Between New Spheres of Influence: Ukraine’s Geopolitical Misfortune

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Between New Spheres of Influence: Ukraine’s Geopolitical Misfortune

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ABSTRACT
Contrary to the popular narrative of ‘return’, the spheres of influence that have destabilized Ukraine are not a throwback to the nineteenth century. They are something new. What makes them new is explained here in a story of a failed experiment to escape geopolitics in a region between the borders of an enlarged European Union (EU) and Russia. This project created a ‘grey zone’ of overlapping authority, jurisdiction and allegiance out of which new spheres of influence emerged. Ukraine’s geopolitical misfortune was to be included into this ‘grey zone’. The logic of this new narrative of the Ukraine crisis is worked out with reference to the literature on neo-medievalism – a political theory that develops a critique of supranational projects like European integration.

The concept of ‘spheres of influence’ has its roots in the statist power politics of the nineteenth century (Hast 2014). However, there is no need to go quite so far back to find the last time a major power was accused of expanding its dominion in this way. The former secretary general of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) has twice poured scorn on Russia’s desire to create a ‘zone of influence’ to stop its neighbours building ties with the European Union (EU) and his own organization (Rasmussen 2014); a criticism he first directed against Russia back in 2008, around the time of the war in Georgia.1

The former president of the United States of America (USA), Barack Obama, and his vice president, Joe Biden, added their voices to this Western criticism of Russia. Commenting on Russia’s relations with Ukraine, in June 2014, Barack Obama said: “The days of empire and spheres of influence are over…Bigger nations must not be allowed to bully the small” (Obama 2014). A year later, Joe Biden called on Russia to abandon the “aggression” of its sphere of influence policy and enter into “the world of responsible nations” alongside the USA (Biden 2015).

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These accusations of cynical power politics have been largely, but not entirely, one way. For its part, Russia has objected to the USA and the EU interfering in the internal affairs of states in the post-Soviet space. The EU in particular has been accused of using its Eastern Partnership Policy (Lavrov 2009) and before that its Neighbourhood Policy (Haukkala 2010) to unite citizens in states close to Russia’s borders against the Kremlin.

Russia’s foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, sitting alongside his German counterpart at a news conference in Yekaterinburg in February 2014, put it pointedly. The EU was the power acting irresponsibly in Ukraine, not Russia:

“I fully agree with [my German colleague] that there should be no spheres of influence. But in dragging Ukraine to one side, telling it that it needs to choose ‘either or’, either with the EU or with Russia, [the European Union] is in fact trying to create such a sphere of influence. That is obvious and no nice words can change that (Lavrov 2014).”

Sergei Lavrov was right about one thing, at least. ‘No nice words’ have been uttered on the subject of spheres of influence in recent years. As Susanna Hast observes, this concept has become a term of abuse in international relations (Hast 2014, 1–6). At a time when the leaders of Russia and Western powers, alike, have been keen to present themselves as fighting empire and defending vulnerable populations from imperial schemes, ‘spheres of influence’ have come to symbolize the worst kind of geopolitics. They represent an expansionary mode of foreign policy that is both archaic and incompatible with the ideals of the contemporary international order.

However, what I discover in this article is that behind this holier-than-thou rhetoric is a deep confusion about spheres of influence, how they are constituted and enforced. Not only in terms of how they operate today, but also back in the nineteenth century. Around 150 years ago, spheres of influence were integral to a conservative geo-strategy aimed at preventing war in the lands between imperial states (Kratochwil 1986). The ‘buffer zone’ was their defining spatial motif (McLachlan 1997). Flanking this space, the unrivalled domains of great power management, the actual spheres of influence to the parties of this arrangement. The grand strategic idea back then was to keep the major powers at a safe distance for one another. Spheres of influence, both in theory and in practice, were characterized by a collective desire to lay down clear-cut boundaries around the most authoritative actors in the state system.² Contrary to how they are seen today, spheres of influence were not aimed at creating “occupied territories” beyond the borders of the major powers (Toal 2017). As I shall go on to explain, they were purposefully designed to prevent imperial interventions at the fringes of the state system.

The main argument advanced here is that this form of spheres of influence has become what, Michael Oakeshott memorably calls, a feature of “the dead
past” (Oakeshott 1933). Spheres of influence in the twenty-first century operate according to a geopolitical logic that is far removed from the restraints of the nineteenth century. The aim of the following analysis is to disclose the dynamics of this relatively new and poorly understood mode of geopolitics, and in doing so offer a corrective to the prevailing climate of opinion on this subject.

The first two parts of this article provide a theoretical introduction to this relatively new version of spheres of influence and its key characteristics. State-centred theories that look back to the nineteenth century, I argue, are of little value in this regard for they fail to bring to light how state sovereignty is actively dis-located in a regional middle that is constitutive of this new kind of sphere of influence; a middle which I am calling a ‘grey zone’. Sections 3 and 4 provide a narrative of the constitution of the EU and Russia’s ‘grey zone’ and its descent into rivalry. This covers events from the opening of negotiations on a EU-led region-building project with Russia, known as Common Spaces (European Commission 2005), to the conflict that draws both of these powers into the internal affairs of Ukraine.

The story of this geopolitical crisis and how it unfolds underscores an important point of difference between the spheres of influence of the nineteenth century and the more recent past. With the earlier model of spheres of influence, Russia was the power setting the geopolitical agenda and Europe followed. In the early twenty-first century, these roles reversed. The spheres of influence depicted here emerge in response to the EU’s foreign policies. More particularly, they spring from a European neo-medieval vision for the development of a region east of the EU’s enlarging borders and west and south of Russia’s state line; a region that has been referred to in Moscow, since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, as the ‘near abroad’ (ближнее зарубежье, blizhneye zarubezhye), literally the space that is ‘near beyond [Russia’s] borders’ (Toal 2017, 3).

**Neo-Medievalism and its Critique**

In his seminal work, *The Anarchical Society* (Bull 2012), the political theorist Hedley Bull discusses a mode of modern politics that is frustrated with the way things work in the existing state system. Or, more to the point, how they do not work. The irritation is with the persistent, divisive conflicts between political communities that create festering problems of a geopolitical nature. The response is to encourage forms of supranational fellowship that seek to override the contested claims to ownership or control of territory. This is the neo-medieval vision in a nutshell. It is a politics of faith. Pursuit of this vision involves a commitment to inclusive forms of political association, supported by inclusive policy goals that express what Hedley Bull refers to as, “the highest moral endeavor” of international cooperation (Bull 2012, 25). From
this lofty position, neo-medieval politics looks down upon individual nation-states and their claims to territorial authority.

As Stephen Krasner writes, the entire state system is based on respect for “the assertion of final authority within a given territory; the core element in the definition of sovereignty” (Krasner 1989). Borders mark the limits of these claims. They clearly distinguish what is inside from what is outside, what the internationally recognized jurisdiction of one state is as distinct from others. The only alternative to a world of international borders that separate and join states is, as Krasner suggests, “a world where there are no boundaries, or a world in which there is no final authority within a given territory” (Krasner 1989, 92). Neo-medieval politics imagines this alternative world order.

Every neo-medieval project, according to Bull, claims to offer a “superior path to world order” (Bull 2012, 254) than the state system. Despite uncertainty about where such a path will lead, neo-medieval projects enter into the unchartered political space beyond the state. They push toward alternative forms of political community and practices of governing. They set out a new mode of governance, no longer moored in the commitments of the state system to territorial notions of separateness, independence, and the supreme and secular authority of law.

Ambitious in design and often bewilderingly complex, neo-medieval projects, according to Bull:

“Promise to avoid the classic dangers of the system of sovereign states by a structure of overlapping authorities and criss-crossing loyalties that hold all peoples together in a universal society, while at the same time avoiding the concentration of power inherent in world government (Bull 2012, 246).”

There are analogies between this neo-medieval vision of ‘overlapping authority and criss-crossing loyalty’ and the language of globalization from the early nineteen nineties. Nation-states, we were told, were on their way out. Their borders were arbitrary impediments to global justice. Their form of political organization was destined to be demoted to a mere node in a vast transnational flux of capital and labour (Friederichs 2001). This was not only happening at the global level. There were also regional variations on the theme.

Bull did not mention it by name, but other writers who have picked up where he left off regard the EU as promoting a regional and neo-medieval vision of government (Rengger 2000). Perhaps the best known, certainly the most provocative critic of neo-medievalism today is Jan Zielonka. In his book Europe as Empire, he writes:

“[The enlarged EU] with its multilevel governance system of concentric circles, fuzzy borders, and soft forms of external power projection resembles the system we knew in the Middle Ages, before the rise of nation-states (Zielonka 2006, 3).”
My aim in this article is to extend this line of critique even further, beyond what is depicted in Zielonka’s *Europe as Empire*. I will explore the governance of a region to the east of the EU’s 2004 enlargement. This eastwards expansion extended the European zone of peace and relative prosperity to the Baltic region in the north and the Black Sea in the south. But it also created a new boundary problem for the “outsiders of enlargement”\(^3\); one of several collective nouns used to describe the six states of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. In 2004, most of these countries were considerably less stable (and poorer) than the other post-Communist countries that were already, or soon would be, members of the EU.

Policymakers in Brussels were concerned about the potential for territorial conflicts with Russia and within and between the weak states of this region and just beyond it.\(^4\) To that end, they set out a succession of neo-medieval designs on this space with the aim of turning these ‘outsiders of enlargement’ into a “ring of friends.”\(^5\) The Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) of 2004 was the first major statement on this neo-medieval vision. It sought “to prevent the emergence of new dividing lines between the enlarged Union and its neighbours” by offering “an increasingly close relationship” between these states and the EU (European Commission 2004). However, this policy suffered from two key shortcomings. Firstly, it was too vague to serve as a basis for the negotiations of these regional associations. Secondly, as we shall see in the case of Russia, it was not the kind of association that all the EU’s neighbours were looking for. Put simply, the EU was trying to do too much with a single policy. Rather than seeking, in Prodi’s words, a “comprehensive approach to our neighbours” Prodi (2002) – all of them from Morocco to Armenia – what was needed was a more diversified approach.

The Eastern Partnership Policy of 2009 was considered a significant step in the right (neo-medieval) direction. Hailed as “more ambitious” (The Council of the European Union 2009) and also more focussed than the ENP, it presented the outlines for a regional governance arrangement that would “deepen and strengthen relations between the European Union and its six Eastern neighbours” (The Council of the European Union 2009). It promised ‘an increasingly close relationship’ between the EU and these six states, particularly on trade, but it stopped short of offering them a direct accession pathway into the Union.

This updated version of the EU’s neo-medieval plan did offer a better deal for these six states. However, it had not addressed Russia’s grievances with this whole project. EU policymakers had been so preoccupied with trying to resolve the tensions in their associations with these states, they had lost sight of the strain their neo-medieval politics was putting on the EU’s relationship with Russia.
The Neo-Medieval Logic of ‘Spheres of Influence’

In *Europe as Empire*, Jan Zielonka makes a compelling contrast between two logics of transition that predict how the EU, as a regional polity, will change through the process of enlargement (Zielonka 2006, 1–22). A statist model or paradigm assumes the creation of a European super-state. This has been the focus of Eurosceptic anxiety down the years. However, there is a less-well-understood alternative, and this is the pathway Zielonka thinks the EU has actually been on. By 2006, he claims this transition was well on its way to resolving itself in the creation of a new version of the Holy Roman Empire.

The neo-medieval trajectory that I refer to in this article runs in parallel to the one Zielonka describes. Where he looks to characterize the governance changes within the expanding boundaries of an enlarged EU, I try to make sense of the changes in the immediate vicinity of what he calls Europe’s “soft” and “fuzzy borders.” Despite the EU’s stated desire to keep its relationship with the ‘eastern neighbours’ open and inclusive, I argue that through its strategic partnership with Russia, the EU becomes involved in drawing new and contested boundaries of regional governance. These would implicate the states of this region, particularly Ukraine.

A neo-medieval paradigm shift allows for a fresh perspective on the origins and dynamics of this geopolitical dynamic. At the threshold of what Zielonka calls ‘a neo-medieval empire’, I argue it is possible to trace out the emergence of a neo-medieval form of ‘spheres of influence’. This form shares the characteristics of a ‘system of overlapping authorities and criss-crossing loyalties’ that Zielonka attributes to the EU. However, it is far more unstable than the order of governance he describes. As this particular regional system is constituted between two major powers, the EU and Russia. And it is the logic of their double agency that creates this instability.

To understand how the logic of this form of ‘spheres of influence’ is different from what has come before it requires an appreciation of the changes over time in the meaning of ‘spheres of influence’ and the patterns of order this concept refers to. The term was first used by Prince Gorchakov (Bull 2012, 219). He was one of the founding statesmen of an entire tradition of Russian foreign policy (Tsygankov 2016). Appointed as foreign minister by Tsar Alexander II in the spring of 1856, Gorchakov made a success of recovering Russia’s lost international power after its defeat in the Crimean War and the signing of a peace treaty in Paris earlier that same year. This treaty provided an international guarantee for the territorial integrity of Turkey.

Gorchakov’s idea for ‘spheres of influence’ reflected the terms of this treaty. And it became part of a broader geo-strategy which Andrey Tsygankov terms “concentration” (Tsygankov 2016, 6–9). The aim was to consolidate Russian power and influence behind stable boundaries. In this
way, Gorchakov sought to balance Russia’s territorial interests against the interests of the major European powers who appeared to be emboldened by Russia’s defeat.

In return for assuring the imperial states of Western Europe, above all Britain, that Russia had no desire to interfere in their wider areas of interest, Gorchakov expected a reciprocal guarantee that they would not meddle in Russia’s own imperial backyard. This geopolitical trade-off required a division of political space into three exclusive zones: two zones, one for each empire to call its own ward or extra-juridical dominion; and a third zone, a territory under the unchallenged possession and control of either signatory. This zone, from which both parties voluntarily excluded themselves, Gorchakov called the “independent zone” (McLachlan 1997, 89). That was the formulation he offered up to his opposite number, Britain’s foreign minister Lord Granville, in the negotiation of the 1873 British–Russian agreement, which established a barrier of states between these major powers in Central Asia. Ten years later, the term had evolved into the more evocative phrase, ‘buffer zone’.

This was the age of the railway. Railways, with speed, capacity to move people and goods, and precision of operation far beyond any existing means of transport on land, were transforming industry, social life, and whole areas of the countries they served. Moreover, they were changing the way policymakers thought about diplomacy, military strategy and the map of the world. ‘Buffers’ were the metal springs at the end of a railway platform. Their purpose was to slow down incoming trains and bring them to a standstill. A ‘buffer zone’ was similarly designed to stop any potentially high-powered collision occurring in the lands between imperial states. Since it first appeared in the Oxford English Dictionary in the 1880s the term has stuck, and is still referred to in current discussions of spheres of influence (Toucas 2017).

The borders around the nascent state of Afghanistan set the boundaries around the first ‘buffer zone’. In Gorchakov’s words, this was an “independent zone…completely outside of the sphere within which Russia may be called upon to exercise her influence.” As the international relations theorist, Frederich Kratocwhil remarks, the original conception of spheres of influence relied on a shared “disinterest in controlling” (Kratochwil 1986, 39) one or more states between the sovereign claims of major powers. This “old conception,” as he puts it, typically took the form of “bilateral, explicit agreements” that “created enforceable rights among the contracting parties” and “imposed a regime upon the local inhabitants (Kratochwil 1986, 46).”

Crucially, this regime was not imposed on the residents within a ‘buffer zone’. On paper at least, state sovereignty in this area was secured. As long as this agreement held, Afghanistan could expect to be free from outside interference. This guarantee of state sovereignty was an important part of the justification of this ‘old model’ of spheres of influence. Gorchakov had
expressed no love of the Afghan people. This pact was a self-interested move aimed at soothing international anxieties about Afghanistan’s status as a state. Reinforcing the modern European state system at its weakest point, at a frontier that was contested between Russia and the major Western power of the day, could – or at least might – avoid the emergence of the next major war.

The contrast between this ‘old model’ of spheres of influence and the twenty-first century version could not be more stark. One might even call them polar opposites. Everything that was simple and clear-cut in the ‘old’ or statist model of spheres of influence is complex and fuzzy in its neo-medieval alternative. Where the former emerged out of the exclusive geo-strategy of imperial Russia in Central Asia, the latter has centred on the EU’s inclusive plans for regional governance in Eastern Europe; plans which have tried (but as we shall see, failed) to eschew the fault lines of geopolitics.

The best way to get a handle on the essential difference between these two models is to focus on their middles; the constitutive spaces that hold and bind these bilateral arrangements together. A ‘buffer zone’ existed either side of a divide between mutually exclusive claims to territorial sovereignty. It reaffirmed a commitment to the foundations of the European state system and thereby the inside/outside opposition that has remained, according the legal philosopher Hans Lindahl, the “core constituent feature” of the modern international order (Lindahl 2013, 3). In looking to preserve this order of states, one can safely say that a ‘buffer zone’ is the product of a conservative geopolitics.

The neo-medieval middle of a ‘grey zone’, on the other hand, is a political space shaped by a progressive orientation. I hesitate to suggest this orientation, or the geopolitical problems associated with it, are altogether new. The formal recognition of spheres of influence between Russia and Europe may have only happened for the first time around 150 years ago. But as Hedley Bull suggests, the antecedents of this arrangement can be traced back to the fifteenth century.

The medieval system of international relations lacked the formal rights and duties of the state system, which have been made with respect to international law and grounded in legally binding treaties. Medieval international relations operated by an informal system of rule rather than an international fidelity to law. What mattered most was, as Hedley Bull writes: “inherited status and precedent, based on the facts of relative power and the consent of international society” (Bull 2012, 36); as articulated by its representatives, the highest political authorities of the day.

Bilateral consent that exists prior to a commitment to the rule of law is crucial for understanding the neo-medieval logic of spheres of influence and why they create problems in a ‘grey zone’ in a midpoint between the signatories. Such is the deep ambiguity over the respect for statist principles
of international law that this is a middle where the rule of law does not run. As it is understood here, a ‘grey zone’ is the unintended consequence of a bilateral agreement that has no grounding in law and is founded, instead, on an uneasy neo-medieval combination of what Bull calls “inherited status and relative power” (Bull 2012, 247), on the hand, and a commitment to the “highest moral endevaour” (Bull 2012, 247) of cooperation on the other. As I will go on to argue with reference to the EU and Russia’s relationship, their agreement on regional governance in 2005 contained both of these features. This agreement is the origins of a ‘grey zone’ that implicated Ukraine.

The Neo-Medieval Dilemma of Common Spaces

“Will the pan-European space be a truly, in legal terms, single space? Or will it be divided into ‘spheres of influence’ and areas in which different standards are applied in terms of military and political security, humanitarian obligations, access to markets and modern technology and so on? (Russian Foreign Ministry 2010).”

These closing remarks in a speech by Russia’s foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, in 2010 attest to the confusion at the centre of Russia’s relationship with contemporary Europe. Five years had passed since the signing of a comprehensive agreement on EU–Russia regional cooperation, known officially as the Common Spaces agreement European Commission (2005). And here was Russia’s most senior diplomat still groping for answers to questions this deal was supposed to have settled.

The text of the Common Spaces agreement offers a perfect illustration of George Orwell’s indictment of political language. As he put it, the words of politicians and diplomats mainly consist of “euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness” (Orwell 2000, 332). Signed in the spring of 2005 after two years of intense negotiations, this agreement remains to this day the most ambitious and the most ambiguous document of partnership between the EU and Russia. Hailed by President Putin as the “zenith” in Russia’s relationship with the EU, the conclusion of the Common Spaces talks in the summer of 2005 was presented to the world as a bold new beginning in the cooperation of these continental neighbours.

Some policy analysts at the time were unconvinced. Michael Emerson, writing for a Brussels-based think tank, called the Common Spaces agreement a work of “diplomatic borsch” (Emerson 2005). Its high-sounding promises about working together in regional governance were, he complained, a “proliferation of the fuzzy” (Emerson 2005). Viewing developments from Moscow, Sergei Medvedev arrived at a similar conclusion. Even though the text of this agreement spooled out over four hundred bulleted actions points, describing the plans for how the EU and Russia would cooperate in four regional policy fields – the common spaces of trade and
energy, of education and culture, and two common spaces for security, one internal and the other external – the agreement, he said, lacked “strategic direction” and a clear definition of its overall objectives (Medvedev 2006, 9).

These criticisms have stood the test of time. As a proposal for how the EU and Russia would govern together, the Common Spaces agreement was ‘fuzzy’ and lacked clear ‘direction’. However, the neo-medieval dilemma it introduced runs deeper than this. The trickiest issue has not been the lack of credibility over the ‘road maps’, meant to set out actionable steps for EU–Russia cooperation. The biggest problem has been with the neo-medieval assurances this agreement sought to extend to others.

As I have suggested elsewhere (Ferguson 2017), Common Spaces introduced an inescapable tension into the EU and Russia’s relationship toward a common exterior. So much so that diplomats from Brussels and Moscow could barely agree on a name for this political space. The word ‘neighborhood’ certainly ought to be dropped from the analysis. Russia has never shown much affection for the claustrophobic intimacy of what former President of the European Commission, Romano Prodi, called “our neighborhood” (Prodi 2002). Indeed, the agreement on Common Spaces only came about after Russia had rejected the opportunity to participate in the EU’s Neighbourhood Policy. Under this scheme, all of the EU’s eastern neighbours, including Russia, were to be provided with the same opportunities for association with Brussels. To Brussels’ surprise, Russia saw this as a thinly disguised claim to the EU’s regional hegemony, and yet another attempt to assert Western dominance over Eastern Europe Haukkala (2010, 660).

In response to Moscow’s rejection, the EU proposed an alternative region-building scheme that recognized Russia as a special kind of partner. As the European Security Strategy of 2003 acknowledged, Russia was the closest of all the EU’s strategic partners in a global network that included ten of the world’s major powers (European Commission 2003). Common Spaces was the embodiment of this strategic vision, in so far as it placed Russia above all the other potential partners to the east of the EU’s enlarged borders.

This is why, for all its ‘sheer cloudy vagueness’, the Common Spaces agreement did mark a new beginning of sorts. It constituted a system of regional governance that was designed to sublimate the EU’s unilateral claim to a neighborhood and do the same for Russia’s unilateral claim over a near abroad. In its commitment to an overarching regional unity, Common Spaces sought to negate the kind of exclusive dividing lines that mark out a ‘buffer zone’. And yet, it still managed to acknowledge what the political theorist, Martin Wight, argues is the basis for any arrangement of spheres of influence – a hierarchy of different classes of powers (Wight 1977). The greatest at the top, or the ‘zenith’ to use Putin’s word, are those political actors that have recognized each other’s special rights, responsibilities and loyalties towards a mass of lesser powers beneath and between them. Because of their lower-ranking status, there is no felt-need to consult these states on their inclusion in this
comprehensive arrangement. The text of Common Spaces did not directly name these neighbours. The only time they were alluded to was in the terms of security cooperation, where it was implied they would be the beneficiaries of the EU and Russia’s protection.

Before the talks on the Common Space of External Security – the third of the four Common Spaces – the EU and Russia had only attempted piecemeal arrangements on security cooperation. Both parties hoped these talks would lead to something more substantial. However, there were difficulties with finding the right vocabulary to use. On Russia’s insistence, the EU’s preferred term for the space to be jointly secured, “common neighborhood,” was dropped from the official agreement in favour of this deeply relativistic formulation: “the regions adjacent to the EU and Russian borders” (European Commission 2005, 35). By pushing back on the EU’s mandate for ‘external security’, Russia made the functioning of a joint security institution all but impossible (Allison 2006).

The tension between this pair of inclusive, yet divergent positions on ‘external security’ was overlooked by commentators at the time. It was also downplayed by policymakers in Brussels and Moscow. Part of the reason why, one might surmise, is precisely the sort of vague and wishful thinking that shapes all the collective projects of this kind – described in poetic terms, by one theorist of neo-medievalism, as the dreams of ‘Fairyland’ (Rengger 2000).

During the Common Spaces talks, the EU and Russia reached agreement on several non-geopolitical matters for which there was never much dispute. Isolating – even dissolving away – these differences, they arrived at a convergence of views that gave the impression of a fully inclusive new beginning in the EU-Russia relationship. The President of the European Commission, Manuel Barroso, was even more convinced than President Putin about this. He declared the Common Spaces agreement an event of world historic significance, a moment of confirmation between the EU and Russia of a “common vision for a European continent, united in the principles of peace, security and enlightenment” (Barroso 2005).

This ‘common vision’ was, however, a neo-medieval mirage. A matter of significant geo-strategic importance had been left in ambiguity. Talk of regional unity had only concealed competing moods, images and symbols of ‘external security’. In time, these would undermine the EU and Russia’s cooperation in regional governance and give rise to its nemesis: the conflict of neo-medieval spheres of influence. Unfortunately, it took the crisis over Ukraine for this contradiction to reveal itself in full. 14

**Ukraine’s Geopolitical Misfortune**

“Not only will traditional interstate contradictions become a risk factor, but so will the internal instability of particular states, especially with regard to countries located at the junction ofthe geopolitical interests(7,5),(994,989) of major powers.”
President Putin, October 24 2014 (The Russian Presidency 2014a)
“Two years after the Maidan revolution, Ukraine is stuck in a grey zone of half-reforms and half-war.”
The Economist, October 22 2016

If you recall from the earlier discussion, a ‘buffer zone’ was the marker of the “disinterest” (Kratochwil 1986, 46) of the major powers. The sovereignty of the state, or states, located at this juncture was supposed to be protected. According to the Oxford English Dictionary of 1883, a ‘buffer zone’ supported the sovereignty of “a neutral state lying between two others” and served “to render less possible hostilities between” major powers. In this section, I wish to disclose how and why such a respect for state sovereignty and the bilateral restraint that sustains it was impossible at the “junction of geopolitical interests” that President Putin referred to. The transgression of state sovereignty at this intersection was a symptom of the precariousness of the EU and Russia’s cooperation in regional governance.

In the winter of 2013, when the Ukraine crisis began, the EU was no longer the only regional power reaching out to embrace this state. An alternative Russia-centered project of regional integration had been taking shape for some time, and was clearly trying to attract Ukraine into its orbit. When the Eurasian Economic Union was officially launched, Putin declared that: “Today we have created a powerful, attractive centre of economic develop-ment, a big regional market that unites more than 170 million people” (The Russian Presidency 2014b). But to his disappointment, this ‘regional market’ has not proved attractive enough for Ukraine, or for that matter Georgia and Moldova. All three post-Soviet states have opted out of integration with Russia (and also Kazakhstan and Belarus). According to one observer, they have done so for pragmatic reasons (Samokhvalov 2016). Each has been trying to get the best possible deal from all their major trading partners. That has meant not binding too tightly to any one major power in particular. These same three states comprise half of the post-Soviet countries included in the EU’s Eastern Partnership program (Samokhvalov 2016). As such, they have also been offered a package of mainly economic incentives to closely partner with the EU (Korosteleva 2015).

Policy analysts, Samuel Charap and Mikhail Troitskiy, argue there is no inherent divergence of agendas between the EU and Russia when it comes to what they hope to achieve with these respective regional projects (Charap and Troitskiy 2013). They both wish to build a regional order of better-off insiders. And they both believe that the existence of weak and poor outsiders at their external borders will breed division, resentment and international instability.

And yet, these two enterprises have been ultimately at odds with one another. This is because, as Charap and Troitskiy observe, the EU and Russia have (often unintentionally) forced the states in this region “to
make zero-sum choices” between political associations that are “de facto closed to one another” (Charap and Troitskiy 2013, 52). After a state has made this either/or choice, it has – certainly in the case of Ukraine – experienced a deepening of “social and political divisions” (Charap and Troitskiy 2013, 52). The predicament of these ‘zero-sum choices’ has been two-fold. For the states themselves, they have had limits placed on their self-governing freedom and new challenges to their stability. And for the EU and Russia, the conflict between these schemes has made their already ambitious economic goals even harder to achieve.

Charap and Troitskiy call this the ‘integration dilemma’ of the post-Soviet space (Charap and Troitskiy 2013). And there is a great deal of merit to their analysis. But their critique does not go far enough. The neo-medieval perspective advanced in this article, I wish to suggest, provides a better account of the major geopolitical dispute that opened up between these regional projects. The divisions Charap and Troitskiy refer to have challenged the territorial integrity of at least one of the states, Ukraine, in what I have called EU and Russia’s ‘grey zone’. The resulting crisis of statehood has not only wrecked the EU and Russia’s separate plans for regional economic development, as Charap and Troitskiy attest. It has also, and more revealingly, compromized the EU and Russia’s partnership set out in the Common Spaces agreement, especially in the field of ‘external security’.

The full realization of this problem only emerged after the former Ukrainian President, Viktor Yanukovych, backed away from signing an EU–Ukraine association agreement at a summit in Vilnius in November 2013. If he had signed, Ukraine would have entered into the most far-reaching partnership between the EU and any of its eastern neighbours. Yanukovych’s about-turn shocked elites in Brussels and brought hundreds of protestors into the streets in Kiev. The head of the EU’s foreign and security policy, High Representative Catherine Ashton, signalled the frustration that she and her colleagues shared with the citizens gathered in Maidan Nezalezhnosti:

“This is a disappointment not just for the EU but, we believe, for the people of Ukraine... We believe that the future for Ukraine lies in a strong relationship with the EU and we stand firm in our commitment to the people of Ukraine who would have been the main beneficiaries of the agreement though the enhanced freedom and prosperity the agreement would have brought about (European Union External Action Service 2013).”

These remarks disclose a sense of betrayal from the EU’s side. The deal Yanukovych had backed out of would, in the words of a joint declaration from the start of the negotiations, “acknowledged the European aspirations of Ukraine and welcomed its European choice” (European Union External Action Service 2010). In explaining his decision, Viktor Yanukovych sought
to dispel the myth that there was any real freedom of choice for his government. Ukraine, he said, could not afford to sacrifice its trade with Russia, which opposed the deal (BBC News 2013). He also described the EU’s offer to lend Ukraine 610m euros as inadequate. It would take at least 20bn euros a year to upgrade its economy to the required “European standards,” he said (BBC News 2013).

Subject of two concurrent obligations for political association, which pulled in mutually exclusive regional directions, Yanukovych could not see any way to hold a non-aligned middle ground. Even by rejecting inclusion in both Russia and the EU’s schemes, he was still accused (by Brussels and by a large section of his own people) of swapping Ukraine’s promised European future for a Russian one. This crisis over Ukraine’s regional prospects brought down his government.

For the policy analyst, Hiski Haukkala, this crisis was the unfortunate, unintended consequence of the EU’s foreign policy (Haukkala 2016). He points to a failure by the EU to see how its Eastern Partnership policy (EaP) and its new-look association agreements with Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova would be taken as a geopolitical provocation in Moscow. The EU, he writes, lacked the “strategic foresight and reflection” (Haukkala 2016, 656) to consider how its partnership deals were forcing states, like Ukraine, into an impossible position. However, it was not only Brussels that was making such strategic miscalculations. Russia’s misguided response to the EaP was equally responsible for bringing the situation in Ukraine to a head.

Long before Catherine Ashton was expressing her disappointment and frustration with Kiev, Russia’s diplomats were harbouring the view that the EU was breaking the terms of the Common Spaces agreement. However, this was a misreading of what had actually been agreed. As noted in the analysis in the previous section, the most strategically important section of Common Spaces was ambiguous about the delimitation of the EU and Russia’s external security belts. Russia wanted the recognition of unrivalled authority in what President Dimitry Medvedev called, in 2008, its “regions of privileged interests” [регионы привилегированных интересов, regiony privilegirovannykh interesov] (The Russian Presidency 2008). However, it had forsaken this exclusive right in the Common Spaces talks by acknowledging the EU also had their own interests in securing a region adjacent to Russia’s borders.

Less than a year after making his ‘privileged interests’ speech, and a full two years before Ukraine started to negotiate the renewed terms of its political association with the EU, Medvedev warned Brussels not to foist its ‘European choice’ on the states outside Russia’s borders. During a post-EU–Russia Summit press in May 2009 he expressed alarm at the EU’s Eastern Partnership policy, which had just been launched:
“I’ll put it succinctly. We’ve tried to convince ourselves [that this European project is harmless] but in the end we couldn’t. … What worries us is that in some countries attempts are being made to exploit this structure as a partnership against Russia.”

Russia’s message to these countries, and above all Ukraine, was clear. You either ‘choose’ to be part of our project or you ‘choose’ to be part of the EU’s. Russia was reacting to a perceived threat to its regional interests. However, in doing so, it was creating the fault lines of regional governance in a ‘grey zone’. These would extend beneath the level of the state. The subject expected to ‘choose’ one side or the other was not restricted to the office of government in capitals like Kiev. Just as the EU’s association agreement had appealed to both the Ukrainian people and its government, Russia’s alternative enterprise of regional governance looked inside this state in search of a commitment to its particular neo-medieval vision of a Russian future for the Ukrainian state, or at least some of it.

Russia-backed referendums took place in May 2014 in Crimea, and later in Luhansk and Donetsk. Each one of them breached the Ukrainian constitution. President Putin tried to deflect criticism from the nature of this challenge to Ukraine’s sovereignty when he sought to justify Russia’s subsequent incorporation of Crimea:

“All our actions, including those with the use of force, were aimed not at tearing this territory away from Ukraine but at giving the people living there an opportunity to express their opinion on how they want to live their lives (Putin 2015).”

The ‘people living there’ had of course held a vote to decide whether to remain a part of Ukraine or join the Russian Federation. The overwhelming 95% support for secession reflected, according to Putin, the people’s choice to join “the Russian world” [Русский мир, Russkiy mir] – an imagined community shaped by the boundaries “of historic Russia” and by a desire “for the restoration of unity…of a divided nation” (The Russian Presidency 2014c). He also stressed the obligation of the Russian government to protect the members of this broad “Russian civilization” [Русская цивилизация, Russkaya tsvilizatsiya] (The Russian Presidency 2014c) from external threats.

If the Common Spaces agreement really did mark a cooperative new beginning in the EU–Russia relationship in the governing of Europe’s new territorial order, then this declaration about the annexation of Crimea marked its neo-medieval endgame. A geopolitical rivalry had unfolded, between the EU and Russia, and between competing regional projects aimed at providing well-being and protection for a common set of neighbours. A zone of instability opened up on the fringes of an enlarged EU. In this zone, the authority of influenced states was subverted by irreconcilable demands for their loyalty. As the EU and Russia reached out to the
governments and the citizens of these states, administrative boundaries were being redrawn around spaces of regional allegiance.

Of all the states in the EU and Russia’s ‘grey zone’ constituted in the Common Spaces talks, Ukraine has been the most affected. It lost its ability to balance off against the neo-medieval pressures from either side. Neutrality or isolationism was not a sustainable option, as it had been for the original ‘buffer state’ of Afghanistan. As a consequence, the spatial solidarity of Ukraine as a territorial community, with all its rootedness in place and a shared sense of history, has dislocated and in some parts of the country, disappeared.

Conclusions

“What difference now?
I sit with my back to the future, watching
time pouring away into the past. I sit, being helplessly
lugged backwards
through the Debatable Lands of history.”
Norman MacCaig, Crossing the Border (MacCaig 2005, 203–4)

This article opened with the concerns, raised in diplomatic exchanges between Russia and the West, about a ‘return’ of spheres of influence in the twenty-first century. I have argued this is a misplaced fear, a myth, which stands in the way of getting to grips with what has really been going on in a region east of the enlarged EU. Some form of spheres of influence has been dividing this political space and destabilizing this region. But these developments do not reflect the ‘return’ of a nineteenth century mode of geopolitics. Indeed, the version of spheres of influence described and explained in this article represents a sharp break from the statist form of the nineteenth century.

Reference to the neo-medieval logic of international relations may seem antedated and baffling to some readers. How is the activity of governing from a time before the modern state system in any way connected to events in the twenty-first century? The answer is that we need to get away from thinking about history in terms of straight lines that connect the past to the present. The whole point of a neo-medieval analysis is to challenge the view that the current state system is a foregone conclusion; the culmination of a stable consensus on sovereignty. However, it goes further than that. It also presents a critique of the actual proponents of neo-medieval politics. These are the policymakers and policy shapers who push political projects that try to ‘chart a superior path to world order’ beyond the horizons of the state system.

Hedley Bull is skeptical about whether this kind of project really can deliver something better, more secure, more stable:

“The case for doubting whether the neo-medieval model is superior is that there is no assurance it would prove more orderly than the state system, rather than less...
If it were anything like the [medieval] precedent...it would contain more ubiquitous and continuous violence and insecurity than does the modern state system” (Bull 2012, 246).

I have extended Bull’s line of critique of neo-medieval politics (and that of others, like Jan Zielonka) in response to the attempts, in the EU–Russia relationship, to forge a common and indivisible political space of regional governance between their external borders. In the quest to build this aspirational space, the advocates of neo-medieval politics, from Brussels and from Moscow, would overlook the ambiguous loyalties, overlapping and competing claims to regional jurisdiction that this common project imposed on the states in the middle.

To explain what went wrong in this region-building project, I sought to explain how a new kind of spheres of influence developed alongside and within Ukraine, the most strategically important of the states included into this project. The EU’s sphere of influence took over some of this state’s power and emotional resonance. Russia was not satisfied with that, also claiming some of this state’s territory in the name of a (supposedly) superior form of community, composed of a spiritually unified people.18

It is unlikely that the conventional narrative about spheres of influence, which I referred to at the start of this article will change overnight. Too many politicians and political analysts seem eager to tell this story. The reasons why are obvious. The narrative of a ‘return’ to a nineteenth century realpolitik has the virtue of simplicity. It marshals and corals many complex recent events into a linear account of history that can be related easily. It offers a simple explanation for the origins of what remains, to this day, a highly complex geopolitical crisis. However, arguably, what makes this narrative of ‘return’ most attractive is that it serves up a scapegoat to blame – the rogue, unilateral power. This could be Russia. It could be the EU. All depends on who is telling the story and which side they choose to take.

My critique of this narrative of ‘return’ is that it is part of the neo-medieval problem. It imposes a misleading simplicity on the events that shape the spaces between major powers. And it indulges us with the false hope of discovering a comprehensive policy solution to the divisions of borders and community in the international arena that goes beyond the pathologies of crude statecraft.

The crucial point to my alternative story of the origins of the Ukraine crisis is that neither the EU nor Russia wanted a divisive geopolitical rivalry. When their relationship was reconfigured in the shadow of the EU’s enlargement it was done so in a bid to avoid a great power struggle over Europe’s new territorial order. But this effort to avoid a ‘return’ of geopolitics has backfired in neo-medieval ways.
The main reason for this is the neo-medieval manner in which the EU and Russia co-constituted their power as regional governors imbued with a sense of responsibility for the ‘external security’ of the space in-between their international borders. In principle, the price of this ‘security’ was submission by the states in this space of overlapping authority. But submission to two powerful protectors, to two regional governors – that was the recipe for a rivalry of a new kind of spheres of influence. Ukraine’s misfortune was to be caught up in this struggle, in a ‘grey zone’ midway between the EU and Russia; a political space that has come to be characterized by the state-breaking experience, to use Hedley Bull’s words, of “continuous violence and insecurity” (Bull 2012, 246).

Notes

1. For a good overview of the international discourse surrounding this particular intervention by Russia, see Summers (2012).
2. As suggested in this article, the ambiguity of Afghanistan’s status as a state and the insecurity this creates in the imperial capitals of London and Moscow helped to provide the impetus for this statist geo-strategy: Bayly (2015). As I argue, here, a different kind of geopolitical anxiety lies behind the creation of a ‘grey zone’, operating at the supranational or regional level and bound up with the EU’s strategic partnership with Russia.
3. Smith (2005). This topic has been the subject of a great deal of excellent research. Two of the best volumes on the dilemma of the association between the EU and these ‘outsiders’, are: Korosteleva (2012) and DeBardeleben (2008).
4. This is not only region beyond the EU’s borders where the Union has sought to transition actual or underlying territorial conflicts in a peaceful direction. However, it is the closest. For a general introduction to this theme, see: Diez, Albert and Setter (2008).
5. This well-known phrase comes from a speech by former President of the European Commission, Romano Prodi. The quote in full: “I want to see a ‘ring of friends’ surrounding the Union and its closest European neighbours, from Morocco to Russia and the Black Sea.” Prodi (2002).
6. Zielonka (2006, 6). Although it is worth noting that this is not the first mention of the term ‘fuzzy borders’ with regards to the EU’s external relations. This came, most likely, in: Christiansen, Petito and Tonra (2000).
8. I find that scholars who have written on ‘grey zones’ from a legal perspective, in the context of globalization, have insights that are particularly relevant in this geopolitical context. See: Minc (1995); Wilde (2006); and Lindahl (2013).
9. This gives it a different meaning to how this same concept has recently been applied in media and policy analyses of the Ukraine crisis. A good example, which can stand in for many, comes from US Ambassador John Herbst, director of the Atlantic Council’s research on Russia and Eurasia. He writes: “The grey zone emerged at the end of the Cold War when fifteen countries appeared following the implosion of the Soviet Union… They became and remain to this day an area in which the West and Russia vie for influence, an area in which there are no clear rules or understandings, a grey area ripe for tension, confrontation and even conflict.” J. Herbst in Hamilton and Meister (2016,
While I do not disagree that a ‘grey area’ is a zone where Russia and the West (more specifically, I argue, the EU) ‘vie for influence’, and an ‘area in which there are no clear rules’, I explicitly do not take the view that this area can be understood as a physical space on the map that emerges at the end of the Cold War. According to the neo-medieval interpretation set out here, a ‘grey zone’ is a fundamentally ambiguous spatial regime because it is more aspirational than physical. What is imagined is a political space of governance beyond the state in which state-centered concerns over the delimitation of territorial authority are overcome. As I argue, it is this (neo-medieval) wishful thinking about transcending the problems of geopolitics through ambitious experiments in governance that makes a ‘grey zone’ an area in which there are ‘no clear rules or understandings’, where there is no familiar inside/outside. Recognizing the constitutional origins of a ‘grey zone’ in this kind of neo-medieval enterprise, as I do here, also switches our attention away from the search for the origins of such a space at the end of the Cold War. This ‘grey zone’ was not created as a consequence of the end of the Soviet Union. It was created through a purposeful relationship with the Russian Federation.

11. These countries are typically referred to in the literature as belonging to a “contested neighbourhood”; see for example, Radchuk (2011); and Ademmer, Delcour and Wolczuk (2016). Or something similar, like an uneasily “shared neighbourhood”; see for example, Averre (2009); Dias (2013). These impressionistic descriptions are not particularly helpful, as I hope this analysis makes clear.
12. The other three common spaces cover economic cooperation, cooperation in research and education, and cooperation in what is often referred to in the shorthand as ‘internal security’, but is officially called ‘The Common Space of Freedom, Security and Justice’. European Commission (2005).
14. Of course, there were open disagreements and tensions over Russia’s military intervention in Georgia. However, these differences were settled, if only temporarily, in the EU-led diplomatic settlement that brought this conflict to an end, and provided the foundation for a reaffirmation of the EU and Russia’s Strategic Partnership. Seppo and Forsberg (2011).
18. For more detail on the theological character of Russia’s new sphere of influence, see Mikhail Suslov’s contribution to this special issue.

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