foreign policies, the evolution of EU-Russia relations, the discourse analysis of EU and Russian hegemonic regional projects, and the deconstruction of foreign policies of countries in the shared neighbourhood – Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus – in the framework of relations with their most significant neighbours. This concluding chapter deals with the critical analysis and triangulation of identities, interests and discursive practices operating in and arising from relations in the above-mentioned triangle, relating them to the most important theoretical and methodological themes discussed in Chapter 2 and to the nodal point and hybrid discourses identified in Chapter 3. The goal is to revisit the main arguments developed throughout this research and produce final conclusions relating to its dual purpose: understand why countries in the shared neighbourhood have agency in the context of confrontation and dispute for influence between two hegemonic regional projects; how this works in practical terms and whether it influences the constitution of EU and Russian identities, interests and discursive practices.

Critical Constructivism provided the theoretical framework to delve into power and security relations in the EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle. This approach envisages to understanding and critically analysing complex subjects such as the construction and evolution of identities, interests and discursive practices by focusing on the deconstruction of social events. The goal is to grasp which key moments and interactions empowered particular discursive practices and supported processes of production, reproduction or transformation of the status quo. Incorporating the sociological, linguistic and practice turns in IR, critical constructivism perceives social reality to be a two-way process resulting from the interaction between agents and structures, which cannot be fully understood in isolation from the social setting in which

they are situated. This social setting is not permanently fixed and changes over time as a consequence of agents-structures' interactions. Even if structures of power do constrain agency, agents are considered to be powerful and reflexive beings that may transform structures of power by thinking about them and acting on them in new ways. As a consequence, structures are simultaneously the medium and the outcome of social discursive practices.

Critical constructivism further contends that the articulation between identities, interests and discursive practices plays a meaningful role in the constitution of social events. Identities are created through processes of othering based on an intrinsic – though constructed – difference. Representations of the self are socially and discursively constructed in tandem with representations of the other, which is often portrayed as an inferior being threatening the self's existence. It is in these concurrent processes of identification and of othering that the roots of political antagonism and insecurities are to be found. As each subject strengthens its identity, it threatens other, which consolidates its own identity in response. These moves are deeply powerful for they construct a hierarchical and asymmetrical world based on the supremacy of the self and the inferiority of the other. In this regard, foreign policy plays an important role in processes of identification as it serves to construct the identity of a given political entity through the representation of an other without which its identity would be meaningless, highlighting the mutual constitution of identity and foreign policy. Identities are also interrelated with interests as the latter are produced by the former, but also have an active role in the formulation of identities themselves. Both come across as dynamic social phenomena evolving according to agents' reading of their social environment in different moments. Discursive practices are crucial to understanding all this complex dynamics underpinning the political realm. Critical constructivism contends that language is performative for it creates systems of meaning that structure social reality. Discursive structures constitute world politics; a field marred by power struggles over the prerogative of defining political events and of providing a hegemonic understanding of social reality. However, these struggles do not always involve discourses as such. It is through the analysis of subtler moves and practices – loaded with power and meaning – that they often become visible. By including the linguistic and non-linguistic moment in world politics, discursive practices are inherently powerful as they simultaneously produce and reproduce a socially

organised and structured context. In that regard, they are at once agential and structural. They are ultimately performed by agents, but they also create structures of power that compels the former to act in a socially accepted manner. Yet, they cannot be reduced neither to agency nor to structures as they are inextricably linked to meaning, something that makes them suitable to unveil the manifold forms in which they interact and shape each other.

Based on the intertwining between identities, interests and discursive practices, critical constructivism provides a nuanced *Foucauldian* concept of power. Power is about productiveness and possibility; it is a relational phenomenon to be found everywhere. It comes across as the imposition of a worldview over another, defining shared meanings, which in turn constitute the identities, interests and discursive practices of a given agent. Powerful agents established game rules, what is normal and acceptable and persuade others to accept their standpoints, thus producing asymmetrical social orders. In this regard, power tends towards normalisation and the exclusion of all alternative knowledges representing a threat to the hegemonic power. In this reading, hegemony comes across as a structural condition reproduced through agency. However, it is never absolute as it produces political conflict and counter-hegemonic discursive articulations. Hegemony is thus contingent upon the construction of an antagonistic outside intending at undermining or changing the power of the hegemonic agent. Accordingly, political discursive practices trigger struggles for power between hegemonic powers and resisting agents. In this regard, resistance itself is as an instance of power, whereby weaker states attempt to reduce inequalities in social relations and potentially to transform structures of power.

Processes of othering and struggles for power marring the political field involve permanent processes of securitisation. Critical constructivism's accounts on security and processes of securitisation differs from the reading provided by the Copenhagen School by considering security as a relational phenomenon; a social construction that cannot be reduced to the speech act. Rather, security is defined as a pragmatic act resulting from processes of securitisation; an argumentative process aiming at convincing audiences to take certain issues higher in the security agenda. In this reading, foreign policy is an important practice of security. Not only does it reproduce the identity of a given political entity, but it also constitutes its identity through the containment of external threats.

Discourse analysis as proposed by Laclau and Mouffe provided the methodological grid to analyse the manifold and complex dynamics that constitute the political realm. The authors propose an abstract deconstructive genealogy based on the understanding that social processes are always about the creation and fixation of meaning. Moreover, they take a comprehensive approach to discourse analysis by claiming that discourses encompass not only language but all social phenomena – i.e. discursive practices. The authors contend that discursive practices are structures of signification, which construct social reality as well as binary oppositional and asymmetrical relations of power, something that is fully consistent with the arguments provided by critical constructivism. By interpreting their approach to discourse analysis we created a four-stage grid of analysis revolving around nodal points, the field of discursivity, discursive articulations and their deconstruction. The goal is to understand and unmask the ongoing struggles, contends and discursive practices, and to move beyond simplistic analysis of power and security dynamics in the EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle.

Based on this theoretical and methodological straddling, Chapter 2 deconstructed and critically analysed EU and Russian post-Cold War foreign policies in order to reveal how these actors have defined their identities, interests and discursive practices via relations of power and security, how their regional endeavours have gradually assumed a hegemonic nature, and how they have conceptualised the indispensability of the shared neighbourhood to their internal security and regional projection. This exercise highlighted that both EU and Russian foreign policies are structured on the understanding that security starts outside their borders and, thus the countries in the shared neighbourhood are pivotal to the definition of their identities, interests and foreign policy agendas. In this sense, Brussels and Moscow have attempted to increase their leverage in this region for security reasons, in a mostly competing and mutually exclusive logic.

It was also noticeable that in the post-Cold War setting their regional strategies have gradually assumed a hegemonic tone. During the 1990s, both the EU and Russia maintained a very introspective positioning towards what was to become their shared neighbourhood. The EU was very much focused on the formulation of its foreign policy and the preparation of the Eastern enlargement, whereas Russia remained focused on its processes of internal transition and the definition of its foreign policy agenda. It was the gradual occurrence of external events and the willingness to reinforce these actors'

regional power that demanded a greater focus on security strategies in their common neighbourhood.

Although relations with countries in the post-Soviet space have always come across as of major importance to EU and Russian security as defined in official documents and frameworks for relations with countries in the region, it was in the context of the EU's Eastern enlargement that a major shift in discursive practices in the broader European space became noticeable. As a result of this enlargement, the EU and Russia came to share a common neighbourhood in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus where their respective powerful manoeuvres and security demands collide.

At the EU level, the post-enlargement geopolitical configuration implied a change in the Union's contextual environment. The replacement of its borders triggered a process of transformation in its perceived threats leading the importance of the shared neighbourhood with Russia to the EU's security to grow in scope and depth. As a result, the EU's interests in this region were redefined and new political discourses were constructed to justify its extension of power towards this area. These political discourses were crystallised in the ENP – a framework for relations with the Union's new neighbours. Its underlying goal was to spread its worldview and reinforce its regional power based on the understanding that EU security, stability and prosperity was contingent upon a secure regional environment. EU foreign policies already contained a transformative potential, but this element was now fully assumed in the ENP's ambition to transform EU neighbours into stable democracies due to self-interested security concerns (Nunes *et al.*, 2008: 21; Sasse, 2009: 370). In this regard, EU policies towards the shared neighbourhood with Russia are best understood as security-driven discursive practices aiming at projecting its liberal agenda and addressing perceived threats in the neighbourhood in order to guarantee its own safety (Ágh, 2010; Averre, 2009: 1693-1694).

EU attempts to transform the neighbourhood are put into practice through conditionality-based and socialising mechanisms. When intervening abroad, the EU has an economic leverage that allows it to promote political, economic and social transformation by rewarding its partners whenever they internationalize certain norms and values (Tocci, 2004). This process is complemented by a socialising axis whereby the EU projects itself as a model to be followed (Manners, 2002: 252). In relations with its neighbours, the EU promotes the interaction of European rules, understandings and mechanisms with the

domestic structures of these countries, in order to boost internal changes while simultaneously projecting its normative superiority (Dimitrovova, 2010; Noutcheva *et al.*, 2004: 33).

In Russia, the post-enlargement context matched a more assertive and pragmatic foreign policy agenda under the administration of Vladimir Putin. The post-Soviet space had already been defined as an area of strategic interest to Moscow in the early 1990s, but the EU's extension of power towards its traditional area of influence gradually led Russia to deploy more robust regional strategies. From Moscow's perspective the EU's Eastern enlargement and the ensuing formulation of new frameworks for relations with the neighbourhood based on security-oriented goals are at odds with its own security interests – prevent new dividing lines in the region and the expansion of external powers into its traditional area of influence; and to ensure secure energy, trade, civil and military communications within and throughout the post-Soviet space (Alexandrova-Arbatova, 2008: 300). Overall, the Kremlin has been using its political, economic, energy and military power, and developing frameworks for regional integration under its aegis to (re)produce asymmetrical relations with its neighbours in order to assure its maintenance in its orbit of influence – something that it understands to be cornerstone to assure its security and national interests as illustrated by the various Foreign Policy Concepts produced since the end of the Cold War. When analysing Russian regional strategies, it becomes clear that they follow a conditionality-based approach encompassing both positive conditionality – rewarding politically loyal neighbours – and negative conditionality – punishing those that drift away from its backyard and prefer to develop closer relations with the EU. Slowly, a socialising stance has also become noticeable in Russian foreign policies towards the shared neighbourhood. This is particularly visible in the context of regional organisations – such as the CIS, the CSTO and the EEU – and Russia's increasing focus on its normative agenda. The latter has been translated into Moscow's promotion of and support to pro-Russian organisations in the post-Soviet space and the projection of sovereign democracy as an alternative to the liberal model enforced by the EU.

As analysed in Chapter 2, conditionality and socialisation in foreign policy are forms of normalisation; disguised strategies of domination that work through persuasion. The goal is to convince other actors to change their ideas, to behave in a certain fashion

and to attract them into one's sphere of influence. As such, EU and Russian foreign policies come across as structural exercises of power envisaging to persuade neighbouring countries to import their worldviews. Whereas Russia has been more straightforward in assuming its regional ambitions – to maintain a leading role in the post-Soviet space and dissuade the interference of external actors in its traditional area of interests –, the EU has often disguised this powerful approach under its force for good argumentative strategy. In this regard, the EU projects its regional initiatives as a result of its duty to protect neighbouring countries from common scourges and to guide them into proper behaviour (Andreev, 2008; Behr, 2007; Zielonka, 2008). However, the analysis of the EU's discursive practices unveil that the EU puts the onus of responsibility of growing insecurities in the region on neighbours alone. More often than not, it is possible to identify discourses congratulating the EU for its positive influence over reforms in partner countries and blaming the uneducated and "uncivilised" elites in the neighbourhood whenever problems arise. Furthermore, evaluations of these countries processes of Europeanisation are made on the basis of EU norms and interests and not on their real needs. As such, European integration is measured on the amount of European norms adopted by these countries and not on the development of real capabilities to address their fundamental problems (Chandler, 2007). This suggests that more than engaging in a benevolent *mission civilisatrice*, the EU is (re)producing a series of dominating practices, which bolsters asymmetrical relationships favourable to its security-driven interests.

The EU's extension of power eastwards represents a challenge and constraint to Russian leverage over the region. As such, the EU's Eastern enlargement and the gradual leaning of countries in the shared neighbourhood towards the EU added a level of complexity in EU-Russia relations that despite significant progress in several areas of technical cooperation have suffered from political ups and downs and mutual distrust. During the initial debates on the ENP, tension between the EU and Russia over their common vicinity is rather limited. In the EU, references to Russia were very prone to include it in the new framework for relations with the neighbourhood. Cooperation with Russia was seen as essential to address regional security challenges and to avoid dividing lines in Europe. In Moscow, the EU's Eastern enlargement and its intention to develop relations with the new neighbourhood were seen as an expected evolution of EU foreign policies and was welcomed by Russia as a development approach towards the region.

However, the EU's more structural approach eastwards along with demands by countries in the shared neighbourhood for integration into the EU caused Russia's distrust and led Moscow to pursue more assertive and robust strategies in its vicinity.

Perceptions of competition between the EU and Russia unfolded and their regional interests started to diverge. Soon relations with the shared neighbourhood assumed a mutually exclusive dimension as one's win was to be perceived as the other's loss. As a result, their bilateral relations were also transformed. The normative agenda visible in EU-Russia relations during the 1990s faded to background based on perceptions in Brussels on the need to develop more pragmatic relations with Moscow and demands by Russia to have its distinctive status when compared to other smaller states in the neighbourhood recognised by the EU. Furthermore, Russia was keen to clarify that it would only accept the terms of a value-free strategic partnership, as it was not willing to be a passive recipient of the EU's normative agenda, which clashes directly with Russian identity and hegemonic ambitions (Haukkala, 2015: 25-26).

Processes of othering based on the construction of the other as a security threat have also become more pronounced, thus adding to a contextual environment marred by competing dynamics. Mutual suspicion has grown exponentially and EU and Russian regional initiatives started to enter in direct collision as the creation of the EEU – which emerges as an alternative to the EaP – and the Ukrainian crisis illustrate more visibly (Casier, 2016: 20-22). As a consequence, relations with the shared neighbourhood were raised higher in their political agendas, thus boosting the antagonism and political struggles in interactions between Brussels and Moscow. Overall, the shared neighbourhood emerges as a contested field subject to power struggles as Moscow regards the region as part of its sphere of influence and privileged interests, and the EU perceives stability in this area as paramount to its security interests and the survival of the Union itself. Despite this competition over a common area of interests, the EU and Russia cooperate on a number of issues of mutual interest. This mix of cooperation and antagonism adds further complexity to EU-Russia relations, as both actors acknowledge the relevance of the other and the need to collaborate on strategic matters but they also recognise the entrenched divergences in their approaches, interests and the potential the other has to undermine their respective hegemonic agendas (Freire, 2006: 6).

Since the end of the Cold War, and most clearly since the EU's eastern enlargement, relations with their common neighbourhood became cornerstone to EU and Russian identities – regional integration and powerful moves in their vicinity are not just something they do; they are part of what they are and what they envisage to become. As such, the unfolding of relations in the EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle has contributed to their respective processes of identification and interests' construction. In the immediate aftermath of the end of the Cold War it was very hard to express EU and Russian identities and interests. Over the course of the last two and a half decades these identities and interests became clearer as a result of their discursive practices – the EU and Russia are two hegemonic regional powers striving to extend their exercise of power beyond their borders in order to assure the security and survival of their respective internal projects. In this regard, EU and Russian foreign policies are created in tandem with the construction and reconstruction of their regional projects and their identity. By creating situations of (perceived) crisis that help them to justify their neighbourhood policies, both the EU and Russia shed light on the hegemonic nature of their regional projects and on the fact that their security depends on the domination and normalisation of their vicinity. All in all, what do the EU and Russia want? What are the underlying interests driving their foreign policies towards the shared neighbourhood? The answer is straightforward – power and security; power to normalise their surrounding environment and to assume themselves as the front-runners in defining regional events; and security to allow their internal projects, identities and interests to survive.

Based on this interpretation, the research identified security to be the main nodal point structuring EU and Russian discursive practices. Security does indeed assume a hegemonic role in the formulation of their foreign policies, operating as a field of meaning producing social relations of power through the construction of distinctive identities and interests. As such, security performs a dual-role constituting a field of interpretations and a field of social relations of power. The deconstruction of EU and Russian foreign policies has also revealed that the identified nodal point is also a floating signifier whose content has been articulated with other meanings resulting in hybrid discourses that both reinforce and widen its power. Overall, the analysis exposed four hybrid discourses related to the nodal point that have performed a meaningful role in structuring fixation of meaning – and power – in new ways: political security, economic security, energy security and military

security. Chapter 3 claimed these hybrid discourses to be triggered by EU and Russian hegemonic ambitions, but also to be contingent upon the contextual environment at their borders. It was the gradual construction of perceived threats which prompted argumentative strategies enabling them to reinforce their scope of action and to boost their power over the shared neighbourhood. However, this construction failed to present successful securitising moves based solely on the explicit utterance of security. It is through the analysis of subtler moves by the EU and Russia that processes of securitisation unfolded, thus providing the basis for security issues to become more pronounced in the context of relations with their common neighbourhood.

Chapter 4 engaged in the deconstruction of discursive practices by Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus in order to grasp instances of agency and resistance to full domination by its most significant neighbours and to understand how they were able to maintain their agency in a context marred by antagonistic forces and struggles for power. This deconstruction unveiled these countries to be active actors with defined identities and interests, which have been using their geopolitical location to obtain advantages from relations with Brussels and Moscow, thus affirming their agency and ability to resist structural exercises of power by these actors. The purpose has been to guarantee the consolidation of their identities and the accomplishment of their interests – which lie in assuring their autonomy. A number of instances of agency were identified, thus reinforcing our initial contention that countries in the shared neighbourhood are not passive reactors to EU and Russian hegemonic power. However, it is only by triangulating these instances of agency with EU and Russian hegemonic manoeuvres around the identified nodal point and hybrid discourses that the field of discursivity and the manifold articulations in the EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle can be fully understood.

On the whole, interactions in the EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle during the 1990s remained rather low profile. Security issues did feature amongst EU and Russia frameworks for relations with countries in the shared neighbourhood reflecting their beliefs that internal security is contingent upon a secure external environment. Despite this focus on security issues, concerns relating to their internal consolidation and the preparation of the Eastern enlargement, in the case of the EU, led to a mild approach towards the region, focusing mostly on political stabilisation, economic integration and technical issues. It was the gradual occurrence of external events and the construction of

perceived threats that allowed the EU and Russia to create argumentative strategies enabling them to confer a hegemonic tone to their foreign policy agenda, with an important role performed by neighbouring countries.

Due to constraints relating to processes of internal transition Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus were themselves very much focused on domestic issues. However, soon Ukraine and Moldova realised advantages from increasing cooperation with the EU, not only to their development and modernisation, but also as a means of levelling Russian regional power. Belarus acted differently and preferred to develop close ties with Moscow, which was seen as the best alternative to promote the country's interests.

Ukraine and Moldova did indeed play an important role in propelling the EU to assume a stronger role in the region. During the 1990s, agential moves by Kiev and Chisinau were particularly relevant in the domain of political security and economic security. In the immediate aftermath of the USSR's dismantling, Ukraine and Moldova experienced very tense patterns of relationship with Moscow. In the case of Ukraine subjects of dispute revolved around disagreements regarding the role the CIS should perform in the post-Soviet space, the future of the nuclear arsenal in Ukrainian territory, the regulation of energy transit to Europe, as well as control over the Black Sea fleet and the status of Crimea, which have always been a focal point of tension between Kiev and Moscow. In this context, the EU emerged as the most attractive foreign partner to the country. Political elites in Kiev regarded the Union as a reference model to the country's development, a platform to assist its international integration and a powerful ally in counterbalancing Moscow's regional power. As such, Ukraine showed itself very willing to benefit from EU technical and assistance programmes and to foster relations with Brussels by highlighting its indispensability to assuring European security. In this context, Kiev declared the approximation to the EU as a strategic goal and made its domestic transition processes contingent upon improved relations with and additional assistance from the EU. However, relations with the EU follow a logic of benefit-maximisation rather than convinced Europeanisation. This claim is supported by the reluctance of political elites in Kiev to comply with EU-imposed conditions and reforms, thus hindering impetus in Brussels to promote closer ties with Ukraine. Despite this political lack of real engagement with the EU, the official rhetoric in the country continued to resonate Ukraine's European aspirations aiming at convincing EU audiences on the unique and

strategic dimension of the EU-Ukraine partnership. These have been powerful moves that together with the country's geopolitical location led the EU to adopt a Common Strategy, thus assuming the distinctive nature of relations with Ukraine, when compared with other countries in the post-Soviet space (with the obvious exception of Russia). Ukraine's claimed European aspirations opened avenues to the expansion of cooperation with the EU in several domains, and in 2001 the EU's decision to include Ukraine in the European Conference even suggested that Brussels was planning a new and more enhanced framework for relations with Kiev.

As the political administration in Kiev gained authoritarian contours and relations with Moscow were improved as a result of the resolution of the various quarrels and mutual accusations regarding blame for problematic relations, Ukraine re-evaluated its foreign policy priorities and promoted a rapprochement to Russia. High levels of political and economic dependence on Moscow and Ukraine's political elites' eagerness to obtain shot-term revenues are at the basis of this realignment. In Russia, this represented an opportunity to reinforce leverage over Ukraine and assure the maintenance of a friendly regime at its borders, thus supporting its leading regional role.

Moldova has also played a meaningful role in the evolution of dynamics of power in the fields of political security and economic security in the EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Chisinau experienced severe socio-economic challenges and political instability due to the Transnistrian conflict. Moscow plays an important role in this conflict by providing political, economic and military support to Tiraspol. For that reason, during the 1990s political elites in Chisinau promoted friendly relations with Russia but, simultaneously, attempted to evade its regional domination. The EU emerged in this context as a natural partner to reduce Moldova's dependence on Russia – by providing political and economic assistance to the country – and to counterbalance its leverage in the post-Soviet space. In that regard, Moldova prompted EU membership as a key foreign policy strategic goal.

The fundamental events triggering an important shift in terms of EU support to democracy promotion and economic integration policies, as well as of Russian reaction against the EU's extension of power eastwards were, however, the EU's Eastern enlargement and the coloured revolutions in the post-Soviet space – in particular the Orange Revolution in Ukraine. These events and the ensuing development of frameworks

for relations with the EU's new neighbourhood cannot be fully understood in isolation from discursive practices by countries in the region during the 1990s and early 2000s. Particularly, Ukraine and Moldova's political discourses and search for closer ties with Brussels resonated with European audiences and gradually led the Union to develop more detailed approaches, as well as technical and assistance programmes to countries in the region. Together these events and this active role by Kiev and Chisinau provided the justification necessary to trigger argumentative processes in the EU claiming for a stronger prioritisation of political reforms and economic integration in the region. The EU had already promoted important ways to influence political and economic reforms in the post-Soviet space via PCAs established throughout the 1990s, but this new contextual environment empowered it to develop the ENP – a structural and holistic framework for relations envisaging to transform countries in the neighbourhood and to promote a political and economic homogenisation favourable to the EU's security interests.

In this context, Belarus opted for maintaining friendly relations with Moscow and to present Minsk security and survival to be contingent upon a symbiotic relationship with Russia. As such, its discursive practices somehow supported Russia's regional ambitions, as well as integration schemes in the post-Soviet space. This is not the outcome of simple resignation to Russia's leverage but the conviction of Belarus' political elites that close relations with its former Soviet ruler were the best alternative to assure the country's transition and to guarantee immediate political and economic benefits supporting the administration of Aleksandr Lukashenko. The authoritarian rule of President Lukashenko is also one of the reasons behind Belarus' preference to align with Russia rather than to promote an approximation to the EU. Brussels' liberal agenda represents a threat to its regime as it demands the compliance with a number of norms and values that Minsk has often disregarded, whereas Russia is more interested in benefiting friendly regimes in its vicinity regardless of their political orientation. Furthermore, manifold dependencies made it easier to pursue amicable ties with Russia than to antagonise it by engaging in a process of Europeanisation in which rewards are only obtained in the medium and long term. Minsk support to Russian leadership in the post-Soviet space is thus an opportunistic one as the country is more interested in using its loyalty to Moscow to obtain political and economic advantages than to promote effective Russian domination over the region. Nonetheless, this behaviour reinforced perceptions in Moscow that regional strategies

based on positive and negative conditionality would serve the purpose of assuring its leading role at its borders. Along with perceptions of the Eastern enlargement and the coloured revolution as threats to its hegemonic ambitions, this triggered more robust responses by Russia in the shared neighbourhood, and raised antagonism between Moscow and Brussels. Overall, these events represented a failure of Russia's capability to maintain control over the former Soviet space and secure friendly regimes in the region. It further affected Russian discourses legitimising its intervention in the neighbourhood based on an alleged historical responsibility and the representation of regional interests (Makarychev, 2009: 62).

In this context of growing antagonism and struggles for power over the common neighbourhood, security issues became more pronounced in interactions in the EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle. Russia started deploying more robust regional strategies and making use of the various dependencies in the region to maintain its leading role in the post-Soviet space. From the mid-2000s onwards, it is noticeable a politisation of the energy field meaning that energy was to be used as a tool to punish its neighbours for political choices contrary to its interests. This move becomes clear in the aftermath of the Orange Revolution with the Russian-Ukraine gas crisis in the 2005-2006 Winter. Although Moscow claims this crisis as a natural development resulting from the marketisation of the energy sector in the post-Soviet space, it comes across as a punishment for Ukraine's European aspirations. Similar energy quarrels with Moldova and Belarus throughout the years confirm Russia's strategy of using energy as foreign policy tool envisaging to dissuade its neighbours to align with the EU to the detriment of Russian regional leverage. Countries in the shared neighbourhood responded to this powerful move by engaging in argumentative strategies presenting Russia as a threat to energy security in Europe, thus providing the EU with the justification to extend its scope of action into energy issues. Ukraine and Moldova have been particularly active in this regard, empowering the EU to reinforce its approach eastwards and to extend its scope of competences to new areas.

Another area where Kiev and Chisinau have played a meaningful role in demanding a stronger positioning by the EU on regional matters is conflict resolution. Russia has been playing a leading role in the management of conflicts in the post-Soviet space since the end of the Cold War. Perhaps for that reason, the EU has always presented conflict resolution as a source of regional instability but failed to present tangible political

initiatives to solve the various conflicts at its borders. However, this situation was gradually reversed mainly due to demands by Kiev and Chisinau relating to a stronger role by the EU in the resolution of the Transnistrian issue (latter reinforced by Ukraine's appeals for a stronger role by the EU in the resolution of the Ukrainian crisis). Based on these demands by neighbour countries the EU has gradually felt more comfortable in consolidating a European footprint in the region and to become more engaged in security issues.

These moves along with the reinforcement of frameworks for relations between the EU and the shared neighbourhood – with particular emphasis on the EaP – were received in Moscow with great suspicion and triggered responses aiming at both regaining and consolidating its levers in the region. As a consequence, levels of tension raised exponentially both in the context of Moscow's relations with its neighbours and EU-Russia relations. Chapter 4 devoted particular emphasis to the Ukrainian crisis. This was not unintentional. To look at this crisis as a chain of exaggerated reactions indicates short-sightedness and overlooks the powerful discursive practices at interplay in the EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle since the end of the Cold War. A broad understanding of the Ukrainian crisis cannot be detached from the identification of the multiple identities and interests at interplay in this area or the deconstruction of patterns of relations by significant actors in this triangle and the analysis of their discursive practices alike.

The Ukrainian crisis is much more than the result of popular uprisings. It is the outcome of the production, reproduction, articulation and transformation of different identities, interests and dynamics of power and security. It is a consequence of the competition between two hegemonic regional projects – i.e. the EU and Russia – and the exercise of agency by the countries subject to their dominating moves. It is the culmination of a set of retaliations by Moscow, including energy crisis, economic bans and support to pro-Russian political movements, sending a strong message to countries in the post-Soviet space – whenever Russia's strategic interests are disregarded, neighbours will incur substantial costs and risks, including territorial dismemberment (Götz, 2015: 5-6). This conflict has brought the EU and Russia directly at loggerheads, and for that reason it can be interpreted as a proxy war between these two hegemonic actors (Alexandrova-Arbatova, 2015: 131; Haukkala, 2015: 37). Of course, this is a change under course and will demand further research to fully apprehend its broader effects on the geopolitical

configuration of the wider European space, but it is very likely that this represents a new stage in EU and Russian hegemonic regional projects, one demanding more muscular endeavours – as suggested by their discursive practices – and increasing struggles for power over a common area of influence.

Confronted with the EU's extension of power towards its traditional area of interests, Russia adopted its regional strategies to assure the maintenance of post-Soviet countries in its orbit of influence and dissuade the interference of external powers in this area. Overall, Russia has pursued a strategy of managed instability in order to shake the foundations of pro-European aspirations in its vicinity. Fuelling conflicts, creating new ones and exploiting manifold vulnerabilities in the region have been the main elements of Russia's hegemonic agenda, demanding measures to contain European integration. This is not a novelty in patterns of interaction in the post-Soviet space, as it was already at the heart of the Soviet Union approach, and of the Russian empire before that (Sirbiladze, 2015). In the post-Cold war scenario, these strategic moves were further elaborated and refined to meet demands of the new European geopolitical configuration. This adds to the understanding that change is indeed permanent in the context of political articulations, but this change is never absolute nor total for there are always certain elements that prevail. World politics is thus a setting marred by continuities and discontinuities, reproduction and transformation.

Whereas the Russian approach towards the shared neighbourhood has for long assumed more robust contours, the Ukrainian crisis triggered more assertive discourses at the EU level. For events in the neighbourhood hampered perceptions on the effectiveness of EU foreign and neighbourhood policies, the European Commission was keen to adapt its discourses. The Ukrainian crisis is presented as a European challenge contingent upon the EU's ability to promote transformation in the country and to make it more European. This discursive move provides the argumentation to support the implementation of more structural neighbouring policies. Seemingly, events in Ukraine have also raised awareness in Brussels regarding the mutual constitution of its neighbouring policies and, therefore, the need to develop more inclusive frameworks for relations. The review of the ENP acknowledges that "the EU cannot alone solve the many challenges of the region, and there are limits to its leverage". Furthermore, the EU seems willing to change perceptions about the ENP's effectiveness in partner countries. As such, it is now very vocal in recognising

that current discursive practices under this framework for relations are “regarded by other partners as too prescriptive, and as not sufficiently reflecting their respective aspirations”. Demands for change by neighbouring countries led the EU to recognise that the ENP should reflect the EU’s interests and the interests of its partners alike (European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2015: 2-4).

However, joint ownership has always been a hallmark of the ENP and the EaP. As such, it remains to be seen if this discursive transformation will be only felt at the rhetorical level or if it will be translated into effective discursive practices. Although Europeanisation without membership has hindered the EU’s transformative power noticed on previous accession contexts (Langbein and Wolczuk, 2012: 865), the EU has managed to reinforce its power in the shared neighbourhood with Russia. Does this mean that the EU has successfully transformed neighbouring countries and normalised the environment at its borders? Hardly. Countries in the shared neighbourhood, and particularly Moldova and Ukraine, committed themselves to adopt EU rules, but did little to implement meaningful internal reforms. Legal changes remained incomplete and contradictory as they did not supersede previous legislative acts in these countries. The goal was to meet EU requirements regarding the adoption of the *acquis communautaire* rather than pursuing effective internal transformation. Furthermore, only measures which coincided with preferences of political elites in these countries were adopted (Wolczuk, 2016: 13). The result is a negative democratic trend in almost all the countries in the shared neighbourhood between the EU and Russia. Since the launch of the ENP, Belarus consolidated its authoritarian regime and declined in the Nations in Transit Index, whereas Moldova and Ukraine have only slightly improved their democratic records over the course of the last twelve years, being currently classified as hybrid or transitional regimes (Nilsson and Silander, 2016: 50-51).

What seems to support EU hegemonic power in the region are perceptions by countries in the shared neighbourhood of the EU as a sponsor of their internal development and modernisation, and an important counterweight to Moscow’s regional power, thus contributing to satisfy the interests of their political elites and to protect them from Moscow’s dominating attempts in the post-Soviet space.

The Ukrainian crisis is indeed paramount to understand power and security dynamics in the EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood relations and unveils important moves. Both Brussels and Moscow have been reinforcing their regional power based on security needs – a stronger footprint in their neighbourhood is a proxy for more security. Events preceding and succeeding the EaP Vilnius summit revealed, however, that European security is at a very fragile point. Growing political and economic instability, and the outbreak of violent conflicts in their common neighbourhood, exposed the failure of their regional security approaches. Certainly, the EU and Russia are now more powerful than they were at the end of the Cold War and their foreign policies mirror their hegemonic ambitions. But this has not translated into a more secure environment. Responses to an increasingly unstable contextual environment reproduce the very same security practices that triggered insecurity and instability in the region. Russia responded to EU extension of power eastwards by promoting instability in Ukraine in order to punish the administration in Kiev for its European choices, and simultaneously to send a message to the post-Soviet space conveying that Russia will not tolerate the interference of external actors in its traditional area of interests. Very much supported by its neighbours' demands, the EU replied by reinforcing its role on the management of events in the neighbourhood and by increasing its competences in conflict resolution based on the urgency in achieving the peaceful settlement of conflicts in the region, because "resolution of conflicts, building trust and good neighbourly relations are essential to economic and social development and cooperation" (European Council, 2015: 3). This added to a very complex field already marred by antagonistic forces and power struggles over a common area of influence and interests, thus raising regional shakiness.

The analysis of power and security dynamics in the broader European space suggests that the EU and Russia are becoming more and more resembled as hegemonic regional powers. Russia, traditionally more assertive in its endeavours, is gradually developing its normative agenda and promoting regional integration in its sphere of influence. However, it still lacks the capacity to project a clear identity which is attractive to its neighbours and that reveals something different than the hegemonic nature of its endeavours attempting at dominating neighbouring countries. Regional integration under the EEU and the reinforcement of Russia's normative agenda may however change this trend by creating a sense of belonging to a common project and of common identities and

interests (Casier, 2016: 27). The EU, a more normative and soft power, is slowly extending its scope for action into hard power domains and playing a more active role in conflict resolution in its neighbourhood. If Russia's assertive foreign policy seems to have a more immediate leeway over regional events, as the Ukrainian crisis illustrates, the EU's soft power and strong bet in socialising mechanisms may well be changing civil society's perspectives and interests in these countries. The colourful revolutions in the neighbourhood and more recently the Euromaidan movement, have shown that the alliance between people's democratic power and European values has the potential to change the balance of power in Europe and provide a more confrontational tone to power and security dynamics in the EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle.

However, the unfolding of power and security dynamics in this triangle and the broader effects of the Ukrainian crisis are not only noticeable in manoeuvres by the EU and Russia. It has also produced significant changes in discursive practices by countries in the shared neighbourhood that are seemingly embracing their agency and ability to control their foreign policy choices more than ever. The defence of sovereignty and territorial integrity has assumed a clear central place in discursive practices by these countries, which, in general, have deployed a strategy of drifting away from the Russian sphere of influence. Although the EU and Russia are, indeed, two hegemonic regional powers with similar, though conflicting, interests, countries in the shared neighbourhood, and particularly Moldova and Ukraine perceive cooperation with the EU to be more fruitful to the satisfaction of their national interests. The case is different regarding Belarus for the country has for long had a symbiotic relation with Moscow and the country's strongman Lukashenko is little interested in democratising the country along EU standards for this represents a menace to its authoritarian rule. But even in this case, it is noticeable a set of attempts aiming at reducing the country's isolation, diversify its external partners and to present Minsk as a peace promoter and a reliable partner to the EU. Simultaneously, in the aftermath of the Ukrainian crisis, President Lukashenko's discourses have become more confrontational towards Russia and a growing concern with the maintenance of the country's independence and territorial integrity has been more clearly assumed.

As a result of processes of social learning, political leaders in the region have co-opted EU and Russian discursive practices and have been using them to project their own identities and maximise the satisfaction of their interests. The civilised vs uncivilised

discourse gains particular relevance in this regard. At different moments, Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus have deployed argumentative processes whereby they represent themselves as part of the civilised world to foster relations with Brussels. This is particularly visible in moments of greater tension with Moscow leading these countries to contribute to the construction of Russia as a threat to European security and, simultaneously, appeal to the EU's claimed sense of responsibility to provide further assistance to these countries. A great source of pressure is thus generated. If the EU claims to be at the centre of the civilised world and embraces the responsibility and duty to promote stability, prosperity and security to its kin, then by projecting themselves as civilised these countries almost oblige the EU to provide them assistance in pursuing their national interests. Similarly, when relations with Moscow feature more prominently – this is particularly noticeable in Belarus, in Moldova during its communist governments and in Ukraine under the rule of Yanukovitch – discourses appealing to Soviet solidarity and the will to develop a model of sovereign democracy represent important tools resonating with political elites in Moscow to provide further support and assure the maintenance of preferential treatment to these countries. This sheds light on the active role these countries have had on power and security dynamics in the region, as well as their strategy of playing their most significant neighbours to their best interest.

Despite their different approaches, countries in the shared neighbourhood between the EU and Russia do share a foreign policy strategy – drag their most significant neighbours against each other to maximise benefits. As such, they will tend to gravitate around whatever centre of power that looks more attractive to them at a given moment, in order to satisfy their national interests and assure their autonomy. On the whole, these countries' relations with the EU and Russia are framed by power and security impetus, i.e. they actively search for political alignments prone to guarantee their survival and security as independent and prosperous states. In that regard, the EU and Russia will be more likely to achieve their foreign policy goals if their trade-offs fit the preferences of political elites in the shared neighbourhood (Langbein, 2016: 2), i.e. if they recognise the larger intersubjective field in which they are situated. In that regard, these countries' foreign policy agenda is also driven by two core interests – power and security. However, their understanding of power and security differs from the one conveyed by the EU and Russia. To these countries the quest for power translates into the ability to preserve their

autonomy, independence and territorial integrity, something that can only be achieved by circumventing domination attempts by their most significant neighbours. As such, security becomes the possibility to fulfil their national interests and construct their identities without aggressive interferences by external actors. Here, the EU has considerable leeway as its exercise of structural power is portrayed as more benevolent than that of Russia, which is still very much associated with repressive imperial and Soviet practices. Whereas integration with Russia is seen as domination and loss of autonomy, relations with Brussels are very much related to the integration on a club of civilised and wealthy states, thus benefiting political elites in these countries. As such, if Russia can still have the upper hand when it comes to commensurable levers, the EU has the potential to win the game of transforming and dominating from the inside-out, i.e. by changing perceptions and exporting its worldview to countries in the shared neighbourhood.

The EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle consists of a complex field where identities, interests and discursive practices have been constructed and transformed as a result of interactions and articulations since the end of the Cold War. This applies to all intervenients as it is noticeable that EU and Russia hegemonic agendas have been subject of reinforcement demanding a greater focus on security issues, and the shared neighbourhood has been more proactive and agential in demanding their interests to be accommodated by their most significant neighbours. EU and Russian foreign policies come across as important and conflicting structures of power aiming at producing a social order through which their respective identities and discursive practices are (re)produced. However, the shared neighbourhood is not merely a subject of domination. Instead, it has been taking an active role in the construction of these structures of power. As interactions in this triangle unfolded Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus engaged in struggles of power with their hegemonic counterparts in order to see their interests accommodated and to assume a more vocal position in the definition of relations in this area. In this sense, EU and Russian structures of power are both the medium and the outcome of discursive practices in this triangle.

At least partially, agency by countries in the shared neighbourhood is contingent upon internal contradictions defining EU and Russian hegemonic powers. First, processes of identification have been both reflecting and producing complex and sometimes contradictory patterns of relationship. Actors in this triangle are concurrently represented

as partners and as security threats. This becomes noticeable in EU and Russian mix of cooperative and competitive strings, where the other is recognised as an important partner in addressing common regional scourges, but also as a threat to European security and to the success of their respective regional endeavours. The same happens regarding their definition of the shared neighbourhood – simultaneously a threat to their security (particularly when these countries drift away from their sphere of influence) and pivotal partners in addressing security issues and promoting regional stability. The shared neighbourhood itself has been defining their most significant neighbours in rather contradicting terms. Overall, the EU is seen as a prosperity club supporting their internal development and a protector of their interests against Russia's robust approach towards the neighbourhood. However, these countries also recognise that the EU's normative agenda is loaded with power and ultimately envisages promoting a compulsory Europeanisation that these countries, and particularly Belarus, reject. On the other hand, Russia is perceived as a dominating power aiming at restoring its power over the Soviet space, something that represents a security threat to their survival. Nonetheless, these countries have on many occasions recognised Russia as a natural partner in the region and the importance of maintaining cooperative strings with Moscow in order to benefit from political and economic revenues. They further present themselves as part of the European civilisation, while assuming the Soviet past and the importance of preserving interactions with the post-Soviet space, where their immediate interests lie, revealing that identity is never definitive and that actors can have multiple fluid identities. What becomes clear is that processes of identification in the EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle are based on several degrees of otherness and difference that conceal various struggles for power and attempts at creating a hierarchical and asymmetrical world, where the EU and Russia envisage to take the role of the front-runner. These actors' identities have thus been socially and discursively constructed in tandem. As each subject consolidated its identity, it threatened other, which in turn consolidated its own identity and discursive practices in response. As EU and Russian hegemonic agendas where constructed, they triggered responses by their significant other that reinforced its agenda in response, and by the shared neighbourhood that was keen to adapt its discursive practices accordingly and to strengthen its agency.

Internal contradictions and lacunae in EU and Russia processes of identification and discursive practices have also undermined their ability to transform the social and

political environment at their borders. Both the EU and Russia support their hegemonic endeavours on an intrinsic responsibility to take a leading regional role in addressing what they label as common security challenges to their mutual interests. The usage of terms such as common, shared or joint when referring to relations with their common neighbours is, however, nothing less than a powerful argumentative strategy aiming at reasoning with their neighbours by creating a sense of belonging to a common project and to persuade them to embrace their leadership in regional events. This leadership is itself a powerful manoeuvre based on their claimed superiority when compared to smaller states in the region. Nonetheless, this permanent argumentative process underpinning EU and Russian relations with their common neighbours, lacks clarity and clear definition on whose security challenges and interests are being addressed. Therefore, these discourses are better labelled as empty signifiers concealing EU and Russian identities, self-interests and power strategies. This argumentative strategy further fails to acknowledge that neighbouring societies have their own identities and interests that need to be accommodated, and that interests are subject to change and transformation. In this regard, by crystallising their frameworks for relations with the neighbourhood around empty signifiers the EU and Russia are making them devoid of proper meaning and content, revealing that they have failed to acknowledge the larger intersubjective context in which relations of power unfold and the mutual constitution of social reality.

Additional contradiction in discursive practices by the EU and Russia relates to the mismatch between words and deeds in the framework of their bilateral relations. Whereas official statements emphasise cooperative relations between Brussels and Moscow, even in the more antagonistic framework of the post-Ukrainian crisis contextual environment, the inclusion of discursive practices in the analysis of their bilateral relations reveals the entrenched struggles for power between antagonistic forces that hinder EU-Russia relations and their powerful moves towards the shared neighbourhood.

EU and Russia hegemonic agendas have put into place very powerful moves establishing game rules, what is normal and acceptable, and persuading others to accept these predicates, thus (re)producing asymmetrical social orders. As a result of these moves, the EU can be characterised as a strong hegemonic agent – as neighbours perceive cooperation with Brussels as the result of genuine conviction and rational choice –, whereas Russia is pursuing a loose form of hegemony – as cooperation with Moscow

flows from the belief that there is no better alternative to manage dependences in the post-Soviet space. Of course, this is not an absolute definition, nor does it apply to all occasions. These hegemonies, however, have been undermined and changed in the course of political events as an outcome of the articulation of different identities and the demarcation of an antagonistic outside. Within these complex articulations, Russia has been simultaneously a hegemonic power and an agent resisting EU hegemony. As such, it has assumed the role of a subaltern hegemonic power simultaneously striving to control events in its area of influence, and defying the EU's power and institutions (Averre, 2016: 708; Morozov, 2015). Resistance to the EU fails to present a radical change to the EU's liberal agenda, and consists mainly of the appropriation and reinterpretation of its core concepts, narratives and of a mimicry of EU discursive practices and processes of integration, as noticeable in the case of the EEU which provides a model of economic association and an alternative to the EU's power in the region.

The EU has somehow been a reluctant hegemonic power that has formulated powerful strategies of domination over the neighbourhood, but has been rather hesitant in assuming a more robust approach towards events in the region or to adopt a more antagonistic tone in relations with Moscow. The EU has also changed in the process of interaction with Russian hegemonic power and the unfolding of relations with their shared neighbourhood. This is visible in two levels. In relations with Russia, the EU has adapted its normative-based approach – unfruitful because Moscow is not willing to accept the terms of its neoliberal agenda nor the EU's claimed superiority – into a more pragmatic framework for relations with Russia based on the acknowledgment that a working partnership is on their best interest and an important contribution to a more secure regional environment, thus suiting the EU's security interests. In the context of relations with the shared neighbourhood, it is also noticeable a gradual adaptation of EU strategies very much in line with Russia's traditional approach towards the region. The latest review of the ENP crystallises this transformative process in two ways. First, it moves forward in assuming the security-oriented basis of relations with the neighbourhood and in revealing that where the EU's normative approach does not work it is prepared to perform more realpolitik moves. Second, it abandons the one-size fit all approach and accepts that processes of European integration will advance more rapidly with those countries willing to deepen relations with Brussels. In practice, this contributes to create inner cores in EU

neighbourhood policies where its power can be applied in a more consistent manner and advance regardless of outcomes of processes of Europeanisation in the neighbourhood as a whole. This approach mirrors the one deployed by Russian-led processes of regional integration, mainly in the context of the various economic integration attempts that culminated in the creation of the EEU in 2015. However, this more pragmatic orientation of EU neighbouring policies is not a novelty in the framework of the ENP and has been deploy by the EU on other occasions. First, in the context of relations with Russia where a more pragmatic tone was imprinted to EU-Russia relations from the early 2000s onwards. Second, this interest-based approach has also underpinned EU relations with the Southern neighbourhood and in the context of the Arab Spring it became clear that the EU prioritises its security interests over its normative agenda, leading it to turn a blind eye on authoritarian regimes for the sake of preserving regional stability and, ultimately, EU security (Dias, 2014b).

EU and Russian relations with countries in the shared neighbourhood, despite relying on their structural exercise of power and their hegemonic ambitions, are socially constructed and contingent upon the identities, interests and discursive practices of countries in the shared neighbourhood. In that sense, the success of their regional endeavours will always depend on their neighbours' willingness to deepen relations with their most significant neighbours. This process is far more complicated, however, for events in the neighbourhood and the political options of countries in the shared neighbourhood between the EU and Russia also impact on the definition, redefinition and transformation of Brussels' and Moscow's regional strategies (Roth, 2007: 506). The readiness of these countries to commit to European integration or to promote a rapprochement to Russia at different moments, leads these regional hegemonic powers to reinforce their regional strategies, whereas approximation to its competitor in regional matters has often translated itself into more assertive initiatives by both Moscow and Brussels in order to either maintain or reinforce their leverage in the region. This reveals that even if the EU and Russia envisage to impose their worldviews in a mostly hegemonic fashion, political relations are a mutually constituted process that can only be successful when benefits arising from social interactions are perceived as beneficial to their neighbours. Whenever that is not the case, EU and Russian leverage becomes compromised with serious repercussions to their effectiveness and credibility as structures

of power capable of shaping their partners' identities, interests and discursive practices (Bengtsson, 2008; Christou, 2010b). It is in this interrelation and interdependence between EU and Russian hegemonic power, on the one hand, and agency by countries in the shared neighbourhood, on the other hand, that lies the understanding of why achievements under the ENP have been less satisfactory than the ones obtained by the policy of Enlargement (Behr, 2007), and of why Russia is seemingly losing its leading role in its traditional area of influence. As a consequence, EU and Russian identities, interests and discursive practices are contingent upon the acknowledgement that relations in the EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle are mutually constituted. This means a lot more than merely listen to what these countries have to say regarding approaches towards the region. It means that the EU and Russia have to find a way to include these countries' identities, interests and worldviews into the formulation and implementation of their neighbouring policies, thus launching the basis for an effective and productive political dialogue based on cooperation rather than on domination. Furthermore, if assuming a leading role in regional matters is what the EU and Russia seek, they need to be accountable for rampant security challenges in the shared neighbourhood. At the EU level, this implies assuming responsibility for its hegemonic exercise of power and antagonistic dispute with Russia over influence in their shared neighbourhood rather than simply emphasising its benevolent role on positive achievements, while relegating the onus of negative events to its neighbours alone (Christou, 2010b). Russia, on its hand, has to find a means of accommodating its neighbours' demands and to soften the constructed image of a threat to its neighbours' territorial integrity and survival, which undermine the very same interests that lay at the core of its regional agenda – maintain a leading role in the post-Soviet space. Otherwise, EU and Russian comprehensive approach towards the shared neighbourhood will remain a domination-based strategy instead of a mutual constituted relation recognising and embracing the agency, interests and identities of countries at its vicinity, which has revealed itself to be detrimental to all intervenients and to European security alike.

5.1. Final Remarks

A critical constructivism reading supported by discourse analysis as proposed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe allowed us to understand how the EU and Russia have

brought meaning to their identities, interests and discursive practices, therefore recognising the larger intersubjective context within which they (inter)act. By adding an additional layer of reflexion, this research analysed the role of Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus – the shared neighbourhood – in these dynamics. Overall, the deconstruction of events in this triangle revealed that the shared neighbourhood has been playing a meaningful role in the interplay between two sets of hegemonic discursive practices – i.e. EU and Russian security-oriented foreign policies. Despite the inherent antagonism and struggles for power in the region, the countries in the shared neighbourhood have not merely reacted to EU and Russian foreign policies. Instead, they actively resisted their most significant neighbours structural exercise of power and used it to their best advantage, thus revealing a very pragmatic reading of their contextual environment. Of course, not all discursive practices by these actors have the same weight, and EU and Russia hegemonic agenda has come across as more powerful than neighbours' agency on many occasions. Nonetheless, by refusing to take a passive role in the midst of these dynamics, countries in the shared neighbourhood became active contributors to processes of power and security in the wider European space with significant consequences to the definition of EU and Russian hegemonic agendas.

This is a triangle marred by complex power and security dynamics, as well as multiple identities, interests and discursive practice which constantly interact and mutually constitute each other. The evolution of relations between the EU, Russia and countries in the shared neighbourhood have experienced several stages, from cooperation, strategic partnership, rhetorical competitions and more direct confrontation. The Ukrainian crisis represents somehow the culmination of this process of permanent, though not always obvious, change and transformation; a process that entails serious dangers to all involved actors and to European security. Although events in the region have become less and less predictable, the interpretation provided under this research suggests that the EU and Russia will continue to pursue their hegemonic regional ambitions, thus increasing levels of competition and animosity between Moscow and Brussels. The countries in between will continue to make use of their agency, whenever possible. However, this conundrum is unlikely to go on forever and they will ultimately have to choose between European or Eurasian integration. In this regard, Moldova and Ukraine's European choice is not

irreversible, and the same applies to Belarus relations with Moscow, thus bringing the outcome of this competition to an uncertainty.

The purpose of this research was to analyse power and security dynamics in the EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle on a high-politics level. As such, it focused on discursive practices by political institutions and elites in this triangle. Practical evidences reveal, nonetheless, that there are more to processes of change and transformation in the shared neighbourhood that just national interests defined by political elites and the competition of the EU and Russia over a common area of influence. Gradually, civil society and opposition movements in Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus have become more vibrant and active in demanding changes in their respective countries. This was already signalled during the coloured revolutions, but has become clearer in the context of the Ukrainian crisis. Also in Moldova and Belarus, civic movements are more active in their demands and are more prone to interact directly either with Russia or the EU to promote changes they find beneficial to their countries. These movements are increasingly distrusting of political elites and are urging sweeping transformations in their societies. Furthermore, they reveal a clear foreign policy agenda. It is possible to find supporters of further integration with the EU and closer relations with Moscow in all countries, but generally the trend is for public opinion to be more pro-European and anti-Russia than ever before. Civil society movements regard the EU as a guarantor of democracy and economic development, and a protector against the corrupt political elites in power since the end of the Cold War. On the contrary, Russia is seen as a supporter of those elites, for it is more preoccupied in assuring the maintenance of friendly regimes at its borders than the development of vibrant and flourishing societies. As such, these countries agency has a grand non-state dimension and civil society is seemingly investing in reversing a trend consolidated since the end of the Cold War related to the use of foreign policy to satisfy the interests of these countries' corrupt elites, something that is likely to gain greater visibility in the upcoming years. Brussels has for long realised the power of civil society movements and contacts with non-state actors have been a strong element of its neighbouring policies. Russia on its hand has traditionally relied on a common historic memory shared by post-Soviet states and its diaspora populations as something distinctive, thus envisaging to create a common sense of belonging to a project where Russia takes the role of the undisputed front-runner. This, however, is something that has promoted a sense

of brotherly fraternity mostly amongst political elites – the main recipients of Russian special treatment. At the level of civil society, this same memory is often associated with domination, repression and grave misery, except for those regions that are highly dependent on Russian business to survive. Gradually, Russia has realised the benefits of the EU's normative agenda and its attempts to transform the mind-set of non-state actors and has itself been attempting to developed its own normative approach as a complement to its top-down initiatives in the post-Soviet space. However, processes of transformation are very time-consuming and Russia has still a long way ahead to catch up with the EU in that regard (Just, 2016: 83-84). This is something that might affect the evolution of EU and Russian hegemonic regional endeavours and add a further level of complexity to the three-way interaction between the EU, Russia and the countries in their shared neighbourhood, thus opening a very important and interesting line of research deserving further enquiry.

The EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle is composed by a complex web of actions, reactions and interactions. The EU and Russia have structural power and hegemonic ambitions, but the countries in the shared neighbourhood have agency and power to resist their attempts at dominating their vicinity by choosing their foreign policy orientation and by dragging the EU and Russia against each other, thus constraining the unfolding of their regional integration initiatives. Most of the power and security related developments in this triangle have their origin in the neighbourhood itself, for its role in the transformation of power and security dynamics cannot be overlooked. On the opposite, they are central to these processes.

Although the EU and Russia have been very active in turning their foreign policies into hegemonic regional projects aiming at projecting their power and securing the environment at their borders, the effectiveness of such endeavours has been rather limited as the broader European space is more insecure and conflictual than ever in the post-Cold war era. Furthermore, EU and Russian images as regional powers is now a very damaged one. EU neighbouring policies are in tatters. Their goal to transform the neighbourhood has failed to produce results as meaningful as the ones produced during previous frameworks for relations, i.e. the Enlargement process. Russia's credibility in the international arena is seriously damaged, and accusations of imperialism revival and isolation from the international community are now very noticeable amongst Western states. How does one understand this failure by these two regional powers that have for long exercised their

structural power in a common area for influence? What is conspicuous is that both the EU and Russia failed to understand the larger intersubjective context in which their discursive practices are situated. Furthermore, their regional ambitions were sustained on empty signifiers portraying their right to transform the environment at their borders and their *mission civilisatrice*. Countries in the shared neighbourhood were treated as mere recipients, subjects of their domination without free-will. They approached neighbouring countries as an extension of their internal projects – essential to their security and survival –, but neglected their agency based on the principle that their hegemonic power and argued superiority would suffice to promote change in their vicinity and to support their regional endeavours. The other was forgotten; identities and interests in the shared neighbourhood were overlooked; their knowledge and worldviews were disregarded; and this has negatively impacted on the unfolding of security and power dynamics in this area.

The fact that the EU and Russia compete over a common area of influence led the subjects of their exercise of power – i.e. the countries in the shared neighbourhood – to find a hybrid space where they can actively exercise their agency. As such, these countries found themselves in a place where they could play with the EU and Russia to their best advantage. First and foremost, these countries are interested in defining their identities as independent and autonomous political entities. During the 1990s, these countries were overwhelmed by their transition processes, but gradually they have defined their foreign policy agenda to pursue their interests. In the aftermath of the Cold War, these countries found themselves severely dependent on Russia, which represented a major constraint to their sovereignty. In different levels, they used their geostrategic condition to foster closer relationships with the EU in order to counterbalance Russian regional power and reduce their dependence on Moscow. Belarus acted somehow differently, perceiving a symbiotic relationship with Russia as its best chance of survival in post-Cold war Europe. These processes were marred by many difficulties and pressures by their most significant neighbours. However, especially after the EU's Eastern enlargement, these countries played their most significant neighbours against each other in order to maximise benefits. In this process, they have actively contributed to the construction of the EU and Russia as threats to their respective hegemonic regional projects, thus fostering ongoing processes of securitisation in the EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle. As such, and contrary to common sense, if one has to pinpoint a victor in these discursive struggles, that would be

agency by neighbouring countries. By carefully reading their regional environment they were able to adapt their words and deeds accordingly and to reassure their indispensability to EU and Russian regional plans. In this scheme, they resisted their structural exercise of power and avoided full domination by any of these powers. Moreover, as EU-Russia interactions gain a more antagonistic tone, they also strengthen the role neighbouring countries perform in reinforcing their hegemonic agendas, thus enlarging their room for manoeuvre to transform dynamics of power and security in the region, and consequently change EU and Russian structures of power. This is not to say that structures of power do not matter, but rather that social reality is defined by the permanent interaction between structures and agents. Structures are not deterministic and agency has been instrumental to understand interactions and political developments in the EU-Russia-shared neighbourhood triangle.

However, these should not be understood as linear processes for they depend on complex contextual factors and the intertwining of power and security dynamics at various moments. The geopolitical condition of these countries, allowing them to pursue pragmatic and multi-vector foreign policies, has limited effects, however. Due to their structural power, the EU and Russia will always attempt to influence their foreign policies and will deploy all available resources to punish unfriendly states in their common neighbourhood, as the Ukrainian crisis illustrates. Even if the balancing between the EU and Russia can effectively slow down these countries' full domination by their most significant neighbours, this region will continue to be a stage of complex power and security dynamics working to produce asymmetrical relations and accentuate their dependencies in order to reinforce EU and Russian hegemonic regional power.

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