

The impact of European and national identity construction on EU-Russia relations

Marco Siddi

Introduction: collective identities and the “other”.

*Identities have much more meaning for each state than a mere label; they offer each state an understanding of other states, its nature, motives, interests, probable actions, attitudes and role in any given political context.*¹

In recent years, constructivist research has brought the issue of identity to the fore of international relations theory. According to constructivists, identity construction plays an essential role in determining an actor's interests and foreign policy. This study briefly reviews the main findings of constructivist research concerning identity construction and applies them to the investigation of European and national identity construction in relation to the “Russian other”. The presence of the formidable Russian power in the East, as well as its ambiguous political, cultural and geographical stance between Asia and Europe, was a key element against which Western and Central European identities were constructed over the last three centuries. The analysis will first focus on the general significance of the “Russian other” for identity construction in the European areas west of Russia that are now part of the European Union. It will then investigate more in depth identity construction in a few national case studies, focusing particularly on those that were part of the Soviet sphere of influence during the Cold War. This study will test the hypothesis that national identity construction in EU member states which had traumatic experiences with Russia in recent decades prevents them from developing good bilateral relations with Moscow, thereby negatively affecting EU-Russia relations as well.

The subject matter of this study imposes a reflection on the essence and formation of collective identities. Collective identity can be conceptualized in at least three different ways. It can identify people included within specific group boundaries, emphasizing the importance

¹ T. Hopf, ‘The promise of constructivism in international relations theory’, *International Security*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (1998), p. 193.

of such boundaries. It may also be thought of in terms of attributes, features and values of a prototypical group member. Alternatively, it can refer to the relationship a collective actor establishes with other collective actors by using its self-image and the image of the “other”.² This last conceptualization is particularly useful for the purposes of this study because it puts the focus on the role of the “other” in collective identity construction. As Iver Neumann argues,

*Identification is as much about what one is not as about what one is. Group identity is not conceivable without an “other” from which the self can be differentiated.*³

Therefore, the presence of an external element against which the “self” can be defined constitutes a *conditio sine qua non* for collective identity formation. Ted Hopf propounds the same argument in more explicit words, asserting that identities “tell you and others who you are and who others are”. He then links identity to the formulation of an actor’s interests and preferences concerning action in specific domains and with respect to other actors.⁴ The close link between an actor’s identity and its domestic and foreign policy preferences explain why political leaders attach great importance to the formation of collective identities. By emphasizing common features of a state’s citizens, such as shared language and memories of group history, as well as the uniqueness of these elements vis-à-vis outsiders, collective identities contribute to the consolidation and viability of a state.⁵

Collective identity and international relations theory.

The question of collective identity formation in relation to the concepts of “self” and “other” was addressed by philosophers much before it became a subject of analysis in international relations theories. Hegel argued that knowing and confronting the “other” is a crucial step towards the formulation of the “self”. Nietzsche refined this argument by stating that “self” and “other” are not fixed elements and perceive each other from a series of changing perspectives.⁶ If applied to the concept of collective identity and the field of politics, Hegel’s and Nietzsche’s considerations have far-reaching implications. Confrontation with the “other” may play an essential role in the construction of a national myth, a dominant national historical narrative and other elements that, to use Benedict Anderson's term, constitute the

2 R. Herrmann, ‘Linking theory to evidence in international relations’, *Handbook of International Relations*, Sage Publications (London, 2005), p. 131.

3 I. Neumann, *Uses of the Other: the East in European Identity Formation*, University of Minnesota Press (Minneapolis, 1998), p. 148.

4 Hopf, ‘The promise of constructivism’, p. 175.

5 Herrmann, ‘Linking theory to evidence’, pp. 130-132.

6 Neumann, *Uses of the Other*, pp. 3-12.

nation as an “imagined community”. Furthermore, if the “self” only knows the “other” as a series of changing perspectives, then the constructions that derive from such knowledge are also variable over time. Theorists of international relations, notably those coming from the constructivist school of thought, understood the relevance of these concepts to international politics and brought them to the forefront of their discipline.

Alexander Wendt's 1992 article on *Anarchy is what states make of it* placed the question of collective identity into the mainstream of international relations theory. In this and later articles, Wendt argues that identity-formation under anarchy is concerned primarily with the preservation or security of the “self”. He thereby paves the way for an analysis of the utilitarian implications of collective identity construction in domestic and international politics. Wendt establishes a close correlation between the structures of international relations, which according to him are social rather than strictly material, and actors’ identities and interests. For instance, a state’s decision to rearm would lead other states to feel threatened and define egoistic identities and interests. The greater the degree of conflict in a system, the more states will fear each other and defend egoistic identities. Furthermore, Wendt argues that history is crucial in this respect, as states are constructed through historical interactions that lead them to form collective identities and interests. He also specifies that interests are dependent on identities:

*How a state defines its corporate interests depends on how it defines the self in relation to the other, which is a function of social identities at both domestic and systemic levels of analysis.*⁷

As emerges from this passage, Wendt emphasizes the role of the “other” in identity formation. He also warns of the negative consequences that this may have for the relationship between an actor and its “other”. In particular, he argues that states depend heavily on their societies for political survival, which can lead them to use conflicts with other states as instruments for rallying domestic support.⁸ As the next parts of this analysis will show, Wendt’s findings are of great relevance for the formation of European and national identity construction in relation to Russia.

Wendt’s studies were followed by the work of other scholars who refined and further developed his arguments. Ted Hopf argued that different states or groups of states behave differently toward other states based on their identities, which are variable over time and

7 A. Wendt, ‘Collective identity formation and the international state’, *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 88, No. 2 (June 1994), p. 385.

8 A. Wendt, ‘Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics’, *International Organization*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (1992), p. 399; A. Wendt, ‘Constructing international politics’, *International Security*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (1995), pp.71-77; A. Wendt, ‘Collective identity formation’, pp. 384-389; J. Checkel, ‘The constructivist turn in international relations theory’, *World Politics*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (1998), pp. 325-326.

depend on historical, cultural, political and social factors. Most significantly, he correlated state identity in world politics with the social practices that constitute state identity at the domestic level, arguing that “identity politics at home constrain and enable state identity, interests and actions abroad”.⁹ According to Hopf, identity politics at the domestic level serve the purpose of legitimizing the state's authority. This objective is pursued in particular through the search of an “other” in world politics, which is then used to justify the state's own rule at home.¹⁰ This strategy is adopted not only by authoritarian governments, but also by democratic ones. In his book on *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*, David Campbell convincingly argued that the United States is constantly searching for new collectives to “other”. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Japan was seen for some time as a threatening “other” due to its swift economic growth, then the focus shifted on the threat posed by Saddam Hussein's Iraq.¹¹ After Campbell published his work, the US continued its search for “others” in the international arena. George W. Bush's “axis of evil” and a rapidly growing China fulfilled this role respectively in the security and the economic sphere.

Russia as Europe's “other”.

During the last two centuries Russia played the role of Europe's “other”. This is not to say that Russia was the only or the main “other” for Europe throughout this long historical phase. Perceptions of Russia were not homogeneous all over the continent and differed depending *inter alia* on the social milieu, political orientation and personal experiences of observers. Nevertheless, numerous and significant patterns consistently pointing at Russia as Europe's “other” can be detected throughout this period. Studying these patterns is essential and of current relevance because Russia is still central to the discourse of European identity. Understanding where Russia fits is a key issue also in present political debates, such as the one concerning the European security order.¹²

European representations of Russia show a tendency to portray it as a liminal case of European identity. Russians were often depicted as “Asiatic” and “barbarous” and as deficient in terms of civility, form of government and religion. The first representations of Russia as “the barbarian at the gates”, a recurrent theme in European perceptions of the powerful Eastern neighbour, emerged in the descriptions of Russian soldiers during the Northern war

9 Hopf, ‘The promise of constructivism’, p. 195.

10 Hopf, ‘The promise of constructivism’, pp. 193-196.

11 D. Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*, University of Minnesota Press (Minneapolis, 1992), cited in Neumann, *Uses of the Other*, pp. 24-26.

12 Neumann, *Uses of the Other*, p. 65.

against Sweden in the early eighteenth century. Around the same time, geographical handbooks argued that Russians were constructed as “body and nature”, whereas Europeans were constructed as “mind and civilization”. In this context, which associated Russia with wild nature, the metaphor of the Russian *ursa major* originated. Its endurance over time is demonstrated by the fact that it is still used today in its modern variants, most notably the depiction of Russia as a threatening and irascible bear.¹³

In the nineteenth century, during the Napoleonic wars, Russian soldiers advanced as far as Paris, through Central and Western Europe. After Napoleon’s defeat, Russia was accepted as a legitimate player in the Concert of Europe. However, this acceptance was relativized by the enduring perception of Russia as “the barbarian at the gates”, who lacked the rationality that had become a defining element of European civilization during the Enlightenment. Liberals, democrats and socialists were particularly keen on describing Russia as a “barbarous power”, socially and economically backward. Conversely, conservative forces saw it as a bulwark of legitimism and of the European *ancien régime*.¹⁴ The Bolshevik revolution inverted radical and conservative views of Russia. The revolutionary nature of the Soviet Union turned it into a threat for the political élites in the rest of Europe throughout the interwar period. To make the threat more real, the Soviet Union could count on the extraterritorial presence of faithful allies, organized in the European communist parties. Perceptions of Russia diverging from the mainstream existed also in this phase; this was particularly the case of radical and leftist sympathizers, who praised the USSR’s political and economic system and the allegedly higher morality of the Soviet model.¹⁵

During the Second World War, the idea of the Russians as a barbarous civilization was pushed to the extreme by the Nazi racial discourse, which depicted them as “sub-humans” (*Untermenschen*). The Nazi idea that Russians should be excluded from humankind, and not just from Europe, was radically new. However, there was continuity between some themes used by Nazi propaganda and pre-existent discourses about Russians, such as the claim that they were a barbarous, uncivilized and Asiatic people. Some of these themes characterized perceptions of Russia also in the post-war period; Konrad Adenauer’s 1946 statement that “Asia stood on the Elbe” provides an excellent example in this respect.¹⁶ Adenauer referred to the presence of the Red Army in Eastern and Central Europe, which became one of the main determinants of European perceptions of Russia during the Cold War. While in the inter-war period the Soviet Union had been perceived mostly as a political threat, during the Cold War

13 Neumann, *Uses of the Other*, pp. 67-80.

14 Neumann, *Uses of the Other*, pp. 86-93 and 96-97.

15 Neumann, *Uses of the Other*, pp. 99-102.

16 J. Rupnik, ‘Europe’s new frontiers: remapping Europe’, *Daedalus. After Communism: what?*, Vol. 123, No. 3 (1994), p. 94.

it constituted primarily a military threat in the mindset of most Europeans. The perception of a political threat persisted in the immediate post-war period but gradually decreased as Communist parties in Western Europe lost their appeal or became critical of the Soviet Union.¹⁷

The Cold War played an important role in the construction of European perceptions of Russia also because it became the setting in which a distinct Central-Eastern European view of Russia developed. This view emerged in Central and Eastern European countries that were located within the Soviet sphere of influence and was reflected in the writings of dissident intellectuals who were born there. Milan Kundera's article *The tragedy of Central Europe*, published in 1984, is the most representative of these writings. Kundera argued that Central Europe (in which he included the nations of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Poland) was a West "kidnapped, displaced and brainwashed" by the "totalitarian Russian civilization". According to Kundera, Central Europe was the cultural heart of Europe and its separation from Western Europe meant that the latter was losing its cultural identity. On the other hand, Central Europe kept defending its identity and "preserving its Westernness" despite Russian domination. The main difference between Central Europe and Russia, he argued, was above all cultural, as demonstrated by the fact that the anti-Soviet revolts of 1956 and 1968 were led by local students and intellectuals. Among Kundera's intentions there was certainly that of drawing the attention of the Western world towards the oppression of Central and Eastern European countries under Soviet influence. In order to show that these countries culturally belonged to Europe, while the Soviet Union did not, he described the former as the "vital centre of gravity of Western culture" and the latter as "the radical negation of the modern West".¹⁸

Kundera's views on Russia were echoed by other intellectuals from Central and Eastern Europe. Different epithets, such as "Second World", "authoritarian" and "totalitarian" (as opposed to "First World", "democratic" and "free"), were associated to Soviet Russia in order to differentiate it from Europe and the West. Some extreme voices in the intellectual world went as far as using quasi-racial arguments to criticize Russia. For instance, the Hungarian philosopher Mihaly Vajda argued that Russia had made the choice to become non-European and that Russians were "incapable of tolerating another civilization, another form of life". Vajda also talked of "the Russian beast" and Russian practices of "holocaust, imprisonment, banishment, exile", forgetting that the Holocaust was actually a page of European history,

17 Neumann, *Uses of the Other*, pp. 99-100.

18 M. Kundera, 'The tragedy of Central Europe', *New York Review of Books*, Vol. 31, No. 7 (26 April 1984); Rupnik, 'Europe's new frontiers', pp. 93-94.

rather than a Russian crime, and that its perpetrators had spoken of Russia in a way very similar to his own.¹⁹

In 1989, when Communist leaders were ousted from their posts and the Soviet Union left its satellites free to choose their political future, the new political leaders started to speak of a “return to Europe”. However, it soon became clear that the Central Europe to which Kundera had referred in his 1984 essay had not emerged from the Cold War as a united political or cultural entity. Central-Eastern European countries had only managed to pass themselves off as a united entity vis-à-vis third parties by using the image of Russia as a common “other”. The new Central-Eastern European leaders continued to emphasize cultural differences between their countries and Russia also after the fall of socialism, with the objective of creating a “self” compatible with Western Europe and strenuously opposed to Russia. This strategy was meant to create the cultural preconditions, both at home and abroad, for the integration of Central-Eastern European countries in the EU and NATO.²⁰

The role of the discourse on Russia in national identity construction in selected EU member states.

When Central and Eastern European states joined the European Union, they brought along the legacy of four decades of resentment and confrontation with Soviet Russia. In some cases, notably those of Poland and Lithuania, anti-Russian feelings dated back from much earlier than the Cold War period. The anti-Russian discourse and attitudes in these countries did not vanish once the “return to Europe” had been accomplished. Historical controversies, the enduring fear of a resurgent Russian military might and economic issues, aggravated by Central and Eastern Europe’s energy dependence on Russia, continued to characterize the relations of the former Soviet satellites with Moscow. Furthermore, conflicts between the new Central and Eastern European EU member states and Russia were transferred to the EU level and risked to paralyze EU-Russia relations. Poland’s decision to veto negotiations on a new partnership agreement between the EU and Russia in 2006, following a quarrel over a Russian import ban on Polish meat, was the clearest manifestations of this.

However, in recent years considerable differences have emerged in the foreign policy approach of Central and Eastern European EU member states towards Russia. This suggests that, despite the troubled past and its burdensome heritage, uneasy relations with Russia are not a foregone conclusion. The analysis of two national case studies, Lithuania and Poland,

19 Vajda, Mihaly, 'Who excluded Russia from Europe?', in G. Schoepflin and N. Wood (eds.), *In search of Central Europe*, Polity (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 170 and 173, cited in Neumann, *Uses of the Other*, pp. 152-154.

20 Neumann, *Uses of the Other*, pp. 144 and 158.

will highlight how states which have a long historical record of conflicts with Russia have recently followed different courses in their relations with the Kremlin. Finally, the case of Germany will show that, if countries are willing to formulate their foreign policy independent of historical constraints, even the most extreme past conflicts do not prevent reconciliation and the development of good relations.

1) Lithuania.

In February 2011 Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov told his Lithuanian counterpart that relations between Moscow and Vilnius should not be a “hostage of the past”.²¹ Lavrov referred to the period of Russian and Soviet occupation of Lithuania, which started at the end of the eighteenth century and lasted until 1991, with the exception of the inter-war years (1918-1940). At the end of the eighteenth century, Russia participated in the partitioning of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and was assigned most of the lands inhabited by ethnic Lithuanians. An independent Lithuanian state was created after the First World War. However, in 1940 Soviet troops occupied the country following the Nazi-Soviet pact on the partitioning of Eastern Europe. Lithuania recovered its independence only in 1991. Furthermore, the transition to independence and democracy was not bloodless, as the Soviet central government used military force in the attempt to reestablish control over the country.

Lithuania's perception of the international system is deeply influenced by its traumatic history. This has led the country to adopt a Hobbesian approach in its foreign and security policy.²² Russia and the United States are the key players in the world view of Lithuanian policy makers. The United States is considered the main benign actor in the international arena and Lithuania unconditionally supports its foreign policy. Conversely, Russia is perceived as a threatening and destabilizing power, whose moves are detrimental for Lithuanian security.²³ The omnipresence of historical arguments in Lithuanian politics is the main determinant of negative perceptions of Russia. Although almost 20 years have elapsed since the departure of the last Soviet troops from Lithuanian territory and more than 70 from Lithuania's annexation to the USSR, the Soviet invasion and occupation continue to dominate the political debate. Due to this, Russia has become part of Lithuanian national identity as “they”, the major threat for national survival. The Lithuanian post-Soviet political elite has made frequent use of the

21 'Lavrov on Russian-Lithuanian relations: let's not be hostages of the past', *The Lithuania Tribune*, 2 February 2011.

22 M. Seselgyte, 'Security culture of Lithuania', *Lithuanian Foreign Policy Review*, No. 24 (2010), p. 23.

23 K. Paulauskas, 'The big, the bad and the beautiful: America, Russia and Europe's mellow paper', *Lithuanian Foreign Policy Review*, No. 20 (2008), p. 120.

“Russian threat” in order to consolidate its legitimacy internally and mobilize public support for Lithuania's integration in the EU and NATO.²⁴

Russia's rapid economic growth and its more active foreign policy in the years of the Putin presidency contributed to perpetuate threat perceptions in Lithuania. During this period Vilnius clashed with Moscow on several occasions. In 2006, for instance, Moscow cut off oil supplies to Lithuania after Vilnius had sold a petrol refinery to a Polish bidder instead of a Russian-owned state firm.²⁵ Russian cyber attacks on Estonia and the military confrontation with Georgia in the summer of 2008 caused anxieties also in Vilnius, as they were perceived as the first steps of an assertive foreign policy concerning the entire post-Soviet space, including Lithuania. Furthermore, in 2009 Russia held military exercises close to the Lithuanian border and invested in strategic sectors of the Lithuanian economy, notably the media sector.²⁶

Due to these recent developments, Lithuania has continued to demand NATO contingency plans for the Baltic states and a considerable US military presence in the region. NATO, and particularly the United States, are perceived as the only reliable guarantors of Lithuanian security. Conversely, Lithuanian attitudes towards the European Union are ambiguous, especially in the security sector. Policy-makers in Vilnius do not consider their European allies as reliable in case of a confrontation with Russia. For this reason, Lithuania was not very supportive of the European Security and Defence Policy, which it perceived as an alternative to NATO that excluded the US and gave a say to Russia in European defence matters.²⁷ A better attitude to the EU exists in the field of energy security, but only when Brussels attempts to coordinate efforts to decrease EU energy dependence on Russia. Vilnius becomes wary of EU policies when Brussels seeks cooperation with Moscow.²⁸

Lithuania therefore sees its relations with Russia, both at bilateral and at EU level, as a zero-sum game. Vilnius considers the EU as a medium through which it can confront Russia from a stronger negotiating position, rather than as a forum facilitating cooperation with Moscow. This approach has not improved Lithuania's bargaining position with Russia. By hampering relations with Russia at EU level, Lithuania often found itself isolated and sidelined by larger EU member states seeking a more pragmatic relationship with the Kremlin.²⁹ Lithuania's policy of prioritizing the role of the US over that of the EU in its foreign policy towards

24 Seselgyte, 'Security culture of Lithuania', pp. 28 and 33.

25 A. Rettman, 'Lithuania nuclear shutdown to test EU-Russia relations', 31 December 2009, available at <http://euobserver.com/9/29209> (accessed on 21 June 2011).

26 Seselgyte, 'Security culture of Lithuania', p. 33.

27 Seselgyte, 'Security culture of Lithuania', p. 39.

28 Paulauskas, 'The big, the bad and the beautiful', p. 120.

29 For instance, Lithuania's tough stance towards Russia did not have any considerable impact on decision-making at EU level when the Union formulated its response to the August 2008 crisis in Georgia. See for example S. Castle and S. Erlanger, "Europeans meet on crisis in Georgia", *The New York Times*, 2 September 2008.

Russia has produced scarce results too. The main concrete problems in Russian-Lithuanian relations concern the economic domain, notably the field of energy security. Since there is little that the US is able or willing to do in this respect, the solution to these problems lies in the EU's ability to formulate a coherent and united energy policy.³⁰

Thus, Lithuania would have an interest in increasing cooperation at EU level. Considering its dependence on Russian energy supplies, Vilnius would also benefit from adopting a more cooperative and pragmatic approach to Russia. However, this will not be possible as long as the political discourse in Lithuania is heavily influenced by the debate on Soviet crimes and the period of Soviet occupation. As Dmitri Trenin has argued, it would be better to leave out of the political debate the historical controversies that haunt Russian-Lithuanian relations. The past should not be allowed to obscure present problems and future prospects.³¹

2) Poland.

The Polish case best illustrates how, still in the last decade, the largest Central-Eastern European country's foreign policy towards Russia was trapped in the labyrinth of history. In order to understand the Polish case, the analysis of European and Central-Eastern European perceptions of Russia presented so far is not sufficient; a deeper analysis of the specific process of Polish national identity construction is necessary. Poland emerged as a modern nation in the nineteenth century, namely at the time of the partitions, when the country was divided among Tsarist Russia, Prussia and the Habsburg Empire. Between 1772 and 1795, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was partitioned three times and finally annexed by its powerful neighbours at the end of the Napoleonic wars. These events deeply influenced the Poles' conception of history and historical consciousness during the following two centuries. Knowledge of the Polish past played an important role and was, together with language, culture and religion, the main element in the construction of Polish identity. The struggles for independence of 1794, 1830 and 1863 were one of the most prominent themes of Polish historical memory. Furthermore, Polish patriots saw continuity between the revolts of the nineteenth century and the wars and uprisings against foreign invaders in the twentieth century, notably those of 1920 (against Soviet Russia), 1939 (against Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany) and 1944 (the Warsaw uprising against the Wehrmacht). The uprisings of 1956,

30 Paulauskas, 'The big, the bad and the beautiful', p. 126.

31 D. Trenin, 'Russian-Lithuanian relations: will the success story last?', *Lithuanian Foreign Policy Review*, No. 6 (2000).

1970 and 1981 against the Soviet-backed Communist government are also seen as part of a two-century-long struggle against foreign occupation.³²

The Second World War plays a decisive role in Polish historical memory. As the eminent historian Tomasz Szarota has claimed, the enduring consequences of this war have forced the Poles to talk and reflect on it for decades. Still today, the war and the people involved in it are constantly present on Polish press, radio and television. The topic is often addressed by literature, theatre, art and films, as well as in the political debate. Surprisingly, the older and the younger generations share the same perception of the war period: 73% of Poles believe that it is still very relevant to today's Poland. As Szarota argues, the Second World War constitutes the main element of the Polish discourse on the country's martyrdom. The discourse stresses that Poland was the first country to oppose Hitler, was left alone by the Allies in 1939 and, most importantly, it proportionally suffered the greatest human losses in the conflict. The martyrdom argument gained further popularity after 1989, when the Red Army's occupation of Eastern Poland in 1939 and the ensuing repression could be discussed openly. The question of the mass murder of more than 20,000 Polish officers by the NKVD at Katyn in 1940 became the central theme of the debate on Polish-Soviet relations between 1939 and 1941, particularly after the Gorbachev government admitted that the crime had been committed by the Soviets and not by the Wehrmacht.³³

The memory of the Second World War is of great importance for relations with other countries, particularly Germany and Russia. As far as Polish-Russian relations are concerned, Cold War propaganda about the alleged Polish-Soviet friendship was perceived as a lie in Poland. Poles see continuity between Tsarist and Soviet policies concerning Poland. Furthermore, most of them believe that the Russian government has not done enough to condemn the Katyn massacre.³⁴ The emergence of Russia as the heir of the Soviet Union's geostrategic role, even if with much more limited ambitions, led the Poles to transfer a good part of their anti-Soviet feelings to their perception of the USSR's main successor state. An improvement in relations between the USSR/Russia and Poland took place from the final years of the Gorbachev administration, when Warsaw was allowed to follow an independent course in domestic and foreign policy, and the initial phase of the Yeltsin administration. The gradual improvement of relations culminated in the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Polish territory and Yeltsin's acceptance in mid-1993 of Poland's future NATO membership. However, from late 1993 Russian-Polish relations deteriorated. Yeltsin retracted his approval

32 K. Ruchniewicz, „Noch ist Polen nicht verloren“. *Das historische Denken der Polen*, LIT Verlag (Berlin, 2007), pp. 11-12.

33 T. Szarota, „Wojna na pocieszenie“ [The war of consolation], *Gazeta Wyborcza* (6 September 1996), in Ruchniewicz, „Noch ist Polen nicht verloren“, pp. 19-20.

34 Ruchniewicz, „Noch ist Polen nicht verloren“, pp. 23-24.

of Poland's NATO membership and the nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovsky, who openly spoke of Poland as "NATO's whore", gained a majority in the elections for the State Duma.³⁵ After several years during which Moscow and Warsaw ignored each other and Poland was fully integrated in the EU and NATO, relations worsened again following the election of the deeply anti-Russian Kaczynski brothers to the posts of President and Prime Minister of Poland. During their mandate, Poland's support for the coloured revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia, the Polish veto on the new EU-Russia partnership agreement and the decision to host a component of the US ballistic missile defence system in Europe soured relations with Vladimir Putin's Russia. In this context, the wounds of the troubled past opened up again, at times in contexts that had little to do with historical events. In 2005, for instance, when German and Russian companies agreed to build a gas pipeline circumventing Poland via the North Sea, then Polish Minister of Defence Radoslaw Sikorski spoke of a "new Molotov-Ribbentrop pact".³⁶

It was only with the election of Donald Tusk to the post of Prime Minister that a new course in Polish foreign policy towards Russia was possible. The ensuing partial reset in Polish-Russian relations showed that Polish foreign policy could evade the traps of history. The more open stance on historical controversies taken by the Russian leadership from 2009 onwards also contributed to facilitate dialogue. Putin's attendance of the commemoration of the seventieth anniversary of the outbreak of the Second World War in Danzig in September 2009 and his admission that the Soviet invasion of Poland had been "morally unacceptable" constituted an important step towards historical reconciliation. The recent broadcast of Andrzej Wajda's 2007 film concerning the Katyn massacre on Russian TV in primetime, the joint Polish-Russian commemorations of the massacre in 2010 and 2011, as well as the countries' *rapprochement* after the Smolensk accident in April 2010, were milestones in the reconciliation process. Certainly, not all historical disputes have been solved and prominent political forces inside Poland continue to use Russia as a threatening "other" in order to rally support. However, the new policy line of the Tusk government towards Russia and the Kremlin's increased openness to discuss historical matters show that reconciliation is possible also in the highly controversial field of twentieth century history.³⁷

35 T. Snyder, *The reconstruction of nations. Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569-1999*, Yale University Press (London, 2003), pp. 236-237 and 278.

36 S. Castle, 'Poles angry at pipeline pact', *The Independent*, 1 May 2006.

37 M. Day, 'Vladimir Putin condemns appeasement of Hitler on 70th anniversary of WW2 outbreak', *The Telegraph*, 1 September 2009; T. G. Ash, 'This tortured Polish-Russian story is something we can all learn from', *The Guardian*, 23 February 2011; A. Trudelle, 'Komorowski and Medvedev commemorate Smolensk, Katyn', *Warsaw Business Journal*, 11 April 2011.

The shift in the Polish approach towards Russia has also changed its image within the European Union in the context of EU-Russia relations. Considered a “new Cold Warrior”³⁸ until a few years ago, Poland is now developing a more pragmatic approach to Russia and is no longer preventing progress in EU-Russia relations. This has allowed some steps forward in the EU-Russia dialogue, particularly the agreement on a partnership for modernization in June 2010. The new Polish approach could also lead the country to acquire a key and constructive role in EU-Russia relations, which could not have been contemplated under the previous approach. In the light of the recent Polish-Russian *rapprochement*, prominent observers have proposed that Poland, together with Germany and France, take the lead in shaping EU-Russia relations. This would allow Warsaw to gain influence within the EU, while at the same time emancipating itself from the constraints imposed by a troubled past.³⁹

3) Germany.

The history of German-Russian relations is ambivalent. On the one hand, Germany and Russia boast a long tradition of economic cooperation and mutual cultural influence that dates back from the time of Peter the Great. German philosophy and political thought deeply influenced the Russian intelligentsia. The German minority of the Tsarist Empire played an important role in the country's political life. Russia was both an ally of Bismarck's imperial Germany and, following the Rapallo agreement of 1922, a key economic and military partner of the Weimar Republic. On the other hand, Germany and Russia were antagonists for most of the twentieth century. During this time, they fought against each other in two devastating world wars. In 1941 the German army attacked the Soviet Union with the objective of annihilating the Russian people. For four years Nazi propaganda inculcated in the minds of the German people the idea that Russians were racially inferior and constituted a threat for German civilization. The discourse on the “Russian threat” survived in Adenauer's Federal Republic during the post-war years, when the Soviet Union deployed a large number of troops close to the West German border. In the German Democratic Republic, the official rhetoric on the East German-Soviet friendship was too artificial to convince the public opinion and suffered a heavy blow as early as 1953, when Soviet tanks crushed a workers' uprising in East Berlin.⁴⁰

38 M. Leonard and M. Popescu, *A Power Audit of EU-Russia relations. Paper for the European Council on Foreign Relations* (2007), p. 2.

39 K. Barysch, 'The EU and Russia: all smiles and no action?', *Centre for European Reform Policy Brief* (April 2011), p. 7.

40 For a concise historical overview of German-Russian relations, see A. Stent, *Russia and Germany Reborn: Unification, the Soviet Collapse and the New Europe*, Princeton University Press (Princeton, 1998). For a deeper analysis of German perceptions of Russia, see M. Keller, G. Koenen, L. Kopelev et al. (eds.), *Russen und*

Thus, during the first half of the twentieth century Russia had played a role in German identity construction mostly as a threat. In West Germany, this perception of Russia continued during the Cold War and was particularly strong during Adenauer's chancellorship. However, German-Russian relations today are good and untainted by past controversies. This *rapprochement* can be understood by analyzing the Federal Republic's foreign policy towards Russia from the late 1960s onwards. Throughout the 1950s and the early 1960s Adenauer's confrontational *Ostpolitik* produced few concrete gains. In the early 1970s the new Social Democratic chancellor, Willy Brandt, initiated a cooperative foreign policy towards the Soviet Union and the countries of the Eastern bloc. As a result, economic relations intensified and tensions between East and West diminished considerably. The positive atmosphere created by Brandt's *Ostpolitik* also had an impact on the way Russia and Germany perceived each other. The memory of the Second World War was still present in public discourses, but was gradually confined to the realm of history and no longer constituted an obstacle to the improvement of German-Russian relations.⁴¹ This was a striking achievement, considering that it took place a mere 25 years after the end of the most brutal conflict in modern history, which had caused millions of casualties and unprecedented material destruction on both sides.⁴²

Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika and his consent to German reunification paved the way for further reconciliation. Chancellor Helmut Kohl's cooperative approach to the Soviet Union showed that all the main political forces within Germany had understood that more concrete benefits could be achieved through dialogue with Moscow. Furthermore, Kohl and Gorbachev started a tradition of close personal contacts between German and Russian leaders that greatly facilitated bilateral relations. The improved political atmosphere allowed the intensification of economic relations. Germany became Russia's most important trading partner and a key supplier of manufactured products. Post-communist Russia became a lucrative market for German investments and exports, as well as Germany's main supplier of oil and gas. Economic cooperation and political dialogue have transformed the former Second World War and Cold War foes into strategic partners. Within the EU, Germany is one of the main proponents of a cooperative approach to Russia. Within NATO, Germany is reluctant to support decisions that are strongly opposed by Russia; Germany's objection to offering a Membership

Russland aus deutscher Sicht, Vols. 1-5, Wilhelm Fink Verlag (Munich, 1985-2000) and K. Eimermacher et al. (eds.), *Russen und Deutsche im 20. Jahrhundert*, Vols. 1-3, Wilhelm Fink Verlag (Munich, 2005-2006).

41 W. Wette, 'Sie wollten den totalen Krieg', *ZEIT Geschichte. Hitlers Krieg im Osten*, No. 2 (2011), p. 12.

42 A vast bibliography is available on the Nazi-Soviet war of 1941-1945. To mention only some prominent publications: O. Bartov, *The Eastern Front 1941-1945: German troops and the barbarization of warfare*, Palgrave Macmillan (Basingstoke, 1986); D. Glantz, *When Titans clashed: how the Red Army stopped Hitler*, University Press of Kansas (Lawrence, 1995); A. Dallin, *German rule in Russia, 1941-1945: a study of occupation policies*, Palgrave Macmillan (London, 1981).

Action Plan to Georgia and Ukraine at the 2008 Bucharest NATO summit provides the best example in this respect.⁴³

All German political parties share the view that a cooperative relationship with Russia is beneficial. The privileged relationship developed by Schröder's SPD-Green government was abandoned neither by Merkel's cabinet in the years of the CDU/CSU-SPD grand coalition nor by today's CDU/CSU-FDP government. This continuity of good relations is made possible by the fact that Germany and Russia no longer perceive each other as threats and by the deep interdependence of their economies. German business groups are represented through various organizations in Russia, notably the Alliance of the German Economy, the Delegation of the German Economy in the Russian Federation and the *Ost-Ausschuss*, the Committee on Eastern Economic Relations. These organizations are very influential and put pressure on the German government not to pursue a confrontational policy towards Moscow, which would negatively affect the business atmosphere for German companies in Russia. German business interests were reflected in the 2006 strategy paper on Russia prepared by the German Foreign Ministry. The paper condensed the main aim of German policy towards Russia in the phrase “*Annäherung durch Verflechtung*”, *rapprochement* through economic interlocking.⁴⁴

Thanks to this economic and political partnership, the way in which Russians and Germans perceive each other has changed for the better. A survey carried out in 2005, on the sixtieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War, showed that both Russian perceptions of Germany and German perceptions of Russia are predominantly positive.⁴⁵ The strength of the German-Russian partnership is demonstrated by the fact that Moscow and Berlin support each other also in difficult times. For instance, Germany's position regarding NATO enlargement to Ukraine and Georgia and during the crisis in the Caucasus in August 2008 took into account Russia's strategic interests. Furthermore, Berlin welcomed Russian investment when the economic and financial crisis hit some key sectors of the German economy, notably the shipbuilding and the car industry. The energy partnership with Russia has acquired further importance following Germany's decision to switch off its nuclear power plants in the near future, as Berlin will have to compensate for the loss of domestic energy production. By the end of 2011 the Nord Stream pipeline, a project led by the Russian-German-Dutch consortium of Gazprom, E.ON, Ruhrgas and Gasunie, should become operative and quickly turn Germany into Europe's biggest energy distributor.⁴⁶

43 A. Rahr, 'Germany and Russia: a Special Relationship', *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (2007), p. 137.

44 M. Salminen, 'German-Russian relations: will there be changes after the German elections?', *Briefing Paper of the Finnish Institute of International Affairs*, No. 40 (September 2009), pp. 3-4.

45 Wette, 'Sie wollten den totalen Krieg', p. 17.

46 Salminen, 'German-Russian relations', p. 5.

The current status of German-Russian relations shows that historical controversies can be overcome through a pragmatic approach that gives priority to current economic and political cooperation and leaves past conflicts out of the political discourse. Germany and Russia have drawn large concrete benefits from this approach. For the EU, Germany's strategic partnership with Russia constitutes an important asset for the development of a constructive EU-Russia relationship. The positive effects that the EU can derive from the German-Russian partnership were epitomized by the “uploading” of the German-led Nord Stream pipeline project to the EU level. Thanks to a German initiative, a pipeline that carries 55 million cubic metres of gas per year was included among the EU's key infrastructure projects, thereby contributing to solve the crucial problem of energy supplies for the benefit of the whole EU.⁴⁷ If the other EU member states stand united behind the German approach, Berlin can use its leverage with Moscow to lead a new European *Ostpolitik* that could turn the existing EU-Russia dialogues into a genuine strategic partnership.⁴⁸

Conclusion.

This study has shown that Russia has been a liminal case of European identity for more than two centuries. During this period, Russia was perceived as the “other” against which Western and Central Europeans defined their own identity. The Cold War contributed to this perception both west of the Iron Curtain, where Russia was seen as a military and political threat, and east of it, where most Central and Eastern Europeans perceived the alliance with the Soviet Union and all its consequences as the negation of their own freedom and independence. The national case studies have shown that these traumatic experiences are an important part of collective historical memory. In Central and Eastern European states this memory played an important part in national identity construction in the new polities that originated after the fall of Communism. However, the extent to which historical memory affects a state's foreign policy towards Russia varies from country to country. Germany provides the best example of how the difficult past has been confined to historical debates and no longer plays an important role in relations with Russia. On the other hand, past conflicts with Russia became a central topic in the political debate in post-1989 Poland and Lithuania. This resulted in frequent tensions with the Kremlin and, after Poland and Lithuania joined the European Union, it also prevented progress in relations with Russia at EU level. While Lithuania has largely maintained this approach, Poland has recently taken a more pragmatic

47 A. Schmidt-Felzmann, ‘All for one? EU Member States and the Union’ Common Policy towards the Russian Federation’, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (2008), p. 176.

48 This view was expressed *inter alia* by Constanze Stelzenmueller in her article ‘Germany's Russia question – A New Ostpolitik for Europe’, *Foreign Affairs* (March-April 2009).

line towards Russia, which reciprocated by demonstrating an increased willingness to solve past controversies. Thus, the case studies have shown that traumatic historical experiences do not prevent EU member states from developing good relations with Moscow. The creation of a truly constructive EU-Russia partnership greatly depends on the EU leaders' readiness not to use Russia as a threatening “other” against which to rally domestic support, as well as on their willingness to leave aside historical disputes and focus on a pragmatic relationship.