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THE PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN THE EU AND RUSSIA AFTER THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE LISBON TREATY – REALITY OR FICTION

Daniela Bochvarska
University Sc. Cyril and Methodius
Skopje, North Macedonia
daniela.bocvarska@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The European Union constantly strives to impose itself as a catalyst for change and an influential factor in relations with states. This issue becomes particularly relevant when considering the impact of the Lisbon Treaty. The question arises whether the Treaty contributed to the EU becoming a global actor capable of creating an effective and credible foreign and security policy.

The turbulences taking place today on a global scale represent a real challenge for the proactive engagement of the EU in the sphere of CFSP. To accomplish more in this domain, it is imperative that the European Union accords greater priority to its partnerships with strategic allies, as sustained engagement and enhanced collaboration are essential for maintaining a clear focus on its overarching objectives.

This paper focuses on examining the European Union's relationship with one of its main strategic challenges-Russia-and explores how the changes introduced by the Lisbon Treaty have facilitated the development of a framework for meaningful cooperation between them.

Keywords: *partnership, neighborhood, CFSP, Lisbon treaty, Russia*

INTRODUCTION

The European Union is facing a major challenge that will determine its future global positioning. Namely, the EU is facing the need to overcome the deficit in its image. The EU needs to create a positive image that would portray it as a transformative force capable of integrating into the cultural and political diversity of the world to ensure that the interests of all involved are considered. The European Union's international role and conduct are inherently linked to broader global dynamics, and the evolution of its external and security policy is closely tied to the nature of its collaboration with strategic partners and neighboring states.

The EU requires a unified foreign policy with well-defined goals to make this cooperation possible. Synchronously, the EU must have both the institutional readiness and the means required to accomplish its goals. These factors underscored the need to develop the Union's legal structure to bolster the CFSP's efficiency, coherence, and consistency. The Treaty of Lisbon was expected to overcome this deficiency.

Maintaining a single, cohesive voice in global affairs has turned into a priority for the EU, which, faced with multidimensional growing crises and security threats in the world, needed to resolve the issue of limited strategic vision. Rising disagreements among an expanding number of member states have hindered the EU's ability to take unified action in dealings with strategic partners and nearby countries. One of the biggest challenges for the EU was cooperation with Russia.

The international community places great importance on the relationship between the EU and Russia. Throughout history, their relations have gone through different phases, oscillating between periods of cooperation and periods of rivalry and mistrust. Russia has always faced the dilemma of whether to impose itself as a key player in Europe or remain on the periphery of the continent. However, this position has significantly changed over time, with Russia striving to position itself as a relevant factor in international relations. With its wealth of raw materials, Russia has emerged as a global energy leader and main energy resource provider. Although EU-Russia relations have always been turbulent, they continuously cooperate in areas of mutual interest, namely: energy, trade, and most importantly-stability.

Nevertheless, despite ongoing cooperation, the EU appears to lack a coherent policy towards Russia. Within this context, there is division within the EU, as a significant number of member states are reliant on Russian energy or uphold other forms of cooperation with Russia. On the other side are Poland (because of its fear of Russian retaliation due to historical legacies) and the Baltic states (where a large Russian minority lives and where there is fear of a potential conflict with Russia).

The EU has voiced concerns about the condition of democracy in Russia, whereas Russia frequently alleges the EU of hypocrisy and applying unequal treatment. Due to these stark differences, both parties have consistently aimed to manage their relationship through a pragmatic approach, seeking to preserve stability and security both within the region and more broadly. (Cierco, 2013)

However, although the EU and Russia could have jointly contributed to resolving global and regional conflicts, the partnership they advocated did not show results in finding ways to address the contentious issues, which eventually escalated into a serious problem in their mutual relations.

PHASES IN EU–RUSSIA RELATIONS

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, EU-Russia relations can be divided into two distinct phases. In the initial phase, the relationship was largely shaped by the EU. At the time, Russia was politically unstable, economically fragile, and lacked influence. The EU played a dominant role in setting the agenda and influencing policies, promoting European standards

and institutional frameworks, along with supporting the development of democracy in Russia. In the second phase, the relations changed substantially. Supported by the rise in energy prices, Russia became increasingly stronger, behaved more assertively, and advocated for stronger regional cooperation. The rise of Russian influence was particularly apparent after the series of revolutions in the former Soviet states. For Russia, these revolutions represented a threat and a clear indicator of the West's increased influence over this area. (Cierco, 2013).

Because of shared, interconnected, and mutually beneficial interests, the EU and Russia implemented joint measures that laid the groundwork for collaboration in specific areas. (Jovic-Lazic, 2009).

The signing of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement in 1994 marked both the initial move toward normalizing relations and the establishment of the first legal framework. This Agreement served only as a basis for further joint cooperation. It was intended to strengthen trade and investments, ensure stable economic relations rooted in market and sustainability principles, and facilitate Russia's gradual involvement in wider European collaborative processes. (Jovic-Lazic, 2015). The EU was split between two perspectives: one viewed Russia as a prospective partner that could be integrated through Europeanization, gradually bringing it closer to the EU's sphere of influence. These member states insisted on involving Russia in as many European processes as possible and supported the entry of Russian investments into the European energy sector. On the other hand, the second perspective regarded Russia as a potential danger due to its strengthening influence, dominance over former Soviet territories, and a form of governance that conflicted with Western democratic norms. As a result, these EU members favored NATO's expansion eastward and the step-by-step integration of eastern neighbors into the EU. (Bindi & Angelescu, 2012).

The Partnership and Cooperation Agreement had a limited duration (until 2007), after which, negotiations began for the establishment of a New Agreement.

CHALLENGES TO ACHIEVING GENUINE STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP AND MUTUAL COOPERATION

The European Council's 1993 Copenhagen decision to offer accession prospects to Central and Eastern European states significantly advanced the EU's role as a stabilizing actor in Europe. At the same time, the EU's eastward enlargement-eventually reaching Russia's borders-contributed to a gradual deterioration of EU-Russia relations. The accession of three former Soviet republics and several former satellite states introduced political dynamics that Russia perceived as unprecedented in both scope and ambition. The EU became a regulator that Europeanized not only the states fully integrated into its structure but also began to encompass a wide spectrum of states located outside the European continent. Russia could not remain a mere silent observer of these processes (Bindi & Angelescu, 2012).

This tension was reinforced by the absence of clearly defined geographical boundaries for Europe, along with Article 49 of the Maastricht Treaty, which left future enlargement open to political interpretation. The resulting ambiguity regarding the EU's long-term intentions toward its eastern periphery intensified Russian concerns, while simultaneously exposing deep divisions among EU member states. The inclusion of new member states further complicated relations with Moscow, as these countries held divergent historical experiences and threat perceptions. Three different groups of states from the EU's eastern enlargement were identified, each with a different stance toward Russia. Some were "pro-Russian," others were "anti-Russian," while a third group remained "neutral." The majority of new EU members, influenced by their historical experiences, perceived Russia's external policy as assertive and detrimental, and appealed to the EU for unified support in managing their bilateral tensions with Russia.

Attempts to institutionalize cooperation with Russia culminated in the 2003 St. Petersburg Summit and the launch of the “four common spaces,” which sought to structure collaboration in economic, legal, security, and research domains. Economic and political ties between the EU and Russia steadily grew, moving toward the establishment of a strategic partnership, with trade and energy serving as the focal points of their cooperation. (EU External Action, 2016). Russia’s foreign policy became more assertive, driven by economic recovery and the strategic use of energy resources, reinforcing asymmetrical dependencies across the post-Soviet space (Cierco, 2013). While economic interdependence-particularly in trade and energy-deepened, political trust remained fragile.

Up until the launch of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), the EU largely pursued a uniform approach toward Eastern Europe. Considered by some countries as a possible step toward EU membership, the ENP was designed to build closer, preferential ties with the EU’s Eastern neighbors. The EU’s growing interest in incorporating an eastern dimension into its external policies was further demonstrated by the launch of the Eastern Partnership initiative (as established by the Council in 2009). This initiative focused on strengthening cooperation with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Although Belarus was initially a member, it suspended its participation in 2021 (EU External Action, 2025).

The European Neighborhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership aimed to promote political reform, economic integration, and regional stability. Although framed as inclusive and cooperative, these initiatives were perceived by Russia as EU-centric and intrusive. Moscow rejected participation in the ENP, refusing to be treated as a “neighbor” rather than an equal partner-an exclusion that became a structural obstacle in EU-Russia relations (Razumkov Centre, 2012).

Efforts to negotiate a new EU-Russia cooperation agreement revealed persistent internal EU constraints. Bilateral disputes between individual member states and Russia-particularly involving Poland and the Baltic states-frequently obstructed collective EU positions. Disagreements over minority rights, energy security, and trade highlighted the EU’s difficulty in depoliticizing bilateral conflicts and speaking with a single voice. Institutional rivalry and divergent national interests continued to undermine policy coherence (Cierco, 2013).

Despite recurring tensions, both sides maintained strong pragmatic incentives for cooperation in the energy sector. The EU depended on Russian oil and gas, while Russia relied on the EU as its primary market and investment partner. The main problems between them concerned differing perceptions regarding the control of the European energy market. Their ongoing struggle centered on the imposition of regional influence in this sphere (Hadfield, 2006). Improving energy efficiency was one area where both sides could work together to achieve a win-win situation. Therefore, it was essential for Europe to present a unified stance in its dialogue with Russia.

The negotiations on a renewed EU–Russia Agreement, launched in 2008, were initially put on hold following Russia’s military involvement in Georgia. The key sources of tension during this period also included:

- The proposal (presented during the NATO Summit in April 2008), by then U.S. President George W. Bush to extend NATO Membership Action Plans to Georgia and Ukraine, which was ultimately opposed by France and Germany;
- The U.S.-revived missile defense shield project in Eastern Europe;
- Kosovo’s declaration of independence on February 17, 2008, was acknowledged by two-thirds of the EU countries;
- The alleged Western involvement in supporting color revolutions within the countries on the EU’s eastern borders (Georgia in 2003, Ukraine in 2004, and Kyrgyzstan in 2005).

All of these issues directly affected Russia and had a significant impact on its attempt to cooperate with the EU.

A paradoxical characteristic emerged in their relations: on the one hand, the methods of cooperation between them were advancing, while on the other hand, the quality of their political relationship was deteriorating, preventing the partners from forming a genuine strategic partnership (Cierco, 2013).

It was expected that the Lisbon Treaty would define the procedural foundations governing the EU's interactions with neighboring states, such as Russia.

EU–RUSSIA RELATIONS FOLLOWING THE ENACTMENT OF THE LISBON TREATY

The European Union is described as *sui generis*, or 'unique' in its own right because, unlike the other international governmental organizations, it can actually be said to exercise a degree of sovereignty over its members via law-making powers in certain areas that its members agreed to relocate to the supranational level. (Rashica, 2018)

The innovations envisaged in the Lisbon Treaty were supposed to enable the functioning of a single structure of the Union, and the issue of EU subjectivity (which had long been a serious obstacle to the Union's efficiency on a global scale) was finally regulated. The treaty explicitly delineated the EU's responsibilities within the framework of the CFSP, with its legal provisions designed to enhance both the cohesion among member states and the effectiveness of the EU's external policy. It laid the groundwork for the EU to assume a position on the global stage that reflects its status and aspirations.

The internal reforms introduced by the Lisbon Treaty, along with efforts to unify the EU's external representation, were intended to advance the EU's international standing and enhance its external image. Namely, the Treaty was supposed to overcome disagreements within the Union. Among its innovations, the Treaty created the European External Action Service (EEAS), designed to enhance the EU's visibility and effectiveness in international affairs. Another innovation was the role of the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR/VP), who was designed to enhance leadership and continuity by combining roles previously dispersed across institutions. The provisions of the Treaty contributed to ambiguity in the European Union's external policy objectives, impeding the formulation of a consistent and effective strategy. However, these measures were intended to promote collaboration with the strategic partners and neighboring countries.

The EU's approach to its neighboring countries constitutes only one aspect of its broader foreign and security policy. Nonetheless, when dealing with these regional matters, the EU often demonstrated an absence of clear goals and insufficient commitment. The rivalry between the EU and Russia for influence over these regions became unavoidable. This was understandable, as the EU aimed for Eastern European countries to adopt the European model, whereas Russia sought to prevent these states from aligning with it. These misunderstandings put Eastern European countries in a difficult position, forcing them to make a geopolitical choice between the EU and Russia.

A key challenge following the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty was managing the interplay between EU and Russian policies in their common neighborhood, which includes Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. These were former Soviet republics that Russia considered to be of "privileged interest." Situated at the crossroads between Europe and Asia, these states developed what was referred to as a "one-sided" economy. They gravitated toward economic integration with the EU, while cooperation with Eastern and Western Asia remained of secondary importance (Wang & Wan, 2014). There was a clear difference between countries aiming for integration into the EU, such as Moldova and Ukraine, and those like Belarus, which did not prioritize EU accession in their foreign policy. Some states, including Georgia, experienced strained connections with Russia, while many others South Caucasus countries faced internal conflicts, such as Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The Lisbon Treaty sought to widen the scope of engagement with neighboring nations. The European Union's emergence as a foreign and security policy actor was intrinsically linked to the imperative of promoting stability, democratization, and comprehensive political, economic, and social development in the surrounding region. The EU was increasingly expected to function as a stabilizing agent within these contexts. Its effectiveness in responding promptly to potential crises along its eastern frontiers, coupled with mechanisms of socialization and integration, constituted a critical determinant for ensuring long-term regional stability.

For the first time, the Lisbon Treaty established clear guidelines governing relations with neighboring countries, fully integrating the European Neighborhood Policy within the Union's legal framework. Article 7a states: "The Union shall develop a special relationship with neighboring states, aimed at fostering prosperity and good unneighborly relations grounded in the Union's values, as well as close and peaceful cooperation." This policy was designed with the ambitious objective of transforming instability along the EU's borders into a foundation of friendship and collaboration among neighboring states.

Numerous action plans targeting neighboring countries underscored the importance of comprehensive reforms, including the strengthening of democratic institutions, the adoption of revised electoral frameworks, judicial reform, the ratification of international human rights treaties, among other measures. (EU External Action, 2015). These plans created opportunities for enhanced collaboration with European Union's institutions, alignment with CFSP declarations, closer engagement between the leaders and elites of these countries and the EU, and greater economic integration.

The persistent conflicts within the former Soviet Union's territory presented obstacles to the progress of these states and hindered the EU's efforts to stabilize its surrounding region. On the other hand, as a result of the revolutions, there were undesirable regime changes in Georgia and Ukraine, due to which Russia-feeling that its influence over these areas was being threatened-sought to impose a more dominant foreign policy. (Cierco, 2013).

In dealing with these problems, the EU demonstrated weakness and a lack of capacity for action. It responded belatedly to the crises that emerged in its neighborhood and was unable to prevent them. The EU's role in the Russia-Georgia conflict was minimal, with France taking the lead in bilateral mediation to secure a ceasefire, followed by the deployment of EU Monitoring Mission personnel in Georgia, financial assistance, and the prospect of a Free Trade Agreement. In Moldova, high-level bilateral discussions between Russia and Germany resulted in a proposal to create a joint EU-Russia committee to address key regional political and security matters. These instances exemplify the largely bureaucratic approach to managing political challenges.

The EU's response to these events sparked a debate about whether it had absorbed the lessons from the Balkan conflicts and whether these experiences contributed to its reluctance to take a more assertive role in managing conflicts in Eastern Europe. One of the most important lessons was that the EU must identify the causes of a crisis much earlier, adopt a preventive approach in crisis management, and, above all, be capable of defining it. Otherwise, the risk of conflict expansion and instability increases, along with the possibility that the conflict could spill over into other states and the wider region. The need for a clear strategy of action was essential, given the fact that the states of this region still face unresolved domestic political issues as well as a lack of internal cohesion.

The conflicts along the EU's eastern borders demonstrated that Brussels, in practice, remained unable to establish itself as a decisive actor in their resolution, relying primarily on confidence-building measures. This significantly constrained the EU's global position.

The EU's weakness gave Russia considerable room for maneuver on contentious issues in the shared neighborhood. One of the challenges Russia faced was its effort to draw more neighboring countries into its regional economic and trade initiatives-such as the Customs

Union-prior to their potential integration into the broader free trade area with the EU. (Bindi & Angelescu, 2012).

Despite the Lisbon Treaty's ambition to consolidate the European Union's role as a coherent foreign and security policy actor, the post-Lisbon period revealed persistent and, in some cases, deepened institutional constraints that significantly limited the EU's external effectiveness-particularly in its eastern neighborhood and in its relations with Russia. While the Treaty introduced important structural reforms, these innovations largely failed to overcome entrenched political divisions, overlapping competences, and the dominance of intergovernmental decision-making in sensitive security matters.

A central institutional limitation concerned the role of the HR/VP. In practice, the position remained heavily constrained by member state sovereignty in the CFSP. The HR/VP lacked autonomous agenda-setting power and was dependent on unanimity within the Council, particularly on issues involving Russia, where national interests diverged sharply. As a result, the HR/VP often functioned more as a coordinator or mediator among member states than as a strategic leader capable of articulating and enforcing a unified EU position.

The EEAS, another key Lisbon innovation, similarly suffered from structural weaknesses that limited its strategic impact. Intended to act as a unified diplomatic service, the EEAS emerged instead as a hybrid bureaucracy characterized by unclear chains of command, competition between institutional cultures, and insufficient integration with national diplomatic services. Rather than resolving institutional fragmentation, the EEAS often reproduced it, particularly in policy areas where competencies overlapped with those of the European Commission (trade, energy, enlargement) or the European Council (security and defense). This institutional ambiguity undermined long-term strategic planning and reduced the EU's capacity for rapid and decisive action in crisis situations.

Coordination problems among EU institutions further compounded these challenges. The Lisbon Treaty did not eliminate rivalry between supranational and intergovernmental actors. Instead, it institutionalized a complex governance structure in which responsibilities for external action were dispersed across multiple bodies. While the Commission retained strong authority over economic instruments-such as trade agreements, sanctions implementation, and financial assistance-the Council and member states dominated security and defense decisions. This division frequently resulted in policy incoherence, with economic engagement and normative conditionality proceeding in parallel with weak or inconsistent security commitments. Russia was able to exploit these inconsistencies, engaging selectively with individual member states while resisting EU-level initiatives perceived as threatening its influence.

The impact of the Lisbon Treaty on the EU's relations with the states on its eastern borders remained modest. While the Treaty sought to enhance the EU's international exposure, in practice, it exposed a broader reluctance among European institutions to cede their individual authority. (Bindi & Angelescu, 2012).

Moreover, the requirement for consensus in CFSP decision-making significantly constrained the EU's ability to act strategically toward Russia. Consequently, the EU often responded belatedly to crises, relying on diplomatic statements, sanctions, and confidence-building measures rather than preventive or coercive instruments.

Although expectations were high, many aspirations for the EU's foreign policy went unmet following the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty. The post-Lisbon institutional framework thus revealed a fundamental mismatch between the EU's global ambitions and its actual capacity to act. While the Treaty strengthened the Union's legal personality and formal visibility, it did not resolve the core political constraint: the reluctance of member states to transfer meaningful authority in foreign and security policy to the supranational level. Instead

of speaking with one voice, bilateral contacts of certain member states with Russia continued to determine the direction of their cooperation, and at times-undermine collective EU action.

The persistence of institutional fragmentation, combined with divergent national interests, limited the EU's ability to function as a credible security provider in its eastern neighborhood. These constraints became fully apparent following Russia's forcible acquisition of Crimea in 2014 and Russia's aggression of Ukraine in February 2022, which have significantly and deeply influenced the further evolution of the relations between EU and Russia. As a result, political dialogue and cooperation mechanisms between them-including in the field of trade-were suspended. The EU adopted measures and imposed sanctions on Russia with the aim of significantly weakening its economic power (especially in the areas of technology and the market), thereby substantially reducing its military strength as well. (EC, 2025). This change in perspective is especially clear in official EU statements, which no longer refer to Russia as a "strategic partner" but instead label it as a "key strategic challenge". (EPP, 2021).

Ultimately, the post-Lisbon experience demonstrates that institutional reform, while necessary, is insufficient without strategic consensus, stronger central leadership, and a willingness among member states to prioritize collective action over national preferences.

CONCLUSION

The extent to which the European project can be expanded to promote geopolitical stability serves as a clear measure of the EU's overall success or failure in the international arena. Yet the EU's weakness in positioning itself internationally is most evident in its relations with Russia, which are characterized by constant oscillation. The aforementioned examples illustrate that the EU's relationship with Russia ultimately proved illusory. While the EU's eastern enlargement-extending to Russia's borders-was one of several factors fueling tensions, it was not the sole cause.

The enduring and drawn-out conflicts-particularly the so-called color revolutions in former Soviet states-challenged the EU's efforts to bring stability to its surrounding region. But these conflicts, along with the status quo that emerged after months of tensions and warfare, demonstrated that the EU lacked the capacity to be a security stabilizer in these areas, offering only its so-called "soft power" in these crisis hotspots. Regardless of the support it received from international allies, the EU remained weak. Russia capitalized on this very vulnerability, securing considerable leverage in handling contested matters within the shared neighborhood and asserting its dominance over these areas. In this setting, the Lisbon Treaty had only a marginal impact on shaping the European Union's engagement with the countries along its eastern borders. Moreover, the EU's experiences in managing various conflicts did not translate into improved strategic effectiveness.

The limited success of the European Union in promoting geopolitical stability in its eastern neighborhood ultimately exposes the gap between the ambitions of the Lisbon Treaty and its practical outcomes. Although the Treaty was designed to enhance coherence, visibility, and effectiveness in EU foreign and security policy, its institutional innovations failed to deliver meaningful strategic capacity in relations with Russia. In particular, the post-Lisbon architecture did not resolve the EU's longstanding problems of fragmentation, weak leadership, and divergent national interests.

Although the creation of the HR/VP was intended to centralize foreign policy authority and ensure consistency between supranational and intergovernmental dimensions- in practice, the HR/VP remained constrained by limited autonomous decision-making power, heavy dependence on consensus among member states, and overlapping competences with the European Council and the Commission. This institutional ambiguity significantly weakened the EU's ability to respond decisively to Russian actions, especially during moments of acute crisis in the shared neighborhood.

Similarly, the establishment of the European External Action Service was meant to provide the Union with a professional diplomatic service capable of strategic planning and rapid response. Yet structural weaknesses-including insufficient resources, unclear hierarchies, and persistent coordination problems with national diplomatic services-undermined its effectiveness. Rather than functioning as a unified foreign policy instrument, the EEAS often became an arena of bureaucratic competition, further diluting the EU's external posture toward Russia.

Coordination gaps among EU institutions further compounded these shortcomings. Divergent priorities between the Council, Commission, and member states repeatedly prevented the formulation of a coherent and unified strategy. This lack of internal cohesion enabled Russia to exploit institutional divisions and assert dominance within the shared neighborhood, particularly by leveraging hard power where the EU could offer only normative influence and economic incentives.

Consequently, despite the Lisbon Treaty's promise to elevate the EU into a credible global actor, the Union failed to translate its normative ambitions into strategic effectiveness. The EU's post-Lisbon experience demonstrates that institutional reform alone is insufficient without political will, strategic clarity, and genuine coordination among member states.

In light of Russia's continued aggression and long-term hybrid campaigns, the EU can no longer rely on illusory partnerships or underperforming institutional mechanisms. A new, realistic, and long-term framework for engagement with Russia is required-one that prioritizes resilience, deterrence, and strategic autonomy, while firmly supporting democracy, the rule of law, and civil society in the eastern neighborhood (EPP, 2021). Only through addressing the structural and political failures exposed since Lisbon can the European Union hope to assert itself as a credible geopolitical actor.

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