



'Lost in Trans(Atlantic Re)Lations' Euro-Atlantic Relations and Russian Reassertion in Light of the Syrian Conflict: Great Power Struggles in a Contested Middle East

DIDIER Brice (FR) – Supervisor: Stefan FRÖHLICH

Abstract

A civil war with sectarian patterns driven by endogenous and exogenous dynamics that have led to its rapid internationalization, the Syrian conflict has turned into a proxy war, catalysing the major geopolitical tensions of today's contested world order. Emerging as a symptom of Russia's reassertion as a counter-power to the United States (US) and the European Union (EU) – i.e. the Union as well as relevant member states – in the Middle East, the conflict represents a major challenge for the Euro-Atlantic community.

Building on a structural realist perspective to explain this reassertion, and examining the relations between Russia and the Euro-Atlantic community in terms of struggles for power, this thesis discusses the singularity of the proxy war in Syria as a confrontation for regional hegemony. In this respect, this study analyses and questions the challenge posed by Russia's re-assertion as a regional hegemon on both transatlantic approaches and relations *per se*.

The Arab Spring having revealed a power vacuum in the region, this thesis first shows that Russia's re-assertion has highlighted EU and US – and thus Euro-Atlantic – inconsistency in their policy towards the Middle East and their failure as security actors. Addressing the silo-based transatlantic approaches to the Syrian conflict, the study demonstrates that, in the framework of its 'Grand Strategy', Russia's reassertion was facilitated by a Euro-Atlantic deadlock resulting from the absence of common perception of threats and opportunities.

This thesis furthermore argues that Russia's reassertion challenges the EU and the US to assume their role in the transatlantic relations. Admittedly, this context questions the relations *per se*, insofar as, in the context of a multipolar world in the making, the combination of external threats exacerbates already existing internal imbalances and divides – between both sides of the Atlantic and within the EU – on which Russia's strategy is already built as well.

Considering that Moscow's reassertion as a regional hegemon contributes to bridging familiar Cold War perspectives and new power politics' multi-polarisation, this thesis however argues that the new geopolitical configuration at stake represents an opportunity for transatlantic relations to evolve towards more balance and fill the gaps that led to the Middle East deadlock. Putting into perspective the US progressive withdrawal from the region and discussing the EU's strategic identity, this thesis concludes that such a context can be a lynchpin moment for the EU to formulate a new strategic rhetoric and redefine its identity as a foreign policy actor in the Middle East. In this respect, the new EU Global Strategy appears as a relevant framework to respond – at least partly – to the challenge.