

EU-Russian Relations and the Ukraine Crisis

by Nicholas Ross Smith

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reviewed by George Voskopoulos*

EU-Russia relations have been defined by a number of defining parameters that affect the conflict-cooperation framework of the two actors. Nicholas Ross focuses on this complex relation by scrutinising the effects and side-effects of the Ukraine Crisis, as well as the role of western security architecture in qualitatively defining the cooperation-conflict ratio.

The author's descriptive approach covers both overt and covert elements that have constituted points of friction in an analysis that implicitly refers to a forceful interdependence framework. The Ukraine crisis has emerged as a critical test that still divides the two sides and sets challenges on multiple, inter-connected levels. Ross-Smith's supports that the crisis gave vent to divergent, if not contending, theoretical approaches to regional security settings and the way interests of the sides involved can be accommodated.

The book by Nicolas Roth Smith looks into the issue from different perspectives with a view to providing insight to a complex security spectrum that, to a great extent, defines security in the bilateral, multilateral and European contexts. The three levels of analysis used, namely historical, empirical and theoretical, provide an inclusive and conclusive picture of the choices made by the EU and Russia in the Ukraine crisis under the impact of NATO's expansion to the East.

The book reflects insights into neo-classical theory, defining the spatial dimension of the issue within the context of a "shared neighbourhood". The author defines Ukraine as a testing territory, a testing ground for EU–Russia relations. After pointing out the increased, in the specific milieu, importance of constructivism, he uses the main EU-centric theories of explaining EU foreign policy choices, namely: the institution-oriented approach

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and intergovernmentalism, providing hindsight for state action and autonomy. Ross-Smith puts emphasis on the issues emerging from these two approaches, since nominal EU common interest clashes with Member States' national interests. This *sui generis* approach is a third way mentioned in an effort to explain the formulation of foreign policy choices.

Russian foreign policy is analysed through the traditional method of analysis pattern, i.e., international system level analysis and state level analysis. Nicholas Ross Smith makes a distinction within the former, namely structuralistic and rationalistic analysis, in an effort to provide causal explanations to choices made. Within this spectrum, structural realist approaches emphasised the shift of Russia's preferences, a tendency which, according to the author, points to the need and actual quest for defining explanatory variables of state behaviour.

The security pillar of the two actors (EU-Russia) is scrutinised under different competitive perspectives, namely geopolitical, geoeconomic, energy and strategic, within a mutual completion mode. Trade, in particular, is analysed within a comparative framework, illustrating the ontological challenges for all sides involved in the security equation. Energy analysis is based on the status of Ukraine as a transit state and the way/circumstances the EU-Russia-Ukraine historical context has been shaped. Eventually, Smith points to an overt, yet subtle, clash of interests affecting the EU and Russia in the Ukraine conflict (based on "ideology and scope"), a fact that leads to existential dilemmas for Kiev, which is forced to make critical decisions determining the state's security and actual survival.

The EU and Russia are treated as adversaries, since they engage in international politics using soft and hard power. Russia is portrayed as a typical hard power actor, a fact that causes negative evaluation cognitions by a typical soft power like the EU. The use of literature is extensive in the author's quest for making comparative evaluative judgments. Ukraine is seen and treated as the major, but not sole, point of friction between the EU and Russia through a systemic prism, namely that of bipolarity and the emergence of a multipolar system. Positioned in Russia's vicinity, the Ukraine crisis is seen as an issue of exercising influence, especially after Russia's status shifted from a world pole to a second tier power. Relations between the EU and Russia are defined by the author in a pessimistic and a less pessimistic framework within a multilayered power range framework. The Ukraine crisis externalised Russia's military power, while illustrating "Ukraine's precarious geopolitical positioning between the EU and Russia".

In terms of security the EU has emphasised the need to apply a regime strategy. Being aware of the EU's capabilities, Smith underlines the dissimilar aspects of nominal power represented by the two actors, i.e., soft and hard. This very fact defines the means to be used by both actors to produce desired outcomes within the context of a competitive strategic relation.

In its conclusion, Nicholas Ross Smith builds upon his “layers” of analysis (historical, empirical, and theoretical) to provide three alternative scenarios for the future, based on the way both actors interact within a clearly defined spatial dimension, where their interests overlap. Ukraine is a crucial part of this interaction space. The Best Case Scenario, the Worst Case Scenario, and the Likely Case Scenario represent alternative outcomes based on a mixture of options to be defined by alternative interaction modes and their accommodating capacity.

The Best Case Scenario points to Ukraine’s free choice of moving on with its strategic relation with the EU and NATO. Ross indicates the rather unrealistic nature of this outcome, yet, defines clear prerequisites for a compromise among Russia, the EU and Ukraine under the impact of NATO’s expanded mission.

The Worst Case Scenario depicts a new Cold War environment and builds upon antagonism between Russia and NATO as well as on the formation of a heavily securitised relation. This would affect Ukraine and would most likely lead to its *de facto* and *de jure* parcelisation. In this case, the country would be a frog under the battling buffaloes.

To the author, the Likely Case Scenario seems the most realistic, since it meets the security needs and fulfils the strategic priorities of the EU, Russia, and NATO, at least on a minimum common denominator ground. According to this accommodating pattern, Ukraine will serve as a buffer state, thus allowing Eastern Europe to have a bipolar element, a goal that does not create a security dilemma for Moscow. For Ross-Smith, this scenario is “the least costly to the EU and Russia” and eases tensions in the common neighbourhood territory. His evaluation is based on the assumption that the West has somehow accepted the Finlandisation of Ukraine, since it is reluctant to move on to actual military projection. Eventually, Ross-Smith realises that the complexities of international politics make it impossible to provide sound prediction patterns.