EUROPEAN UNION STRATEGIC NARRATIVE TOWARDS THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP COUNTRIES AND THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION'S ESCALATION: STOP, SLOW OR GO?

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Abstract: *The narrative dimension of the EaP programme was considered by the European policy makers of secondary relevance as it was focused on the bureaucratic aspects of the economic and judicial convergence of the target countries with the European Union through "regulation setting". The importance of these aspects has clearly increased after the Russian Federation used hybrid war tactics in Ukraine since 2013 based on a fabricated Strategic Narrative that relied on the "Reflexive Control" and "Informational Warfare" principles to a great effect. The growingly opposing information spheres, the Russian and the European, have an enormous importance for the political discourse in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries. By drawing on a closer examination of a number of primary and secondary sources – including important events, official texts, and excerpts from interviews – this paper aims at comprehending the formation, projection and reception in the EaP states of the Strategic Narratives of the Russian Federation and the European Union since 2013.*

Keywords: *European Union; Russian Federation, Eastern Partnership, Strategic Narratives, Information Sphere*

Introduction

Communication is more and more at the centre of the international scene. The constant evolution of the new media channels (i.e. the development of social networks) affects policies and their outcome. In fact, "definitions of policy problems usually have narrative structure; namely, they are stories with a beginning, middle, and an end, involving some change or transformation. They have heroes and villains and innocent victims, and they pit forces of evil against forces of good" (Stone, 2002, p. 138). The Eastern Partnership (EaP) region, its people, elite and civil society, are caught in-between.

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The European and Russian Strategic Narratives are increasingly in contrast. The struggle of identities is transforming into an irreconcilable confrontation that European policy-makers, scholars and civil society have to address. After the Russian 'middle class' protests of 2011 and the Arab Spring events in the same year, the Russian Federation's policy-making elite perceives any change in the 'near abroad' as a direct threat to Russian sovereignty. In fact, "Kremlin's policies towards the post-Soviet space range somewhere between domestic and foreign policy; they can be regarded as an extension of domestic politics" (Adomeit, 2011, p. 25). The Russian intervention in Georgia in 2008, the 'hybrid war' enacted to seize Crimea in 2014 and the creation of the separatist entities in Luhansk and Donetsk are increasingly included in the Russian Strategic Narrative as rightful acts to oppose the larger Western offensive. The "Maidan-phobia" is currently one of the pillars of the wider Russian identity (Makarychev, 2013).

Process tracing is the main research method employed in the present paper in order to capture the essence of the current aggressive merging of the Russian and European informational spheres in the EaP countries one. As the hybrid confrontation's analysis underlines, the "Holmes's method of elimination […], when the investigator has eliminated all plausible alternatives, the remaining scenario must be the correct one" (Collier, 2011, p. 827), process tracing becomes fundamental, being a particularly useful analytical tool.

Based on Strategic Studies and Strategic Narrative Studies theory, the data provided offer a fresh and profound outlook on the recent events in the region. The main goal of this paper is the analysis of the implementation of a remodeled Strategic Narrative into the EaP programme, capable to re-engage the EaP states and the Russian Federation into dialogue, taking into account the current international stalemate. The confrontation level in the region, in fact, is assuming an existential dimension which has to be re-shaped to a more pragmatic nature. The European narrative projection needs to create a new synoptic judgment which will enable proper contexts and circumstances, in order to dialectically reverse the current regional zero-sum confrontation between local actors, the European Union and the Russian Federation.

1. Russian Strategic Narrative: Stop?

The annexation of the Crimean peninsula in 2014 was the culminating point of the shift within the Russian Federation towards a more traditionalist and conservative paradigm, cyclically returning throughout Russian history. The pre-modern 'holiness of un-freedom' is supported by the technological 2.0 revolution of the 21st century, creating a unique Strategic narrative to defend the Russian interests at home and in the near neighbourhood. Andrei Kolesnikov (2015, p. 9) argues that "the 2010s offer one a simple choice: you are either for the regime and its satellites and its ideology, or you are against it". Ever since the Communist era, there has been an established tradition of related studies in Russia, of

furtherly refine capabilities, in order to achieve specific objectives through principles as 'Camouflage' and 'Reflexive control'. In fact, "how Russia positions itself in the Western media space and the deliberate closing of its own space is no accident [...] the aim being to maintain cohesion at home while encouraging discord elsewhere" (Laity, 2015, p. 25). The point of view of the opposing "information spheres" play a huge role in Russia's self-understanding, as well as in shaping the Russian approach towards the international scene.

Reflexive control is based on a careful individuation of its methods and objectives. The development of the capacities to control and shape the 'cognitive area' of allies and adversaries was central to the Soviet Foreign policy: "One gains an advantage in conflict [...] above all if one is able to influence the opponent's perception of the situation [...] and at the same time conceal from him the fact that one is influencing him" (Lefebvre *et al.*, 1971, p. 45). The Communist party's objective was to control society through manipulation and careful management of the information received by the Soviet citizens.

Using historical legacy as the starting point, the Russian Federation made further advances to refine the scientific use of propaganda and ideology using the currently available technological means, involving even the highest levels of policy-making. The Ukrainian conflict was a perfect representation of this narrative approach. The modus operandi was based on hiding or manipulating information in order to achieve a strategic objective. When the situation on the international scene is changed and the evidence is overwhelming the truth can be revealed. Vladimir Putin, quite ironically, affirmed during his conference to the nation at the end of 2015: "we never said there were not people there who carried out certain tasks including in the military sphere" (Walker, 2015). There is no clear separation between the 'Peace' and 'War' narratives in the Russian approach, but a constant grey area. The process of militarization of information and narratives in the Russian Federation has a long history. Currently, these separations (war/peace, military/non-military) are taken to an entirely new qualitative level. Bogdanov *et al.* (2013) studies on the new generation warfare, for example, are going in that new qualitative direction. Media, religious organizations, cultural institutions, NGOs, financed public movements and scholars are described as non-military elements used to defend the Russian interests. The main battlefield of the future becomes the information and ideological sphere (Bogdanov *et al.*, p. 18). Therefore, the Russian Strategic Narrative in the EaP region is evolving as a part of the overall evolution of the Russian Grand Strategy which is adopting an effects-based operational road-map from the unique heritage of the Soviet Union's theoretic studies.

This represents a complex challenge for scholars and analysts as "effects-based operations are conceived and planned in a systems' framework that considers the full range of direct, indirect, and cascading effects [...] achieved by the application of military, diplomatic, psychological and economic instruments" (Davis, 2001, p. 7). In fact, while Kremlin perceives several European member-

states (i.e. Germany, Italy, France, Greece, and Hungary) still as potential strategic partners, in the current international context, the European Union as a whole is considered as a rival bloc. The EaP region is considered as the area of direct rivalries. In sum, "Russia wants to recreate the erstwhile world order in which Moscow plays a major role again, and it's strategy is to cultivate fear of Russia (as it has been Russia's historical culture) to force submission from their rivals" (Kakachia, 2010, p. 89). The refinement of the aforementioned narrative is at the centre of the Russian strategy.

The end of the summer of 2013 was the turning point for the zero-sum game between Russia and the European Union in the EaP region. As Wohlforth (1995) underlines, it is difficult to uncover the decision-makers' assessments of power which is crucial for the outbreak of hegemonic rivalry. Armenia was the initial target, as it was the country on which Russia held the biggest leverage. "In a single day Moscow sent a message to the inhabitants of an entire region that they do not have a choice - that their independence is arbitrary" (Cathcart, 2013) thus commencing a flexible narrative, that goes beyond the geopolitical game at play. The traditional multipolar perspective was brought to an entirely new level. The Russian Federation's sponsored Eurasian Union (EEU) was increasingly perceived as incompatible with the European Union. Consequently, "a lack of shared understanding of what constitutes and should constitute acceptable rules and behaviour could lead to competing and conflicting interpretations and strategies" (Hurrel, 2007). For instance, the EU-EEU rivalry was also one of the factors that added up to the escalation of the Ukrainian conflict. Interestingly, the Russian strategic narrative targeted areas way beyond the political or economic spheres, as for example "gender and gay rights have become geopolitical […] Armenia's LGBT people are seen as an existential threat to the nation, agents of enemies past and present" (Nikoghosyan, 2016). Thus, a completely new game with different rules emerged. Russian Strategic Narrative directly uses proxies on the ground in the targeted countries for local support, through different levels of sub-narratives that together back up the Russian goals. Moreover, any interference of Russia is negated and is maintained at the unofficial level. Igor Dodon, for example, the leader of the Socialist party in Moldova, in an interview in 2013 affirmed: "I have quite good relationships there [in Russia], but they have nothing to do with the funding of political ideas, but rather with the bilateral and personal relationship with different entities in the Russian Federation" (Tribuna, 2013). Nevertheless, his political discourse is based on the "Western masters" narrative[1] and he vowed several times to "end the European experiment in our country" (Socor, 2014). This is another present feature of the Russian Strategic narrative, as the Kremlin's sponsored international news multi-media channels attempt to divide and rule through support and diffusion of claims based on 'Western world'

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[1] The narrative based on emphasizing and arguing the imperialism of the Western world (USA, EU / NATO, the so called EUSA)

criticism. The fervent focus on the flaws of the pro-European political forces is never held towards the Russian institutions. Moreover, the audience is broad as the broadcasts go not only towards the Russian-speaking minorities but equally to the European public itself, with broadcasts in English language.

History and time itself is being stretched in the Russian Strategic narrative efforts to *re-create* the understanding of the audience and ultimately to re-channel it. It should be noted that "time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal experience" (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 52). Russian Strategic narrative is directed to *hijack* the interpretation of the historic trajectory itself of the EaP region, for domestic, local and European audiences. The Ukrainian conflict's understanding was re-created in this way, especially within the Novorossiya narrative:

> According to the Kremlin version of Ukrainian history, Novorossiya consists of lands which were colonized by Russians in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The cities of Novorossiya are said to have all been founded by Russians and populated by Russians. […] In reality, the regions claimed as Novorossiya have been imperial borderlands and melting pots for centuries, attracting a wide range of settlers including Greeks, Germans, Bulgarians, Jews, Armenians and countless other communities including ethnic Russians (Dzherdzh, 2014).

The EaP region's identity itself is being transformed, especially by changing the casual explanation of the current events. An explanation fitting the Russian geopolitical actions and strategy emerges with the exposition of the naturalness of how one thing led to another, how one thing followed another "as a matter of course" (Humphreys, 2010, p. 14). Thus, the events in the region are portrayed as part of a larger Eurasian 'awakening of conscience'.

Another salient characteristic of the Russian Strategic Narrative is consequently a dialectic transformation of the coloured revolutions (the Revolution of Roses in Georgia in 2003, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004 and 2005, and the Maidan itself in 2013 and 2014). Integrating with the concept that

> Defence is used in Aesopian terms to address issues of offence. […] Russian media and diplomatic sources have kept up an incessant campaign to characterize the 'Banderite' government in Kyiv as illegitimate and brutal. Cyberspace was not immune, as 'patriotic hackers' attacked Ukrainian banks and government websites. The essence of this non-linear war is, as Gerasimov says, that the war is everywhere (Galeotti, 2014).

In the tradition of the Reflexive control-based operations, the events are portrayed in a suitable key. "Today Ukraine stands before a choice – to go on the way of peace and constructive dialogue in the society – or to go down to

authoritarianism and a national-radical tyranny (Embassy of the Russian Federation in the Republic of Moldova, 2015). The same reasoning can be applied to other countries of the EaP region in the current Russian perspective. The conflictual perceptions of the Ukraine crisis in Russia and the West are in fact motivating the Russian population and minorities for a better identification with Putin's Russia, as a struggle for Russian survival:

> The result of the information *brainwash* is that the word 'Russian' in Ukraine causes rejection, they begin to hate us. This is thanks to the efforts of the United States, the efforts being made by the European Union, which are trying to bring us, Russians, to our knees" (The Siberian Times, 2015).

The Russian Strategic narrative leaves quite little space for maneuver and dialogue. Even Azerbaijan, far from the Euro-aspirations of other countries of EaP, is under pressure from the Russian mass media. The reason is the pressure on the Russian minorities from the government (Pravda, 2013). This is a reoccurring dimension of the Russian Strategic narrative. The leader of the Russian minority and member of the Milli Mejlis, Mihail Zabelin, directly addressed the issue saying that: "We, the members of the Russian minority of Azerbaijan, completely don't agree and we are deeply outraged by the fictional informational, lies and slander, which were diffused in the Russian and Azerbaijani means of mass information on behalf of our name"[2] (The Federal Lezgin National-Cultural Autonomy[3], 2013). Similarly, in Ukraine the Russian Strategic narrative's included misinformation does not affect the local Russian minorities as much as the domestic public, which is its main target.

> We have created our myth. The myth is a faith, it is passion. It is not necessary that it shall be a reality. It is a reality by the fact that it is a good, a hope, a faith, that it is courage. […] And to this myth, to this grandeur, that we wish to translate into a complete reality, we subordinate all the rest" (Baumer, 1978, p. 21).

To sum it up, the Russian Strategic narrative in the EaP region intertwines the absence of reality and the projection of National grandeur. It directly targets the vulnerable strings of the domestic public and Russian minorities abroad, using the Russo-phobia as a tool to accomplish geopolitical goals with mixed results. Moreover, it allows the Russian policy-making elites to estrange themselves from the reality and persists on the path that started to materialize in the early 2000s.

2. Strategic narrative of the European Union: Slow.

The European Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership initiatives were conceived on the grounds of sharing the same interests, ideas and values in

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[2] Translation of the author
[3] Translation of the author

EU's near abroad. The main goal to achieve in the region were building democratic and open market economies which would provide the ground for future EU's eventual enlargement. In fact, EU's narrative consisted of a revolutionary "new vision of an enlarged area of peace, stability and prosperity encompassing the wider neighbourhood of the EU, a circle of friends, a shared neighbourhood founded on common values" (Wissels, 2006, p. 1). Nevertheless, despite EU's ambitious goals, its narrative's essence was condemned to erode in the following years, as it was shaped by its fostering of the "institutional emulation" (Börzel *et. al.*, 2007) and lacking a political dimension. The Russian growing assertiveness and opposing Strategic narrative was the main reason for its narrative's erosion in 2013, with the Ukrainian events and the Crimean annexation.

"Peace, stability and prosperity" were substituted with one keyword, "Stabilisation" (Tomčíková, 2016), which became in fact, the lacking dimension of the neighbouring regions in the eyes of the European Union's policy makers.

"Against its will, the EU was slipping into a geopolitical competition with Russia, a scenario for which it was badly prepared" (Lehne, 2014), lacking a coherent and solid narrative to address the emerged challenges. The European Union was facing a 'zero-sum' game, instead of the 'win-win' scenario of the 'Big Bang' enlargement of 2004, in a profoundly different region. Biscop (2014) considered that EU has learnt the hard way "the geopolitical implications of technical cooperation, export of norms and trade relations the hard way". Thus, following the Ukrainian crisis, EU's response was 'defensive' based on sanctions policy, support of the pro-Western government and condemnation of the Crimean annexation. Although it seemed adequate, it did not offer a clear and immediate resolution towards the de-evolution of the security situation in Eastern neighbourhood. The current "frozen" state of the EU's Strategic narrative is a direct product of this realization and a mirror of the many "frozen" conflicts that plagues the region.

The European Strategic narrative was considerably shaped by its ambiguity and lack of coherence towards the EaP members, especially in its narrative arc. Moreover, for the EaP countries, there is simply no stimulus to actually apply the internal reforms which the EU requires, whereas EU's main challenge was the lack of knowledge to coherently frame its own interests, as "we can know what our interest are […] only if we can first settle the question of who or what we are ourselves" (Ringmar, 1996, p. 52). For instance, the democratic criteria were rigorously applied to Belarus as no 'vital interest' was at stake, while Azerbaijan, a major energy partner and important for the "Southern Corridor" project, with equally authoritarian practices was treated with considerable tolerance, in comparison. Moreover, despite being supposedly closely aligned to Putin, Lukashenka provided means to reach out to the post-Maidan Ukraine and address the security instability. Vladimir Makey, the Belarusian foreign minister, directly asks to "openly acknowledge that the situation in Belarus compared to several

countries [including those in the EaP] is no worse and in many regards is even better than in these countries" (Goble, 2014).

The lack of coherence and clear objectives in the region are not the only hick-ups of the EU's actions and narrative in the EaP countries. For instance, Armenia's position in the European Strategic narrative equally raises certain perplexities. The main issue is the fact that "there is also a gap between the EU's desired and actual role in the South Caucasus. […] it is clear that its interest in the region is primarily energy driven" (Babayan et al., 2011, p. 5). Therefore, the EU's strategic narrative has mainly failed to address the Armenian population and its civil society. Currently, "the EU needs to explore alternative measures to engage and empower embattled Armenia, but based on a more realistic recognition of the limits and liabilities" (Giragosian, 2015). The European Union has to offer a solid narrative that is able to shape the perception not only of domestic public but also to re-wire the Russian take on the actions of the civil society in the region. For example, in 2015 "Armenians took to streets whenever they felt that their government neglected their interests and rights and continued to ignore its pledge to transparency in decision-making" (Babayan, 2015). The US narrative take on the protests can even more radicalize the Russian media response. The main element of the protests is that "contemporary Armenian civil society is not only about elite NGOs, but also about self-organized, grassroots movements" (Mikhelidze, 2015, p. 8). The European Union has to address such events *not only* in Armenia but also throughout the EaP region, in order to be able to guarantee a truly independent coverage. The EaP initiative has to be based on enabling "vulnerable communities themselves to create the conditions for peace and stability" (Kaldor *et al.*, 2008, p. 3) and therefore answer the "who" question (Stryker, 1996, p. 335). Especially in the case of Ukraine, "Brussels should gradually engage in comprehensive outreach to the grassroots – a process that is not well-known to the EU" (Shumylo-Tapiola, 2013), although this engagement is vital for the European Strategic narrative.

Moreover, the communication aspects are in fact critical to the success of the EU's overall Strategic narrative, but also for the entire EaP initiative. Without a doubt, "effective communication is an essential part of successful policies, productive initiatives, mutually beneficial partnerships or cooperation projects" (Kimber *et al.*, 2015, p. 5). The efforts to increase communication capacity in order to enhance EU's capacities have also to be subtle, considering that the last decade the EU-Russia dialogue regarding the EaP has been characterised bya "combination of worst-case assumptions about one another's intent with best-case assumptions about one another's will", which "encourages escalation on both sides" (Saunders, 2014). Moreover, there is an urgent need to foster in the EaP members the feelings that "Europe is a state of mind" (European Commission, 2013) for them too, thus creating "spill-over" effects through effective strategic communication. The local population's perceptions regarding the European EaP initiative are not particularly encouraging, as, only 51.1 per cent of respondents

believe that the EaP has created any progress. Moreover, in bolstering the pro-reform cause in partner countries, "the EaP received the fairly low approval rating of 58.8 per cent" (Dostál, 2015). Therefore, the local population has to understand what the European Union stands for convincingly, in a better way.

The nature of European economic projects, security and foreign policy has to be intelligible and open for the public, especially for the citizens of the EaP region. "Connection, contest and (un)complexity" (Fricke, 2015) are three dimensions that have to be answered continuously. While the following initiatives adaptively integrate with the European wider narrative, these ideas have to be absorbed in the EaP larger frame, in linguistic and accessibility terms, not only to the elites but also to the uneducated population. "In other words, to get to an alternative future, you have to create a story about the past that connects to it" (Kaplan *et al.*, 2016) and create the historic connection to Europe is paramount for the EaP initiative. "Constant fluidity" has to be the quality to pursue for EU to adapt to the characteristics of the region.

The European Strategic narrative therefore is shaped by the overall European Strategic culture. Longhurst (2004, p. 17) points out that:

A strategic culture is persistent over time, tending to outlast the era of its inception, although it is not a permanent or static feature. It is shaped and influenced by formative periods and can alter, either fundamentally or piecemeal, at critical junctures in that collective's experiences.

The European Strategic narrative is affected by a certain degree of self-absorption on the part of the European Union. Nevertheless, this uncanny dimension is hard to capture. Venus identity does not identify the essence of the issue (Coss, 2002), especially in the EaP region; Mercury is a more precise identification of this "light-footed" approach. There is a clear lack of understanding that the interdependences, especially in information space, in the post-modern world, are not exclusively positive. Such expanding environment can be better exploited by an aggressive international actor. "Illusion of validity" (Zaiman, 2011) can jeopardize the capacity to realistically individuate the priorities that the European Strategic narrative has to follow. The EU's instruments in this regard are only being shaped and they have to be consolidated.

Another important element of the strategic narrative is the end-state. The weakness of the European Strategic narrative in this sense is plain to see. The worst option is "the continuation of the indefinite, vague and drifting policies towards the region, underpinned by the large diversity of the countries in question" (Novák, 2015). The European Union's unique identity has to be preserved through persistently trying to re-frame the chessboard itself and adapting to the changing conditions. It is fundamental to respect -in the framework of the EaP initiative- the fact that "the more a story takes cultural, personal, role-specific, religious and media structural expectations into account, the more tangible and relevant and, thus, the more understood and accepted it

becomes" (White Paper, 2014, p. 11). In this context, the EaP has to become a credible story for the people of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova.

3. Russian and European Strategic narratives re-configuration: Go!

The Russian Strategic narrative assertiveness should highlight the European Strategic narrative's need for consistent transformations, and ultimately motivate the EU to take action in order to shape a new "re-configuration" in the EaP region. The initial priority becomes to re-tune the European approach to address the fact that in the post-modern world "due to the non-systemic nature of the global mind-space one cannot trace, however, all the casual relationships and intolerant elements from this non-system, but only seduce these elements to change their behaviour" (Sirén, 2013, p. 210). The new European Strategic narrative priority towards the Russian narrative should be an increased pragmatism, the realization of the finite nature of the means and possibilities in such a complex environment. Simpson (2012, p. 116) identified the nature of strategy itself in these chaotic connections: "Essentially, strategy is a dialectical relationship, or the dialogue, between desire and possibility. At the core of strategy is inevitably the problem of whether desire or possibility comes first." Laity (2015, p. 27) clearly identifies the dimensions of the EaP initiative Strategic narrative re-branding, related to desire and possibility:

> 1. Our problem/situation is Russia challenging the existing European security and seeking to re-establish spheres of interest; 2.Our desire/objective is to protect that order; 3. Our actions/execution are what we are doing now and decide to do in the future; 4. In order to reach our happy ending/end state, where all Europe's nations (including Russia), large and small, can have secure borders and make their own choices, based on mutual respect and accepted rules.

The European approach to EaP region has to deeply understand the complex system this region represents and that events in a similar initial situation can evolve in profoundly diverse end-states and "exhibit erratic behaviour through disproportionally large or disproportionately small outputs" (Beyerechen, Winter 1992-1993, p. 62). It is exactly the reason why fluidity has to become the preeminent feature of the European Strategic narrative. A sober assessment is needed, as "it is foolish to think now that a more confident Russia, bent on asserting its interests in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, is beyond the reaches of productive engagement" (Starobin, 2015). While retaining the realistic evaluation of the Russian actions, the European Strategic narrative has to create a possible constructive position for Russia in the region, delicately 'surfing around' vital issues that immediately evoke 'the spiral of hostility'. The greatest mistake would be to turn to Russia as the 'Other' on the World scene. The content that the European Strategic narrative provides can push the regional situation further away

from a dialogue-based structure. "For a number of European nations, national pride may be a long forgotten concept, and sovereignty is something they can't afford. But for Russia genuine state sovereignty is an absolutely necessary prerequisite for existence" (Putin, 2014) and the capacity to understand such elements of the Russian identity is the key for successful points of contact between European and Russian communication spheres.

Major events assume the significance for both narratives as strategic episodes, each of which is relevant for the final fate of both. It is relevant to underline that strategy and strategic episodes "both are mechanisms to give meaning to actions in attempts to win the mind, only strategic episodes truly answer the question for strategy" (Garard, 2016). The events and the hostile actions from state and non-state actors in the post-modern world are inextricably becoming more and more "dynamic, unpredictable, diverse, fluid, networked, and constantly evolving" (Pfaltzgraff Jr *et al.*, 2016). The capability to build a chain, in which the individual rings connect themselves is the practice which should be adopted. The European Strategic narrative is its people, the staff that represents the EU in the region and the pro-European locals.

Narrative has to be translated into reality. In fact, "practices are forms of behaviour with regard to strategy that have become institutionalised and can thus be seen as having a degree of stability and routineness in an organisational setting, although they may vary in their specific performance" (Fenton *et al.*, 2008). The EaP initiative has therefore undergone ulterior restructuration through innovative practices. The European Strategic narrative inclusion of "everyday" local stories, based on the principles of inclusion and transparency, is a fundamental step. Achieve "coexistence in time and space of both ordering and disordering narratives […] to create the desired order" (Pedersen *et al.*, 2012, p. 15) should also enrich the adaptation potential of the overall European Strategic narrative.

The goal is to achieve a situation which could enable even a partial "re-inclusion" of the Russian informational sphere into the European Strategic narrative. The concept of "comprehending a complex event by 'seeing things together' in a total and synoptic judgment" (Mink, 1966, p. 42) is interesting to explore in this sense. Importantly, "a synoptic judgment is a single and self-contained act of understanding which does not contain temporal sequence" (Mink, 1966, p. 43) and allows a more coherent re-structuring of the interpretation of events. "Moving ahead […] perhaps calls for a differentiated '3-1-2' approach, in response to the different circumstances the EU faces" (Hug, 2015, p. 19) and could perhaps include Russian Federation as the +1 partner, remaining firmly committed to the values that the European Strategic Narrative stands for. While adopting this approach, cohesion to impede "political actions in some EU countries expressing admiration for Putin as a strong man who is unafraid to resort to military might, and whose 'macho-nationalism' seeks to dictate the fate of others" (Bildt, 2015) is the priority, as a fractured Strategic narrative is no narrative at all. Moreover, since the "lack of trust is a direct consequence of

Russian aggression, not Western miscommunication" (Dehez, 2016), a firm commitment to have a common voice emerges as the "centre of gravity" of the European Strategic narrative, towards the EaP partners and Russia itself.

Clausewitz addresses the issue stating that "a certain centre of gravity develops, the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends" on (Clausewitz, 1989). Describing centres of gravity, which are not physically existing, is quite difficult: "moral centres of gravity are less obvious. Yet, it is essential to understand them since they are likely to be more important on the strategic level" (Strange *et al.*, 2004, p. 27). EaP initiative's success is based on the capacity of the European Union member states to speak with one voice towards the target countries. Still, it is important to underline that, for the European Strategic narrative to be successful, "elements of this kind of job, such as security sector reform and intelligence, might be better suited for member states acting bilaterally or in groups rather than for the European Commission" (Leonard *et al.*, 2014, p. 6). Therefore, while the member states have to be encouraged to participate in the European Strategic narrative, as they can integrate it in a quicker fashion, elements that can foster and justify aggressive actions from the Russian side have to be avoided.

Conclusions

"The great risk, though, is that Europe and Russia find themselves in a film noir, where the villain's plot fails but takes everyone down with it." (Leonard et al.*, 2014, p. 6)*

"A strategic narrative is necessary to create a logical framework, a pattern of meaning" (Tobias, 1989, p. 5). Considering the European approach towards its Eastern neighbours, a change is required. The European Strategic narrative has to include all six partners, on a tailored-made basis. In this context, the words of the foreign minister of Poland, Witold Waszczykowski sounds particularly true: "We should think about the future of six states of very different status. We should decide whether to divide the program or to preserve, but to offer an individual cooperation agreement to every member" (Hartyja '97, 2016). The EaP initiative has to transform even more in a shared journey. "It's more than a value proposition of what you deliver to them. Or, a mission of what you do for the world. It's the journey that you are on with them" (Bonchek, 2016) and a clear destination has to be provided.

As Dmitri Trenin quite correctly points out, there is a dire and impelling need to renew the European Strategic Narrative in the EaP in the light of a historic-political trajectory: "The new normal of alienation and estrangement is here to stay. It is impossible to say how long, but likely a number of years. The Ukraine crisis of 2014 was not a product of miscalculation or misunderstanding. It grew out of the failure of Russia's integration into the West following the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Communist system and the dissolution of the

Soviet Union" (2016).

The EU and the EaP states' leadership have to pursue a coherent and pragmatic path for Europeanisation, thus avoiding to perceive the EU commitment to EaP against the EaP countries'engagement with Russia, as if these were two counterbalancing options; with the probable exception of Ukraine. A long-term perspective has to be adopted, in order to answer to the question: what kind of states does the EaP initiative wish to create? Overcoming the deeper source of tension, the antagonistic fracturing of the population between the EU and Russia in the EaP countries, should be *the* goal of the European Strategic Narrative. Challenges, such as the general culture of intolerance or the disproportionate power of law-enforcement agencies, have also to be eventually addressed in its framework.

A new systematic re-alignment in the region is emerging. Strategic Narrative is a political roadmap which is constructed in three phases: status quo, conflict and the creation of a new situation. The European re-engagement in the region has to pass this Rubicon in order to continue to achieve meaningful results and turn the current trend. In fact, the European Union's priorities are realistically "managing the running conflicts rather than resolving them, while preventing dangerous accidents; learning the fine art of cooperation within confrontation, in those few cases where the convergence of both sides' interests is compelling" (Trenin, 2016). Likewise, it has to continue to invite all actors concerned. It is quite clear that "the Union can no longer allow itself to operate in ad hoc manner,[…], if it hopes to achieve any strategic objective" (Coelmont, 2012, p. 3), although re-framing the European Strategic narrative faces the Russian challenge, which could prove to be either an obstacle or an opportunity for the EaP initiative and its future.

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