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EU and Russia competing projects in the neighbourhood: an ontological security approach

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/0034-7329202000113>

Rev. Bras. Polít. Int., 63(1): e013, 2020

Abstract

This paper analyses the development of European security since the end of the Cold War and how the European Union's and Russia's understandings of European security have diverged. The paper argues that the competing projects of the EU and Russia in the neighbourhood are a reflection of ontological insecurity which have prevented a renewed European security regime from emerging.

Keywords: ontological security; European Union; Russia; eastern neighbourhood; Ukraine

Received: April 20, 2020

Accepted: August 15, 2020

Introduction

This paper analyses the development of European security since the end of the Cold War and how the European Union's (EU) and Russia's understandings of European security have diverged, contributing to reinforce feelings of ontological insecurity in both the EU and Russia. The competing projects of the EU and Russia in the neighbourhood became an expression of difference, here analysed from an ontological security approach. The paper argues that these competing projects, promoting divergent visions of European security, – materialized for example in the EU's Eastern Partnership and Russia's integration projects in the former Soviet space, or in a more explicit form in Ukraine, – are a reflection of ontological insecurity. The post-Cold War security order was built around ontological insecurity in Russia and the EU, which has prevented a renewed European security regime – as a result, the neighbourhood became the locus of geopolitical confrontation, such as the

Ukraine demonstrates. Understanding security from an ontological perspective allows us to better grasp the EU's and Russia's narrative construction and identitarian self-definition, and how these have been moulded in relation to feelings of anxiety and routine-seeking. As Kinnvall and Mitzen (cited in Kinnvall et al. 2018, 255) put it, “all security is ontological’ because it is impossible to separate ways of seeing the world from a sense of well-being in the world.” In this way, the article seeks to understand the disparate European and Russian approaches to European security, and how Ukraine further contributed to reinforcing ontological insecurity feelings.

Applying an ontological security framework to the analysis of EU-Russia relations, with a focus on the shared neighbourhood, allows an innovative overview over how (in)security is conceptualised and grounded in narratives about the self, and on how these narratives have been flexibly adapting to feelings of ontological insecurity; how the biographical narratives underpinning self-reflexivity and context-dimension demonstrate anxiety about the self's ability to respond to threats, both from the EU and Russia; and how the neighbourhood, and particularly Ukraine, became the locus of confrontation and competition, highlighting anxiety and fears about the loss of a crafted identity associated with different models of development. Ontological security allows for an in-depth analysis of EU-Russia competing relations framing these in the anxiety-driven narratives that have been reflecting challenges to selfhood, both in the case of the EU and Russia. Dynamics of fear, distrust, and anxiety have prevailed, despite moments of cooperation, reformatting narratives in an exclusionary and differentiating manner with direct implications in perceptions, policies, and practice. How the distinct interpretations about European security in EU and Russia came to be reinforced in dynamics of ontological insecurity, with a special focus on their shared neighbourhood, is here the focus of analysis.

The paper starts by introducing ontological security as the framework of analysis of European security development since the end of the Cold War, identifying how this approach assists in highlighting dynamics of competition, resistance, and cooperation framed in a comprehensive understanding of security, not only in the sense of material or objective anxieties and fears but also regarding intersubjective meaning – the so-called psycho-socio-political dimensions (Kinnvall et al. 2018) of anxiety and fear. The biographical narratives' framing of the EU and Russian selves and how these have been adjusted according to context, highlight the feelings of ontological (in)security in this relation. Who defines the narrative, feeds it, masters it, is here analysed at the level of the political elites, namely key EU institutional actors and Russia's high-level political decision-makers. This section focuses on how the competing projects of the EU and Russia in the neighbourhood became central to understanding this relationship, in the context of the evolution of European security, and how dynamics of ontological insecurity became present and were reinforced in this process, despite moments of cooperation between the EU and Russia. The paper concludes by arguing that the development of European security fostered ontological insecurity in the EU and Russia, visible in the competing projects developed in the EU-Russia shared neighbourhood. Ukraine became not

only the visible expression of the anxiety and fears related to the questioning of routinized practices and self-identity in the EU, Russia, and Ukraine proper but also of the processes associated with how narratives and practice might reinforce ontological insecurity, contributing to replicate discourses that tend to aggrandize differences.

Ontological security as a framework of analysis

Ontological security theory has made its entry in the field of International Relations in the last two decades, adapting the work of Ronald Laing in the field of Psychology, and of Anthony Giddens in the field of Sociology, to the analysis of the international realm, including states, organisations, and communities. Several authors have been treating ontological security at this “collective level” (Browning 2018; Hansen 2016; Kinnvall 2006; Mitzen 2006; Steele 2008; Zarakol 2010). The theory relates to the security of being, to how the self perceives itself and the surrounding world, in other words, “the subjective sense of who one is, which enables and motivates action and choice” (Mitzen 2006, 344). Ontological security presupposes order and stability, but is not static; just like the self, ontological security is in constant mutation, resulting from self-perception and from interaction with others. As the self has the need to feel stable, dealing with routine anxiety and discontinuity is a process always in-the-making (Kinnvall and Mitzen 2017, 4). Self-identity is a central referential point, where ontological security might become manifest in the way we feel threatened or reinforced in our own identity. Routines become part of a stable self, where autobiographical narratives are important legitimisers of the very self. As many argue, coherent self-narratives are important as they lay the ground for “biographical continuity” (Chernobrov 2016, 582), providing for “basic trust systems” (Bayley 2014). Moreover, they define who we are and provide guidance regarding how we interact. “[...] the self constructs its understanding of itself and its surroundings and acts within these coordinates, gaining power, predictability, and creating common sense in the system, as long as these coordinates remain unchallenged” (Chernobrov 2016, 583).

Differently, a breakdown in routine, disruption of the biographical continuity, uncertainty, instability, bring anxiety and fear, and thus ontological insecurity. However, the need to readapt behaviours, or change routines should not necessarily be interpreted in a negative way, in the sense that it might promote change and reposition the self, ending up reinforcing its own security. Moreover, given a certain freedom to act which this rupture entails, it might even pave the way for including “new forms of political resistance and agency” (Rumelili 2011; 2015), reaffirming the self in a renewed ontological framework. Ukraine’s course from friendly relations with Russia to a state of war illustrates the fundamental shift in the identity narrative from “brotherhood” to “the other as enemy.” The anxiety caused by Russian political moves and discourse, with the annexation of Crimea coming up as the materialization of fear, pushed for Ukraine’s adaptation of its system of meaning socially and politically. Political resistance,

as a result, came to reinforce Ukraine's biographical narrative towards Russia, ending up in self-reinforcing the national narrative in Ukraine, as autonomous and differentiated from that of Russia. This means that "ontological security is not just a question of stability but also adaptability, i.e., openness towards and the ability to cope with change" (Browning and Joenniemi 2017, 32). In this process, the self might reinforce its ontological security by changing patterns of anxiety into new forms of understanding that bring back trust and stability – the re-wording of narratives might express this change and the capacity of adaptation. Yet, this also might result in steps back to a more comfortable setting, "returning home" in search for the lost routinized behaviour that ascribed the feeling of ontological security to the self (on this see Subotić 2016).

In the case of Russia and the EU, this seems to be the trend, a return to past narratives where the parties find the "other as the enemy" narrative as providing well-known ground for action. This will be further analysed in the text. The main point is that routines might be readapted, or even replaced in the pursuit of ontological security, making these moments opportunities for change and flexible adaptation to changing contexts. Nevertheless, these changes are not always positive – as much as they can contribute to ease tensions and build cooperative approaches, they may also lead to negative or conflictual behaviour. Moreover, this also means that in the process of assuring ontological security we might be creating ontological insecurity for others (Croft and Vaughan-Williams 2017, 25). The spiral of ontological insecurity that might result, self-reinforcing negative perceptions and negative behaviours encroached in conflictual narratives might be difficult to stop. The continuous effort to overcome anxiety might end up generating more anxiety, and the narratives that accompany these processes, while momentarily providing for perceived ontological security, are filled up with elements of ontological insecurity.

This feeling of (in)security is both a result of self-reflexion about who we are, and the result of the way we interact with others – this means ontological (in)security combines an inner reflexion about the self with the insertion of this self in the broader context where inter-relations take place. So, the feeling of well-being or of anxiety results from both self-representation and from how the self interrelates with others (see for example Zarakol 2010). Narratives, by establishing cognitive and normative maps (Kinnvall et al. 2018), provide sense to the outside context and reinforce the identity definition of the self, including towards the outside. The master-signifiers, such as "the nation," "the people," "the other," according to Kinnvall et al. (2018) provide for an illusion of stability of the self and the other, contributing in some way to ontological security. Nevertheless, as further analysed, this illusion and construct of the self's narrative providing for routinized behaviours and biographical continuity may be challenged both from inner self-reflexion and from outside challengers. The process of continuous change of the self and of the context where the self interacts with others also means that the feeling of ontological security and insecurity will always be present in the perpetuation and re-adaptation of routines.

EU-Russia competition in the neighbourhood: back to the past

The discursive construction about the neighbourhood and the crisis we currently face in EU-Russia relations show a clash in perspectives that has reinforced ontological insecurity both in the EU and in Russia. In this relationship, the neighbouring space and the discursive constructions about it are relevant for understanding EU-Russia relations. The approaches the EU and Russia have developed towards the neighbourhood-in-between follow differentiated alignments – if, on the one hand, both actors seek a stable and prosperous neighbourhood, on the other hand, the mechanisms and procedures to achieve this overall goal are divergent. The EU put in place the Neighbourhood Policy around the time of the 2004 enlargement, as a policy to respond to anxiety in some of the neighbours not included in the enlargement package. The idea underlining the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) was that this would become an inclusive framework where encompassing policies could be devised in multiple areas of cooperation (Commission of the European Communities 2003). This would become the privileged instrument for the EU to relate to its neighbours, both to the East and South. Due to the heterogeneity and vastness of the geographical area included in the ENP, along with the need for more guided action towards the area, in 2009 the Eastern Partnership (EaP) was put forward (Council of the European Union 2009), involving six states from the post-Soviet space, namely Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine and the three South Caucasus countries, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia.

The policy constituted a reinforcement of the EU narrative on informal integration, stability-promotion, and transformational diplomacy – deepening the biographical construction of the EU as a security actor. Self-reflexively the EU consolidated internally, fostering consensus among the member states towards the neighbourhood, and externally, by projecting its security role to its eastern neighbourhood. In the process, however, Russia's anxiety increased, as it understood the new policy as directly challenging Moscow's role-model-seeking for the post-Soviet space. The competing formal and informal integration dynamics that formed in this space contributed to ontological insecurity in the EU, Russia, and the neighbourhood countries. Materialized in the EaP, promoted by the EU, and regional integration projects in the former Soviet space, such as the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and the Eurasian Economic Union, promoted by Russia, the clashing models in these projects fostered mutual ontological insecurity.

Moreover, we should bear in mind that the EU acts based on what it believes Russia has become as much as Russia acts on the basis of what it believes the EU is (Della Sala 2018, 271; see also Casier 2016). “[T]he expression given and the impression received” keep deeply apart as reflected in Russia's image of itself and the Western image of Russia (Hansen 2016, 364), as well as on the EU's image of itself and the Russian image of the EU. The construct of clashing images, real and imagined, based on differing understandings about the self and the management of relations with the neighbourhood, reinforced ontological insecurity. For example, the EU's Eastern enlargement and the Copenhagen criteria attached to it, particularly in their political

dimension, involving “stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and respect for and protection of minorities” (European Council 1993), understood as an extension of the EU community was perceived in Russia as a threat to its political regime and to its exceptionalism (Akchurina and Della Sala 2018, 1640). The EaP project also raised anxiety in Russia about the EU creating a sphere of influence in the post-Soviet area, potentially diminishing Russia’s status as the primary partner in the area and offering a different model of integration (Alexandrova-Arbatova 2016). For Russia, this “sense of ‘belonging’” is part of its autobiographic narrative according to which “these territories [Siberia, the Caucasus, Central Asia and Eastern Europe] had been conquered, subjugated or otherwise connected to the Russian Empire,” and became part of the “expansion of the Russian Empire and its multinational character. [...] With this arose a whole range of sources that slowly formed the picture of a multinational Russia and its geographic magnitude, embedding this concept into the Russian imaginations of the surrounding world” (Leichtova 2016, 7). The EU also built an understanding of Russia as a country seeking to exert influence beyond its borders, crystallising a sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space, driven by values and norms very distinct from those of the EU, as visible in criticism about violations of fundamental freedoms and rights in Russia. The resulting image is one of “back to the past,” where the re-enactment of “the other as a threat” is visible in narratives rebuilding past rhetoric of confrontation and enmity.

Very telling is Medvedev’s statement at the Munich Conference in 2016, several times quoted, that “we are rapidly rolling into a period of a new cold war. Russia has been presented as well-nigh the biggest threat to NATO, or to Europe, America and other countries [...]. They show frightening films about Russians starting a nuclear war. I am sometimes confused: is this 2016 or 1962?” (Medvedev 2016). At this speech, Medvedev recalled Putin’s 2007 intervention at the Munich Security Conference where criticism towards the West was clearly voiced. At the time, Putin’s narrative emphasised the physical and symbolic division the Berlin Wall represented and how a return to the past seemed to be in motion. In his words, “is it possible that we will once again require many years and decades, as well as several generations of politicians, to disassemble and dismantle these new walls?” (Putin 2007). As mentioned, the ontological insecurity spiral that has embedded EU-Russia relations does not seem easy to reverse.

The EU has built its own narrative around the peace project it sought to become after the great World War. Fostering liberal democratic principles, the self’s identification with a security project meant the need to articulate different national state narratives. The European Security Strategy (ESS) of 2003 (European Council 2003) became part of this actor’s biography, conceptualising the self as a security actor. The Strategy identifies threats, mechanisms to respond to these threats, and the liberal democratic principles that sustain decisions and actions. The EU’s ontological security presupposed a stable neighbourhood, where EU principles would be shared and flourish promoting a neighbourhood akin to the EU. The identification of problems in the neighbourhood was part of EU’s self-reflexion on security, meaning that instability in the neighbourhood was contributing to EU’s ontological insecurity. The ESS document makes explicit that “We need to

extend the benefits of economic and political cooperation to our neighbours in the East while tackling political problems there” (European Council 2003, 8). In its relations with its neighbours, in particular, in the context of the EaP, the fostering of security and democracy, as an expression of the EU-self were very much present. However, the history of the EaP is not a rosy story, with different responses from the partner countries, from deep cooperation to resistance and criticism of “imposition” of values and practices (Börzel and Hüllen 2014; Christou 2010; Dias 2013). The heterogeneity of these countries, and the many challenges associated with reforms and politics of transformation, led the EU to rethink its narrative – the security actor ontological referential frame was maintained, but the mimicking model gave place to “resilience” and the promotion of capacity-building-ownership in the neighbourhood (see European Commission 2017). Moreover, the instability pervading the EU neighbourhood also raises questions about the EU’s own integration process with effects on its “sense of self,” and thus, its ontological security (Johansson-Nogués 2018, 530). This is so as it directly relates to a disruption in the biographic narrative, implying anxiety over the continuity of the self, which different narratives about Russia within the EU only further contribute to exacerbating (see for example Leonard and Popescu 2007; Dempsey 2015).

The EU’s limited transformative capacity as a central part of the self’s definition towards the neighbourhood caused anxiety. EU’s ontological insecurity was reverted by adapting the narrative to fit EU’s response capabilities without ultimately questioning the normative and value-oriented peace project – “principled pragmatism” as stated in the Global Strategy document (2016) illustrates well this line of readjustment of the EU-self.¹ The reference documents on security reflect this growing anxiety. The 2003 ESS is not focusing on violence in the post-Soviet space, whereas the 2008 Report on the Implementation of the European Security Strategy (Council of the European Union 2008), already in the context of the 2008 Georgia war, puts much emphasis on the conflicts taking place in the ‘shared neighbourhood’ area. In 2016, the Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy for the European Union (European Union Global Strategy 2016), positions the EU as a security actor – the post-Crimea annexation context, in particular, provides for the stronger narrative. The EU repositions its narrative, thus, reinforcing its biographical continuity, both towards the self and the other. The document is clearly more security-oriented, as Mälksoo (2016, 376) underlines, putting forward a comprehensive view of security, highlighting defence issues, and positioning the EU as a global actor within security issues. The document presents this vision of the security actor resulting “as much from a realistic assessment of the strategic environment as from an idealistic aspiration to advance a better world” (European Union Global Strategy 2016, 16). The narrative on security is explicit in the acknowledgment made that a secure neighbourhood means a more secure Union: “Internal and external security are ever more intertwined: our security at home entails a parallel interest in peace in our neighbouring and surrounding regions” (European Union Global Strategy 2016, 14).

¹ The EU’s vision of the world is pragmatic as it sees the world as it is and not as it would like it to be, and principled since despite recognising different ways and models, international law and norms are still the reference to be followed (European Union Global Strategy 2016).

In the difficult context within which the document was crafted, amidst harsh relations with Russia and an unsolvable Ukraine instability, facing Brexit and the height of the refugees/migrants crisis, it aimed at reordering the self, allowing for a balancing act between the inner self and the way it interacts with the exterior. As Mälksoo (2016, 376-7) puts it, “The ESS and European Union Global Strategy (EUGS) are similarly exercises in ordering the world by establishing knowledge claims about ‘how the world works’ and thus attempting to keep the fundamental dread of uncertainty at bay.” Therefore, the way the self was framed as a security actor revealed the need to tell a particular story about its positioning and contribution to international issues (see Mälksoo 2016, 383).

Also, the Global Strategy is clear in its wording about Russia’s policies and practices as creating instability and insecurity: “Russia’s violation of international law and the destabilisation of Ukraine, on top of protracted conflicts in the wider Black Sea region, have challenged the European security order at its core” (European Union Global Strategy 2016, 33). The Georgia war in 2008 leading to Russia’s recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and Crimea’s annexation in 2014, in particular, constitute a violation of the borders’ regime in Europe (Averre 2016). In face of the complex situation in Ukraine and the impact this had on already frail EU-Russia relations, in March 2016 the EU agreed on five principles for relations with Russia, which reflect the anxiety that the Ukraine and Crimea situations cause on the EU, and the need to reaffirm its self as a relevant security actor. These five principles related to the implementation of the Minsk agreements, stronger relations with the Eastern Partners and other neighbours, in particular in Central Asia, strengthening EU’s resilience, selectively engaging with Russia, and the promotion of people-to-people contacts and support to Russian civil society (Council of the European Union, 2016). The agreement on these principles seeks to reinforce EU positioning towards Russia in such a way that it grants ontological security by repositioning the narrative, as argued.

In the Global Strategy document, it is mentioned that “We have learnt the lesson: my neighbour’s and my partner’s weaknesses are my own weaknesses. So we will invest in win-win solutions, and move beyond the illusion that international politics can be a zero-sum game” (European Union Global Strategy 2016, 5). This clearly acknowledges ontological insecurity feelings arising from Russia’s own narrative and positioning in European security affairs. The change in narrative about Russia from the 2003 ESS to the 2016 Global Security document is abyssal: from positive references to Russia as a partner, and the need to coordinate efforts with Moscow and other international actors, as well as continue to closely work with Russia in various topics, the narrative became framed mostly in negative terms. The document follows the 2014 backlash in relations between the EU and Russia and the new narrative of “the other as a threat” that has accompanied the evolution of relations. Wording such as “Russia’s violation of international law and the destabilisation of Ukraine,” and that “[m]anaging the relationship with Russia represents a key strategic challenge” (European Union Global Strategy 2016, 33), are illustrative. The interdependence of Russia-EU relations is, nevertheless, recognised, having

in view that it is important to “engage Russia to discuss disagreements and cooperate if and when our interests overlap,” which still reveals a limited positive appeal (European Union Global Strategy 2016, 33).

The EU’s conceptualisation of the self as a security actor in its particular terms provides this actor legitimacy and a sense of self-identity, projected in fundamental documents providing the biographical continuity and guidance for routinized action essential for ontological security – which in the process required an adjustment of the EU-self and of its routines, as analysed. In the process of self-identification, the EU distanced itself from Russia on the fundamental values and principles defining the self, and on the guiding-narratives providing orientation and legitimising action. For Moscow, the continuation of NATO and its enlargement, the creation of the ENP and later of the EaP, were examples of how the West was excluding it from the European security construct. This feeling of exclusion caused anxiety in Russia which needed to reinforce its great power narrative, both in material and non-material ways. The militarization course pursued, for example through the return of the military parades to the Red Square from May 2008 or the expanded military exercises, including with other partners, such as India, China, or under the auspices of organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, responded to the first; the deepening of the self-narrative of Russia as unique, and as the promoter of an original civilizational development model, focusing on Russia’s foundational myth (Hansen 2016; Akchurina and Della Sala 2018) and conservative and “civilization state” (Tsygankov 2017), as illustrated in Crimea’s annexation justification as the place where Prince Vladimir was baptised (in the year 988) bringing spiritual unity to these lands (Putin 2014), reinforced Russia’s ontological security. By mastering the “exclusion” narrative around the “great power” discourse, Russia sought to overcome the anxiety caused by the West’s increased involvement in the post-Soviet area, and in this way regain a sense of selfhood.

In Ukraine, destabilisation of the Donbass and Crimea’s annexation reinforced the narrative of the great power-self, whereas promoting ontological insecurity in the EU. At this time, Putin’s popularity at home increased substantially with 83% of the population approving the President’s actions, reinforcing the perception of the great power at play (Sokolov and Bigg 2014). The incapacity to act feeling allied to the militarization policy of Russia caused anxiety in the EU, in a mix of inner and external challenges to EU’s ontological security. As Tsygankov (2017) puts it, “[o]ne side insists on sanctions as a punishment for the Kremlin’s aggressive policies, while the other believes such a policy is a necessary reaction to the infringement of its civilizational rights in Eurasia.” These differentiated perceptions and clashing narratives have been permeating EU-Russia relations for long.

Russia’s biography went through a fundamental shift after the end of the Cold War. The first challenge was the reconceptualization of Russia’s self after the end of the Soviet Union. This has remained a source of ontological insecurity and Russia is still crafting its self in identity terms. As Makarychev (2016, 2) argues, “the main source of Russia’s ontological (in)security is its oscillation between the Soviet and the post-Soviet identity discourses, with the latter

being semiotically fragmented and dispersed.” Makarychev borrows in his work the concept of “post-Soviet aphasia” from Serguei Oushakine, referring to the incapacity to “clearly articulate the meanings of nation’s collective self” (Makarychev 2016, 3). The central argument is that Russia perceived the end of the Soviet Union not as an opportunity to reshape its identity and adjust the self accordingly but instead viewed it as “a deprivation, a disenfranchisement, a deep traumatic experience amounting to an irrevocable and irreparable loss of basic elements of national identity” (Makarychev 2016, 3). This perception deepened ontological insecurity in the inability to reflexively reconceptualise the self.

Moreover, if in the first two years of the nineties, ontological security was built on the narrative of “the West as partner” and “natural ally,” with Russia seeking to be recognised as a “normal great power” (Kozyrev 1992), soon this gave place to shaming and criticism of the West. Russia understood that the West preferred a weak Russia, as visible in the “insistence by the West that it had defeated the Soviet Union in the Cold War as well as the humiliation by the former of Russia” (Razyvayev cited in Hansen 2016, 366). This created anxiety and ontological insecurity feelings, as Surkov (2005, cited in Götz 2016) makes clear. As such, a shift in the narrative about the self was enacted, i.e., Russia not a submissive actor to the West, but as having its own unique character. This change in the narrative of the new Russia shows how ontological insecurity might lead to adaptation – the reshaping of the self in this case. Moreover, the way Russia has been defining its self as embedded in a civilizational role-model in contrast to the decadent liberal West, as part of a reflexive process where the recuperation of these elements grants the self more stability, is a further illustration. Tradition and conservatism can be a way of reclaiming a sense of purpose, which in Russia has functioned to reinforce ontological security. Reshaping the articulation of the self with identity shifts, namely the West as the significant other but also Russia’s self-identification as a unique power, allowed Russia to reshape its own reflexive definition of the self in articulation with its identity construction.

Since the 1990s, Russia’s views on security have evolved from an inner focus due to poor economic performance and social problems (Lomagin 2016), to a more outward-looking approach as a result of what Moscow understood as Western threats to its interests. The new narrative of the great power provided the self with trust and legitimacy to act, whereas reinforcing the differential with the West. NATO’s intervention in Kosovo in 1999 or the continuous NATO enlargements, disagreement on offensive and defensive weapons, or the tensions arising from the US defence missile shield project, led to the famous Munich speech by Putin in 2007, where anxiety about Western moves was made clear, along with the need for a more self-assured and self-affirming Russia. In Putin’s words, referring particularly to US policy, “[...] no one feels safe. I want to emphasise this – no one feels safe! Because no one can feel that international law is like a stone wall that will protect them” (Putin 2007). This provided ground for Russia’s status building strategy as a great power (Freire 2018). Ontological security in Russia was very much built on the frontline of competition with the West, causing anxiety in the EU regarding Russia’s intentions. The Neighbourhood Policy became a reflection of ontological insecurity feelings,

in the way the process has been framed and narrated both in the EU and Russia. The EaP model has reinforced the image that “‘without Russia’ will always be interpreted by Moscow as ‘against Russia’” (Alexandrova-Arbatova 2016).

Ukraine came as a crucial issue to the agenda when the EU offered the Association Agreement and DCFTA to the country (fall 2013). Moscow understood this rapprochement of Ukraine to the EU as threatening core interests, including the Eurasian Economic Union project in development. Ukraine is a key country at the core of Europe that Russia sought to keep close, feeling insecure in face of a turn in Ukrainian politics that would move it away from Moscow. For Russia, Ukraine symbolises the birth of civilization, a narrative that has been recovered since “Russian elites and the majority of Russians do not look upon Ukraine and Belarus as ‘foreign’ countries” (Kuzio 2006, 407).² This is illustrated, for example, in Russian history books taught in schools where the narration of Russia’s past is founded on the nationalist myth (Hansen 2016, 368) as providing cohesive structure for the self’s autobiographic continuity. As already mentioned, Putin’s words in his address after Crimea’s annexation are clear in emphasizing the historical links underlining the Russian biographical narrative. “This is [...] where Prince Vladimir was baptised. His spiritual feat of adopting Orthodoxy predetermined the overall basis of the culture, civilisation, and human values that unite the peoples of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. [...] In people’s hearts and minds, Crimea has always been an inseparable part of Russia” (Putin 2014). Thus, for Russia losing Ukraine constituted a threat to its ontological security as the country was both the basis of Russian civilization and of the contemporary “Russian World” (*Russkiy Mir*) (see Akchurina and Della Sala 2018, 1645).

The war in Ukraine, and particularly the annexation of Crimea, were part of Russia’s ontological insecurity response to the EU’s deep involvement in Ukraine (among other factors). However, if part of the result was enhancing Russia’s ontological security by annexing Crimea, getting strong internal support for the move and recognition of Russia’s great power, more insecurity also came as a result. This arose, among others, from the fact that Ukraine turned westwards and nationalist feelings gained prominence, countering Russia’s goal of influencing Ukrainian politics. Surveys in Ukraine have been confirming the tendency across the country to disapprove of Russia, right after the 2014 events and following these (see Pew Research Center 2015; Bikus 2019).³ Also, Ukraine ended up signing the Association Agreement with the EU in March 2014; the same day, Russia’s upper house of parliament opened the way for signing into law the treaty on Crimea (Croft 2014).

The self-identification of Russia with a great power caused anxiety in the way it felt it was treated by the West. The narrative adaptation implied, therefore, a critical tone concerning the West. National security in Russia has been defined around the concept of the sovereign people, a multinational identity that constitutes the source of Russian power, linked to traditional values

² This is a contested issue, see Kuzio (2006) for a discussion.

³ The Levada Center in Russia has been regularly surveying Russia-Ukraine relations, with results showing a prevailing negative attitude of Russians towards Ukraine (Yuri Levada Analytical Center 2020).

of independence and territorial integrity (“National security concept of the Russian Federation” 2000; Putin 2015). This self-defining narrative is strengthened by the identification of major threats to Russia’s security as part of the process of identifying an outer ‘other’ driving our fears and responses to anxiety. The biographical account of Russia identifies this ‘other’ as the West, incarnated in the multiple discursive moves threatening Russia. Therefore, ontological insecurity is very much associated with NATO’s enlargement, which causes anxiety in Russia for the threatening nature of the organisation towards Russia’s well-being. NATO’s eastward expansion has been considered not just a threat, but also as a source of humiliation by Russia (Roache 2019). Moreover, the West is depicted in the Russian National Security Strategy (Putin 2015, paragraph 17) document as promoting tension, disruption in regional integration and harming the promotion of Russia’s national interests. Ukraine is very much at the core of the reframed narrative, where Russia accuses the West of promoting an image of Russia as “the enemy,” labelling the relationship in conflictive terms. Moreover, the Russian Strategy highlights Ukraine as having become a “chronic seat of instability in Europe and in the immediate vicinity of Russia’s borders” (Putin 2015, paragraph 17), signalling a new narrative towards the former “brotherhood” in historical and cultural terms that framed relations. This translates ontological insecurity feelings and the need to readapt the narrative in Russia towards Ukraine, which has impacted on Ukraine’s ontological insecurity, as earlier mentioned. This shows how different perceptions in both the EU and Russia contribute to reinforce ontological insecurity, becoming almost a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The changing narrative is visible in other reference documents, such as Russia’s Foreign Policy Concepts, where references to the West translate this unsettling feeling. Russia’s ontological insecurity becomes clear in the criticism it makes to the Western imposition of ways of seeing the international order, implying no space for alternative proposals (see, for example, the latest Foreign Policy Concept adopted in 2016, after Crimea’s annexation, paragraph 5). Moreover, the narrative refers to NATO and EU expansion as geopolitical projects that have created instability (The Embassy of Russian Federation to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland 2016, paragraph 61), breaking with the routinized approach of Russia towards its neighbours and beyond, and therefore instilling anxiety in Moscow. Crimea became the epitome of Russia’s psycho-social-political and material response to ontological insecurity, understood as part of the self’s affirmation as a great power, and in its interaction with relevant players particularly in the post-Soviet space, such as Ukraine. As Russian President Putin framed it in the discourse after Crimea’s annexation,

“They are constantly trying to sweep us into a corner because we have an independent position, because we maintain it and because we call things like they are and do not engage in hypocrisy. But there is a limit to everything. And with Ukraine, our Western partners have crossed the line, playing the bear and acting irresponsibly and unprofessionally” (Putin 2014).

At the Valdai Club discussions in 2014, the great power narrative as part of the self's identity was reinforced. "If a nation approaches the issue of national identity consciously, it becomes conceptually integral to it, so that it is able to project its image internationally all the more successfully. If, however, the self-consciousness of a nation is not integral, it will be more susceptible to outside propaganda and its image will be more vulnerable to distortion" (Karaganov 2014, 34). What the report highlights is Russia's reflexivity over master-narratives under threat. The "national identity," "statehood" and "great power narratives," for example, were understood as being over Western pressure, requiring a response from Moscow. This came in the form of a reinforcement of the self and its autonomy, which is constitutive of the very self as defined biographically in Russian narratives. Moreover, in the process, Russia has reinforced the narrative about Ukrainian ontological insecurity, by claiming the West is seeking to dismantle the autonomy and independence of the state.

Ukraine as Russia's "imagined community" ended up reflecting Russia's anxiety over its own identity-building, contributing to ontological insecurity. Russia was again losing a part of the self, by losing Ukraine. Part of the response to this anxiety is found in military modernisation and development, and a militarization course in Russian policy, which in turn enhances ontological insecurity in the EU. This imbalance in the narratives and self-identification of the EU and Russia, became even more evident after Crimea's annexation. Crimea implied sanctions, a hard narrative in some EU and NATO members about the "Russian threat" and demands for NATO military build-up, particularly in countries closer to Russian borders. This contributed to a feeling of reinforced security in NATO countries, whereas feeding a feeling of insecurity in Russia. The "encirclement" discourse in Moscow together with the threatening discourse in the West provided for military build-up on both sides (Freire and Simão 2018). These developments demonstrate how ontological insecurity raised anxiety about the other, and in response to this, more anxiety ensued.

Conclusion

Both the EU and Russia projected in the shared neighbourhood the ideal of friendly relations and developing close politics, but by promoting two different security orders they ended up enhancing anxiety about the very nature of their selves and their external projection. For the EU, the self-legitimising narrative that provides for ontological security rests on its own security role identification plus NATO at the centre of the European security regime, whereas for Russia, this narrative is threatening and raises anxiety, translated in exclusion from European security decision-making and a leading role for the West in security matters. Preventing Ukraine from joining NATO was clearly part of the anxiety counter-measures. By advancing Association Agreements (AAs) with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, the EU contributed to "an accelerated disruption of Soviet-era links between Russia and these former-Soviet republics" (Freire and Simão 2018). In this context of ontological insecurity for Russia, the annexation of Crimea came as part of

the master narrative of the great power, countering the EU's actions in the neighbourhood, and reaffirming Russia's self-legitimacy on the basis of historical arguments. Moreover, the narrative on traditional spheres of influence was recovered (see for example Browning 2018), bringing back the EU and Russia to a well-known past. As Chernobrov (2016, 583) remarks "the inner complexity of the recent Ukrainian crisis is overshadowed by a more knowable routine of Cold War politics, although acting on this routine may be an unnecessary escalation."

This paper sought to highlight how self-reflexivity and changing narratives in the EU and Russia have contributed to ontological insecurity. The process was clearly mastered by inwards-driven anxieties related to rupture in routines and systems of meaning, requiring adjustments and even reframing of narratives, and by outwards-driven anxiety and fear in the way each of these actors perceived the other. As the argument shows, in the process of development of European security, anxiety became present in both the EU and Russia, and led to self-reinforcing moves, both psycho-social-political and at the material level of ontological insecurity. This process prevented the emergence of a renewed European security regime, in the face of a growing context of distrust and fear, and where the neighbourhood became a locus of confrontation. The ontological security framework allowed for an in-depth analysis of EU-Russia relations and to better understand how behaviour has shifted in face of ontological insecurity. Thus, it is our understanding that ontological insecurity has been driving EU-Russia relations, prompting adjustments to the selves, which have led the parties to retract to a known narrative – the confrontationist narrative à la Cold War of the "other as the enemy." This means that change resulting from ontological insecurity has not led to a positive reframing of narratives, but instead meant a step back to the past, where a well-known narrative has been providing ontological security in a context of insecurity.

Acknowledgements

This research work was developed in the context of "Projeto Estratégico, FCT" (UID/SOC/50012/2019) and the Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence "Peace Relations, Ontologies and Narratives in Europe: EU and its Eastern Neighbours" (PRONE), 611269-EPP-1-2019-1-PT-EPPJMO-CoE, University of Coimbra.

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