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**Stabilization, Resilience and the Perpetuation of Conflict: the EU and Russia  
as Normative Actors**

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## **Stabilization, Resilience and the Perpetuation of Conflict: the EU and Russia as Normative Actors**

The EU–Russia relationship has been shaped to a significant degree by diverging ideas about the meaning of Europe and by a broader normative contestation. This rivalry originated, at least in part, in the fact that in the first 15–20 years after the end of the Cold War, the EU seemed to embrace a post-sovereign outlook, associated with de-bordering, globalisation and the end-of-history utopia that saw no alternatives to liberal democracy. This led Brussels to exactly the type of normative activism that made Russia deeply uneasy about the EU’s intentions, given that neither the EU nor NATO were particularly keen on opening their doors to Russia. To make sure its concerns were attended to, Moscow decided to leave the terrain of normative contestation and to use military force, with what looks for the time being as irreversible consequences.

It is ironic that Russia’s new assertiveness forced the EU to abandon its post-sovereign worldview. The EU’s Global Strategy, which declares a state of ‘existential crisis within and beyond the European Union’, sets stabilisation and resilience as key priorities both internally and with regard to the neighbourhood. This indicates that the Union is moving away from its previous self-identity as a normative power and towards a more traditional, pragmatic understanding of sovereignty and territorial borders as something that needs to be protected against external threats.

Paradoxically, this realignment means that the EU and Russia now stand closer to each other in the sense of being wary of the post-sovereign world, which, as it turned out, is full not just of opportunities but of challenges and threats. However, at least for now, there is no indication that this conceptual similarity is likely to bring about an easing of the tensions and an end to the normative rivalry. However, any attempts to move in this direction are currently blocked due to a fundamental lack of trust in Russia’s leaders’ intentions and in their willingness to keep any promises that might be given as part of a hypothetical future compromise. Russia’s critics would argue that it had always stood outside of the European civilisation, and the only reason why it used to demonstrate more cooperative behaviour was the weakness resulting from the Soviet

collapse. Overcoming this mistrust would be a daunting task for any current or future Russian leader.

The change of leadership in Ukraine might present a unique opportunity for at least partially rebuilding the trust between Russia and the EU. If Moscow could find a way to stop framing Ukraine as an adversary and demonstrate good will in resolving the deadlock in the Donbas, this could constitute a solid foundation for a pragmatic compromise with the EU. It is not clear, however, whether such a compromise is seen by the current Russian leadership as in any way preferable to the current situation, which might be interpreted as the best possible fit for Russia's geopolitical priorities. In other words, it is not clear whether Russia really wants to build a better relationship with the EU. It might be the case that the current state of affairs is the optimal equilibrium. If this is indeed the case, any way forward is only possible with the change of policy priorities on either side, which, in turn, would imply a change in the dominant understandings of the respective identities. Under such circumstances, the best policy recommendation is wait and see.

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