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Russian Challenge to the EU’s Normative Power: Change and Continuity

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Abstract
The article examines how Russian criticism of the normative power Europe (NPE) has evolved. Initially Russia insisted that NPE arguments covered realpolitik. However, two new approaches have recently emerged in Russian reporting on human rights in the EU. One is the demonstration that the EU does not qualify as a normative power. Another is the development of an alternative interpretation of human rights. Russia has, therefore, mastered all NPE critiques. This has occurred as the result of a change in how Russia views international relations. Moscow’s ultimate goal has, however, remained unchanged; it is to reaffirm its equality with key global players.

IAN MANNERS’ ARGUMENT ABOUT NORMATIVE POWER EUROPE (NPE), describing the specificity of the EU’s influence in the world, was eagerly taken on board and actively promoted by EU politicians and technocrats (Manners 2002). Former President of the European Commission José Manuel Barroso famously argued that the EU is ‘one of the most important, if not the most important, normative power in the world. … There is not an other case … where the United States or China or Russia has been able to have so many other countries following their patterns’ (Barroso 2007). Thus the practitioners adopted this academic thesis, which helped them to justify their policy.

Much has already been said about the concept itself and its constituent elements, about its coherence and contradictions. Less attention has been paid to how it is challenged not only in theory but also in practice. Academic literature provides at least three blocs of critique which practitioners can make use of. The first of these challenges the NPE concept from the realist position, imploring that attention be given to the structure of world politics and, most importantly, to the interests of the actors involved. The second undermines the specificity of the EU and its ability to be a normative leader. Finally, the third bloc questions the thesis about the universality of the values that the EU promotes. In essence, the three groups of critique pose different questions: firstly, whether normative power in fact exists in its own right; secondly, who promotes these values; and thirdly, what values are promoted? There are
numerous ways to deal with these critiques academically. What is of interest for this article, however, is how they have been exploited by EU partners, and by Russia in particular.

Russia is probably the best illustration of the unease with which NPE is met by EU partners. This is due on the one hand to the geographical and cultural proximity, reciprocal dependence and highly developed network of contacts between the two parties; and, on the other, to the inability of Moscow and Brussels to define a durable, long-term basis for their cooperation and strategic partnership.

The present article looks at how Russian reaction to the NPE, understood as the EU’s promotion of human rights but also of democracy and the rule of law, has evolved. Initially Moscow sought to demonstrate that the normative power argument was developed to cover the EU’s realpolitik (interest-based) intentions and that the EU has not been consistent and coherent in its implementation (Romanova 2009). Moscow avoided substantive discussions and was mostly on the defensive. Recently this approach has been modified and rendered more complex through reporting on human rights in the EU, prepared by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MID). As a result, Russia has increasingly challenged the NPE, showing how the EU does not live up to what is expected from a normative power. Furthermore, these reports also provided a platform for Moscow to develop an alternative normative concept, which draws extensively on conservatism. In doing this, Moscow challenged the universality of the concept that the EU promotes.

Hence, Russia has evolved in how it criticises the NPE, concentrating increasingly on questions of who promotes the norms and what norms are promoted, and increasingly going on the offensive. The goal that Russia pursues, however, has remained the same—it is to guarantee its equality with key global players (in this case, the EU). Such a view is consistent with key documents such as the 2008 Foreign Policy Concept, which stated that ‘Russia looks forward to the emergence of a stable system of international relations based on the principles of equality, mutual respect and mutually beneficial cooperation’ (President of Russia 2008). Similarly, Russia’s 2013 Foreign Policy Concept stresses ‘equality of partnerships’ (President of Russia 2013). The EU’s normative argument is seen by Russia as profoundly unequal because it reserves for the EU the right to unilaterally decide what is right or wrong and to judge others. Russia’s insistence on equality has thus remained central, but its practice has evolved in parallel with the changes in Russian understanding of current international relations.

In what follows the article first examines the three blocs of critique that practitioners can use to challenge the NPE. It then looks at how Russia has challenged the EU’s normative power, and how and why the Russian critique has evolved through Russian reporting on human rights in the EU. The analysis mostly concentrates on the 2011, 2012 and 2013 MID reports on human rights in the EU, which brought the biggest changes in the Russian attitude to the NPE. However, it also makes use of Vladimir Putin’s addresses and other MID documents.

The normative power Europe concept and its critique

The argument about the specificity of the EU’s actorness is of long standing.¹ So are the ideas about normative influence. Already in the 1930s Edward Carr stressed the importance of power over opinion (Carr 1939). The father of realism, Hans Morgenthau defined power as ‘a psychological relation between those who exercise it and those over whom it is exercised …

¹See, for example, Duchêne (1972).
[which] gives the former control over certain actions of the latter through the impact which
the former exert on the latter’s minds’ (Morgenthau 1993, p. 30). Johan Galtung (1973) further
developed the ‘power of ideas’ argument.

Ian Manners, however, gave a new impetus to these studies. Manners stresses that he
is not concerned with the EU’s actorness or with ideational competition. Rather he points
out that the EU exists as being different from others, sets an example for others, and also
shapes ‘the conception of “normal”’ both internally and externally (Manners 2002, p. 239).
In Manners’ own words, he sought to ‘refocus analysis away from empirical emphasis on the
EU’s institutions and policies, and towards including cognitive processes’ (Manners 2002,
p. 239), in order to stress that the EU’s normative power is ideational rather than physical or
material (Manners 2009). The substance of the EU’s normative power (or of its normative
agenda) consists of five core values—peace, liberty (meaning mainly four economic freedoms),
democracy, the rule of law and human rights—and four “minor” norms”—social solidarity,
anti-discrimination, sustainable development and good governance (Manners 2002, 2008).

Criticism of the NPE concept can be clustered in three blocs. Realists have dominated
in the first bloc, recalling the importance of interests and of the structure of international
relations. In essence, their arguments can be summarised in the question ‘do we need to talk
about the normative power as something special?’. Adrian Hyde-Price (2006), for example,
illustrated how neo-realism could be used to explain the EU’s foreign and security policy.
He criticised the NPE concept for being ‘reductionist’ (that is, seeking to explain changes in
the system through its elements), for neglecting power and for regarding normative power as
essentially good (Hyde-Price 2006). In Hyde-Price’s view ‘the EU serves as an instrument
of collective hegemony, shaping its external milieu through using power in a variety of forms’
and is ‘a “civilizing power” only in the sense that it is used by its most powerful member
states to impose their common values and norms on the post-communist East’ (Hyde-Price

Furthermore, cases of the EU privileging its interests (especially economic but also
security) over normative arguments have been documented (Youngs 2004; Warkotsch 2006;
Here, attention was paid to: how the EU uses ‘moral norms in the public legitimation and
self-rationalisation of geopolitical interest and commercial gains’ (Langan 2012, p. 243);
how norms were ‘derived from interests’ (Storey 2006, p. 334), ‘designed with more direct
strategic utility in mind’ (Youngs 2004, p. 421) and served to reinforce interests and to create
a proper context for their promotion; and how norms can be used as a ‘means of agency’ (Flynn
& Farrell 1999, p. 531). In this sense norms are similar to Stephen Lukes’ third dimension
of power, which is about ‘influencing, shaping or determining the priorities of an actor ‘by
controlling their thoughts and desires’ (Lukes 2005, p. 27).

Researchers have also exposed a conflict within the EU about which norm to promote
in a specific situation, as well as discrepancies among various institutions (Falkner 2007;
Balducci 2010). Furthermore, cases of divergence between the EU and its members in terms
of privileging norms over interests were documented (King 1999; Timmins 2006). Finally,

\(^2\)See also alternative lists in Nicolaïdis and Howse (2002), Manners and Whitman (2003), Scheipers and
Sicurelli (2007).
\(^3\)See also Merlingen (2007), Hyde-Price (2008).
\(^4\)See also Casier (2013).
inconsistency in the promotion of norms in various countries and parts of the world and, ultimately, the problem of double standards were exposed (Lucarelli & Manners 2006, pp. 207–8; Romanova 2009; Mattlin 2010).

The second bloc of NPE critique departs from Ian Manners’ concept. The question that is asked is ‘who promotes the values?’—that is, whether the EU lives up to what is expected from a normative power. The three parts of NPE are what the EU ‘is’; what it does and ‘says’ (how it promotes its norms); and what that behaviour ‘does’ (Manners 2002). NPE will be problematic if any of these components are not in place. In a sense, the second and third components are dealt with in the first bloc of critique. The second bloc of critique is more concerned with whether the EU itself lives up to the expectations: whether internally it behaves on the basis of the norms which it promotes, and whether its reputation is impeccable. The importance of internal/external consistency lies in the fact that it ‘signals that norms are not merely instrumental, existing only when there is a happy overlap with self-interest, but have value in and of themselves’ (Tocci with Manners 2008, p. 318). The EU, however, is frequently criticised for the gap between what it is and what it preaches (Nicolaïdis & Howse 2002).

Finally, the third bloc of critique is about the universality of the relevant norms, about what is projected beyond the EU’s borders. Adrian Hyde-Price famously argued that ‘universalist claims more often than not serve to disguise particularist interests’ (Hyde-Price 2008, p. 33). Thomas Diez (2005) supported the same view from a different research focus, while Helen Sjursen emphasised that ‘values or conceptions of what is good may vary according to cultural or social contexts. … If the EU defines itself … as a “force for the good”, this risks being a subjective definition linked to a particular European understanding’, being ‘an expression of Euro-centric cultural imperialism’ (Sjursen 2006, p. 248). Zaik Laidi (2007) hinted at the possibility of the EU becoming a normative empire by insisting on universal norms. Federica Bicchi further argues that the EU’s policy ‘can … be seen as unreflexive behaviour mirroring the deeply engrained belief that Europe’s history is a lesson for everybody’ (Bicchi 2006, p. 287).

Elizabeth De Zutter (2010) was the first to elaborate on the importance of NPE’s recognition by others. More recently Henrik Larsen demonstrated that ‘there are significant geographical differences in the extent to which the EU is seen as a normative power. This perception of the EU is much more prominent in the EU’s southern and eastern neighbourhood and much weaker or non-existent in the rest of the world’, which means that while the EU might aspire to be a global economic power, it is less likely to become so in normative terms (Larsen 2014, p. 906).

Researchers outside of the EU have also exploited this argument extensively. Guy Harpaz and Asa Shamis, for example, argue that most works on normative power are ‘both Eurocentric and abstract’ and that ‘the academic discourse fails to ascribe appropriate weight to the manner in which Normative Power is perceived by the non-European’ (Harpaz & Shamis 2010, p. 580). Russian researchers also elaborated on this point, stressing that it is ‘nonsense to imagine a single world community with some sort of unified system of values, cultures, single way of life and single stereotypes and standards’ (Gadzhiev 2008, p. 28). Rather, they insist on the need to preserve national identities and peculiarities of national statehood (Igumnova, 2014).

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Research carried out by Natalie Tocci (2008), meanwhile, examined the significance of normative arguments (but also their plurality) in the foreign policy not only of the EU, but also of the US, Russia, China and India. It exposed the differences in the sets of ideas held by these actors about the world and international relations. The project concluded that three factors explain why various players have different hierarchies of norms. These are: history and philosophical traditions; ‘background, location and perspective’; and the ‘political configuration in which an actor finds itself in the international system’ (Tocci with Manners 2008, p. 312). In this way, it challenged the universality of the EU’s claims to normative power. Another study gauged the reactions of the Russians and Chinese to the EU’s normative power (Gerrits 2009).

On the basis of these three blocs of NPE critique, alternative concepts have been suggested. Among them are reinvigoration of civilian power (Maull 2005; Telò 2007); post-modern power (Cooper 2003); ethical power (Aggestam 2008); transformative power (Leonard 2005); normative Empire (Laidi 2007); and normative hegemony (Haukkala 2008; Diez 2013). However, what has remained unexplored is how the critique of NPE manifests itself in the foreign policy of EU partners, what arguments they deploy and how their treatment of NPE has evolved. These issues are explored in the remainder of the article through an analysis of Russian practice.

Russian critique: the past

Russia has traditionally insisted on the importance of interests rather than the promotion of values in international relations. This should not be taken to imply that Russia is defined solely by interests, as opposed to the EU’s reliance on values, since the promotion of values is seen as masking a quest for some tangible political, security or economic gains. Vladimir Putin has succinctly claimed that he is unable to understand what the ‘protection of so-called European, Western values’ means, saying that he sees at least two problems with the concept. ‘Firstly, … there is no criteria for them [the values]. These are only general discussions about democracy, about this or that. … Secondly, what is behind [this promotion]? Definitely these are geopolitical interests of one country or a group of countries’ (Putin 2014b). In sum, Russia has always conceptualised values and norms promotion as empty talk, as a cover for more mundane interests and as an instrument for manipulation and promotion of geopolitical objectives (Igumnova 2014; Okara no date).

Furthermore, Russia has criticised the EU and the US for politicisation of the human rights agenda and for arbitrary choice of the norms to promote. In an article ‘Russia in the Changing World’, published prior to his re-election as president in 2012, Vladimir Putin argued that...

… Western states dominate and politicise the human rights agenda, using it as a means to exert pressure. … The objects of human rights monitoring are chosen regardless of objective criteria but at the discretion of the states that have ‘privatised’ the human rights agenda.

Russia has been the target of biased and aggressive criticism that, at times, exceeds all limits. … When we are subjected, again and again, to blanket criticisms in a persistent effort to influence our citizens, their attitudes, and our domestic affairs, it becomes clear that these attacks are not rooted in moral and democratic values. (Putin 2012)

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Russia has, therefore, insisted on the depoliticisation of human rights, which, along with democracy and the rule of law, should not be linked to other aspects of international relations. Similarly, Konstantin Dolgov, Russian Special Representative for Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law, has argued that politicisation is about Western powers’ attempts to use human rights for the sake of ‘promoting their national, geopolitical interests’, ‘interfering in the politics of sovereign countries up until the change of alien regimes’ (Dolgov 2013a). This view directly contradicts the EU’s own claim that its strategy is predicated on integrating human rights and democracy promotion into all aspects of its external activity (European Union 2012).

As can be seen in Putin’s statement above, Russia has always insisted on not being taught lessons all the time, especially when the criticism received is not constructive. In his now famous Munich speech in 2007 Vladimir Putin lamented the fact that ‘Russia—we—are constantly being taught about democracy’ (Putin 2007b). In a similar vein, Vladimir Chizhov, Russia’s ambassador to the EU, has argued on a number of occasions that it is ‘counter-productive to talk … [to Russia] in a didactic and categorical manner, to attach labels, sometimes without any effort to understand the issue’ (Chizhov 2012b), while Konstantin Dolgov has condemned the EU for ‘giving lectures’ and ‘teaching us democracy in the widest sense of this word’ (Dolgov 2012).

Moreover, in the statement above, Vladimir Putin also reproaches the West for inconsistency and arbitrary choice of the norms to promote. This line of argument has also remained quite popular amongst the Russian political elite. Alexei Pushkov, chair of the Committee on External Affairs of the State Duma, argued that ‘[i]f human rights are a universal value, they cannot be interpreted differently all the time. … Mobile concepts cannot be universal values’ (Pushkov 2012b).7

As can also be seen from Putin’s statement above, Russia has viewed this criticism as inappropriate interference in its domestic affairs or in the domestic affairs of other states, which can lead to upheavals, revolutions and coups d’état (Putin 2012; Dolgov 2013b). In Russia’s 2013 Foreign Policy Concept, for instance, it is stated that:

… increasing global competition and the growing crisis potential sometimes create a risk of destructive and unlawful use of ‘soft power’ and human rights concepts to exert political pressure on sovereign states, interfere in their internal affairs, destabilise their political situation, and manipulate public opinion, including under the pretext of financing cultural and human rights projects abroad. (President of Russia 2013)

Furthermore, Russia has stressed that the EU’s normative agenda is not consistently reflected in all EU policies, at the level of its member states or in the activity of various institutions and bodies. This inconsistency is used to demonstrate that the EU’s normative power is not so much about normative arguments as geopolitics, and that it bears the imprint of historical wounds carried by the new member states (Romanova 2009). It is also cited as a reason why Russia would do better to cooperate with individual EU member states rather than with the EU as a whole. Finally, Moscow has emphasised that normatively defined policies are applied differently, according to the interests of the Union. This line of argument has been preserved and further enhanced in recent years. For instance, the aforementioned Alexei

7See also Romanova (2009).
Pushkov accused the European Parliament of double standards because it does not criticise the US (Pushkov 2012a), thereby conveying the message that there are double standards in the application of NPE.

In sum, Russia has mostly used elements of the first bloc of critique to counter the EU’s normative discussions. In essence, the idea was not to challenge the agenda, but rather to demonstrate that normative power as such is not relevant for today’s international relations (or for dialogue with Russia). This approach was also meant to illustrate that the EU itself does not follow its own logics consistently, implying that the normative power argument is an instrument rather than a different approach to relations. In this respect Russia has mostly been on the defensive side.

What predefined this attitude? Since the breakup of the Soviet Union Russia has positioned itself as a normal actor in today’s international relations. This implied deideologisation—a move from the practices of the past towards an interest-based foreign policy. At the time of the development of the country’s first Foreign Policy Concept, the then Minister of Foreign Affairs Andrei Kozyrev argued that Russia had to become ‘a normal great power’. As Andrey Makarychev has aptly observed: ‘it is Russia’s denial of politicised practice that underpins its claims to being a “normal country”’ (Lavrov 2007), which does not need to be “normalised” by others’ (Makarychev 2008, p. 202). For Vladimir Putin this normalcy was mostly about cooperation, based on interests and mutual economic and security gains. The 2013 Foreign Policy Concept casts this idea in stone by stating that defence of the interests of the Russian state, its society and citizens is among the key principles in constructing relations with third countries (President of Russia 2013, emphasis added).

Furthermore, Russia has advanced the principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of sovereign countries and argued against any unnecessary critique. This has been perceived as an essential feature of the partnership with the EU. Accordingly, the role of international organisations is to be limited as well. As Vladimir Putin argued in Munich, the role of international organisations like the OSCE is conceived as assisting ‘country members in observing international human rights norms at their request’ but not as ‘interfering in the internal affairs of other countries, and especially not imposing a regime that determines how these states should live and develop’, since the latter leads to political and economic instability (Putin 2007b).

**Russian critique: the present**

The preceding section has shown how Russia’s vision of the world predefined the way it tried to re-establish equality in its relations with the EU following the end of the USSR. This entailed the denial of normative interaction in favour of interest-based interaction and a realistic reading of the EU’s behaviour. During the first decade and a half of its interactions with the EU, Russia only employed the first bloc of NPE critique. However, this had already begun to change by 2007. In 2011 a significant transformation became apparent, with the appointment by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Ministerstvo Inostrannykh Del—MID) of a Special Representative for Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law and the appearance

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of reports on human rights in the EU and US. At the time of writing, three reports on the EU have been produced (MID 2011, 2012, 2013). The geographical coverage and subject matter of these reports is not accidental. Through them, Russia has commented on the situation in countries which (in its view) are not sufficiently criticised in terms of human rights and which at the same time frequently use arguments about human rights, democracy and the rule of law to criticise Russia. Furthermore, it is in the field of human rights where Russia is most vulnerable, because the critique it faces is linked to very specific cases like the prosecution of members of Pussy Riot or the death in custody of Sergei Magnitsky, rather than to general observations on the state of democracy and the rule of law (Romanova & Pavlova 2014). These reports produced two novelties in the Russian approach to the EU’s normative power.

The first novelty: the EU does not live up to the standards which it promotes

The key source of the EU’s normative power is its own example. This is a point frequently repeated by EU policy makers and scholars alike, including Manners (2002, 2008, 2009), who regards this as one of the key components of NPE. Officials in Brussels frequently cite the Union’s strong record of guaranteeing human rights, promoting democracy and ensuring the rule of law. These internal achievements are the main reason why the EU can serve as an example and legitimately promote the same values beyond its borders. It is this very aspect that Russia decided to challenge in its reports on human rights.

The 2011 MID report covered only a part of the EU. It stressed the problems faced by the Russian-speaking population in the Baltic countries (particularly non-citizens in Latvia and Estonia), the Roma/gypsy population in some EU member states, and migrants and asylum seekers (especially those of African origin). It also highlighted issues of racism and xenophobia, claiming that certain EU member states use these for political purposes instead of seeking to address the problem. Finally, MID looked at crimes against children, 19% of whom were reported to have experienced family violence (MID 2011).

The 2012 report was more comprehensive. Firstly, it was devoted exclusively to the EU (a separate report was produced on the USA) and, unlike its predecessor, included all member states. In a further new departure, the document did not differentiate between states which were critical of Russia and those which were friendly to it; even Greece and Cyprus, traditional Russian allies, received their share of criticism. The subject matter was also widened beyond the issues raised in 2011, to include manifestations of aggressive nationalism and neo-Nazism and violation of the rights of prisoners and the mentally disabled. The report paid specific attention to cooperation between EU member states and the US on secret prisons, to the violation of the freedom of mass media, and to human trafficking. Moscow also severely criticised member states for disregarding international agreements in the field of human rights and increased its critique of corruption and shortcomings in their judicial system and police (thus drawing attention also to the rule of law). Finally, the report meticulously detailed rising unemployment and the worsening of social protection in Greece, Italy, Portugal and Slovenia as a result of the economic crisis. Hence, emphasis was placed on the violation of economic and social rights (MID 2012).

The 2013 report developed the points of the previous reports, stressing in particular xenophobia, racism, aggressive nationalism and neo-Nazism. The threat of neo-Nazism was
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qualified as underestimated, promoted by ‘a virtual need for freedom of expression’ at a time when it increasingly and negatively affects various spheres of life (in Latvia, Estonia, Germany, Sweden, Austria, Greece and Italy) (MID 2013, p. 9). The report also placed violation of the rights of minorities, asylum seekers as well as disregard of social rights in the context of economic crisis, stressing that problems were becoming rooted. The report also dwelled on the violation of children’s rights and gender equality as well as on systemic violation of privacy (referring, in particular, to the case of Edward Snowden and to US monitoring of EU mobile phones) (MID 2013).

Furthermore, the 2012 and 2013 reports point to an interrelation between the EU and national levels. They stress that the 2000 Charter of Fundamental Rights failed to live up to expectations, that the scope of its application is limited and that member states manage to bypass it (European Union 2002). Moreover, the European Parliament critique of human rights failings in the EU was characterised as inadequate and lacking specific addressees. Although in 2012 the Commission was praised as delivering, the stance toughened in 2013, when Moscow argued that supranational institutions tended to justify their passive attitude by reference to a lack of competences and ignored the implementation of articles 2 and 7 of the EU Treaty (MID 2013). The EU’s Human Rights Agency was characterised as toothless, while similar conclusions were drawn about the EU Special Representative for Human Rights. Moscow also criticised the lack of a permanent supranational mechanism for the monitoring of human rights in the EU, which it reproached for a lack of ambition in response to the 6 March 2013 proposal by Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark and Finland to set up an EU monitoring mechanism for human rights, democracy and the rule of law (MID 2013). The 2012 and 2013 reports stressed that most EU recommendations are declaratory and fall short of any real change. Indeed, the critique can be compared to a reverse interpretation of the principle of parallelism—that is, if the EU promotes something externally, it has to have similar competences internally (but in fact does not). Finally, the EU’s treatment of NGOs was qualified as biased because of the way the funding is distributed.

By 2013, therefore, Moscow’s position had become more solid and substantiated with arguments, more comprehensive and also more critical of EU-level bodies. The conclusion regarding the EU level was that all violations are ‘in vivid contradiction with the EU’s ambitions to play the role of the “key judge” in the field of human rights and democratic freedoms’ (MID 2012, p. 3). It was further stated that the ‘European Union continues to position itself as the main outpost in the struggle for human rights in the world. But its own legal activity in this area does not correspond to these claims’ and that ‘[h]uman rights diplomacy in the EU is still a “one-way street” and is implemented strictly outwards’ (MID 2013).

Finally, regular reporting allowed Moscow to make some conclusions on the dynamics of respect for human rights in the EU. In particular, Moscow underlined the lack of progress on most issues, as well as the absence of political will to solve them. It also claimed that this situation comes into ‘dire contradiction with the EU’s mentor rhetoric targeted at other countries’ (MID 2012, p. 4), implying that the EU cannot legitimately criticise Russia or most other countries in its present state. Similarly, the 2013 report concluded that ‘the existing system of protection of fundamental human rights … remains ineffective. … No improvements have been noted in ensuring both at the institutional and regulatory level in the EU constant supranational monitoring of cases involving violations of fundamental rights and freedoms by some of its Member States’ (MID 2013). In sum, Moscow moved to demonstrating the gap
between the EU’s declarations on the one hand and its substance as an entity on the other. Some traces of this new strategy towards human rights and the rule of law can be found in earlier years. For instance, Vladimir Putin has from time to time drawn attention to ‘secret prisons and torture in Europe, troubles with mass media in some countries, immigration legislation’ (Putin 2007a).10 However, the move towards regular reporting meant a qualitative change in the critique and thus a more consistent use of the second bloc of NPE critique.

The second novelty: a Russian alternative to the EU’s normative power

The reports on the situation concerning human rights in the EU also provided Moscow with a chance to gradually carve a niche for itself in the protection of human rights. At least seven thematic priorities can be identified in the MID reports.

Firstly, Russia stresses its experience in constructing a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional society, which it can share in order to help the EU deal with problems of ethnic minorities, racism and xenophobia. To emphasise this point, Vladimir Chizhov argued that Russia was ready to share its ‘unique tradition of good neighbourhood coexistence of representatives of various cultures and religions, based on tolerance at socio-political and interpersonal levels’ (Chizov 2012a). In other words, Russia would like to become the source of expertise and an example for certain states when they solve their problems. In autumn 2014 Russia also promoted a declaration against Christianophobia in the UN and OSCE, stressing that similar declarations were made on other religions but not on Christianity (Lavrov 2014). This represents a logical development both of the defence of Christianity and of the Russian turn to conservatism (see below).

Secondly, Russia is traditionally preoccupied with the rights and freedoms of the Russian-speaking population in the Baltic countries. It has consistently stressed their deprivation, lack of access to various institutions, limited political rights as well as rights to education in their native language. The section dealing with Russian-speakers in the Baltic has been the longest in all of the human rights reports and other relevant communications with the EU. Defending the rights of these people, Russia has promoted the principle of ‘non-selectivity’ in the human rights’ agenda, that is to say the necessity to respect all categories of human rights. In particular, Vladimir Chizhov has contrasted the status of non-citizens in the Baltic countries, ‘deprived of political and social rights’ with that of ‘journalists or sexual minorities’ (Chizhov 2012a).

Thirdly, Russia argues that preference should be given to the rights of the group over those of the individual but also for the equal treatment of all groups in any society. For example, Konstantin Dolgov has argued, referring to the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (UN 1966) that ‘realisation of the rights of one person cannot damage the realisation of the rights of another person’ (Dolgov 2012). This idea about the prevalence of group rights over those of the individual has recently gained in influence. For example, the treatment of the punk-rock group Pussy Riot was justified by the fact that their individual rights entailed an insult to and attack on the rights of believers, a much bigger group. This part of the Russian normative agenda was further developed during the international campaign against Syria in 2013, when Moscow argued that there was no reason to privilege one group over the other, that is, to intervene in any country on behalf of one part of the population

10See also Putin (2007b).
threatening other groups. The preferred solution was to facilitate negotiations between all groups involved in the conflict.

Fourthly, Moscow stresses economic and social rights and gives them prevalence over political rights. Here, it is worth remembering Vladimir Putin’s argument that the EU is not the authority anymore, not even in human rights, because it does not deliver to its citizens what it has promised (Valdai 2012). In Putin’s view, the current crisis can be attributed to EU’s politicians failing to live up to their promises. It is also worth citing a poll of the Russian Levada Centre, which demonstrates that 50% of Russians believe that it is not worth paying attention to the critique of Russia by the West because of the economic crisis there (Levada 2012). Social rights and the critique of their violation in the EU gained in importance in the 2013 MID report, while the only NGOs in Russia that were recognised and promised support in Vladimir Putin’s 2014 address to the Federal Assembly were those dealing with social issues (Putin 2014a).

Fifthly, Russia pays attention to the revision of history that is taking place in some European states. Here, Moscow is preoccupied above all with the diminishing importance attached to the role of the Soviet Union in World War II. This is because the victory over Nazi Germany in 1945 constitutes the least controversial moment in the recent history of Russia, one which unites all of today’s political forces. As such, evoking the heroism and sacrifice of this victory has become central to the construction of the new Russian political identity.

Sixthly, the fight against alleged manifestations of neo-Nazism and neo-fascism is also acquiring more and more importance. On the one hand, emphasising this dimension allows Russia to draw on its historic victory in World War II, and gives the current generation the opportunity to repeat this heroic deed, albeit within a different framework. On the other hand, invoking anti-fascism provides a justification for Russia’s contemporary policy (including its 2014 Ukrainian policy). It is, therefore, logical that Russia criticises the EU for inadequate treatment of fascist and neo-Nazi tendencies (see above), while putting forward proposals within international organisations such as the UN and OSCE to condemn perceived manifestations of such tendencies. This strategy does not prevent Russia from forging alliances with extreme right parties in certain EU member states, which resist existing and further transfer of competences to the EU’s level. This undermines the Russian crusade against fascism.

Finally, the 2013 MID report was vocal in condemning the EU for ‘the dissemination of … neo-liberal values as a universal lifestyle for all other members of the international community’ and for attempts ‘to enforce on other countries an alien view of homosexuality and same-sex marriages as a norm of life and some kind of a natural social phenomenon that deserves support at the state level’ (MID 2013). Thus, Russia increasingly argues for support of traditional family values and a conservative agenda in general.

All in all, then, Russia has demonstrated not only its willingness to criticise the EU but also to provide an alternative to it. This has allowed Moscow to put into practice the third bloc of the NPE critique, which is based on the idea that the EU’s normative agenda is not universal and, therefore, has limits.

Since 2011 Russia has therefore increasingly criticised the EU’s normative power on the basis not only of the first, but also of the second and third blocs of NPE critique. Its reports

on human rights in the EU provided a venue for this qualitative change. On the one hand, Moscow has accused the EU of not standing up to the standards which it sets, thus challenging the key component of NPE. On the other, Russia has developed an alternative vision of human rights, which emphasises both general issues (like the construction of a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional society, inclusiveness and economic rights) and issues specific to Russia (revision of history, the Russian-speaking population in the Baltic states, the fight against fascism and neo-Nazism, prevalence of economic and social rights over political ones and group rights over individual rights). Voicing the forms of critique contained in the second and the third blocs allowed Moscow to move from the defensive to the offensive in its human rights discussions with the EU.

Russia’s critique of the EU and voicing the Russian alternative paradigm have been increasingly in tune with each other. Initially, Russia at times criticised the EU on the basis of the EU neo-liberal paradigm, that is, for not living up to its own standards (for example for suppressing the rights of sexual minorities (MID 2012)). As reporting developed, Russia’s own agenda has increasingly become a point of reference when criticising the EU. However, Russia still has to develop a single yardstick for all EU member states, and its critique therefore differs significantly from one EU member state to another.

This tendency is exacerbated by a dependence on what is reported in a particular country and on what information is available (mostly through Western-based NGOs like Freedom House, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Medecins Sans Frontieres, and Reporters without Borders (Dolgov 2013a)). Hence, the Nordic countries are criticised in the area of gender equality (because they themselves carefully monitor it), whereas far more pronounced levels of gender inequality in other EU members go unnoticed. Similarly, the UK is criticised for its treatment of sexual minorities, while a more hostile attitude on the part of some other EU states is ignored. Reliance on the data of Western NGOs therefore limits Russia’s abilities to synchronise the second and third blocs of criticism.

Why did the changes in the Russian critique occur?

Already in Putin’s 2007 Munich speech, traces of the change in the Russian perception of the world and international relations can be identified. The change became more pronounced in 2008, when Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov admitted that deideologisation of contemporary international relations had not occurred. Rather, he claimed:

… there are two basic approaches. … The first one holds that the world must gradually become a Greater West through the adoption of Western values. It is a kind of ‘end of history’. The other approach—advocated by Russia—holds that competition is becoming truly global and acquiring a civilisational dimension; that is, the subject of competition now includes values and development models. (Lavrov 2008b)

In the same year, but on a different occasion, Lavrov talked about soft power, defining it as an ‘ability to influence the external world by civilisational, humanitarian-cultural, foreign policy and other attractiveness’ (Lavrov 2008a).

Vladimir Putin used the term ‘soft power’ for the first time in his pre-election article of 2012, admitting that this instrument is ‘used increasingly often’ and defining it as ‘a matrix of tools and methods to reach foreign policy goals without the use of arms but by exerting
information and other levers of influence’ (Putin 2012). Putin lamented what he saw as the illegal use of soft power, but also admitted that:

More often than not, we are too humble and too willing to spare the self-regard of our more experienced partners. Still, we often have something to say, and no country has a perfect record on human rights and basic freedoms. Even the older democracies commit serious violations, and we should not look the other way. Obviously, this work should not be about trading insults. All sides stand to gain from a constructive discussion of human rights issues. (Putin 2012)

He also stressed that Russian activities in the field of human rights reporting should be intensified because ‘[t]his will facilitate broader and more equitable cooperation in the effort to solve humanitarian problems and promote fundamental democratic principles and human rights’ (Putin 2012). Russian views about soft power were further developed during Putin’s meeting with Russian ambassadors on 9 July 2012, and in the 2013 Foreign Policy Concept, which defined soft power as ‘a comprehensive toolkit for achieving foreign policy objectives building on civil society potential, information, cultural and other methods and technologies alternative to traditional diplomacy’ (President of Russia 2013).

In the latter document Russia also committed itself to ‘working to ensure respect for human rights and freedoms in the world through an equal and constructive international dialogue with due regard for ethnic, cultural and historical characteristics of each state’ (President of Russia 2013). This statement is noteworthy because of its stress on non-universality of rights on the one hand and, on the other, the need to guarantee Russia’s equality with other major actors in the world. Furthermore, Russia reaffirms here (and in other documents) its adherence to the concept of human rights and freedoms; it nevertheless reserves for itself the right to provide its own interpretations of this concept (on a par with those of the EU or US) and to observe the practices of other states.

Work on the Russian concept of soft power continued in 2014 with a (non-state) report that detailed the current state of play regarding soft power in Russia and emphasised the role of Vladimir Putin in this area. More importantly it analysed the concept of soft power reportedly developed by MID and Rossotrudnichestvo (Russian Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation) in 2014 (not made public at the time of writing).

The idea of competition on the basis of values has also gained strength in Russia since 2008. The latest Russian Foreign Policy Concept bluntly states that ‘global competition for the first time … acquires a civilisational dimension and translates into the competition of different value orientations and models of development while staying in the framework of universal principles of democracy and market economy’ (President of Russia 2013). Hence the adherence to values and universal principles is restated. Russian MPs and diplomats alike have consistently stressed that the EU does not have any monopoly on human right critique, because ‘human rights are a universal value’ (Pushkov 2012b) and cannot be seen as belonging exclusively to ‘a western …, eastern …, southern or any other field’ (Dolgov 2012).

In recent times, Russia has increasingly drawn upon conservatism as the substance of its own alternative interpretation within this value competition. In his address to the Federal
Assembly in 2013, Vladimir Putin for the first time openly criticised attacks on traditional values and demanded recognition of the ‘equality, however strange it may seem, of the good and the bad’ (Putin 2013). Drawing on Russian philosopher Nicolay Berdyaev, he defined the essence of conservatism as the prevention of a ‘movement backward and downward, into chaotic darkness, a return to a primitive state’ (Putin 2013). This new Russian vision had implications beyond its borders, because ‘there are more and more people in the world who support our position on defending traditional values … the values of traditional families, real human life, including religious life’ (Putin 2013). This approach was further refined in 2014 (Putin 2014a, 2014c).

Putin’s 2013 speech saw him immediately proclaimed as one of the leaders of the global conservative movement, conservatism being conceptualised as a system of values, which helps to build bridges across various cultures (Abzalov 2013). This conceptual approach emphasised that the new conservatism had broader, international implications. Europe, by contrast, has been increasingly portrayed as having lost its true values, and as being too materialistic and consumerist (Narochnitskaya 2007; Okara no date; Rogozin 2009; Igumnova, 2014).

The change in Russia’s perception of the world and its accompanying strategy also required it to strike a balance between its new approach to NPE and its stances on non-interference in the domestic affairs of a sovereign country. Vladimir Putin’s stance on this issue is quite instructive, adopting the position that ‘human rights override state sovereignty. … However, when state sovereignty is too easily violated in the name of this provision, when human rights are protected from abroad and on a selective basis … these actions cannot be considered a noble mission but rather outright demagogy’ (Putin 2012). Hence, the conclusion is that there should be no easy violation of sovereignty and no selectivity (that is no Western-only interpretation of the human rights concept).

In line with this interpretation, MID representatives have stressed that ‘according to the international practice, critique of other countries in the field of human rights is not considered interference in their internal affairs’ (Dolgov 2012). In a similar vein, the Russian Ambassador to the EU stated that ‘[h]uman rights are not exclusively the internal affair of a state. They are a matter of interest for all states’ (Chizhov 2012a), reinforced by the relevant OSCE commitments. However, Russian representatives also insist that no-one should ‘attempt to somehow influence from outside and in their interests the functioning of sovereign state institutions and structures’ (Dolgov 2012). In other words, the MID sought to demonstrate that what is needed is critique without pushing any recipe for how to correct a particular situation or specifying changes to legislation (the latter being defined as interference in the domestic affairs of a country).

In sum, Russia’s new approach to human rights-based critique of the EU and to dealing with NPE emerged as a result of a change in its perception of international relations. This has been due mainly to the internal evolution of Russia, rather than to changes in the EU’s promotion or use of normative power. Gradual development of an alternative normative interpretation of human rights has been equipping Russia with a yardstick to criticise the EU but also with an alternative value paradigm to promote. This allowed Moscow to bring to life the second and third blocs of NPE critique.

The ultimate goal of Russia, however, has remained the same; it is to re-establish equality with the EU (and the West at large). In addition to the above-mentioned quote from Vladimir
Putin’s 2012 article that ‘sovereignty is too easily violated in the name of … human rights’ (Putin 2012), it is worth mentioning some other statements. For instance, Andrei Klimov, a Russian MP, has pointed out that article 2 of the EU–Russian Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EU & Russia 1997) presupposes reciprocity; that is why ‘Russian members of parliament, have no less reason to be interested in how human rights are respected in EU member states than our colleagues in the European Parliament’ (Klimov 2012). Similarly, the MID has underlined its wish to see ‘an equal and constructive dialogue with the European Union on the issues of human rights and democratic development …’ (MID 2012, p. 3, emphasis added). In other words, the new NPE critique which Russia put forward represents a new way to re-establish (or reaffirm) equality with the EU.

**Conclusion**

This article has charted an evolution in the way Russia has challenged the EU’s normative power. Russia started with a relatively simplistic critique, rooted in the realist tradition (described here as the first bloc of critique). This argued that international relations have to be based on interests rather than values, and that values promotion is hypocritical, concealing real geopolitical intentions and leading to unnecessary politicisation of the human rights agenda. Moscow also criticised the EU for intervention in the domestic affairs of sovereign countries through its critique of human rights, and exposed differences within the EU to demonstrate that the use of human rights is tactical rather than strategic.

However, Moscow’s critique has been evolving since 2011, when it first published a report on human rights in the world. This and consequent reports provided a venue for Russia to criticise the EU, implying that the latter does not live up to its expectations and therefore cannot reprimand others and give lectures on human rights. The MID documents also allowed Moscow to flesh out an alternative reading of human rights, thereby showing that the EU’s own concept is not universal. In sum, these reports embody the second and third blocs of NPE critique. Russia has, therefore, moved from a defensive to an offensive strategy in the field of human rights.

The article also demonstrates Russia’s increasing interest in who promotes the values and what values are promoted. Previously in the literature, it was argued that the question ‘who promotes?’ is more important for Moscow than the question ‘what is promoted?’ (Pavlova & Romanova 2014, emphasis in original). While Russia did indeed develop its critique of the normative power of the West in order to re-establish equality in contemporary circumstances, there is evidence to suggest that what is promoted is also of increasing importance. This also explains the rise in popularity of such concepts as soft power and value competition. Russia’s choice of alternative framework is also instructive, as conservatism is meant to provide a channel of communication which is understood and well received in all countries, irrespective of geographical position.

The development of the second and third blocs of critique did not mean the abandonment of the first one. Rather, there is a peaceful coexistence of the three blocs. As a result, the second and the third blocs of Russian critique are sometimes perceived as instrumental, as tactical rather than strategic changes. This impression is reinforced by the fact that Russia devotes few resources to human rights monitoring, mostly relying on Western NGOs. As a result, the critique of various EU member states differs and the overall conclusions (drawn on the
basis of Russia’s alternative reading of human rights) are not always substantiated by the data provided in the rest of the document. Moreover, Russia does not have its own clearly-defined yardstick for assessing the human rights situation in the EU.

This latter deficiency, however, has gradually been dealt with. The concept of human rights, which Russia promotes and is slowly fleshing out (conservatism, with an emphasis on traditional family values, spiritual development and religion), has been increasingly tied to the critique of human rights in the EU, and is by degrees becoming the yardstick by which the EU is assessed. It remains to be seen whether future reporting will show more tuning between the EU’s critique and the values that Russia promotes. At the same time, the Russian case demonstrates that, in order to credibly criticise and defy the EU (that is, in putting forward the second and third blocs of NPE critique), its partner needs to present an alternative concept.

The evolution described has resulted from changes in the Russian perception of international relations. Russia’s initial vision of the world was based on a concept of interest-based interaction, allowing parties to reap economic and political benefits without interfering in the domestic affairs of one another. However, a change in this attitude could be seen already in the 2007 speech that Vladimir Putin gave in Munich. Since that time, the notions of value competition and soft power have been developed, signalling an understanding by Russia that it needed its own critique of the EU and its own alternative concept to promote. Thus, the type of NPE critique that is put forward by the EU’s partner depends on the views that the latter holds regarding the world and the nature of international relations.

The ultimate goal of Russia, however, has remained the same, despite the evolution in the human rights-based critique. It is still about guaranteeing Russia’s equality with the EU and other major players. This goal, however, is to be realised not through the denial of value promotion, but rather through embarking on value competition (which in turn includes contestation of the EU’s values and the promotion of an alternative paradigm, to a large extent based on conservatism).

The evolution in Russia’s approach has also entailed a fine-tuning of its attitude to intervention in the domestic affairs of another state. In this regard, non-intervention has remained the basic norm, with critique being ideally limited to exposing the weaknesses rather than challenging the historical and cultural specificity of the country in question, and stopping short of prescribing recipes for change. An important exception to this rule, which is currently being coined, relates to the rights of Russian-speaking populations (so-called compatriots) abroad. Their protection could still be used as an official justification for Russian military intervention (as was the case in Georgia in 2008) or for non-military use of the Russian army (as in Crimea in February–March 2014), as well as for the semi-official support of volunteers in Eastern Ukraine in 2014–2015.

What are the implications of this evolution for EU–Russian relations? The first, and most straightforward, is that the EU cannot continue to practise the same model of relations with Russia it had until 2014, and which was essentially a modified version of its enlargement policy. Instead, a more pragmatic concept will have to emerge. Secondly, the changes in Russia’s vision of international relations and the rise of value competition mean that it will be much more difficult to re-establish the trust between the EU and Russia that was destroyed in the course of the 2014 events in Ukraine. Thirdly, if value competition persists there are limits to how close relations between Moscow and Brussels can be, even if trust can be restored. The parties will be able to agree on approximation of some mechanisms, technical regulations
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and implementation instruments, on convergence in certain policy areas (such as energy efficiency or trade in gas) but not on a large-scale cooperation (such as a comprehensive free trade area deal or an association agreement, which were discussed as a possible scenario for EU–Russian relations at the turn of this century).

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