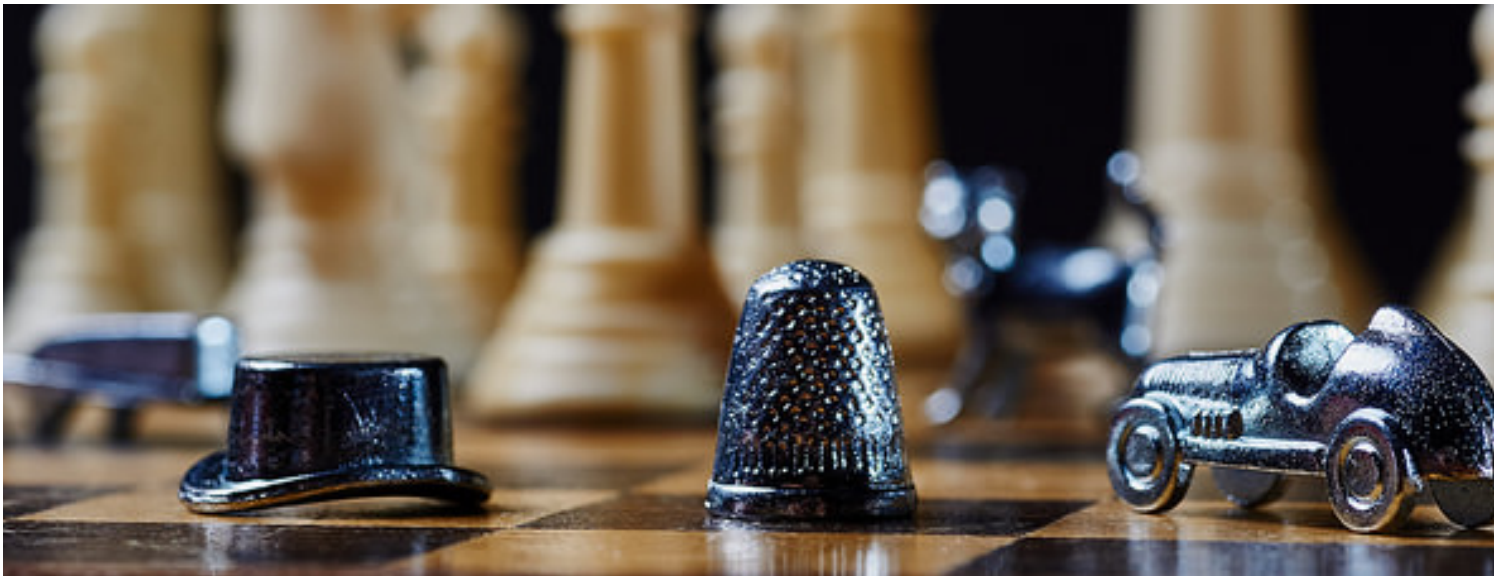




‘The EU plays monopoly, Russia plays chess’



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A Different Game Altogether

‘The EU plays monopoly; Russia plays chess.’ Variants on that theme can be found throughout the entire recent academic discourse on Russo-Western relations. The phrase is often used to emphasize that the two parties involved play fundamentally different games on the world’s stage, leading to a number of misunderstandings and severe clashes of a politico-strategic nature. Neither player seems to understand the other’s motives and tactics, or do they? What does the main playing board really look like? What are the spheres of influence? Why do the EU and Russia seem to understand the terms "winning" and "losing" in different senses, if they consider their respective international relations strategies as a game that must undoubtedly end in a gain or loss for either party in the first place?

The Greater Europe Think Tank challenged aspiring young students to provide their own interpretation of this modern maxim, and to answer the questions above. The result: Four papers have been selected, which are all incorporated in this article. Various dimensions of EU-Russian relations, such as structural and normative ones, are evaluated. In terms of general strategy, the “Russkiy Mir” and “Near Abroad” concepts are juxtaposed with the EU’s Neighbourhood Policy. According to the students, the board on which EU-Russian affairs are played out, are the ongoing Syrian conflict, the Ukrainian civil war, and the Moldova uprisings, among others.

Can a more harmonious stance between the players be established? Only if the EU abandons its universalist value ideology, according to one submitting student. Russia will need to respect human rights if it ever wants to be respected itself, another author argues. Undoubtedly, such measures will require the players to profoundly change their ways, but apparently, it is necessary to adjust the rules in the middle of the game, in order to move forward.

R. Zard, R. Dieleman, Greater Europe Think Tank editors

4. O. Kryshchapovych: Are the EU and Russia symmetrical players?

The discussion of (a)symmetry of foreign policy actors requires identifying the dimensions for comparison. Here I will focus on “structural” (power struggles in internal policy-making process) and “normative” (values promoted by actors’ foreign policy) dimensions.

Structural dimension

Imagine a chess game. On one side of the board, one player makes decisions and moves. On another side of the board, 28 different players argue over decisions, exercising their formal equal voting rights and informal political influence, to get the best possible decision for their individual gain with the objective of arriving at generally acceptable solution. This is what I call a structural dimension, in which the EU and Russia are asymmetrical.

In Russia, decision-making is practiced by a small elite group and exercised through increasingly large powers of the head of state. The public discussion about new policies takes place (if it takes place at all) as merely a facade, while core decisions are made behind the scenes (Taylor, 2013).

The multi-level governance system of the EU ensures that none of the EU bodies has the power to make important decisions independently. While the European Commission’s responsibilities have increased with each extension of the EU (Heidbreder, 2014), the European Parliament and the Council of the EU both remain capable of scrutinising the European Commissions’ power. Moreover, despite the declared intention of the Member States to increase cooperation in foreign policy and security (e.g. Maastricht Treaty), there is still a reluctance of large Members States to delegate to the EU the matters of war and peace, and a sound foreign policy with clear goals in the EU Neighbourhood is still missing (Blom et al., 2016:18).

To sum up, in the structural dimension Russia and the EU are asymmetrical players, which manifests itself in the speed of decision-making and reacting to the changes in the geopolitical environment. This structural asymmetry is painfully clear when one simply compares the speed with which Russia annexed Crimea from Ukraine (a few days), and the EU response to the annexation.

Normative dimension

In the normative dimension, the EU and Russia are symmetrical actors: they both offer their “shared neighbourhood”– with often competing definitions of democracy, human rights and other values. According to the “Normative Power Europe” (NPE) argument, the unique political form of the EU “predisposes it to act in a normative way” (Manners, 2002:242). The EU politicians and technocrats have founded themselves on this assumption to justify the universality of the EU norms of democracy and human rights, which in turn serves legitimise the conditionality of their policies, linked to the promotion of these norms.^{xvi}

Unlike other EU partners in the Eastern neighbourhood, Russia heavily criticised the ENP, considering it an illegitimate imposition of European values. Since the mid-2000s, Russia has offered its own concept of “sovereign democracy” –one where countries decide for themselves

what their final product of democratisation should be (Casier, 2013). More recently, the Russian normative agenda was formulated as “Russkiy Mir” – the idea of a civilizational community, united by common history and Christian Orthodox values, which de facto confronts normative goals of the EU’s Neighbourhood Policy (Wawrzonek, 2014).

To conclude, the fact that both the EU and Russia turn to normative arguments to justify their policies towards the countries in the “shared neighbourhood” makes them symmetrical players in the normative dimension. Symmetrical attempts of Russia and the EU to win over the hearts and minds of citizens in their respective neighbouring countries – most notably Ukraine and Moldova – have resulted in the creation of ideational “battlefields” as components of the ‘frozen’ conflict between Moldova and Transnistria since 1992 and the ongoing military conflict in the East of Ukraine since 2014.

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