

The narratives of exclusion and self-exclusion in the Russian conflict discourse on EU–Russian Relations

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Abstract

The article focuses on the interplay of the narratives of ‘exclusion’ and ‘self-exclusion’ in the Russian discourse on EU–Russian relations. Since the late 1990s, this discourse has acquired an increasingly conflictual orientation, whereby the official foreign policy objectives of ‘strategic partnership’ with the EU and Russia’s ‘integration with Europe’ are increasingly problematised across the entire Russian political spectrum. In the analysis of the Russian conflict discourse we shall identify two at first glance opposed narratives. Firstly, the EU enlargement has raised the issue of the expansion of the Schengen visa regime for Russian citizens, travelling to Europe. Particularly acute with regard to Kaliningrad Oblast’, this issue has also generated a wider identity-related discourse on the EU’s exclusionary policies towards Russia. Secondly, the perception of Russia’s passive or subordinate status in EU–Russian cooperative arrangements at national, regional and local levels resulted in the problematisation of the insufficiently reciprocal or intersubjective nature of the EU–Russian ‘partnership’ and the increasing tendency towards Russia’s ‘self-exclusion’ from integrative processes, grounded in the reaffirmation of state sovereignty that generally characterises the Putin presidency. This article concludes with the interpretation of the two conflict narratives in the wider context of debates around the project of European integration.

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Introduction: conflictual dispositions in EU–Russian relations

This paper seeks to reconstitute the central conflict narratives in the Russian discourse on EU–Russian relations. In contrast to the enthusiasm about the EU–Russian ‘strategic partnership’ among Russian politicians and analysts during the 1990s, the present state of EU–Russian relations is widely perceived as a conflictual impasse, marked by an increasing mutual alienation of the two parties. While on the official level the mutual affirmation of strategic partnership, initiated in the 1995 Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, continues to this day, presently specified in the project of four EU–Russian ‘common spaces’ (see Prozorov, 2006, chap. 1), the meaning and substance of this partnership are increasingly put in question. A number of analysts have argued that rather than develop in a linear progressive manner, EU–Russian relations have deteriorated since the late 1990s and that their condition during the second term of the Putin presidency may be approaching a crisis (Trenin, 2005; Voronov, 2005). We need only recall a series of conflict occurrences between Russia and the EU since 1999 to demonstrate that the ‘strategic partnership’ between the two parties is marred by a number of substantive political divergences: Kosovo, Chechnya, Putin’s federal reforms, the Yukos case, ‘colour revolutions’ (Rose, Orange, Tulip) in post-Soviet states. Yet, the focus of this article is not on individual conflict issues but rather on the more general narrative structure of the conflict discourse, in which these and other issues are articulated. In my analysis of this discourse, I shall attempt to account for its immanent contradictions that, contrary to first impressions, do not indicate defects or inconsistencies in policy design but rather point to the fundamentally problematic status of the figure of Europe in Russian identity politics.

According to empirical studies and at first glance, conflict in EU–Russian relations revolves around two opposite themes: the Russian problematisation of its exclusion from Europe in the EU’s administrative practices and the reassertion by Russia of its sovereign subjectivity through a policy of ‘self-exclusion’ from the European political and normative space (see e.g. Anders, 2003; Bordachev, 2003; Kaveshnikov & Potemkina, 2003; Khudolei, 2003; Potemkina, 2003; Prozorov, 2004b, 2005a, 2006; Trenin, 2004). Moreover, both of these conflictual dispositions are articulated both on the level of concrete technical policy *issues* and on the more general level of the ‘*identity conflict*’ (Stetter, Diez, & Albert, 2003). In this article, I proceed from this point of departure in a systematic analysis of the *narratives of exclusion and self-exclusion* in the Russian political discourse concerning EU–Russian relations.

The narrative of Russia’s *exclusion from Europe* descends from the technical issue of the expansion of the strict visa regime for Russians in the course of EU enlargement, which both complicates the existing EU–Russian cooperative arrangements, particularly on the local and regional levels and contradicts both parties’ declared ambitions of ever-greater and ever-deeper integration (Fairlie & Sergounin, 2001; Khudolei, 2003; Potemkina, 2003; Prozorov, 2004a). This issue was originally articulated in the context of the intensification of the visa regime for Russian travellers to Central and Eastern European countries in the late 1990s, one of the conditions for their prospective EU membership. The extension of the Schengen regime in the enlarged EU has entailed the imposition of a visa regime that far exceeds in its stringency the bilateral visa practices that existed between Russia and e.g. Finland, Poland, Cyprus or Lithuania (Khudolei, 2003; Prozorov, 2004a). In the unfavourable context, marked by Russia’s negative response to the NATO Kosovo operation in Spring 1999 and the EU’s harsh criticism of Russia’s military campaign in Chechnya in Fall 1999, the visa issue acquired and presently retains an intensity that transcends its original locus of articulation. Instead, this problematic has developed in the Russian political and academic discourse into an *identity conflict* on Russia’s

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