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Armenia and Belarus: caught between the EU's and Russia's conditionalities?

Alena Vieira [a] and Syuzanna Vasilyan[b]

[a]CICP (Centro de Investigação em Ciência Política), Department of International Relations and Public Administration, School of Economics and Management, University of Minho, Braga, Portugal; [b]Institute for European Studies (IEE), Universite Libre de Bruxelles (ULB), Bruxelles, Belgium

ABSTRACT

This article looks into Armenia's and Belarus' engagement with the European Union's (EU) and Russia's conditionalities, the two EU Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries that are also members of the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). While paying attention to political, economic (including energy and technical) as well as security dimensions of the EU's and Russia's approaches, as proposed in the present special section, the article demonstrates that the conditionalities extended by the EU and Russia to the two countries in question have differed. In their turn, Armenia and Belarus have reacted differently to Russia's and the EU's conditionalities. Against the backdrop of the changing significance ascribed to both the EU's and Russia's policies towards their common neighbourhood since the 1990s, the present contribution identifies and analyses factors that account for the diverging positions of Armenia and Belarus, including the type of regime, the geopolitical considerations, the stakes in the economic and energy spheres and the predisposition to integration. The article shows that in the resulting complex context, Armenia and Belarus have been able to influence the shape and content of the EU's and Russia's conditionalities, although in a different way and to a different extent.

Introduction

Within the EU's Eastern neighbourhood comprising six countries in the post-Soviet area, namely, the geographically defined Eastern European Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, and the South Caucasian Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, Armenia and Belarus stand out due to their close relations with Russia.[1] These are the only two European Union's (EU) Eastern Partnership (EaP) states that are also part of the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). While Armenia and Belarus differ in terms of reasons, nature and objectives of their relationship with Moscow, they share a similarity of close security ties, as well as economic and energy dependency on Russia.[2] This common feature sets the tone for Armenia's and Belarus' engagement with the EU, while also raising the question of how

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CONTACT Alena Vieira ✉ d4215@eeg.uminho.pt 🖂 CICP (Centro de Investigação em Ciência Política), Department of International Relations and Public Administration, School of Economics and Management, University of Minho, Campus de Gualtar, 4710-057 Braga, Portugal

much of EU conditionality, and of what kind, could be absorbed by countries in such a position. The issue is intriguing since Armenia's and Belarus' close relationship with Moscow has not precluded their cooperation with the EU, as reflected in their participation in the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the EaP, albeit to a different extent.[3]

In the dynamically evolving field of the EU external governance and the ENP/EaP studies, single-case studies of Armenia (Delcour, 2017; Vasilyan, 2017) and Belarus (Bosse, 2012; Korosteleva, 2013) have been already carried out. While there is also a smaller number of contributions exploring EU's and Russia's influence on each of the two individual countries (Delcour, 2017; Vasilyan, 2017; Vasilyan & Petrossian, 2014), these studies have not specifically focused on the reception of Russia's *versus* EU's conditional approaches in Belarus and Armenia. In addition, a comparative analysis of Armenia and Belarus has been rare (*cf* Dragneva, Delcour, & Jonavicius, 2017).

By firstly assessing the policies of Russia and the EU towards their shared neighbourhood and, secondly evaluating their respective reception in Armenia and Belarus the article carries out a double comparison. It allows to demonstrate that, on the one hand, the conditionalities imposed by the EU and Russia towards the two countries have differed. On the other hand, it shows that Armenia and Belarus have reacted to Russia's and the EU's conditional approaches in a different way, something reflected in the fact that only Armenia and not Belarus signed an advanced agreement with the EU, the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA), in November 2017. This divergent pattern of conditionality reception in two EaP countries urges for exploration of factors responsible for it on the part of the individual EaP states, which is especially crucial in light of the 2015 revision of the ENP and the ensuing EU aspirations to develop a more differentiated and flexible set of policy tools towards its neighbours.

This article starts with a short account of the EU's and Russia's conditional approaches towards the two countries that serves to establish turning points in their changing positions towards the common neighbourhood. While tracing the evolution of EU engagement with its neighbours towards its most recent expression in the Association Agreements (AA) and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTA), it also investigates the Russian foreign policy shift away from the affinity-based and towards a pragmatism-oriented position. It finally looks into the role played by the EAEU, developed initially as the Eurasian Customs Union (EACU), but nevertheless displaying ambition to become a full-fledged Eurasian Union. The reaction of two EaP states is then analysed by applying analytical framework proposed in the introduction to this special section, in addition to identifying further factors relevant to the reception of the EU and Russian policies in Armenia and Belarus in specific policy areas.

EU's and Russia's policies towards shared neighbourhood: the legacy of two decades

Both the EU and Russia have been faced with the dilemma of how to define a new approach towards their common neighbourhood following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The EU's initial stance in the beginning of the 1990s has been mostly oriented towards finding a mode of cooperation with Russia, with the EU's Eastward enlargement occupying most of the place on the political agenda. Russia's own position set the premium on the cooperation within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS),

extending advanced cooperation in military (industrial) field, as well as in the areas of education and culture, and the movement of people (labour) to Russia in addition to trade and financial assistance, to its most eager members. Russia's emerging policy towards its 'near abroad' was based upon socio-cultural affinity rather than conditionality, aiming at cultivating a 'collective we' with these states without, however, stipulating a clearly defined set of cooperation conditions and rewards. Such affinity-based engagement allowed for flexibility in dealing with pressing bilateral problems, as reflected in the intricate Russia-Belarus barter schemes to resolve pressing energy debt issues (Balmaceda, 2014). Along with social, economic and political ties, Russia's privileged position in terms of influencing its neighbours had a strong cultural and linguistic dimension, with the Russian language as a *lingua franca* facilitating the relations. A factor especially relevant to fostering bilateral relations was the presence of the Russian media, as most of Russian TV and radio channels had been widely broadcasting both in Belarus and Armenia. Multiple ways were therefore available to convey Russian narratives as an integral part of its 'soft power' influence in its 'near abroad'. The EU hardly enjoyed a similar tool of projection of its image or influence in the region at that time. However, while being aware of its advantage over the EU in terms of influence over its 'near abroad', Moscow was not interested to capitalise upon it: the EU's incipient policy towards CIS states was not viewed as a threat to what Russia has considered its traditional zone of influence (*cf* Schmidt-Felzmann, 2016).

In the initial phase of the evolution of EU's and Russia's policies towards the post-Soviet states, as the EU was channelling its Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS) programme, starting from 1991 onwards,[4] there was no overlap between the EU's and Russia's approaches towards their neighbours. Originally, TACIS comprised humanitarian and technical assistance provided unconditionally to CIS countries (Vasilyan, 2006), and it was only in the TACIS regulation adopted in 1996 that the EU referred to negative conditionality, by stipulating 'the possibility of suspending an assistance … in cases of violation of democratic principles and human rights' (European Commission, n.d.). The associated 'Western template' for reforms in different spheres, was not contested by Moscow. More generally, TACIS aimed to help CIS countries, including Russia, revive infrastructurally, economically and politically after the demise of the Soviet Union. In this spirit, EU initiatives like the additional Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia (TRACECA) and Inter-State Oil and Gas Transportation to Europe (INOGATE) also targeted the whole former Soviet space with the objective of creating a transportation and energy hub stretching from the EU to the Newly Independent States (NIS) (Vasilyan, 2006).

Meanwhile, since the 1990s, the EU and its member states have stood out as zealous democracy promoters in the eastern part of its neighbourhood channelling funding both through state and non-state actors (Vasilyan, 2010c). For the latter the European (Initiative later to be renamed into) Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), Non-State Actors and Local Authorities (NSA&LA), Decentralised Cooperation have served as relevant budget lines. Recently these have been augmented by the funding provided directly to non-state actors by the European Endowment for Democracy (EED).[5] Armenia has been one of the beneficiaries of such funding with the adoption of 'soft norms' taking place at the bottom (Vasilyan, 2010c).

However, even in this initial stage of interaction, in stark contrast to converging views in Moscow and the West on the course of Russia's and CIS states' internal political and economic reforms, tensions emerged between the parties in the area of conflict resolution,

especially in the post-Soviet space. For instance, in the case of the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict within the frames of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group,[6] frictions surfaced between Russia and Sweden as co-chairs over choice of venue or differing initiatives in the mid-1990s (De Waal, 2003).[7]

The adoption, conclusion and ratification of the first PCAs between 1994 and 1996 marked an important turning point in the evolution of the EU conditionality towards the post-Soviet countries. The PCAs established the so-called 'suspension clauses' as well as 'evolutionary clauses' paving the way to a FTA in the future (Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova),[8] thereby reinforcing the role of the (positive and negative) EU conditionality in promoting reforms. Its subsequent application has not always been consistent, however, as manifest in negative political conditionality (i.e. sanctions) applied to Belarus,[9] which stood in contrast to exclusively positive conditionality extended to Armenia. As for Russia, its approach towards CIS countries, continued to be affinity-based, informal, and was developed on an *ad hoc* basis, with specific benefits for the cooperation-oriented partners defined individually for every bilateral relationship, and often subject to (re)negotiation. The reinforcement of a 'collective we' towards the post-Soviet states continued to be the main rationale of Russia's engagement, as manifest in Gazprom's pricing policy for Russian natural gas export to individual neighbouring countries (Balmaceda, 2014).[10]

The years 2000 introduced a turn in EU-Russian relations and a rethinking, on the part of Russia, of the EU/Western recommendations as a blueprint for Russia's reforms (Schmidt-Felzmann, 2016). NATO intervention in Kosovo in 1999, and the subsequent recognition of independence by the US and a majority of EU member-states created a new political context for conflict-resolution efforts in Chechnya, as well as Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh. NATO enlargement to Central Eastern European countries between 1996 and 2004 was making pro-Western oriented Georgia after its Rose Revolution (2003) and Ukraine after its Orange Revolution (2004) hopeful of their accession bid, while simultaneously raising the wariness of Moscow (Vasilyan, 2010b). Negotiations over consequences of the EU enlargement for Russia, which included the issue of Kaliningrad transit and trade aversion, demonstrated a clash of interests between Russia and the EU. All of the aforementioned changes reinforced the belief in Moscow that it could no longer rely on the West as an agenda-setter for Russia's reforms, so that the EU conditionality and EU ensuing position of policy-maker (*vis-à-vis* Russia as a policy-taker) were now reconsidered in Moscow.

This new phase in EU-Russia relations went hand in hand with a rethinking of Russia's relations towards the CIS countries. A 'pragmatisation' of Russian foreign policy was announced by Russian Security Council Secretary Sergey Ivanov in 2001 (Vieira, 2016), with Russia now putting its foreign policy to the service of its own (economic) development, thereby abstaining from the previous practice of subsidising its (south-)eastern neighbours. In the mid-2000s, Gazprom's pricing policy towards the 'near abroad' changed radically, and Gazprom came to gradually acquire gas and oil transmission networks in Moldova, Belarus and Armenia (Babayan, 2015). Russia's affinity-based approach originally aimed at fostering a 'collective we' was now giving place to a new style of interaction, with Russia's own interests coming fist. However, it continued to lack any clear set of conditions for Russia's CIS partners' compliance.

Faced with the need to find new, more effective cooperation modes with its politically defined neighbours following its eastward enlargement, the EU launched the ENP in 2003–2004. This new EU policy was founded upon positive political conditionality, with the prospect of the 'EU internal market and further integration and liberalisation to promote the free movement of persons, goods, services and capital (four freedoms)' (European Commission, 2003). Following the ENP review in response to the Arab Spring, the EU introduced the so-called 'more for more' principle in 2011, stipulating a closer relationship with neighbours displaying a more advanced reform progress. This resulted in additional funding for Armenia (together with Georgia and Moldova) owing to the country's good performance as assessed by the EU in 2012 and 2013 (Vasilyan, 2018).[11] While Belarus remained outside the ENP, EU's relations with Armenia had been codified in the EU-Armenia Action Plan (AP), a political document building upon the legal PCA foundation and listing the 'priorities for action' in all the domains of public life (Ibid.).

The ENP aimed at the introduction of 'partial' positive conditionality (Vasilyan, 2010a), implying incremental provision of additional funding, extension of projects and budget lines, access to programmes and agencies short of the membership 'carrot'. However, it has been often criticised for inconsistency, including at the point of the acceptance into this policy of Armenia and Azerbaijan in following Georgia's Rose Revolution, in spite of the lack of democratic progress in the two countries (Babayan, 2015). The positive conditionality approach underpinning the ENP, which was additionally reinforced in the 'more for more' principle, has been actively debated in the expert community. Hale (2012) recommended to pursue the 'more-for-less' principle for rendering influence over authoritarian states, such as Azerbaijan. For the sake of proportionality it has been suggested to offer least for most, e.g. Georgia, less for more, e.g. Armenia, and most for least, e.g. Azerbaijan (Vasilyan, 2010c). In addition, while the main aspiration of the AP was to reinforce the EU conditionality, uncertainty regarding specific conditions and rewards for neighbour states' compliance was recognised as a weak point (Delcour, 2017).

As the ENP introduced the logic of 'competition for reforms', with 'frontrunners' and laggards among six EaP states identified in every monitoring phase, all six of them politically, economically and culturally close to Russia, EU's policy and the reform efforts of the former Soviet states started to be closely followed in Moscow. In response and building upon pragmatism as a new principle of Russia's foreign policy, Moscow started to employ its own-styled negative functional conditionality, by calling upon the established linkage(s) with its neighbours, which eventually led to (re)appearance of a number of sectoral 'trade wars' (over milk, meat, wine, energy, etc) (Korosteleva, 2013; *cf* Samokhvalov, 2016). Russia's approach stood in stark contrast with the ENP offer underpinned by positive conditionality, a contrast further reinforced by the Russia-Georgia war over Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008, which attested to Russia's capacity to resort to military measures *vis-à-vis* the states in its 'near abroad'. In 2009, responding to the new Russian assertiveness as well as to the growing concerns of the Russia's neighbours, the EU launched the EaP establishing the prospect of further political association, economic integration and legal convergence between the EU and the six participating states. The original Polish-Swedish idea of a special relationship between the EU and the countries to its East eventually assumed the contours of AA and a DCFTA, in addition to the focus on multilateral cooperation (Vasilyan, 2010a).

Russia's subsequent position can be characterised as further consolidation of Russia's *ad-hoc* negative functional conditionality. One of its manifestations was recurrent trade conflicts with both EU-oriented countries such as Ukraine and pro-Russian states (Koroste- leva, 2013). Heads of Russia's food safety agency (Rosselkhoznadzor) as well as consumer protection agencies (Rospotrebnadzor) became faces and voices of Russia's unpredictable trade conflicts with Russia's neighbours. Internal administrative adjustments reflected the new importance of the agencies: in 2012, Rosselhosnadzor was made directly responsible to the federal government, in contrast to its previous subordinated position at the ministry of health (Black, 2015, p. 110).

The revamp of the Eurasian project, in the form of the EACU and afterwards the EAEU (and potentially the Eurasian Union) offered another response to the evolving EaP, which demonstrated the double-track nature of Russian engagement. On the one hand, Moscow indicated that it had developed its own negative functional conditionality, with an associ- ated package of 'sticks' and 'carrots' now extended to the prospective members/outsiders of the Eurasian project. The case in point were the sensitive Russia-Belarus gas trans- mission network negotiations eventually leading to what has become known as an 'inte- gration discount', of the price of natural gas in return for Belarus' participation in the Eurasian project (Vieira, 2017).[12]

On the other hand, Moscow demonstrated willingness to supplement its previous *ad hoc* approach towards its 'near abroad' with an institutionalised basis for the relations. In stark contrast with the previous integration initiatives on the post-Soviet space, where the cooperation was primarily grounded in Russia's aspiration to cultivate the 'col- lective we' on the basis of informal trade-offs, EACU/EAEU cooperation included an actual implementation of the institutionalised and legalised norms. For instance, the EACU became *de facto* operational very fast, introducing new legislation in a number of fields (Delcour & Wolczuk, 2014). This created new terms of engagement with Russia for its Eur- asian partners such as Belarus and Armenia.

By the moment of EAEU's entrance into force in 2015, in light of the rapidly evolving events in Ukraine, the Eurasian integration had been experiencing a setback (Vieira, 2016). Russia's actions in Ukraine demonstrated that Russia was determined to resist uni- lateral application of the EU conditionality in the EaP countries. At the same time, Russia's Eurasian partners were now more cautious in taking steps towards deepening integration, while also raising questions on Russia's overall integration commitment and objectives. A linear evolution of the Eurasian initiative was no longer a viable plan, as the parties have in fact regressed in terms of their integration efforts in a number of fields. This has not only led to sporadic setbacks in trade and economic matters (such as the occasional milk and meat 'wars' between Russia and Belarus); in 2016 and 2017, checkpoints have been intro- duced between the two EAEU member states, undermining the common custom space while also indicating Belarus' resistance to the Russian functional conditionality (Vieira, 2016). All these events eventually raised new questions on the mechanisms and dynamics of the Eurasian integration process, once again bringing to the forefront the issue of the Russian (and the EU) conditional approaches.

The EU in its turn recognised the need to develop a more differentiated approach towards its neighbours, including by rethinking its engagement with the EaP countries also participating in the EAEU, thus paving the way towards EU-Armenia CEPA as a new precedent formalising the EU-EaP states relationship. However, Russia continued to

insist on the right to interpret the extent of compatibility between two integration blocs (Dragneva et al., 2017, p. 16).

The EU, Russia and Armenia: policies with loose strings

The case of Armenia illustrates a vivid difference of perception of the EU and Russia as influential external actors. The Armenian elite, political parties and the public have perceived the EU as a political and economic bloc, with Russia and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) considered as vital security partners (Vasilyan, 2011). The Armenian National Security Strategy has appreciated cooperation with all the possible global and regional actors, yet, naming only Russia as a 'strategic' ally (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, 2007, in Vasilyan & Petrossian, 2014). This can be attributed to the fact that, as a result of the Armenian Genocide under the Ottoman Empire, Russia per se has been viewed as a saviour and the subsequently established Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) as a safe haven, which entitled Armenians to statehood.[13] The EU and its member states, including France, Germany, the UK and Italy, along with the US have thus been new-comers to a region previously subject to imperial incursions by the regional powers, especially Russia, Turkey and Iran as successors of the Russian, Ottoman and Persian Empires. In the face of the lingering Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as a domestic and foreign policy priority, and in its condition of a small state, Armenia has been keen to navigate in the 'known terrain' configured by conventional relations with states rather than recent international actors with cumbersome bureaucratic machinery such as the EU. However, the country has also welcomed EU's programmes, projects and initiatives (contrary to other states, such as Belarus).

While the official discourse recognises the country as 'European', Armenia's nation- and state-building is to be attributed to the Soviet period. At the same time, the size of its diaspora has made the Armenian identity multi-layered, branched among the American, European, Eurasian, North-American, and Middle Eastern ones. With the largest Armenian communities residing in Russia, the US and France in the mentioned order, and thereby representing important constituencies and interest groups in the respective countries, the Armenian government sought cooperation with all (Vasilyan, 2011).[14] This led to facing the differential conditionalities of the EU and Russia tied to their political identities, as assumed in the approach adopted in the present special section. Therefore, even with consideration of the historical ties and contemporary political context, no exclusive reception of Russia's versus the EU conditionality has been taking place.

In comparison to the enlargement policy currently exercised towards the (potential) candidate countries, especially in the Western Balkans with embedded negative conditionality, and in contrast to EU sanctions against Belarus, the EU has only applied positive conditionality towards the South Caucasian countries, including Armenia (Vasilyan, 2018). Despite being classified as 'partial democracy' (Freedom House, 2016) due to its electoral malpractices, Armenia was able to benefit from the good disposition of the EU, who had been inclined to reward the apprenticeship of better democratic practices.[15] Meanwhile, Russia had not imposed any negative conditionality on Armenia either. An episode of an application of functional EU conditionality can be considered the Mobility Partnership Agreement with Armenia (2011), when the EU has attached the repatriation of illegal migrants as a condition for offering visa facilitation and especially potential visa

liberalisation for temporary migration. Eventually, the Visa Facilitation Agreement signed in 2012 and the Readmission Agreement signed in 2013, entered into force at the same time in January 2014. In contrast, the Russian Compatriots Programme as of 2009 had provided an unconditional offer for permanent labour immigration, something that had been facilitated by demographic shifts in the Russian aging population (Vasilyan, 2017; Vasilyan & Petrossian, 2014).[16]

Meanwhile, domestic acceptance/resistance to the policies of the EU and Russia can be illustrated by internal political dynamics. The country has witnessed a number of public rallies over the past few years.[17] The case in point are protests in Yerevan in September 2013, that even though of a less magnitude than the Euromaidan in Ukraine, nevertheless united hundreds in front of the presidential residence following the presidential announcement regarding the country's change of foreign policy course (Grigoryan, 2013). Different from the colour revolutions in Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, Armenia's civic activism at the bottom has been frequent, and aimed at revealing the malpractices in domestic economic, social and political governance. With Russia involved in the country via the assets it holds in Armenia's energy (electricity and gas) and transportation networks, in addition to banking, insurance and telecommunications, and considering Russia's share of foreign direct investment (FDI) and its role as the second trade partner (after the EU), as well as security ally with a military base in Armenia's second largest town Gyumri, Moscow had been a target of some civic protests, either directly or indirectly (Vasilyan, 2017; Vasilyan & Petrossian, 2014).

In the energy sphere, in spite of the public protests, Gazprom gained complete control over Armenia's gas distribution network in December 2013. As a result of the subsequent protests against mismanagement and corruption following the electricity price hike in June 2015, the gas price offered to Armenia was lowered to 165 USD per thousand cubic metres in September the same year (Radio Free Liberty, Radio Europe, 2015, in Vasilyan, 2017) making Armenia the top beneficiary ahead of Belarus (Vasilyan, 2017). Further, in April 2016 it was dropped to 150 USD (Arka News Agency, 2016). The Electric Networks of Armenia (ENA) acquired by RAO UES in 2006 was sold to the Tashir Group owned by a Russian-Armenian billionaire in mid-2015, something that allowed the Armenian government to make a pledge to subsidise the expenditures up to 31 July 2016, switching to compensation of families living below the poverty line as of August 2016. Unlike Georgia, who is a member to the Energy Charter Treaty promoted by the EU, Armenia is an observer (Vasilyan, 2018). In short, in the energy domain, the relevant interests have determined the reception of EU and Russian conditionality.

In the security sphere, Russia has been Armenia's primary ally. This 'bandwagoning' exercise has been juxtaposed to the Azerbaijan-Turkey and US-Georgia alliances. In the meantime, Armenia (although not a formal party) and Azerbaijan, which/who has recurrently threatened with the use of force, have pursued an arms-race resulting in escalation in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (Vasilyan, 2010b). The EU has not provided conflict-resolution focused assistance to Armenia or Azerbaijan through the National Indicative Programs (NIPs), the programming instruments under the ENP, distributing its funding proportionally among different domains instead. The August 2008 war over Abkhazia and South Ossetia reaffirmed Russia's leading position as a mediator via the Maindorf Declaration in the presence of Russian, Armenian and Azeri Presidents (Vasilyan, 2013). However, Armenian public's hopes that Russia's recognition of the independence of

Abkhazia and South Ossetia would be followed by Moscow's identical posture *vis-à-vis* Nagorno-Karabakh, remained unfulfilled. Russia's role as a major mediator was nevertheless reinstated in the aftermath of the April 2016 war launched by Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, with Russia convening a meeting in Moscow with the presence of the Iranian Foreign Minister.[18] Having tried to maintain 'parity' between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Russia has provided weaponry (for free or at discounted rates) to the former and sold to the latter (Kucera, 2015). In the meantime, up to 2013, Armenia aligned with more CFSP declarations issued by the EU than the neighbouring Azerbaijan or even Georgia (Vasilyan, 2018). Yet, Armenia's economic condition and the security environment have *a priori* made it susceptible to accepting Russia's potential conditionality.

The constitutional amendments following the 2015 referendum were approved by the CIS observers, with the EU delegation 'calling for investigations' amidst allegations of fraud (ArmeniaNow 2015 and Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Armenia 2015 in Vasilyan, 2017). The envisaged transition from the presidential to a parliamentary type of regime in circumstances when the incumbent president was heading the majority Republican Party has raised suspicions regarding the intention of the latter to find a covert tactic for keeping on to power (Ibid.). The envisaged signing of the AA had raised public expectations over potential amelioration of the political climate via improvement of electoral practices, human rights and governance, so that the retreat from these principles has led to public disenchantment. At the same time, while Armenia has been lagging behind other EaP countries such as Georgia and Moldova in terms of the overall democracy score, in the EAEU it still fares best, both politically, despite the stagnation since 2013 (Freedom House, 2016) and as a relatively more liberal economy (Vasilyan, 2017). Without any reform incentive from the top, and democracy not being a criterion for accession into the EAEU, '(b)lockage' of transition to democracy has been taking place in the past few years (Vasilyan, 2016). As a result of retreat from the path of closer 'integration with' the EU (Vasilyan, 2017), Armenia has experienced stagnation of the reform-prone stamina.

The turning point marked by the shift of Armenia's foreign policy choice towards entering the EACU in 2013 and eventually becoming a member of the EAEU in 2015 was not accompanied by formal negative conditionality on the part of the EU or positive conditionality by Russia. While the visit by President Sargsyan to Moscow at the brink of his declaration regarding the change of Armenia's foreign policy course led to public reflections on a possible push by President Putin, the Armenian leadership has denied any pressure exerted by Moscow. Rather, the preference for the EACU/EAEU was justified on security grounds, in the sense that Armenia's membership in the CSTO presupposed conformity with its participation in a regional economic grouping that had a similar member-state composition (Vasilyan, 2017).

Meanwhile, the accession to the EACU did not go smoothly. Due to Azerbaijan's lobbying, Kazakhstan and Belarus objected to Armenia's membership, expressing reluctance to see the potential extension of the EACU to Nagorno-Karabakh, which does not have a customs checkpoint with Armenia. This was resolved with the Russian statement articulated by the Head of the Eurasian Economic Commission Viktor Khristenko that an external country could not determine matters pertaining to a regional bloc, implying that Armenia's membership would take place against all odds (Asbarez, 2013). This implied that Russia preferred to keep the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict de-securitised in the EAEU framework. Moreover, the Armenian bureaucrats had to de-learn what they had

apprehended from the European counterparts in the process of approximation to the rules, standards and practices with the EU and learn what was put forth by the EAEU colleagues (Vasilyan, 2017). This has led to complications in functional adaptation through 'hard norms', despite the political determination to proceed. Additionally, while Belarus as a founding member could have a say over the nature of the EACU and the EAEU being a norm-setter together with Russia and Kazakhstan, Armenia, together with Kyrgyzstan were late-comers, thereby becoming norm-takers.

Paradoxically, Armenia had become a front-runner in terms of adoption of the required EU legislation in line with the necessary positive functional conditionality, with a best record of approximation to the EU *acquis* by adoption of hard norms in addition to soft norms. Given the fact that the Armenian government's position indicated that the relationship with the EU constituted a priority, the pre-Vilnius summit declaration by President Sargsyan was met with disappointment in Brussels. However, the EU expressed respect for the partner's choice (Panarmenian.Net, 2013). The already negotiated AA and the DCFTA had to be abandoned and a new unprecedented type of a document was to be developed, eventually taking the shape of the CEPA. The EU therefore did not hesitate to continue with sectoral cooperation with Armenia in those spheres of interest whereby no clash between Armenia's relations with the EU and membership obligations in the EAEU would be detected. These ranged from reform of the justice sector, public administration, private sector to engagement with civil society. The sectoral cooperation was accompanied by a funding scheme, the Single Support Framework, which replaced the NIP, yet again devoid of any negative conditionality (Vasilyan, 2018).

The tacit levers which Russia may have utilised *vis-à-vis* Armenia in September 2013 draw on the above-mentioned stakes. Moreover, the entwinement between the Armenian and Russian elites allows inferring that any informal reference by the Russian leadership to these issues would have made the Armenian authorities comply with a Russia-favoured policy choice. While previously Armenia had managed to oscillate between Russia and the EU, the decision on accession to the EAEU had reshaped Armenia's former 'complementary' foreign policy into a 'supplementary' one, i.e. with unequal weight in foreign policy now distributed in favour of Russia and the EACU/EAEU with the relevant domestic repercussions (Vasilyan, 2014). In the meantime, Armenian political actors and the public watched the Maidan from a distance, wary of any radical change potentially leading to a crisis. Albeit having retained stability, public distrust in the political processes grew in Armenia, irrespective as to whether these have been tilted towards the EU, which is associated with scepticism *qua* the values, especially, minority rights it intends to transpose, or Russia *qua* loss of sovereignty-related concerns (Vasilyan, 2011).

The EU, Russia and Belarus: conditional approaches in a zero-sum game?

At first approximation, Belarus represents a clear case of acceptance of Russia's and the rejection of the EU's conditional approaches. Since the mid-1990s, Russia's policies have been viewed as appropriate and even legitimate in Belarus, while the EU conditionality rejected along with other Western approaches, proposals and offers. The EU and the West were determined to apply negative normative conditionality on the increasingly authoritarian Belarusian regime since the mid-1990s. Brussels came to adopt 'one of the most complete CFSP sanctions regimes in force', in addition to reducing the political

dialogue and the interaction with the Belarusian authorities (but not the opposition or civil society) to its minimum, which included the suspension of the PCA (Bosse, 2012, p. 374; Portela, 2011, p. 487).[19] Both internally and in relationship with Moscow, Belarus' confrontation with the West had featured as an important factor in improving the position of Belarusian leadership. Under these circumstances, the EU political conditionality had become 'unacceptable in principle' (Rontoyanni & Korosteleva, 2005, p. 217). Policies and offers coming from Moscow, on the contrary, were met positively, independent of whether they were associated with hard or soft norms. In this sense, the Belarusian leadership came to support all Russia-led regional initiatives, such as CIS, CSTO and the Eurasian project. Belarus' reaction to EU's and Russia's conditional approaches resembled the logic of a zero-sum game, in which the choice for embracing Russia's conditional approaches was embedded into an affinity-based relationship with Moscow, while rejecting the conditionality of the EU served to reaffirm Belarus' explicit denial of any EU potential to exert its influence. It is in this sense that the nature of Russia and the EU as actors with two different political identities can be argued to determine Belarus' reception of Russia's and the rejection of EU conditionality.

This account of a decade of Belarus' limited contact with the West, however, needs to be reconsidered in light of the evolving Russian and EU approaches. Starting from the mid-2000s, the acceptance of Russian conditional offers and initiatives had become much less 'commonsensical' in Belarus, as manifest in growing bilateral disagreements between the two closest allies, including recurrent trade wars, Belarus' de-alignment from Russia in the matters of recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as well as cooperation within the CSTO (Busygina, 2018). Meanwhile, EU recognised that the effects of its negative normative conditionality in Belarus had been limited, which eventually paved the way to the EU' engagement with the country in the late 2000s, the opening of the European Commission's Delegation in Minsk, Belarus acceptance to the EaP (multilateral dimension), and the launch of functional cooperation. The latter has included 'structured discussions' on energy (Portela, 2011, p. 494), and some years later, visa facilitation talks and the European Dialogue on Modernisation (2012). The EU has also increased its financial support in Belarus. Targeted sanctions have been suspended in 2008, although expanded once again following the worsening of the political climate in Belarus in 2010 (Bosse, 2012, p. 376; 2018). In February 2017, Belarus unilaterally introduced a visa-free regime for citizens of all EU countries (for short-term visitors) (while Armenia introduced the same measure in January 2013). In spite of the constant episodes of political downturn, the new position assumed by the Belarusian leadership indicated that the reception of Russia's and EU's conditional approaches was hardly taking place in accordance with the logic of a zero-sum game, as one could have suggested before.

As for Russia's conditional offers, starting from the mid-2000s, their reception, while continuously viewed in largely positive terms in Belarus, was not any more related to the issue of appropriateness, to the extent that the rejection of Russia's conditionality was not any more considered an illegitimate option. As argued elsewhere (Vieira, 2014, 2016), even Belarus' initial wholehearted embracement of Russia's affinity-based conditional approaches has been founded upon a specific trade-off, in which Belarus' alliance commitments have been exchanged against economic and politico-diplomatic support of Moscow to the Belarusian regime.[20] Accordingly, Russia's shift away from an affinity-based position towards pragmatism led the Belarusian leadership to revise its posture towards

Moscow (Danilovich, 2006, p. 147), even though this did not lead to a foreign policy change commensurate with a committed reorientation towards the West.

This new Belarus perspective on Russia's conditional approaches explains the mixed record of Belarus' implementation of Eurasian agreements, where the progress in terms of adoption and implementation of the agreed arrangements has coincided with a growing number of trade conflicts between Russia and Belarus, including over industrial machinery, milk products and meat, not to mention oil and gas issues (Korosteleva, 2013, p. 240). The unpredictable timing and the unclear reasons behind the 'trade wars' reinforced the belief of the Belarusian leadership that the Eurasian integration process would remain a subject of negotiations, independent of whether it was underpinned by soft or hard norms. Uncertainty over the course of Eurasian integration was reinforced by Russia's own controversial decisions, such as Russia's proposal in 2013 to adopt sanctions against Ukraine in Moldova, as a common 'Eurasian' measure, which eventually was not supported by other EACU members, including Belarus (Vieira, 2016). Similarly, Russia's decisions on anti-sanctions against the EU and the US, taken in 2014 amid the economic hardship and a new series of Russia-Belarus 'trade wars', were also not joined by Belarusian leadership, who instead decided to revise its own commitment to the Eurasian integration project, eventually causing another round of bilateral trade conflicts and introduction of border checks with Russia that were undermining the integrity of a common customs space (Vieira, 2016, 2017).

A less straightforward position on the reception of the Russian conditionality has however not meant acceptance of the conditionality of the EU. While the Belarusian leadership had acknowledged the quality of EU norms, never questioning their credibility or associated incentives and indeed often referring to the EU as a model in the talks within the CSTO and CIS frameworks (Vieira, 2014), the transposition of the EU regulatory framework was hardly a priority. Rather, the Belarusian leadership was eager to use the prospect of compliance with the EU conditionality as a bargaining chip against Russia. Given the sensitivity in Moscow to any EaP state rapprochement with the EU, which was reinforced by the events in Ukraine, the Belarusian leadership did not need to actually implement the EU *acquis*. To achieve its goals of raising stakes in the negotiation game with Moscow, some measures indicating openness to dialogue with Brussels in the spirit of 'functional cooperation' would be sufficient. In this sense, one could argue that the Belarusian elites have been able to reaffirm their agency by identifying a certain space of manoeuvre stemming from the conditional approaches of Russia and the EU. An additional factor facilitating the *rapprochement* between Minsk and Brussels has been the position assumed by the Belarusian leadership on the Ukraine crisis (Busygina, 2018), which included divergence from the official Moscow narrative, demonstrating a pro-Ukrainian orientation (Vieira, 2015), as well as Belarus' investment and engagement in the peace negotiation process. All of this has made the traditional EU focus on sanctioning the Belarusian authoritarian regime a less urgent matter.

As far as the adoption of soft rather than hard norms is concerned, the tendency has been towards the adoption of the former rather than the latter. While the legal basis (PCA), as a foundation for the potential transfer of hard norms, continues to be missing in EU-Belarus relationship, soft norms represent a sufficiently suitable fit for the Belarusian leadership's objective to use the EU conditionality as an instrument in its relationship with Moscow. In addition, opting for soft rather than hard norms in relations with the EU can be

seen as a safer option: the events in Ukraine demonstrated how fast and how easy the adoption of hard norms, such as AA/DCFTA, could be politicised and even securitised in Moscow. Growing preference for the soft norms can be identified in the case of the Eurasian integration project as well, corresponding to the resistance to the institutionalisation of regulatory Eurasian norms, as in the case of the roadmap towards the common currency in the EAEU framework (Vieira, 2016). This tendency can be attributed to the aspiration of the participating countries to leave as much room for negotiation as possible, given the uncertainty related to Russia's interpretation of its Eurasian commitment (Dragneva et al., 2017, p. 10). An exception which reinforces the importance of distinguishing between cooperation in different policy areas has been the energy issue and the prospect of the Eurasian energy market, an especially sensitive matter to Belarus given the high dependence of the latter on Russia's gas and oil. In the framework of 2014–2015 EAEU negotiations, contrary to the Russian position indicating preference to leave undefined the establishing of short-term targets and roadmaps in the EAEU founding documents (Vieira, 2016), Belarus insisted on the adoption of more specific provisions. The failure of the Russian leadership to move towards harder regulation of the energy matters led the Belarusian leadership once again to revisit its Eurasian commitment.

Finally, considering the possible role of security conditionality, Belarus as Russia's ally, could be expected to act upon alliance conformity. The latter could be either a result of Russia's exercising alliance coercion as a specific form of security conditionality (Schweller, 1994) or Belarus' voluntary compliance in accordance with its interpretation of the alliance obligations. Thus far however, Belarus' alliance with Russia has not led to an unrestricted reception of Russian conditional approaches, as already indicated above. In military-strategic terms, Belarus importance to Moscow results from its geostrategic position and the direct border to NATO countries as well as connection to Russia's Kaliningrad exclave. Even though Belarus is dependent on Moscow in terms of the modernisation of its armed forces and military equipment, this cooperation structure does not always allow for the asymmetry necessary for Russia's exercising alliance coercion, something that finds confirmation in Belarus' resistance to Russia's plans to construct an airbase on Belarusian territory in 2016. In addition, as indicated above, the understanding of an alliance obligation in Belarus has been intertwined with political, economic, trade and energy aspects and a possibility to (re)negotiate the terms of Russia's conditionality. This specific context of the reception of Russian conditional approaches in Belarus has also influenced Belarus' expectations within the Eurasian project, and its setbacks combined with the instability created by the events in the neighbouring Ukraine eventually urged the Belarusian leadership to revise its alliance obligations towards Russia.

Conclusions

The present contribution, which aimed to provide an assessment of the reception of the EU's and Russia's conditional approaches in Armenia and Belarus, allows us to draw a number of conclusions. First of all, the EU and Russia, have both evolved in terms of their policies towards the shared neighbourhood since the 1990s, and have become increasingly aware of the implications and tensions provoked by their respective conditional approaches. In this respect, the launch of the EaP and an offer of AA and DCFTA, followed by the revamping of the Eurasian project, in spite of all the differences

between the two approaches, represent important turning points in the evolution of the EU's and Russia's shared neighbourhood'.

In accordance with the analytical approach adopted in the special section, the present contribution has explored the importance of individual conditionality dimensions in the reception of the EU and Russian conditional approaches. Regarding the role EU and Russia as actors of different political nature and the corresponding identity dynamics in the region, the present analysis confirms that both external actors indeed prove to be critically important to the countries in EU's and Russia's shared neighbourhood: both serve as anchors for a variety of processes ranging from identity-building to economic modernisation. A reflection of this is the reception in both Armenia and Belarus of at least some (functional) conditionality from Russia and the EU. This conclusion is in tune with a further finding concerning another conditionality dimension, namely that of security. Here, the centrality of security cooperation in the bilateral relationship with Russia, i.e. the formal military alliance underpinning both Russia-Armenian and Russia-Belarus relations does not determine the reception of conditionality from just one of the two actors (Russia) to the detriment of another (EU). A case in point is Armenia and its advanced state of reception of the EU functional conditionality as manifest in the CEPA.

Confirmation of the importance of identity dynamics as a foundation for the reception of EU and Russian conditional approaches comes with some qualifiers. Firstly, neither Armenia nor Belarus have been passive receivers of the existing conditional approaches. Secondly, while both Belarus and Armenia, just as many other EaP states, can be said to display an internal identity split, manifest in the Europhile and Russophile orientations, which are present in both countries, the reception of EU conditionality in the two cases has been different. While Armenia has been able, for a long time, to absorb the EU conditionality and could thus enjoy the 'carrots' offered by both Russia and the EU, Belarus has been moving away from its exclusive reception of the Russian conditionality only starting from the mid-2000s.

The present study also allows us to confirm receptivity towards soft norms in the reception of Russian conditional approaches. As shown in the case of Armenia, soft norms correspond to Russia's aspiration to maintain its hegemonic position resulting from its role as a security guarantor, primary economic investor, trade partner and labour destination, as well as a cultural trendsetter. On the other hand, the EaP states participating in the Eurasian project seem to rely on soft norms or at least to resist the hard norms, as a means to avoid getting entrapped into a disadvantageous agreement with Russia (a concern that seems to be absent from the EaP states interactions with the EU). Belarus' position towards the common Eurasian energy market, however, shows that hard norms can also be seen as a guarantee of Russia's Eurasian commitment. This proves that the structure of interests may be more important than the general tendency towards the receptiveness of soft rather than hard norms. More generally, the present tendency towards soft rather than hard norms is demonstrative of the uncertainty regarding (the scope of) the Eurasian commitment of the participating countries.

The case of Armenia provides important evidence of the EaP states' unproblematic acceptance of hard norms embodied in the EU conditionality. Once certain of the compatibility between the offers of the two external actors, Armenia was keen on deepening relations with the EU by pursuing the closest possible integration, most vividly represented in the approximation to the EU *acquis*, without questioning any EU offer irrespective of its

nature as a hard or soft norm and eventually embarking upon the course of substantial reforms. The EU, in its turn, followed the progress made by the country on its way to closer integration by offering additional funding and providing access to EU agencies and programmes.

In addition to the analysis of individual conditionality dimensions in the reception of Armenia and Belarus, the comparative analysis undertaken in this contribution allows shedding light over the reasons behind both Russia and the EU recurring to practicing negative (political) conditionality towards Belarus, while only extending positive conditionality to Armenia. A more authoritarian nature of the Belarusian regime as compared to Armenian, and its initial course of confrontation with the West provides part of the answer, but it is as important to consider that the geopolitical proximity has made Belarus, immediate geographical neighbours of both the EU and Russia, more relevant to Brussels and Moscow, thereby raising the stakes and urging both external actors to look for ways to influence the behaviour of the Belarusian leadership, with the reverse being applicable to Armenia, which is geographically detached from both. Moreover, in Armenia, both the EU and Russia have favoured stability through preservation of the status quo. Negative conditionality towards Armenia might have implied shattering the frozen Karabakh conflict, whereas Belarus does not have any security hotbed. Finally, with Belarus acting as the energy corridor between the two foreign actors, both have tried to exercise influence by asserting 'power', be it 'normative' of the EU or 'traditional' of Russia *vis-à-vis* each other. Armenia being landlocked and resource-poor, which was additionally reinforced by the fact that it had largely surrendered its energy infrastructure to Russia, and has not received such attention by either the EU or Russia.

These interests on the part of EU and Russia contribute to the explanation of the use of negative conditionality towards Belarus and non-use of the latter *vis-à-vis* Armenia. While both Belarus and Armenia have been reliant on both the EU and Russia as primary trade partners, the inter-dependence with Russia has led to recurrent trade wars in the case of Belarus, contrary to Armenia, who has evaded such tensions. Most importantly, even if both Armenia and Belarus are members of the EAEU, the former has entertained 'integration with' the EU as a foreign policy priority until the presidential declaration made in 2013. Subsequently, this has been manifested in Armenia's continued inclination to pursue closest possible cooperation with the EU through CEPA in the areas, which do not collide with the obligations it has undertaken as a member of the EAEU.

To conclude, the present contribution has once again demonstrated the need to depart from a thinking of EU or Russian conditionalities in their common neighbourhood in terms of 'competition', or in terms of the conditionality's (in)effectiveness on (one of the) supply side (s). More attention should be paid to the way the conditionality is translated into actual policy outcomes in the individual participating countries instead. Both the cases of Belarus and Armenia demonstrate that while being caught in between the EU and Russia, and likely to remain so due to their geographic, security and energy characteristics, the two EaP countries participating in the EAEU have been able to change the eventual shape and content of both the EU's and Russia's conditionalities extended to them.

Notes

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2. Russia-Belarus military alliance established by the Union Treaty (1997) has with time evolved into a common defence system, including air defence and joint military planning (Vieira, 2014). Russia-Armenia security relations initially based on a Friendship Treaty (1997) for mutual assistance in case of a potential military attack, allowing Russian guards to protect Armenia's borders with Iran and Turkey (Vasilyan, 2010b), have more recently developed towards a joint air defence system agreement (2015) and a Joint Task Force agreement (2016) (Vasilyan, 2018). Both Armenia and Belarus are highly dependent on the Russian energy. In addition to the natural gas, Russia's oil, refined and exported to the EU, generates critical export revenue for Belarus (Balmaceda, 2014).
3. While Armenia has demonstrated aspiration to integrate more closely with the EU, coming close to pre-signing the AA, including the DCFTA, but retreating from this foreign policy course in 2013 (Vasilyan, 2017) and eventually signing the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA), Belarus has only participated in the multilateral track of the EaP, and its relations with the EU evolved without a PCA (Vieira, 2014).
4. Besides the EaP states, TACIS also covered Russia and the Central Asian countries.
5. The EED was established in 2013 replicating the US National Endowment for Democracy (Vasilyan, 2018).
6. The Minsk Group was a body set-up at the 1994 Budapest summit to deal with the mediation process of this conflict.
7. Both parties displayed willingness to exert influence via agenda-setting. Eventually, although Sweden remained a participating state of the Minsk Group, it was replaced by France as a co-chair in 1996 (Vasilyan, 2013). Besides the co-chairing Russia, France and the United States (US), the Minsk Group comprises Sweden, Germany, Italy, Finland, as well as Belarus and Turkey as participating states.
8. These clauses linked upholding human rights and democracy to an increase in trade access and deepening of relations in general, while also stipulating a unilateral suspension of the agreement in the event of its 'material breach' (Bosse, 2012, p. 369; Hillion, 2000, p. 1220).
9. EU sanctions imposed on Belarus since 1996 included visa bans, freezing of assets of certain individuals, economic sanctions on Belarusian companies, withdrawal of privileges under the Generalised System of Preferences, in addition to limiting the political dialogue. Sanctions never included a stoppage of the oil and/or gas flow into the EU, even 'given the fact that income from such sales was so critical for the Lukashenka regime' (Balmaceda, 2014, p. 63).
10. In 2006, the difference in pricing policy for the natural gas of Ukraine versus Belarus constituted 55 versus USD 95 per thousand cubic metres (Balmaceda, 2014).
11. These revisions covered the time period of Armenia's participation in the EaP (see below).
12. The price was lowered from USD 286 for thousand cubic metres in 2011 to 166 per thousand cubic metres in 2012.
13. Being among the oldest ethnic civilisations, Armenia thrived as a kingdom in the 1st century BC during the reign of Tigran the Great, then briefly in 1918–1920 as a part of the Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic, afterwards of the Transcaucasian Federated Soviet Socialist Republic and subsequently, as the ASSR.
14. The number of Armenians residing abroad surpasses the number of those in the country by about twice.
15. The EU approach has differed from the approach of the US, which imposed negative conditionality on Armenia (Vasilyan, 2010c).
16. This Programme covering travel, housing, job placement, among other factors was however ceased in 2012 due to the concerns raised by the Armenian government reflecting the public discontent over emigration (Hakobyan, 2012).

17. The civic rallies carried out since November 2007 have been against potentially negative environmental consequences of mining. The illegal construction in the Mashtotz Park in Yerevan led to protests in February 2012. Further, rallies were held against the pension reform in January 2014, demolition of buildings having historical significance in Yerevan in June 2014, extradition of a Russian servicemen who murdered an Armenian family in Gyumri in January 2015, the rise of public transport fares in June 2015, and the electricity price hike in July 2015. A distinct kind of protest in the form of an armed occupation of a police station took place in July 2016 (Vasilyan, 2016).
18. While Iran had been neutral *vis-à-vis* the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict due to its large Azeri population, as well as its marginalisation owing to the Western sanctions, after the nuclear deal reached through the Geneva process, Iran has become a more active regional player.
19. Subsequently, Brussels has reached out to the Belarusian civil society and the opposition, by supporting media programmes, backing the opening of the Office for Democratic Belarus in Brussels, sustaining the European Parliament's Delegation for relations with Belarus (Vasilyan, 2018) and the support to the European Humanitarian University, which moved to Vilnius after it was closed down in 2004 in Minsk.
20. This has allowed to classify Belarus' relationship with Russia as 'bandwagoning for profit' (Schweller, 1994, p. 74; *cf* Vieira, 2016).

ORCID

Alena Vieira 🄳 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5643-0398

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