

**CHARLES UNIVERSITY**  
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**Eastern Partnership as a Matter of Security:  
Russia's perspective**

Master's Thesis

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## **Declaration**

1. I hereby declare that I have compiled this thesis using the listed literature and resources only.
2. I hereby declare that my thesis has not been used to gain any other academic title.
3. I fully agree to my work being used for study and scientific purposes.

In Prague on  
**31.07.2024**

Andrei Nosov

## References

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## Introduction

Relations between Russia and the EU have gone through significant changes in the 21st century. Negotiations on the abolition of the visa regime began back in 2002. In 2010, at the Russian-German-French summit in Davila, a plan was agreed upon to create within 10-15 years a common economic space with a common security system and complete absence of visa regime. Obviously, relations between Moscow and the EU deteriorated after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and became almost hostile after the launch of a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, but they may not have been the only reasons for this development.

The Eastern Partnership (EaP) program, launched in 2009 by the European Union (EU), is a pivotal initiative designed to enhance and deepen the political and economic ties between the EU and six Eastern European and South Caucasus countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. The EaP aims to promote stability, good governance, and sustainable development in these regions by fostering political association, economic integration, and people-to-people contacts. Through this program, the EU seeks to support democratic reforms, enhance energy security, and encourage economic development in its eastern neighbors. The initiative also provides a platform for dialogue and cooperation on various issues such as trade, mobility, and energy efficiency. The main directions of the program's development are formed at the 28+6 summits held every few years, the first of which was the 2009 summit in Prague.

One of the main issues related to the work was the role and position of the Russian Federation. Being the only post-Soviet country not participating in the program (with the exception of Belarus, whose participation was suspended), Moscow has repeatedly and in different forms expressed a negative attitude to the program. At the same time, there is a lack of studies in the scientific literature that attempt to analyze the statements of Russian officials on the topic of the program in question. This paper aims to fill this gap, so **the aim of this research** is to understand how the officials responsible for making Russian foreign policy decisions at the highest level addressed the emergence and development of the Eastern Partnership. In other words, **the research problem** of this paper is as follows: the way Russian officials frame their perception of the Eastern Partnership program is understudied

and might be important to understanding the underlying reasons for this perception. The relevance of this paper can be considered particularly high, as since the inception of the program, relations between the EU countries and Moscow have gone from discussions of visa regime abolition to massive mutual sanctions, mainly due to the Crimea annexation in 2014 and a full-scale invasion in 2022. A study of the evolution of Moscow's rhetoric regarding the program linking the post-Soviet countries (including Kiev) and the EU can clearly show the nature of the deteriorating relations between Moscow and the EU, as well as the main themes and categories involved in the discussion of this issue. In order to maintain the consistency of the research, one author of the statements was chosen - Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov.

According to the purpose of the paper and its specifics, the main research question is formulated: How did Russian officials express their opinion on the emergence and development of the Eastern Partnership program? Additional research questions are presented to clarify the research design: What themes and narratives emerge in Lavrov's rhetoric regarding the Eastern Partnership Program's on the international affairs in the region? How do they develop throughout the evolution of the program? How do historical and geopolitical contexts influence the security-related discourse of Russian officials on the Eastern Partnership Program? How have Russia expressed its opinion on the emergence and expansion of other international programs and organizations involving EU members and post-soviet countries?

It is worth noting that the topic of Russia's relations with the countries of the European Union and the post-Soviet space is extremely vast and multifaceted, which requires the establishment of clear boundaries of this study. The scope of the paper is limited to the study of statements of Sergey Lavrov regarding the Eastern Partnership program, its origin, specific goals or aspects of the program, as well as the participation in it of all post-Soviet countries or some countries separately. In terms of timeframe, the period from the beginning of the active discussion of the possibility of the program's emergence (2008) to 2014 will be considered, since Euromaidan and Russia's occupation of Crimea, among other things, significantly changed Moscow's rhetoric and the nature of its relations with the EU countries. Proceeding from this, it is also possible to clearly define the geographical boundaries of the research, as its objects will be Russia and the participants of the Eastern Partnership (EU member states + 6 participants of the program) other states, which in one way or another

play a role in the relations of countries in this region, are not studied.

Since the work is largely focused on the study of statements made by Sergey Lavrov, it will often refer to parts of statements and codes in Russian. To overcome this problem, each significant utterance or excerpt used in the paper which is unique to Russian language will be cited once in Russian and accompanied by transliteration and translation, which are used later in the study. This is done in order to indicate the use of specific passages and declensions, as well as other features of the Russian language that may carry significant emotional coloring and meaning, but are absent in English, which is the primary language of the study.

This thesis has a certain potential significance for the field. By systematically analyzing the rhetoric and narratives employed by Russian representatives, this study sheds light on the strategic considerations and security concerns that underpin Russia's foreign policy towards the EaP. This understanding is crucial for scholars and policymakers navigating the intricate dynamics between the EU and Russia, as well as well as for predicting future interactions and potential conflicts.

Furthermore, this research opens new avenues for future studies by providing a robust methodological framework for analyzing political discourse. It sets a precedent for examining how other regional powers perceive similar integration initiatives, thereby broadening the scope of geopolitical analysis.

Practically, the insights derived from this study can inform EU policymakers on the underlying motivations of Russian resistance to the EaP, potentially guiding more effective and nuanced diplomatic strategies. By addressing these concerns proactively, it is possible to mitigate tensions and foster a more stable regional environment. Ultimately, this research not only deepens academic understanding but also offers pragmatic solutions for enhancing international relations and regional security.

Additionally, this study is representative of a small but growing group of works that provide a methodological basis for combining neoclassical realism as a theoretical framework and qualitative content analysis as the main method of data analysis, creating a framework that can be adapted by other researchers who wish to combine the basic tenets of the realist framework with methods that take into account the importance of utterances and discourse

in general.

According to the outlined aims and objectives, the structure of the work is formed, which can be presented in this way:

- Introduction
- Literature Review
- Theoretical Framework
- Methodology
- Russia and the Eastern Partnership: the context
- Content analysis of the statements of Russian officials regarding Eastern Partnership
- Discussion of Empirical Findings
- Conclusion

The introduction is followed by a review of the existing literature on the topics covered in this paper. The next part of the paper describes the main concepts in the field of international relations, which are used in the paper, thus framing the theoretical basis of the research. The next chapter defines the methodological approach used in this work, in particular research philosophy, research approach, research design, sampling strategy and data collection and analysis techniques in the next chapter a qualitative content analysis is conducted exploring the statements of Russian policy makers regarding the emergence and development of the Eastern Partnership program. Findings of the data analysis are discussed in the chapter 6. The paper ends with a conclusion summarizing its findings and their implications, as well as suggesting directions for future research.



## **1. Literature review**

The purpose of this paper is to investigate how Russia viewed the emergence and development of the Eastern Partnership program by means of content analysis of Russian officials' statements. The literature widely studies the relationship between Moscow, the EaP countries, and the EU through a historical and geopolitical lens. Scholars like Makarychev (2014) argue that Russia perceives the EaP as part of a broader Western strategy to integrate Eastern European countries into Euro-Atlantic structures, thereby diminishing Russian influence in the region. They emphasize that this perception is rooted in the historical context of Russia's post-Soviet identity and its desire to maintain a sphere of influence in its near abroad.

Rontoyanni (2014) supports this view, highlighting that the EaP is seen by Russia not merely as an economic or political initiative, but as a strategic threat. The author discusses how Russia's historical ties with its neighboring countries form the basis of its geopolitical strategy, with the EaP being perceived as a direct challenge to this strategy.

Adomeit (2011) takes an interesting approach. In his paper "Russia and its Near Neighborhood: Competition and Conflict within the EU" he notes that Moscow actively views the post-Soviet countries from a realist perspective, considering them as its sphere of influence and actively discouraging their rapprochement with Western countries. In this regard, Russia initially viewed the program as a threat to its security and influence, but by the time the paper was written, this position had changed to an indifferent one, as it had become definitively convinced of its purely economic orientation. This paper, while providing essential insights into the topic, is an important example of the need for retrospective analysis, as Russia's actions and statements since 2011 show the inaccuracy of the author's conclusions.

Babayan (2015) expands on this perspective by highlighting how Russia views the EaP as an instrument of Western soft power. The program's emphasis on democratic reforms and economic integration is perceived as a direct challenge to Russia's model of governance and economic practices, which are often characterized by state control and limited political pluralism.

The strategic and security implications of the EaP are central to Russia's apprehensions. Sakwa (2015) provides a detailed analysis of how Russia views the EaP as a security threat. He suggests that Russian officials frame the EaP as an attempt to encircle Russia and undermine its regional security architecture. He states that Russia was not usually against projects aimed at the rapprochement of the CIS countries. However, the European Partnership represented this issue's radically new depth of development. Moreover, he mentions that this happened not only because of the basic ideas that define Russia's foreign policy but also because of the change in Brussels' approach to developing the Eastern Partnership.

Moreover, scholars like Trenin (2016) highlight that the security dimension of Russia's concerns is compounded by the EU's perceived alignment with NATO's strategic objectives. They argue that Russia views strengthening ties between EaP countries and the EU as a precursor to NATO expansion, exacerbating Moscow's security anxieties.

In addition to security concerns, Russia's economic and political interests are also threatened by the EaP. Popescu (2014) explores how Russia perceives the EaP's promotion of EU norms and standards as a direct challenge to its economic influence in the region. The author argues that the EaP's efforts to create a free trade area with Eastern European countries could undermine Russian-led economic initiatives like the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). According to the author, not only the EaP but also the entire European Neighbourhood Policy are obstacles to Moscow's strategic goal of establishing Eurasia as a new political region, with Russia playing a major role in it.

Furthermore, Dorin, Popescu, and Parlicov (2016) examine how Russia perceives the EaP's emphasis on energy cooperation as threatening its dominance in the regional energy market. The author argues that Russia's energy policy is a critical component of its foreign policy strategy, and the EaP's initiatives to diversify energy sources and routes undermine this strategy. This paper shows how the energy field in the region is a matter of economic and security concern for Russia at the same time.

Engelbrekt and Nygren (2012) point out that the Eastern Partnership had a very good timing as a potential new wave of deepening economic relations between the EU, Russia, and post-Soviet countries. However, the lack of a detailed explanation of the program's

goals and communications negatively turned Moscow against it, as it was seen as an attempt to reduce Russia's influence in the region. At the same time, the subtleties of this Russian attitude to the program are ignored, and the program itself is simply assessed as negative.

The Routledge Handbook of Russian Foreign Policy (Tsygankov, 2018) gives an important place in the development of Russian foreign policy in the 21st century to the reaction to the Eastern Partnership. First, the paper notes that it is ineffective to assess Russia's attitude to the Eastern Partnership in isolation from other developments in Russia's relations with the EU countries and with the entire integration group in particular and with NATO countries. This conclusion is based on the thesis that Russia views the program as a part of a comprehensive attitude towards itself and its goals in the international arena, and it is this approach that predetermines Moscow's view of this problem as a matter of security, sovereignty, and sphere of influence. Secondly, Moscow's natural or contrived reticence about the goals of the Eastern Partnership on the part of the organizers of the program led to the fact that the former began to assess what is happening in the region as a zero-sum game, thus defining its attitude to what is happening (i.e., to the Eastern Partnership) as a threat to its strategic goals.

All these papers come to different conclusions, but they generally describe Russia's assessment of the Eastern Partnership program as unfavorable. They have another common feature: they do not provide sufficient methodological tools for such assessments. Some of them rely on other researchers' work, and some use isolated quotations from statements of Russian political leaders to support their conclusions without relying on the context and comprehensive analysis of these statements. One of the main reasons for the relevance of this paper may be the lack of depth of the existing methodological approaches to assessing Russia's perception of the Eastern Partnership and the expression of this perception. From this point of view, the large number of papers that do not use a similarly in-depth level of data analysis to verify such conclusions can be considered an additional incentive to conduct the stated research.

At the same time, there is a certain group of papers that are methodologically partially similar to this one and explore similar problems. By similarities here we mean the use of a full-fledged qualitative data research method, which aims to assess the attitudes of Russian

representatives towards the Eastern Partnership or the program as part of the relationship with the European Union.

The paper by Tumanov, Gasparishvili and Romanova (2011) attempts to analyze the way international relations are perceived in Russia. An important part of the research is the assessment of opinions about the European Union, its prospects and achievements, member states, and initiatives. The main method of data analysis is a social interview with questions about international relations. According to the authors' findings, Russian residents have a negative attitude towards NATO and a positive view of the EU and many EU countries, and they even approve of the idea of Russia joining the European Union in the future. At the same time, they have no idea about the political structure and functionality of the EU, as well as the main initiatives and directions of development, including the European Neighborhood Program, of which the Eastern Partnership is a part. The paper makes a decent attempt to use qualitative methodology to achieve its objectives, but the timing of the paper allows its authors to come to conclusions about the positive future dynamics of the relationship between these two actors. In addition, the study relies on public opinion to assess such prospects, which would be logical for a democratic country. However, it is impossible to draw a clear conclusion about Russia's democracy at the time of writing the paper and the further trend of reducing freedoms and the public's influence on decision-making makes the conclusions less applicable to reality. Both of these shortcomings can be evaded in this paper through appropriate research design.

Mila and Neuman (2023) in their paper analyze the way the Eastern Partnership is framed by Russia and the European Union. Using their own developed methodological and conceptual framework, they map out the predefined frames, viewing the initiative as a political-economic program, as a securitized concept, and as a geopolitical tool. The paper does a good job of showing not only the different dimensions of the program from the point of view of different actors but also puts a separate emphasis on Russia's reaction to its evolution and mentions the influence of various external factors on the formation of these views. The only misalignment with the purpose of this thesis is the lack of consistency in data collection methods. In their paper, the authors use different types of sources, both individual parts of Russian officials' statements and academic literature on the topic, thus making the research findings comprehensive but not allowing for a full assessment of potential meanings in the statements. Gretskiy, Treshchenkov and Golubev

(2014) follow a similar approach in their paper analyzing the evolution of the views of the expert community and decision makers on the Eastern Partnership in particular and relations with the EU in general. We can also highlight the paper by Hartsö (2022), which provides a content analysis of documents related to summits and other official events within the Eastern Partnership from a security perspective.

Frear and Mazepus (2016), in "A New Turn or More of the Same? A Structured Analysis of Recent Developments in Russian Foreign Policy Discourse," analyze how recent shifts in Russian foreign policy rhetoric reflect deeper economic and political anxieties. They argue that the discourse surrounding the EaP is emblematic of broader strategic narratives aimed at preserving the status quo in Russia's near abroad. Unlike the previous one, the paper examines two types of primary sources to assess the evolution of political discourse: Policy Concepts of the Russian Federation and Presidential Addresses to the Federal Assembly. Despite methodological similarities and interesting conclusions about the importance of concepts such as security and sovereignty in Russian foreign policy discourse, the paper does not focus on relations with a specific region, taking a more comprehensive approach.

These papers are closer to this thesis methodologically and often have similar goals but do not answer the research question posed here, thus failing to close the research gap that this paper aims to fill.

The paper by Haukkala (2008) deserves special attention. Although it was written before the initiation of the Eastern Partnership program, it is quite relevant for this study, as it examines Russia's attitude towards European Neighborhood policy, which is manifested in the EaP. Based on the discourse analysis of Russian policymakers' statements, the author concludes that Moscow does not agree with the EU's attempt to create normative hegemony, i.e., "imposition of European norms and values" (Haukkala, 2008, p. 45) on the countries neighboring the integration organization, and warns against considering this issue as a matter of Russia's pride and desire to be the main power in the region. This conclusion questions the validity of a superficial study of Russia's rhetoric, pointing to the importance of using more comprehensive data analysis methods.

Another piece of literature that does not have the same obvious affinity for the topic and/or

methodology under study but is important to this paper is "The Explanatory Power of Structural Realism in the 21st Century: The Eastern Partnership, Russian Expansionism and the War in Ukraine" by Herbut and Kunert-Milcarz (2015). Their paper also explores the Eastern Partnership and Russia but uses foreign policy realities not as the main subject of analysis but as a way to assess the ability of the neorealist paradigm of international relations to adequately explain and conceptualize the main processes in the world community on the example of relations between Moscow, Kyiv, and Brussels. The authors come to the fair conclusion that realism is indispensable for the consideration of such issues since the study of processes related to contemporary Russia often involves such concepts as sovereignty and sphere of influence, which are invariably associated with realism. At the same time, it has several obvious disadvantages, including the lack of analysis at the level of domestic politics of states and, as a consequence, the unification of all state actors under study. This paper is also aware of these limitations of the realistic approach and proposes another way to define the theoretical basis, which is explained in the next chapter.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

According to the primary studies reviewed in the previous chapter, Russian policy in the post-Soviet region is related to concepts such as sphere of influence and sovereignty. All of them are most suitable for the realist conception of international relations. Realism traditionally views international relations as anarchy, i.e., the absence of order, and denies the possibility of creating such order through supranational organizations. In classical realism, the actors (i.e., the units of world politics capable of exerting real influence on international relations) are states, whereas in neorealism (also known as structural realism), the structure of international relations itself is the main driving force, and the actorhood of individuals or international organizations is either denied or viewed with great doubt. The development of complex actors based on a huge number of agreements between states, such as the European Union, has called into question the ability of classical realism and structural realism to explain the international processes taking place in the 21st century, leading to the emergence of a new current of realist thought.

"Neoclassical realism" as a term was first used by American researcher Gideon Rose (1998) about the papers of Thomas Christensen, Randall Schweller, William Wallfort and Fareed Zakaria. According to Rose, these researchers, although writing their papers under the umbrella of realism, could not be categorized as either classicists or structuralists. The concept was later developed into a fully-fledged theory of international relations. One of the most comprehensive descriptions of it is the paper by Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro (2016).

One of the main issues of any theory of international relations is the question of the state: its necessity, its effectiveness, and its role in world politics. In neoclassical realism (as in any other subspecies of this current), the state is the main and only way for people to survive. Neoclassicists go back to Thomas Hobbes' idea of a war of all against all in the natural state, which leads people to the need to create some institution to contain themselves and endow it with a unique right to legitimate violence. As before, in classical realism, the state is the main actor in international relations, but the direction of states' actions in the world is determined by the pressure of the external system, which is inherited from neorealism. However, according to the authors, the challenges of the system, passing through the prism of state institutions, are transformed into solutions taking into account

four factors: images of leaders, strategic culture, the relationship between the state and society, and internal institutions. These factors are described as an intervening variable, as opposed to the independent variable (international system) and dependent variable (states' foreign policy).

The first factor is the image of leaders. It means, on the one hand, how a leader appears in the public's opinion. Depending on his image, a politician has a rather limited number of decisions and actions that will align with public opinion and retain the population's support. On the other hand, the image of leaders refers to their personal qualities and characteristics. Depending on their upbringing, environment, and temperament, they can perceive the challenges of the external system in different ways and make different decisions that shape the state's policy in the international arena. The effectiveness of the state in the sphere of international relations often depends on their personalities.

The strategic culture of states is the next factor. This term here means a set of traditions, beliefs, and norms, as well as the population's adherence to certain ideologies. In some states, democratic tradition is widespread; traditional militaristic sentiments are extremely popular in others. Strategic culture determines not only the decisions to which leaders gravitate but also the options for their actions in accordance with public sentiment.

Neoclassical realism, in contrast to the theory of neorealism, separates state and society and assumes their certain autonomy. The relationship between them is considered an important intra-state factor in international relations. The state is understood here as various central institutions, and society as economic and social groups. Harmony between these actors of domestic politics empowers the state, but achieving this harmony is not an easy task. A conflictual environment between the state and society can negatively affect the potential military mobilization of the population, the approval of leaders, and the unity of decision-makers.

The next factor is inextricably linked to the previous one, as it represents the domestic institutions that often express the relationship between the state and society. Neoclassical realism involves considering various governmental and non-governmental organizations, church, education, and other state institutions as factors in international relations.

These types of intervening variables, unique to neoclassical realism, greatly increase the



opportunities for social research within the overall realist orientation. This is particularly important for our study. The ability to study realist concepts and their evolution (such as the balance of power in the region and Russia's sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space) and to consider the influence of Sergey Lavrov's personality as a representative of the political elite and leader of Russian foreign policy through the prism of his statements on the Eastern Partnership is an ideal theoretical framework for the study.

### 3. Methodology

The paper's research problem is as follows: the way Russian officials frame their perception of the Eastern Partnership program is understudied and might be important to understanding the underlying reasons for this perception. The methodology chosen corresponds to the research goal.

This study uses interpretivism as a philosophical framework. According to the basic postulates of interpretivism, social life is quite different from nature sciences. Therefore, research methods used in non-social sciences either cannot be applied in principle or are insufficient for obtaining scientific knowledge in the study of social life. Interpretivism allows the researcher to interpret both the data and the results of data analysis in an original way, which can lead different researchers to different results even when identical data and methods are available. This is particularly well suited to our paper as the main purpose of this study is to examine public statements expressed in textual form.

Qualitative content analysis is chosen as the main method of data analysis in this paper.

Qualitative content analysis (QCA) is a method used in social science research to systematically interpret textual data, aiming to understand underlying meanings, contexts, and phenomena. Klaus Krippendorff (2018, p. 18) describes QCA as a method that "permits researchers to make replicable and valid inferences from texts to the contexts of their use." This approach involves categorizing and identifying patterns or themes within the data, allowing for a detailed and nuanced understanding of the material. Philipp Mayring (2000) emphasizes the importance of context, noting that QCA seeks to interpret texts in a way that considers their situational and cultural background, ensuring that meaning is derived from the specific circumstances in which the text was produced. For this reason, our paper will separately consider the context of Russian foreign policy at the stage relevant to the paper, as well as the current stages of development of the Eastern Partnership program, in order to give the studied statements more contextual meaning in the analysis.

Content analysis has two main directions. Qualitative content analysis focuses on interpreting information, while quantitative content analysis compares the frequency of use of certain words or ideas. That said, the two approaches are not mutually exclusive, as demonstrated, for example, in the paper by Rejnö, Danielson, and Berg (2017), where the authors apply both methods. In our paper, qualitative content analysis will be the main

method, but the frequency of use of certain codes will also be used to analyze the study results. Accordingly, our paper will use a mixed-method research design with a strong bias toward qualitative methods.

The process of QCA typically starts with data collection, where textual data is gathered from sources like interviews, documents, or social media. This is followed by transcription, converting audio or video data into written form. Researchers then familiarize themselves with the data by reading and re-reading it, which helps them gain an in-depth understanding. The next step is coding, where significant pieces of text are identified and labeled. According to Krippendorff (2018), coding is crucial as it transforms raw data into a form that can be analyzed systematically.

Following coding, researchers develop categories by grouping similar codes together. Mayring (2000) describes this as a process of abstraction that helps reduce data's complexity while preserving essential content. Then, the main themes that represent the key findings of the analysis are identified and described.

In our paper, the data for content analysis will be collected as follows. Since our paper aims to examine how Russian officials responsible for policy-making decisions have spoken about the Eastern Partnership, we have chosen to focus on one person's statements that mention the program. Sergey Lavrov has been the Russian Foreign Minister since 2004 and is still in office at the time of writing this paper. This is a good fit for this study because it increases the likelihood that Lavrov's statements are consistent with the basic principles of Russian foreign policy, given his time in office and the fact that he occupies one of the highest positions in the managerial hierarchy of Russian foreign policy. These factors also reduce the significance of the fact that the entire dataset we use is a single person's statements and may express his opinion more than Moscow's official position.

The timeframe of the statements chosen for our dataset is also important for our paper. Sergey Lavrov first mentioned the Eastern Partnership program on October 25, 2008. At that time, the prospect of the Eastern Partnership was only being discussed, so this date was chosen as the starting point of the timeline of our research.

Regarding the dataset size, the choice was made in favor of a more in-depth study of a smaller number of statements instead of a more superficial study of a larger amount of data. For our paper, it was interesting to examine the evolution of views from the inception of the program to one of the critical moments in the relationship between Russia and the EU, which was Euromaidan. This is the name given to a series of mass public protests in Ukraine

caused by President Yanukovych's refusal to sign the Association Agreement with the EU. Euromaidan led to a change in the country's political leadership, and the weakening of the supreme power allowed Russia to annex Crimea and launch indirect military actions in the east of the country and provoked massive EU sanctions against Moscow. At the same time, this study would benefit from assessing not only the statements that Lavrov made before the crisis but also those that he made during and shortly after its end, referring to the Eastern Partnership. During the analysis, it was revealed that since 2015, the number of references to the Eastern Partnership by the Minister has significantly decreased (in 2014, there were ten such references, compared to 3 in the period of 2015-2016). Therefore, we chose the end of 2014 as the final date for the study timeline.

To sum up, we compiled a dataset of 28 public statements by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov that took place between October 25, 2008 and December 31, 2014. All these statements were taken from the official website of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs: the presence of an official source significantly improves the validity of the data. This paper does not consider the existing possibility of potential moderation of the text of the speech after it has been delivered to be a problem, as the website presents it in the way the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs would like it to be presented, which is consistent with the goal of analyzing Moscow's perception of the EaP. For the same reason, the study does not claim that this sample of Lavrov's speeches for the period in question is exhaustive. However, it can be considered to be presented in the way Russia wants to present its perception of the program to the world public.

Coding is a mandatory part of qualitative content analysis. In order to start coding, it is necessary to define coding units. According to Schreier (2012, p. 131), "units of coding are those parts of the units of analysis that can be interpreted in a meaningful way with respect to your categories and that fit within one subcategory of your coding frame." Since Lavrov's statements used in our dataset are heterogeneous (they can be both answers to questions and his own monologues), there is no clear definition in this paper of how large a unit of code should be. Rather, the research here focuses on whether a particular unit of text denotes the statement of a clear thought. According to this approach, a unit of coding can be represented either by a paragraph or by a single word, which gives us some flexibility in the study.

For the same reason of heterogeneity of the studied statements it is necessary to mention the issue of the original audience. Even though we are analyzing a text, it is intended

to depict speech that was uttered in different contexts and may have varied according to the original audience. Although this fact is not avoided in the study, it is also of little importance to us. The paper assumes that the text in the public domain on the website of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs uses all interested Internet users as a secondary audience, therefore it should be universal.

The existing limitations of the thesis format do not allow us to address one of the main problems of qualitative content analysis—reliability. The main method accepted in the scientific community to improve the reliability of the content analysis is cross-coding, which involves several researchers, but it is impossible in this format.

## **4. Russia and the Eastern Partnership: the context**

According to Schreier (2012), qualitative content analysis is impossible without understanding the context in which the content was created, as it allows us to delve into the more detailed meaning of each thought expressed. In order to give an idea of the context, the paper provides a brief summary of the basic information about the Eastern Partnership and the European Neighborhood Policy, which it is a part of. Moreover, it is necessary to understand the main directions of Russian foreign policy and the main events linking the post-Soviet countries, Russia, and Europe that took place during the period under study.

### **4.1 The European Neighbourhood Policy: Concept and Implementation**

The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) was introduced in 2004 as a strategic framework to strengthen the relationships between the European Union (EU) and its neighboring countries to the south and east. The primary objective of the ENP is to foster stability, security, and prosperity in the countries closest to the EU's borders, thereby creating a ring of well-governed states with whom the EU can enjoy close, cooperative relations (European Commission, 2004).

The ENP is built on the premise of mutual commitment to shared values such as democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights, and market economy principles. It offers neighboring countries a privileged relationship involving a significant degree of economic integration and political cooperation. The policy operates on a bilateral basis between the EU and each partner country, tailored to each state's specific needs and aspirations (Kelley, 2006).

One key mechanism of the ENP is the Action Plans agreed upon by the EU and each partner country. These plans set out an agenda of political and economic reforms with short—and medium-term priorities. The implementation of these reforms is supported by financial and technical assistance from the EU. The funding is provided through the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI), which succeeded the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) in 2014 (Delcour, 2010).

The implementation of the ENP is monitored through regular progress reports prepared by the European Commission. These reports evaluate the extent to which the partner countries

have implemented the reforms outlined in their respective Action Plans. They also serve as a basis for adjusting the EU's support to better align with the progress and needs of the partner countries (Lavenex & Schimmelfennig, 2011).

Critics of the ENP have pointed out several challenges in its implementation. These include the varying levels of commitment to reforms among partner countries, the complex geopolitical environment, and the EU's limited capacity to enforce compliance (Korosteleva, 2012). Despite these challenges, the ENP remains a cornerstone of the EU's foreign policy, reflecting its commitment to fostering a stable and prosperous neighborhood.

#### **4.2 The Eastern Partnership: Development and Milestones**

The Eastern Partnership (EaP) is a significant initiative under the broader ENP framework, launched in 2009 to enhance the EU's relationships with six Eastern European partners: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. The EaP aims to create the conditions necessary for political association and further economic integration between the EU and these countries (Popescu & Wilson, 2009).

The EaP initiative was driven by both the EU's strategic interests in securing its eastern borders and the aspirations of Eastern European countries to strengthen their ties with the EU. The partnership is structured around four thematic platforms: democracy, good governance, and stability; economic integration and convergence with EU policies; energy security; and contacts between people (Ghazaryan, 2014).

Several important milestones have marked the development of the EaP up to 2014. The inaugural EaP summit in Prague in 2009 established the political framework for the partnership and outlined the initial commitments. Subsequent summits, such as the Warsaw Summit in 2011 and the Vilnius Summit in 2013, further developed these commitments, leading to the signing of Association Agreements and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTAs) with Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine (Delcour & Wolczuk, 2015). President Yanukovich's refusal to sign the treaty led to mass protests and a change of power in Ukraine in 2014, the annexation of Crimea by Russia, and the start of hostilities in the eastern regions of the country involving Russian troops.

Researchers have proposed various frameworks to understand the stages of the EaP's development. According to Cadier (2019), the program has undergone a significant evolution of its meaning for both the EU countries and the six participating countries. The author claims that it has been significantly geopoliticized, which means that it has moved away from its original goals of increasing cooperation and democratization in the region and has become more of a tool to counteract Moscow. Although Russia's aggressive actions have become a significant factor in this development, they are not the only reason for such evolution of the EaP. He claims that such development was facilitated by the intensive actions of Central European countries such as Poland and the Czech Republic, and their actions changed the direction of the EaP development around 2013.

Hartsö (2022) comes to similar conclusions. According to this paper, from 2009 to 2013, the main topics discussed in official EaP documents changed from Stability, Prosperity, and Strategic and economic integration to energy security, strategic partnership, and resolution of conflicts.

Korosteleva (2014b) suggests that the EaP's development should also be viewed through the lens of "effective multilateralism," where the EU seeks to promote regional cooperation and integration while acknowledging the sovereignty and individual paths of the partner countries. This approach underscores the importance of balancing the EU's strategic interests with the Eastern Partnership countries' domestic dynamics and geopolitical realities.

In conclusion, the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership represent crucial elements of the EU's external relations strategy. They reflect the EU's commitment to fostering stability, security, and prosperity in its neighborhood through tailored bilateral and multilateral engagements. Despite the challenges and criticisms, these initiatives continue to play a pivotal role in shaping the EU's relationships with its eastern and southern neighbors.

### **3.3 Overview of Russian Foreign Policy (2000-2014)**

The period from 2000 to 2014 marks a significant era in Russian foreign policy under the leadership of President Vladimir Putin. This phase is characterized by a strategic reassertion of Russia's influence on the global stage, efforts to consolidate power



domestically, and a more assertive approach towards neighboring countries, especially in the context of the post-Soviet space.

Vladimir Putin's ascension to the presidency in 2000 heralded a new era in Russian politics, with a distinct shift towards centralization of power and strengthening of state control. This period saw a marked effort to stabilize the domestic economy, which was critical for asserting foreign policy goals. According to Lynch (2001), the early 2000s were focused on stabilizing Russia internally while rebuilding its international stature.

One of the significant aspects of Russian foreign policy during this time was the emphasis on forming strategic partnerships. Relations with China, for instance, were strengthened through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), promoting regional security and economic cooperation (Wishnick, 2001). Additionally, Russia sought to maintain a pragmatic relationship with the European Union and the United States, emphasizing cooperation on issues like counterterrorism post-9/11 (Allison, 2004).

Energy resources became a pivotal tool in Russia's foreign policy strategy. By leveraging its vast oil and gas reserves, Russia sought to gain economic and political influence, particularly in Europe. According to Goldman (2008), Russia's energy policy was designed not only to maximize economic benefits but also to exert geopolitical influence. The control over energy supplies to Europe allowed Russia to wield significant leverage, as seen in the gas disputes with Ukraine in 2006 and 2009, which highlighted Europe's dependency on Russian energy.

A central theme of Russian foreign policy during this period was reasserting influence in the post-Soviet space. This was evident in Russia's actions towards former Soviet republics, which were increasingly seen as within Russia's sphere of influence. The "near abroad" policy was aimed at countering Western influence and ensuring that these states remained aligned with Russian interests.

This reassertion was particularly noticeable in Russia's relations with Ukraine and Georgia. In Ukraine, the Orange Revolution of 2004, which brought a pro-Western government to power, was seen as a direct challenge to Russian influence (Kuzio, 2005). In response, Russia used a combination of political pressure, economic leverage, and support for pro-Russian factions to counter this shift.

The culmination of Russia's assertive foreign policy in the post-Soviet space during this period was the war with Georgia in August 2008. The conflict, which lasted five days, resulted from escalating tensions between Russia and Georgia over the latter's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Georgia's aspirations to join NATO and its growing alignment with the West were perceived as significant threats by Russia.

The immediate cause of the war was a Georgian military offensive to reclaim South Ossetia, which prompted a large-scale Russian military response. According to Cornell and Starr (2009), the war demonstrated Russia's willingness to use military force to maintain its influence over its neighbors and prevent further NATO encroachment. The conflict ended with a ceasefire agreement brokered by the European Union, but it resulted in Russia recognizing South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states, a move condemned by the international community.

The war in Georgia had significant strategic implications. It underscored Russia's resolve to assert its dominance in the post-Soviet space and highlighted the limitations of Western influence in the region. The conflict also led to a temporary cooling of relations between Russia and the West, particularly with the United States and NATO (Asmus, 2010).

Furthermore, the war had a profound impact on the regional security dynamics. It demonstrated the vulnerabilities of small states in the post-Soviet space and the limits of Western security guarantees. The international community's response, which included condemnation but limited concrete action, revealed the complexities of dealing with an assertive Russia.

The period from 2000 to 2008 in Russian foreign policy is marked by a deliberate and strategic effort to reassert Russia's influence on the global stage, particularly in the post-Soviet space. Through a combination of energy diplomacy, strategic partnerships, and, ultimately, military intervention, Russia sought to counter Western influence and maintain its dominance in its perceived sphere of influence. The war in Georgia stands out as a critical event that encapsulates the assertiveness and complexities of Russian foreign policy during this period.

The next conflict of the same scale, in which Russia, the Eastern Partnership countries and the European Union were directly involved, was the Euromaidan. The Euromaidan was a

wave of demonstrations and civil unrest in Ukraine that began in November 2013, initially sparked by President Viktor Yanukovich's decision to suspend the signing of an association agreement with the European Union within the framework of the Eastern Partnership, instead opting to strengthen ties with Russia. This decision triggered mass protests in Kyiv's Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square), symbolizing a broader desire for closer integration with Europe and widespread frustration with pervasive government corruption.

The movement gained momentum, drawing large crowds and escalating tensions. On January 16, 2014, the Ukrainian parliament passed anti-protest laws, which further inflamed the situation and led to violent clashes between protesters and security forces. The conflict peaked in February 2014, when intense street battles resulted in numerous deaths and injuries.

Under mounting pressure, President Yanukovich fled Kyiv on February 22, 2014, eventually seeking refuge in Russia. The Ukrainian parliament responded by voting to remove him from office and scheduling new elections. This power vacuum and the subsequent establishment of a pro-European interim government exacerbated regional tensions, particularly in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine.

Russian involvement in the crisis became overt in late February 2014, when unmarked Russian troops, later identified as Russian military personnel, seized control of key locations in Crimea. This led to a disputed referendum on March 16, 2014, in which the majority of voters purportedly chose to join Russia. The annexation of Crimea by Russia was quickly formalized, despite international condemnation and claims of electoral irregularities.

In Eastern Ukraine, pro-Russian separatists, allegedly supported and armed by Russia, declared independence in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in April 2014. This ignited a brutal conflict between Ukrainian forces and separatist militias, leading to thousands of casualties and widespread displacement.

The international response included economic sanctions against Russia from the EU and other countries and diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict, such as the Minsk agreements. Despite these efforts, the crisis has left enduring scars on Ukraine's political

landscape and its relations with Russia, significantly altering the geopolitical dynamics in the region.

## **5. Qualitative content analysis of Lavrov's statements regarding Eastern Partnership**

One of the first references to the Eastern Partnership was the public speech of the Russian Foreign Minister at the opening of the international conference of the Bergedorf Forum, "Russia's Responsibility in World Politics" on October 25, 2008. This speech largely focused on the conflict with Georgia and explained (or justified) Russia's aggressive actions. Lavrov responds to various accusations directed at Moscow in connection with the conflict, including Russia viewing the post-Soviet space, including Georgia, as its own sphere of influence and is therefore not prepared to allow Tbilisi to move closer to NATO (Lavrov, 2008). The Minister rejects these accusations, noting that the countries of the former Soviet Union have a privileged interest in relations with each other. In this argument, he refers to the Eastern Partnership and the European Neighborhood Policy as similar actions of the EU and NATO countries towards the countries of the Post-Soviet Union. This attempt to correlate a yet-to-be-launched program aimed at developing economic ties and democracy with participation in armed conflict for this study is interesting in the way the EaP is framed. In this case, we consider the idea that the Eastern Partnership epitomizes what Russia is accused of as a separate code. This verbal technique is used to shift the focus of the discussion from accusations against Russia to accusations against the EU. Such an attempt to turn the issue around using Eastern Partnership in one of the earliest references to this program by Russian political leaders in history may indicate several things. On the one hand, although not directly, Moscow immediately shows a negative stance on the program, accusing it of trying to influence a region where Russia has special interests. On the other hand, the program is also used in this statement to confirm Russia's willingness to be more active in the region.

Lavrov's next statement referring to the Eastern Partnership, which happened on March 21, 2009, at the Brussels Forum, also focuses on using the program as a metaphorical shield. This time, answering a rather provocative question from a journalist about the nature of Russia's foreign policy, Lavrov again tried to prove that an aggressive foreign policy corresponds not to Russia but to the EU countries, and the proof of that is the Eastern Partnership and possible accession of Belarus to it (Lavrov, 2009a). He puts forward such an idea in connection with the fact that by the winter of 2009, Minsk was one of the candidates to join the initiative, and in February, the Foreign Minister of the Czech

Republic, who chaired the EU Council, Karel Schwarzenberg, announced that possible recognition of Ossetia as an independent state by Belarus would negatively affect its prospects for the Eastern Partnership. Lavrov expressed a similar idea on June 9, 2009, but already responded to the accusation of pressure from another actor. Commenting on the statement of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko that the Russian side tried to pay Minsk for the recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the Russian Foreign Minister again denied the existence of pressure on other countries to achieve their goals and accused the European Union of such actions, again referring to the statement of Schwarzenberg (Lavrov, 2009d).

In the same March 21, 2009 statement, Lavrov puts forward another important idea concerning the Russian perception of the program. He points out that from Russia's point of view, the Eastern Partnership puts the countries of the post-Soviet region before a clear choice: either further rapprochement with Europe or development without its support and being a colony of Russia. Such an attitude not only does not correspond to Russia's interests but also ignores the interests of the post-Soviet countries. Lavrov characterizes these EU actions with extremely strongly stylistically colored words "подковерная возня и наушничание," (Lavrov, 2009a) [podkovyornaya voznya i naushnichanie] which can be directly translated as "fuss under the rug and earwiggling." Such epithets are intended to show the EU's actions on the development of the Eastern Partnership as frivolous and unfair and Moscow's attitude to these actions. It is important to note that in this statement, the spread of the EaP is shown by the activities not only of Brussels but also of Washington, and no evidence of US involvement in this process is given.

On April 28, 2009, Luxembourg hosted a meeting of the Permanent Council of the EU-Russia Partnership at the press conference, after which Sergei Lavrov again discussed the Eastern Partnership. This time, his sentiments about the program were expressed less sharply and even with some optimism. Perhaps the reason for this lies in the fact that the press conference was attended by acting Foreign Minister of the Czech Republic Karl Schwarzenberg, who was the author of the statement about the connection between the possible recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and Belarus' accession to the Eastern Partnership, and some dialog regarding the issue might have happened. Lavrov notes that Russia "has taken note of" the EU "assurances" (Lavrov, 2009b) that the Eastern Partnership is not a tool to expand the sphere of influence of Western European countries

among the EaP member states. Given the nature of previous statements about the program, one could hardly expect a radical change in the position of the Russian Foreign Ministry, which makes this wording one of the most positive of all possible. It is worth mentioning that no mention was made of the Russian authorities' confidence in their European partners (Lavrov used the phrase "we want to believe") (Lavrov, 2009b) and that Russia can only hope that the initiative will develop in accordance with these assurances. Another important idea that was coded during the analysis chronologically for the first time was the reference to the Joint Statement on EU enlargement and EU-Russia relations (Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2004). specifically to Article 13, which reads: "The EU and Russia reaffirm their commitment to ensure that EU enlargement will bring the EU and Russia closer together in a Europe without dividing lines, inter alia by creating a common space of freedom, security and justice". Lavrov interprets it as an agreement that there will be no potential conflict between the two directions of integration - European and Eastern European - and also as a possible unification of these directions in the future.

As another public statement shows, specifically the joint press conference with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus on November 25, 2009, Russia, under this interpretation, understands the absence of conflict over the accession of any countries to the integration processes organized by the EU and Russia, in particular, the Eastern Partnership on the one hand and the Customs Union and the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC) on the other. At this press conference, Lavrov said that Moscow had received guarantees from Minsk that such a conflict would not happen, and in contrast to receiving assurances from the EU countries, he immediately noted that the Russian authorities "proceed from the fact that this will be the case" (Lavrov, 2009e). The same statement mentions another idea that can be interpreted as Russia's more positive attitude towards the Eastern Partnership compared to the first few statements. Lavrov notes that Russia is ready to consider proposals to join participation in some Eastern Partnership programs, provided that this participation is mutually beneficial. This idea can be understood in different ways: at first glance, it may correspond to the main thrust of the statement, i.e. increased tolerance for the initiative. However, it can also be seen as a manifestation of a desire to continue to play an important role in most international activities in the post-Soviet region. This statement is also one of the closest chronologically to the founding summit of the Eastern Partnership in Prague in 2009, so it can be seen as

conveying Moscow's general mood about the program: Lavrov states that they will "follow the evolution" of the program and "will see how it goes" (Lavrov, 2009e).

In 2010, one statement by Lavrov containing a reference to the Eastern Partnership can be noted. At the International Economic Forum of the CIS member states on March 5, Lavrov again touched upon accusations against Russia regarding the perception of post-Soviet countries regarding its sphere of influence. The Russian foreign minister rejects these accusations and redirects the focus to other countries again. He notes that other states with interests in the region (which he considers legitimate) are playing "zero-sum games" (Lavrov, 2010). This is the terminology of game theory, which implies a conflict between two actors in which only one can emerge victorious and gain from the game's results while the other party suffers losses. In geopolitics, the term is used to show a commitment not to a path of mutual progress and coexistence but to conflict in order to defeat the other actor and take away its access to some resource for one's own good (Niou & Ordershook, 2015). Lavrov argues that this approach is outdated and should not be applied in the post-Soviet region.

On the one hand, the zero-sum game could mean an attempt by the EU to take away Russia's ability to influence the Eastern Partnership countries, and on the other hand, an insistence that the countries in question make a clear choice between Russia and the European Union. This interpretation is confirmed by the continuation of the statement, in which Lavrov accuses EU countries of disrespecting both Russia and other post-Soviet countries. It is worth noting that he mentions that this attitude is observed only by a few EU members and also shows this attitude by actions of the same nature as NATO enlargement.

The next most recent statement by Lavrov, which is freely available on the Internet and the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, dates back to the beginning of 2013. In other words, there is a gap of more than two years between these two statements. One could assume that it could be justified by the suspension of the program's activities, but it was actively developing. First, the second summit of the program was organized in 2011, held in Warsaw. The official statement of the President of the European Commission, José Manuel Durão Barroso (2011), at the end of the summit touched upon the topics that would later become a permanent topic of discussion for Russian representatives: "a timeframe for



the signing of an association agreement including a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas with Ukraine," as well as "as a significant step ahead towards visa-free regime, notably with Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova."

Moreover, in 2012, there was a meeting of EU and EaP foreign ministers, where one of the main topics was the prospects of rapprochement with Belarus, which the deteriorating human rights situation could hamper. In 2012, the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum was held, and in 2011, the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly was organized, which is an inter-parliamentary initiative that includes representatives of the European Parliament and parliaments of the member states with annual events. It follows from this that the Eastern Partnership in 2012 and 2013 continued to actively develop and actively deal with issues directly related to Russia's interests, and despite this, Moscow's attention to the initiative for this period has significantly decreased. The following theory can be put forward to explain this phenomenon. Even in the example of the small part of the dataset analyzed so far in the paper, Russia has overwhelmingly used the Eastern Partnership in its statements as a response to accusations against it in connection with pressure on other countries, and in the period from 2008 to 2010, this was always in connection with aggressive actions against Georgia. It is possible that Russia is more interested in the Eastern Partnership not as an international initiative but as a justification for its actions: If the European Union can influence the post-Soviet space, Russia can do it even more intensively. This theory is also supported by the fact that the next time the Eastern Partnership starts to appear in Sergey Lavrov's rhetoric is in 2013, as the scheduled date for the signing of Ukraine's Association Agreement with the EU and the subsequent political crisis approaches.

However, the statement of February 25, 2013, is unrelated to this. At a press conference at the Diplomatic Academy of the Russian Foreign Ministry, a participant asked about the prospects for visa facilitation between Russia and the EU. In his answer, Lavrov notes that the technical side of the issue is already fully ready to be solved (introduction of biometric passports, border control). The easing of the visa issue is actually hindered by the political problem, and suggests that the EU (to be precise, "some members of the EU") (Lavrov, 2013a) oppose visa facilitation with Russia ahead of the Eastern Partnership countries. He cites the visa facilitation agreement with Ukraine as an example, and calls what is happening "discrimination," and expresses the wish that "the abolition of the visa regime is decided based on each country's readiness, not on how much someone politically likes it"

(Lavrov, 2013a). This idea was repeated on October 15, 2013, when Lavrov reiterated that all the technical requirements necessary for Russia to sign an agreement on visa facilitation had been met, and the process was stopped only by the EU's political reluctance (Lavrov, 2013d). Separately, it is worth noting that when answering this question, Lavrov explained the basic idea of the Eastern Partnership program and its participants. On the one hand, this can be attributed to the audience of this statement, which took place among students. However, in general, it serves as a good indicator of the extent to which the Eastern Partnership had dropped out of the foreign policy agenda by that time.

Lavrov's joint press conference with Belarusian Foreign Minister Makei on July 10, 2013, brought back into the discussion the idea that the Eastern Partnership was politicized and should be developed in line with the idea of complementing European and Eurasian integration (Lavrov, 2013b). However, the following speech, dated July 24, 2013, and delivered jointly with the Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration of Moldova Gherman, contains a new idea. Answering a question about the next Eastern Partnership summit and the signing of a free trade agreement with the EU Chisinau, Lavrov expresses Moscow's wish to be included in the discussion of such issues, as they will directly affect relations between the two countries and mainly in the economic and energy sphere (Lavrov, 2013c).

At a press conference on October 24, 2013, Lavrov was asked a similar question about Ukraine's desire to sign an association agreement with the EU. The foreign minister's response did not contain a specific answer describing Moscow's attitude towards this upcoming event (Lavrov, 2013e). However, it did contain a speech about the general vision of integration processes in the region. Lavrov noted that the concept of Russia's foreign policy and the statement of the head of the European Commission, Barroso (2013), contain the same ideas about the ultimate goal of integration - a common economic space from Lisbon to Vladivostok and that they should not be synchronized. In our opinion, this statement is a direct continuation of those ideas that used to refer to the roadmaps of relations between Russia and the EU; therefore, in our study, they were coded as parts of the same category.

The approaching crisis related to Ukraine's association agreement with the EU is also visible in the evolution of Lavrov's rhetoric. On October 28, 2013, Lavrov gave a speech

that largely referred to this upcoming event. This was five days after the European Parliament recommended that Ukraine sign the agreement in question. In his statement, Lavrov noted that Russia had taken a certain position voiced by Russian President Vladimir Putin, and this position had been conveyed several times to the Ukrainian leadership. This position was that if an association agreement, which includes a free trade agreement, is concluded, Russia will not allow Ukraine to join the Eurasian Economic Community Customs Union. This is also an integration structure consisting of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia, and Ukraine's accession to this organization has been discussed for a long time. In other words, in this statement, Lavrov is making a direct reference to an attempt to pressure Ukraine to put Kyiv in front of a choice and to what can be described as a zero-sum game. At the same time, in the same statement, the minister accuses the EU countries of posing a similar choice (Lavrov, 2013f). The association agreement in this statement is called not just an EU plan but a plan within the framework of the Eastern Partnership program, which means that the prospect of integration rapprochement between Ukraine and the EU, in the minister's words, is directly linked to the initiative under study. Lavrov again mentions the final goal of integration processes in the region (from Lisbon to Vladivostok), and the use of this idea in this context confirms the theory that by this phrase, Moscow understands the existence of a privileged right to spread its own integration formations on the territory of the post-Soviet space. This is also indicated by the phrase that Russia will join European integration only after it achieves sufficient economic strength and by the fact that this phrase was followed by another phrase stating that this topic was discussed at a forum of the Chambers of Commerce and Industry of Russia and Ukraine, which can be seen as a hint that representatives of Ukrainian industry hold the same view on the prospects of European integration. It should be noted that Lavrov mentions many times in this statement that Kyiv will make the decision, as Moscow respects the sovereignty of this country, and representatives of Ukraine are called friends.

The public statement of November 19, 2013, is the last mention of the Eastern Partnership by Sergey Lavrov before the unfolding of the Ukrainian political crisis. In this statement, he clarifies that Russia considers the Eastern Partnership to be the EU's attempt to play a zero-sum game in the post-Soviet region. He again links the need for the development of the post-Soviet states (in particular Belarus and Kazakhstan) within the framework of

Eastern European integration with the goal of comprehensive Eurasian integration. This statement gives us further confirmation that this phrase is being used as Russia's desire to attach the countries of the region, including Ukraine, first to its integration groupings and then to plan rapprochement with the EU. Thus, he claims that all member states of the EurAsEC Customs Union are not yet ready to join EU integration projects from an economic point of view and inserts the comment, "I'm sure there will be more than three of us," (Lavrov, 2013g) which can be considered a hint at Kyiv's expectation to join the organization. As in his previous statements, he rejects accusations against Russia and accuses the EU of similar actions, citing the Eastern Partnership as an example, but this time, these accusations refer to the cooperation between the EU and the Eastern Partnership countries, i.e., he accuses the European Union of blocking the cooperation between Russia and Ukraine. Lavrov repeats the idea that Ukraine's accession to the EU's free market will lead to "consequences" (Lavrov, 2013g) in trade with Russia, and immediately compares such pressure with that of the EU and concludes that Russia is acting more honestly, as it clearly defines these consequences, rather than posing vague threats to the focus countries of the Eastern Partnership. The minister also refers to the April 28, 2009 statement when he spoke about Russia's possible accession to the Eastern Partnership projects (Lavrov, 2009b). He notes that Russia has not received any such offers, using this fact as an argument that the Eastern Partnership is initially directed against Moscow.

On December 14, 2013, Lavrov gave an interview to the Russian television channel Russia 24 explaining the Ukrainian crisis. By that time, Ukrainian President Yanukovich had already announced his refusal to sign the Association Agreement, which had caused mass protests that were violently dispersed by law enforcement, and the operations of the authorities were essentially paralyzed. Lavrov began his interview by attempting to devalue the public reaction to this decision by the Ukrainian authorities, calling it "borderline hysterical" and the situation itself "staged" (Lavrov, 2013h). Interestingly, Lavrov clearly states that signing the Association Agreement is not beneficial for Ukraine at the moment, adding that this is also true for all Eastern Partnership countries. He reiterates the thesis that Eurasian integration should be pursued first and European integration should be later, and he also accuses the EU of pressuring Ukraine. Additionally, for the first time, he tries to explain how Moscow sees the reasons for such EU activities.

Lavrov calls the first reason the economic desire for big profits by dominating the markets of the non-free-trade-ready Eastern Partnership countries (using Ukraine as an example), which is especially important in the context of the economic crisis, and the second reason the ideological desire to "tear [] neighbors away from Russia," (Lavrov, 2013h) a desire that Lavrov says has not been successful, to the surprise of unnamed forces within the EU.

Lavrov's next public discussion of the Eastern Partnership occurred on December 16, 2013, during a press conference after a working lunch with European Commission President Ashton in Brussels. The format of the meeting presupposed the presence of delegates from all EU countries, not only political leaders holding administrative positions within its structure. The general tone of Lavrov's answers at the press conference can be described as more positive than expected. First, he notes that the Russian and EU representatives concluded from the meeting that countries that are not part of the Customs Union and yet are part of the Eastern Partnership should decide on their own future integration development. At the time of the press conference, only Belarus did not fall under these criteria among the EaP countries. Lavrov also said that at the meeting, a large number of EU countries were in favor of Russia's participation in solving the crisis in the trilateral format (Moscow, Kyiv, Brussels). At the same time, Lavrov makes a clear distinction that such an approach is supported by the EU member-states, but opposed by the officials of the European Commission. In general, the minister described the conversation as "frank and useful" (Lavrov, 2013i). However, even in this public speech, there were a lot of ideas that indicated the presence of tension between the participants in the meeting. For example, Lavrov again accused the EU of putting a choice in front of Ukraine, according to which it should join European integration either now or never. He rejects such a dilemma and confirms this with the plans of the Customs Union participants to join integration, but only after joint economic development. In other words, the idea that Russia's goal is to integrate the post-Soviet space under its leadership and then move closer to the EU can be interpreted even more clearly. This idea in the minister's speech is immediately followed by another reference to the Concept of Russia's Foreign Policy and the goal of universal Eurasian integration from Lisbon to Vladivostok. This again confirms the synonymy of these ideas in Moscow's view.

Asked about Swedish Foreign Minister Bild's accusing Russia of misinformation in connection with the Ukrainian crisis, Lavrov accused Bild of propaganda, saying that such

formulations are only designed to form a certain opinion among ordinary people. He again accused the EU of secrecy in their relations with the EaP countries, thus demanding that Russia be included in discussions on the spread of European integration in the region, justifying this by saying that Moscow is the largest partner for all the countries in the program.

An essential part of this public speech by Lavrov is the mention of security in connection with the discussion of the Eastern Partnership. Generally, if such a topic has been raised in any public speeches related to the program, it has not been directly related to the EaP. Here, Lavrov not only describes the European Union's activities in the region as a zero-sum game but also links them to Russia's security: "Security is indivisible; no one should strengthen their own security at the expense of others' security" (Lavrov, 2013i). Moreover, Lavrov also talks about economic security. It is the concern for Russia's economic defense that he justifies another condition that Moscow imposes on Ukraine. If before it was only a question of preventing Kyiv from joining the Customs Union, now Moscow is threatening Ukraine with more severe consequences. The CIS (2011) Free Trade Zone Treaty has a mechanism for resolving disputes when situations arise that would be disadvantageous to one of the parties, the result of which could be the suspension of benefits (i.e., in essence, the breakdown of the agreement between Russia and Ukraine). Lavrov notes that Russia will be forced to resort to such a measure because it fears an influx of Ukrainian goods that cannot compete with European goods inside the country after the free trade agreement with the EU concludes. At the same time, the CIS Free Trade Zone Treaty mentions, firstly, that such a measure should be temporary and, secondly, that its application should take place only after a relevant decision of a special commission of experts appointed by both sides. Both of these important details were not mentioned in Lavrov's speech.

The minister's interview with the Russian media outlet RIA Novosti on December 20, 2013, generally repeats the main ideas of the last two public speeches. He touches on the disadvantages of Ukraine's joining the free market with the EU, Russia's need to cancel the preferential treatment with Ukraine within the CIS free trade zone, and Russia's goal to first unite the post-Soviet countries into an integration project before moving closer to the EU. The topic of trilateral consultations, i.e., Russia's inclusion in the negotiations on signing the Association Agreement between the EU and Ukraine, has been touched upon separately. If, on December 16, Lavrov noted that many EU countries were in favor of

such negotiations, then four days later, he noted that these negotiations were unlikely. He blamed politicians holding essential positions in the EU structures, thus additionally pointing to the conflict of interests between the EU member-states and the EU as a structure. Additionally, it is worth noting that Lavrov agrees to such negotiations if the EU is ready to conduct business "taking into account the legitimate interests of the Russian Federation and those countries they include in their Eastern Partnership program" (Lavrov, 2013i), putting, firstly, Moscow's interests above those of the EaP countries, and secondly, assuming that the EU policy at that time does not correspond to the interests of Kyiv, Kishinev, Tbilisi, Yerevan, Baku, and Minsk.

On January 21, 2014, Lavrov delivered an official speech on the results of Russian diplomacy for 2013, which was supplemented by answers to questions from the audience. In the first part, that is, in the speech prepared in advance and containing the main points of the results of Russian foreign policy, Ukraine is mentioned only once, and not in the context of a political crisis, but as the chairman of the CIS in 2014, to which Lavrov wished good luck. He describes relations with the EU in his statement as a partnership and rejects the idea that "systemic problems" (Lavrov, 2014a) exist between the two actors. He also refers separately to the Eastern Partnership countries, again noting the inadmissibility of imposing choices from outside. One of the questions he was asked was about the postponement of signing a visa facilitation agreement with the EU. When answering the question, Lavrov again mentioned his dissatisfaction with the desire of "some EU members" (Lavrov, 2014a) to first sign such treaties with the EaP countries and then with Russia.

Moreover, he accused the EU of trying to "bargain" some concessions from Russia in exchange for a relaxed visa regime. In response to a question about the Ukrainian crisis, Lavrov continued his line of devaluing the public reaction: he said that the failure to sign the Association Agreement with the EU had "поднялся вой" [podnyalsya voj] (Lavrov, 2014a). This phrase in Russian is most often used in reference to animals and can be translated as "raised a howl". In the same speech, the minister said that the proposal to hold trilateral talks between the EU, Russia, and Ukraine had been rejected by Brussels and expressed bewilderment that the reasons for this decision had not been explained. According to Lavrov, Russia also wants a more comprehensive explanation of the Eastern Partnership and the EU's unwillingness to hold "consultations on harmonizing integration

processes in the West and East of Europe” (Lavrov, 2014a). This idea is interesting because, for the first time since 2009, Lavrov claimed Moscow's understanding of the program's goals was incomplete. However, most of the answers contained the ideas already explored here, such as the coincidence of the wording of the final integration goals authored by Moscow and Brussels and the setting of a choice between Russia and the EU for the Eastern Partnership countries with the help of the program.

The joint press conference between Lavrov and Estonian Foreign Minister Paet on February 18, 2014, is notable for the fact that the Russian foreign minister presented Moscow's position on European integration most clearly (Lavrov, 2014b). Russia wants equality between Eurasian and European integration, while the EU insists on developing integration with Brussels as the center. Another unique aspect of this particular public speech is that Lavrov addresses the view that Russia is afraid of the Eastern Partnership. This view is refuted, but it has probably developed enough to be given attention by the minister. In addition, this is the first time that Russia's goal of a future overlap between Eastern European and Western European integration gets any follow-up: Lavrov refers to President Putin's proposal to create a free trade area between the European Union and the EurAsEC Customs Union by 2020, noting that High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Ashton, in an article on the issue, expresses a similar idea, although that article does not mention a specific timeline, only the intention to achieve “greater compatibility between different free trade regimes” (Ashton, 2013).

Lavrov's March 29, 2014 interview on Russian television took place after Ukrainian President Yanukovich had fled to Russia, and Crimea had by then been fully annexed by Moscow. The interview is almost entirely devoted to the Ukrainian crisis and Ukrainian domestic politics. It is notable because Lavrov directly says that the Eastern Partnership is a geopolitical tool (literally, “an instrument of feverish exploration of geopolitical space”) that “was pushed through at any cost, absolutely ignoring the legitimate economic interests not only of Ukraine's neighbors - Russia and other countries - but also of the states that were involved in it” (Lavrov, 2014c). He does this while responding to accusations of a zero sum game, shifting the blame to the EU. The difference between this public speech and others is that most often, when discussing the program (and before the Ukrainian crisis turned into a conflict between Ukraine and Russia), when accusing the Eastern Partnership of trying to influence the region, zero sum game, putting Ukraine and other countries in



front of a choice, no direct statement is used. For example, in a March 21, 2009 statement, Lavrov said: “We are accused of trying to intimidate by pressure. What is the Eastern Partnership? Is it not pressure intimidation [ ]?” (Lavrov, 2009a). Here, he uses a questioning construction, avoiding a direct statement of fact. In the March 5, 2010 statement, he does not directly accuse the EaP but expresses a wish: “We would also like the EU's Eastern Partnership project not to be used, as some EU members want, to expand these notorious ‘spheres of influence’” (Lavrov, 2009a). This shift in rhetoric is of particular interest for this study.

The same tendency can be seen in the statement of April 11, 2014, when Lavrov said, “From the very beginning, the EU's Eastern Partnership program - despite our warnings and cautions - has been developing in a secretive manner,” (Lavrov, 2014d) thus assessing not only the current stage of the program's development but its entire evolution with initiation. Similarly, on June 4, 2014, he directly accused the Eastern Partnership of building a “sanitary cordon” (Lavrov, 2014e). between Russia and the EU, but he added two significant details this time. First, he notes that the initiative to create the program belonged to “extremely loyal to the U.S. members of the European Union”. (Lavrov, 2014e). It is worth noting that researchers note Poland, the Czech Republic, and Sweden as the primary initiators (Cadier, 2019). Second, according to him, the Eastern Partnership harms not only Russia but also the EU itself, as it spoils relations with Moscow and deprives it of new sources of development. Lavrov again touches on security, noting that fixing the goal of pan-Eurasian integration (from Lisbon to Vladivostok) would improve its prospects. Given the analysis, this phrase can be interpreted as a warning that if Moscow's view of integration is not adopted, we should expect more security threats in the region.

On October 14, 2014, during a meeting with the heads of member companies of the Association of European Businesses in the Russian Federation, Lavrov repeated many of his main points related to the Eastern Partnership: that Russia should be included in the main discussions on the development of the program (including the de-escalation of the Ukrainian crisis), and that the main goal of the EU should be to build a common space from Lisbon to Vladivostok (Lavrov, 2014f). The attempt to discredit the efforts of Ukraine's civil society to carry out the “revolution of dignity” also continued. Lavrov said at a press conference that the Association Agreement with the EU had been postponed again, meaning that public action after President Yanukovich's refusal to sign the

document had not changed the outcome. At the Russia-Ukraine-EU summit, the signing was indeed postponed, not of the entire Association Agreement, but of its part related to the Ukraine-EU free market. Moreover, this time, there was a clear deadline for when this issue was frozen (December 31, 2015). In addition, Lavrov accused the EU of preparing the Eastern Partnership treaties without the participation of the focal countries, which they are offered for signing after they have been drafted. This contradicts his own statements (e.g., from December 16, 2013), when he accused the EU of discussing these treaties only with the focal countries, without including Moscow.

The October 20 public speech repeats the direct accusations of the Eastern Partnership in attempts to put the post-Soviet countries in front of a choice and spread influence in the post-Soviet space. Only he holds the entire collective “West” responsible for these actions, rather than the EU, its individual members, or the United States. Lavrov returns to the postponement of the signing of the free trade agreement between Ukraine and the EU, interpreting it as a recognition of Russia's interests in harmonizing integrations (in other words, on the clear division of integrations into Eastern and Western) and accuses the EU that the delay in making this decision made the EU responsible for all the negative consequences of the Ukrainian crisis (Lavrov, 2014g).

The public speech of October 27, 2014, is characterized by three main points of most interest for our study. First, he continues to insist that the details of the Eastern Partnership accession agreement were presented to the focus countries *ex post facto* without the possibility of influencing their content. He uses the phrase “с барского плеча” [s barskogo plecha], which implies a significant difference between the status of the actors involved in the process (Lavrov, 2014h). Second, he connects two of his previous ideas: Russia was not invited to participate in individual projects based on the Eastern Partnership because the program was initially directed against Russia. Third, for the first time, he notes any components of the Eastern Partnership program beyond the signing of the Association, Free Market, and Visa Waiver Agreements. Moreover, he recognizes their usefulness.

Lavrov's statement of November 18, 2014, at the joint meeting of the Collegiums of the Russian and Belarusian Foreign Ministries is more calm and favorable toward the European Union, not fully consistent with previous statements. He again accused the Eastern Partnership of posing an artificial choice between Russia and the EU for the focal

countries (Lavrov, 2014i). However, he notes that Moscow still considers the EU its major partner and hopes to develop relations.

The November 22, 2014, public speech is characterized by a re-emerging narrative of a mismatch between the interests of the Eastern Partnership and the EU itself, according to which an “aggressive minority” is trying to channel Europe's resources into an “adventure” within the Eastern Partnership, while the “Eurogrands” (by which Lavrov means the countries of southern Europe) are more concerned with problems in the Middle East (Lavrov, 2014j).

Finally, in a December 4, 2014 speech, Lavrov spoke negatively about the Eastern Partnership because it was aimed at spreading Western European integration in the post-Soviet space without taking into account the developing Eurasian integration with Moscow's leadership (Lavrov, 2014k).

## 6. Discussion of Empirical Findings

Based on the results of the content analysis we can form three tables corresponding to the three themes summarizing the rhetoric of Russia, represented by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, regarding the attitude to the Eastern Partnership program. The first table considers those cases when the Eastern Partnership was mentioned in a positive connotation, i.e. it includes the codes that were used in such a description of the initiative.

Codes	Example
Eastern Partnership was beneficial for its participants	“There were some useful things in the program that our neighbors were interested in - some funds were allocated for institutional reforms, to ensure more effective setting up of the papers of economic agencies, law enforcement agencies” (Lavrov, 2014h).

Table 1. Theme “Russia's positive perception of the Eastern Partnership”

There are also statements that demonstrate Russia's neutral attitude to the program. They are often associated with codes that describe Moscow's expectations from the implementation of the program.

Categories/Codes	Example
<b>Russia’s expectations of EaP</b>	
Russia will evaluate EaP based on its activities	“Let us hope that its [EaP] practical implementation will be carried out exactly as our European colleagues have told us today” (Lavrov, 2009b).
Russia is satisfied with the way their concerns were addressed	“[We] noted these assurances” (Lavrov, 2009b).
Russia might join some EaP’s programs	“We, of course, will study the proposals on our connection to some or other projects within the framework of the “Eastern Partnership”, we do not exclude it for ourselves and we will consider each specific project according to its merits” (Lavrov, 2009e).

Russia believes EaP to be transparent	“We trust that the “Eastern Partnership” as a project of the European Union will be implemented in a transparent and non-politicized manner” (Lavrov, 2013b).
Russia wants to participate in EaP negotiations	“We would be interested that as we approach the signing of certain agreements with the European Union, consultations between the expert representatives of our countries would take place in order to understand how the obligations that will be imposed on the Republic of Moldova in case of signing the relevant agreements with the EU will be met” (Lavrov, 2013c).

Table 2. Theme “Russia's neutral perception of the Eastern Partnership”

However, the overwhelming majority of statements suggest a negative attitude towards the program in one way or another.

Categories/Codes	Example
<b>EaP is what Russia has been accused of</b>	
Not Russia, but the EU through EaP sees the post-Soviet region as a sphere of influence	“[] historically conditioned, mutually privileged relations between states in the former Soviet Union try to pass off as a certain “sphere of influence”. If we accept this logic, then the European Neighborhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership fall under this definition” (Lavrov, 2008).
Not Russia, but the EU through the Eastern Partnership is pressuring Belarus to make a decision on the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia	“I mean, in particular, the statements voiced in due time from the mouths of official representatives of the European Union, which, in fact, directly conditioned the invitation of the Republic of Belarus to the “Eastern Partnership” on the refusal to recognize South Ossetia and Abkhazia” (Lavrov, 2009d).
Not Russia, but the EU through the Eastern Partnership forces focal	If we compare our, in my opinion, honest and friendly position with what some representatives of the European Union are doing, it is from the other side that unapologetic

countries to choose between Russia and the EU	pressure is exerted on the focus states and statements are made such as, “You have to choose - either back to the dark past or with us into a bright future” (Lavrov, 2013g).
Not Russia, but the EU through EaP spreads misinformation to influence the state of affairs in the region	“Such “simple” slogans [Russia spreads misinformation] can be hammered into the head without explaining anything. A person in front of the TV hears the same repeated phrase and it settles in his head“ (Lavrov, 2013i).
Not Russia, but the EU through EaP does not respect the sovereignty of Ukraine	“Russian President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly said that everyone must respect the sovereignty of the Ukrainian state, and we will all have to respect the choice that the Ukrainian people will make. Western Europeans, on the other hand, say: everyone must respect the choice of the Ukrainian people in favor of Europe“ (Lavrov, 2013h).
<b>Eastern Partnership does not meet the interests of the focal countries</b>	
Eastern Partnership puts countries before a choice: Europe or Russia	“You will have to choose whether to be a colony of Russia or part of the free world.” This is unacceptable. In this game, the legal rights of these countries are completely disregarded, and these countries themselves are not shown any respect” (Lavrov, 2009a).
Invitation to a free trade area under the EaP is unprofitable for the focal countries.	“We have never said that Ukraine is facing a choice: to participate in the EU or in the CU. No one is calling it to the EU, but they are inviting it to a free trade zone, which will be quite unprofitable for the Ukrainian economy“ (Lavrov, 2013i).
EaP countries have not had the opportunity to discuss the terms of entry into the program	“Nobody was going to cooperate equally with all the others either, because the Eastern Partnership program was invented, which was written in Brussels. It was offered to Armenia, Azerbaijan, Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia and Belarus as an already completed thing, it was not subject to negotiation: “Here is what we can offer you from the benevolent shoulder.” 27.10.2014

Public support for the European path of development in the EaP countries is overrated and unjustified	“What is the main reason for these protests? The reason is that the government, fully within its powers and competence, has decided not to sign or initial documents with the EU now. And what a howl has been raised!” (Lavrov, 2014h).
<b>Eastern Partnership does not meet the interests of the EU</b>	
EaP is a minority interest and utilizes resources that are needed in other areas of EU foreign policy	A new Commission has been formed in the EU, [] who will have to endure a serious struggle over where to direct the main resources - to continue the adventure in Ukraine, Moldova, etc. within the framework of the “Eastern Partnership” (for which an aggressive minority in the EU is in favor) or to listen to the “Eurograndes” (the countries of southern Europe) and pay attention to what is happening on the other side of the Mediterranean Sea (Lavrov, 2014j).
EaP prevents EU from developing interactions with Russia	The Eastern Partnership program, [] was used [] to counteract the strategic interests of both Russia and the EU in the joint search for new sources of development. (Lavrov, 2014e).
<b>EaP does not meet the interests of Russia</b>	
Eastern Partnership - an attempt to make the post-Soviet space a sphere of influence for the EU	"The Eastern Partnership has simply turned into an instrument of feverish exploration of geopolitical space” (Lavrov, 2014c).
EaP is a threat to Russia-led Eurasian integration	“It became clear that it [EaP] was conceived on the basis of the logic of “zero-sum games” as a tool to counteract integration processes involving Russia“. (Lavrov, 2014d).
EU discriminates Russia against EaP countries	“According to some information available to us, a number of EU members, using the EU consensus principle, are firmly insisting that visa facilitation in relations with Russia should not precede, but follow visa facilitation for the Eastern Partnership countries” (Lavrov, 2013a).

<p>EU tries to upset Russia's relations with post-Soviet countries through EaP</p>	<p>“Those who thought in the categories of “either-or” and those who put the main task of the Eastern Partnership project to detach our neighbors from Russia, even artificially, with the use of blackmail, have seen that everything is not so simple” (Lavrov, 2013h).</p>
<p>Eastern Partnership forces focal countries to make Russia-influencing decisions without consulting Moscow</p>	<p>“It is not by chance that the agreements with the Eastern Partnership countries were prepared in secret. No one has shown them to anyone. it is interesting to understand how they can affect our relations, to what extent these agreements can take into account the interests of the Russian Federation as the largest partner of Kiev and Chisinau” (Lavrov, 2013i).</p>
<p>Russia was not invited to participate in EaP-based projects</p>	<p>“Initially, after the announcement of this program by the European Union, we expressed our readiness to participate as an observer, as well as to participate in the implementation of practical projects together with the EU and the so-called focal states of the Eastern Partnership in cases where such projects can be formulated and are of mutual interest. As a result, we were neither invited to be observers nor presented with any such projects“ (Lavrov, 2013g).</p>
<p>Free market agreements with EaP countries are a threat to the Russian economy</p>	<p>“Signing a free trade zone agreement with Ukraine would mean only one thing. If we simultaneously kept our free trade zone and did not use the right contained in the CIS Agreement on Free Trade Zone to protect our industries and economy in case of risks, then what has already been described by presidents and our experts many times would happen: Ukraine would immediately open 85% for European goods, which would flood the Ukrainian market, and Ukrainian goods, unable to withstand competition with European ones, would flood abroad. And Russia and Belarus would be the most obvious</p>



	candidates to receive these goods. Thus, our production of similar products would be killed.” (Lavrov, 2013i).
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Table 3. Theme “Russia's negative perception of the Eastern Partnership”

These three tables clearly show that Moscow, represented by the foreign minister, has had a much more extensive discussion of the negative consequences of the program's unfolding. Lavrov uses many different arguments to express disapproval of it.

Based on the literature reviewed in the relevant chapter, Russia perceived the Eastern Partnership negatively as a threat to its own influence and security. However, the data studied does not lead to this conclusion directly. On the contrary, if we do not try to analyze additional meanings of Lavrov's statements, Russia constantly denies considering the region as its sphere of influence, and the topic of security is rarely touched upon.

The evolution of the thesis about the synchronization of integration processes is of separate interest. When using this idea in the early years of the Eastern Partnership, Lavrov referred the audience to the roadmaps on cooperation between the EU and Russia established in 2004. However, we did not find such wording in these documents.

This idea did not disappear from Lavrov's rhetoric after the three-year break in the discussion of the Eastern Partnership. However, after this break, its importance is no longer confirmed by the existence of roadmaps but by President Putin's proposal, which later became part of the Concept of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation in 2013, and the EU's commitment to this idea - by one statement of the President of the European Commission Barroso at the conference "Russia-European Union." As briefly mentioned in this paper, the constant repetition of this idea and its proximity to the dissatisfaction with the manifestation of the Eastern Partnership as an extension of European integration to the post-Soviet space lead to the theory that Russia, under the integration from Lisbon to Vladivostok and synchronization of integration processes in the West and East of Europe, assumes a privileged right to develop integration groupings in the region. It is evident that this right is not enshrined in any official documents since the confirmation of such interests would lead to ignoring the sovereign opportunities of the post-Soviet countries to chart their own path of political and economic development.

Based on how often such language is repeated and the fact that the EU has, in one form or another, expressed agreement with it (be it the signing of roadmaps for cooperation with Russia or Barroso's statement), one gets the impression that Moscow assumes that the question of its right to exclusively extend integration in the post-Soviet region is an issue on which it has reached consensus with Brussels. Again, it is evident that such a consensus could not have remained in official documents available to the public. However, such rhetoric makes one wonder about the possibility of the actual existence of such a consensus at any point in the development of Russia-EU relations. Then, the repetition of language related to the synchronization of integrations can be seen as Moscow's appeals to the EU to follow existing agreements and not to extend European integration in the post-Soviet region (which were violated when the goal of signing the Association Agreement with Russia was set). The study of this possible verbal agreement could be an exciting continuation of this research.

Interestingly, in addition to Lavrov's explicitly negative attitude toward the Eastern Partnership in some of his statements, he tried with a certain consistency to present the program as disadvantageous to other actors. Most often, of course, this happened with the focal countries of the Eastern Partnership. He repeatedly emphasized that the European Union's actions towards these countries negatively affected the economies of the EaP countries and showed disrespect. Moreover, he even tried to expose the program as an unprofitable development vector for EU foreign policy. Perhaps behind such ideas, there was a real desire to change the opinion of the objects of this rhetoric about the Eastern Partnership. However, given the existence of the initiative and at the time of writing the paper, they can hardly be called successful.

From the point of view of the objectives of this paper, it is necessary to consider the evolution of Lavrov's statements about the Eastern Partnership from a chronological point of view. Even the very first statements of the minister about the program already expressed distrust and wariness, but almost always, the wording was softened by the subjunctive mood and the statement of a wish ("We would like..."). At the same time, it is evident that the EU tried to influence this position one way or another through negotiations with Russia, and even achieved some success, which is evident from the change in Moscow's rhetoric, according to which they were satisfied with the explanations of the main goals of

the Eastern Partnership, as Lavrov clearly says in his statement of May 6, 2009 (Lavrov, 2009c).

Particular attention should be paid to the break between Lavrov's references to the Eastern Partnership, which amounted to almost three years. Taking into account how important this program was for Moscow at the initial stage of its development (and Lavrov began to express his dissatisfaction with it even before the first summit that started its activities), such a phenomenon cannot happen without significant reasons. We can put forward two theories that are not mutually exclusive. On the one hand, such a break can be considered an indication that the Eastern Partnership has ceased to be a troublemaker for Russia. Although the last statement before the break (i.e., March 5, 2010) criticizes the EU for treating the post-Soviet region as a sphere of influence through the initiative, the previous few statements contain confirmation from Lavrov that Russia has heard the arguments about the EaP's harmlessness. Moreover, according to the minister, by 2014, Russia had not received invitations for any indirect participation in the activities of the entire program or specific parts of it. Accordingly, if an initiative does not directly concern Russia, does not harm its interests and goals, and does not involve Russia in its activities, interest in discussing it may fade.

To address the second theory, it is worth paying attention to what Lavrov uses in his rhetoric and what he ignores. First, in 7 years (from 2008 to 2014 inclusive) of statements about the Eastern Partnership, apart from the signing of Association and Free Trade Agreements with Ukraine and Moldova, real projects and activities within the framework of the initiative are mentioned only once: in a statement of October 27, 2014, when during the general criticism of the EU policy in the region Lavrov makes a digression that the Eastern Partnership program at the time of its launch had prospects to interest the focal countries because it offered an opportunity to reform many of the countries of the region. Lavrov continues his criticism not by saying that there was no real application of these promises but by complaining that Russia was not included in these projects.

In addition, apart from mentioning the prospects of signing Association and Free Trade Agreements with the EU (Ukraine, Moldova), the conflict with Georgia in 2008, when the Eastern Partnership was used as a way to shift the blame from Moscow to the EU, and Belarus, which was close to recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia, putting it in danger

of not being included in the Eastern Partnership, the other two countries participating in the program, which have a significant trade turnover with Russia and were considered to be Moscow's partners, were practically not mentioned. Armenia and Azerbaijan appeared in Lavrov's speeches related to the Eastern Partnership during the seven years from 2008 to 2014, only in the list of participants of the initiative. There was no substantive discussion in the public space by the Russian Foreign Minister of Moscow's interaction with Yerevan and Baku, considering their participation in the EaP, even though Lavrov held joint press conferences with representatives of these countries during the period under study.

The general attitude towards this program can explain this selective interest in the Eastern Partnership. Suppose, within its framework, Russia was only interested in actions that directly threatened its goal of developing Eurasian integration in the post-Soviet space centered in Moscow. In that case, it is possible that this is what it is primarily in the view of the Russian political elite - an instrument of the European Union used only to confront Russia in the region. From this point of view, numerous initiatives, projects, forums, and other formats of meetings held within the framework of Russia's Eastern Partnership are either not interesting enough or, in Russia's perception, are an attempt to hide the program's true purpose.

The possibility of Ukraine signing the Association Agreement with the EU, which was undoubtedly one of the main achievements of the Eastern Partnership, has dramatically changed Russia's rhetoric towards the program. This is logical enough: although Lavrov stated that Russia respects Ukraine's sovereign decision, the constant repetition of the idea of the need to keep integration synchronized, as well as the mention of the economic consequences of Ukraine's signing a free market agreement with the EU, show that this issue was extremely important for Russia.

At the same time, after the unfolding of the Ukrainian crisis and the deterioration of relations between Russia and the EU, the very accusations of the Eastern Partnership did not change much: in his statements, Lavrov still accused it of trying to make the post-Soviet space its sphere of influence, hinder Russia's goals in the region, and cause economic damage to Moscow. It is the tone of these accusations that has undergone a major change. Whereas before, they were veiled, expressed with the help of a question or a wish, after November 2014, they were expressed directly as a statement of fact. Even after

the annexation of Crimea and the start of hostilities in eastern Ukraine, Lavrov often blames not the entire European Union but only part of it, the "aggressive minority," for the current situation. Moreover, he notes that Russia hopes to restore relations and still considers the EU its main partner. Such statements can be considered a rejection of the opportunity to burn all bridges and conclusively define the EU as an actor whose actions are hostile to Russia.

Based on the data analysis and the interpretation of the results obtained, it is possible to draw a conclusion regarding the original aims and objectives of this study. Russia's statements about the Eastern Partnership are indeed understudied, but they are also not straightforward. Using Lavrov's statements from 2008 to 2014 as an example, it can be seen that while the general trend of deteriorating rhetoric about the Eastern Partnership is evident, this change is not direct, and, perhaps even more significantly, it is often not explicitly stated. Russia was initially wary of the EaP because it saw an opportunity to counteract its interests in the region, and these fears were later confirmed, but this evolution has not been linear and has not only depended on the development of the program itself. Moreover, the content analysis of the Russian Prime Minister's statements suggests that Russia's strategy for a certain period was based on the certainty of a verbal agreement with the EU, which would guarantee Russia the possibility to develop its own integration associations in the region without hindrance.

## **Conclusion**

This paper examines how Russia, through its political leaders, has voiced its opinion on the creation and development of the Eastern Partnership program. This program, founded in 2009, envisioned economic and political rapprochement between six post-Soviet countries (Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia) and the European Union. The problem that this research addressed was that although there is a fairly clear consensus in the academic literature describing both Moscow's attitude towards the Eastern Partnership and the main reasons for such an attitude, there is a lack of papers that utilize specific methodological frameworks to reach such results. In this regard, our research also implied a possible investigation of the reasons behind the formation of opinions about the program.

Qualitative content analysis was chosen as the research method aimed at studying the statements about the Eastern Partnership by Russia. This method involves coding the initial data in order to break it down into specific semantic parts. These parts were then analyzed and combined into categories, and the categories were combined into broader themes. A clear dataset was identified for the study. The paper investigated public speeches of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov concerning the Eastern Partnership program between October 25, 2008, and December 31, 2014, and published on the official website of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Several reasons dictated this choice of data for analysis. First, Sergei Lavrov has been the main face of Russian foreign policy throughout his career in this position, which began in 2004 and continues at the time of writing this paper. On the one hand, choosing only one person for this analysis reduces the sample's diversity, but on the other hand, increases the probability that his statements most closely correlate with Moscow's official position. The given time period was chosen because in 2008, Lavrov made the first mention of the studied initiative in the public field. After the end of the decline in 2014, there was a clear decrease in the number of its references, which satisfied our interests in analyzing the statements that followed shortly after the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis, which occurred due to the failure of Ukrainian President Yanukovich to sign the Association Agreement with the EU in 2013, which resulted in mass protests and change of power, and also allowed Russia to start indirect military operations in Ukraine and occupy Crimea.

The result of the content analysis was the identification of several categories united into

three themes summarizing Russia's attitude to the Eastern Partnership.

1. Theme "Russia's positive perception of the Eastern Partnership"

a. Eastern Partnership was beneficial for its participants

2. Theme "Russia's neutral perception of the Eastern Partnership" a. Eastern partnership was beneficial for its participants

a. Russia's expectations of the EaP

3 Theme "Russia's negative perception of the Eastern Partnership" a. Russia's expectations of EaP

a. EaP is what Russia has been accused of

b. Eastern Partnership does not meet the interests of the focal countries

c. Eastern Partnership does not meet the interests of the EU

d. EaP does not meet the interests of Russia

According to the results of the analysis, it was revealed that in Lavrov's statements, a negative attitude towards the Eastern Partnership really prevails. It is often repeated in public speeches in various forms, but the general perception of the EaP cannot be considered unambiguous. In the chronologically first statements about the program, a neutral attitude or even optimism, as well as a desire to participate in the activities of the program, are often read. Even after the statements became sharper and clearly negative due to the Ukrainian crisis, Lavrov's statements contained Russia's desire to cooperate further and build relations with the European Union.

The main reasons for Lavrov's negative attitude towards the program were cited as attempts to negatively affect relations between Russia and the focus countries, attempts by the European Union to make the region its zone of influence, to put member states before an artificial choice between the EU and Russia, and to block the development of integration groupings behind Russia's leadership, such as the EurAsEC and the Customs Union. In addition, Moscow was dissatisfied with the EU's discriminatory policy in its attitude, according to which Russia was to get the opportunity to relax the visa regime with the EU only after the Eastern Partnership countries, as well as the potential economic consequences of signing free market agreements with the EU under the program, in

particular Ukraine.

Of particular note is the fact that in his speeches, the Russian foreign minister has often used the Eastern Partnership as an attempt to justify or at least shift the focus of accusations directed against Moscow itself. This was the case with accusations of Russia viewing the post-Soviet region as its sphere of influence, pressuring countries in the region disrespecting their sovereignty, and spreading disinformation.

It is also worth noting that just as Russia's attitude to the Eastern Partnership was not linear, the frequency of Lavrov's statements about this program was not constant. Using a mixed-methods research design, the analysis revealed that in the nearly three-year period between 2010 and 2013, Lavrov never once mentioned the Eastern Partnership in his speeches, despite the active development of the initiative. After the initiative's founding, the Russian foreign minister returned to discussing it only in connection with the approaching date of the planned signing of the Association and Free Market Agreement between the EU and Ukraine.

Lavrov's constant repetition of Russia's ambitious goals of creating an integration space from Lisbon to Vladivostok, with the indication that the EU had expressed its agreement with this goal, allowed us to hypothesize the existence at some point of verbal agreements between Moscow and Brussels on the division of territories in which both actors would develop their integration processes. The development of the Eastern Partnership could have signaled the European Union's rejection of such agreements, which was one of the reasons for both the deterioration of relations between the actors and the deterioration of Russia's attitude toward the Eastern Partnership.

Based on the inconsistency of Lavrov's reference to the Eastern Partnership in his speeches, the use of the program as a response to accusations against Russia, as well as some other factors, such as ignoring the activities of some member states within the framework of the program and any of its real initiatives besides the spread of the free market, it was concluded that Lavrov's statements demonstrate Russia's attitude to the Eastern Partnership not as an independent program with many projects and formats, but as an instrument of the European Union.

In connection with certain conclusions, it is possible to consider the research goal achieved. However, it is worth mentioning the limitations that, on the one hand, made it impossible to consider the problem more broadly and, on the other hand, provide new



opportunities for researchers to study Russia and the Eastern Partnership. Firstly, this paper studies a rather short period of 6 years, while in the year of writing the paper, the Eastern Partnership is 15 years old. During this period, a large number of events related to Russia, the Eastern Partnership, and the region as a whole have taken place, the most important of which was the Russian military aggression against Ukraine, which started in 2022 and dramatically changed both the balance of power in the region and Russia's relations with many actors, including the EU countries. A study of statements related to this period could shed light on the extent to which Russia uses the Eastern Partnership to accuse the EU and Ukraine of hostility.

In addition, the choice of Sergey Lavrov as the only analyzed representative of Russian foreign policy is a clear indication. Despite his frequent public statements, there are specialized positions in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs responsible for interaction in the post-Soviet space or with the European Union, as well as a separate position of the official representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs related to public statements. In addition, Russian president Putin has often made important statements about the relations between the actors under study. The study of their statements may change or confirm the way in which Russia's attitude towards the Eastern Partnership is presented in this paper.

Finally, qualitative content analysis is not the only method for assessing the rhetoric of political actors. Thematic or critical discourse analysis could have provided a different perspective on the issue under study.

However, the limitations of our research are not the only prospects for future studies. The findings of this paper suggest that Russia views the Eastern Partnership purely as a tool of the European Union to counter Russia. Perhaps similar perceptions could be assessed with respect to other regions of the world in which Russia also has interests. In addition, the theory that there is a verbal agreement between Russia and the EU on Russia's exclusive right to develop integration processes in the post-Soviet space clearly requires additional research, not necessarily based only on rhetoric but also on real actions and events on the world stage.

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## List of Appendices

Appendix no. 1: Theme “Russia's positive perception of the Eastern Partnership” (table)

Codes	Example
Eastern Partnership was beneficial for its participants	“There were some useful things in the program that our neighbors were interested in - some funds were allocated for institutional reforms, to ensure more effective setting up of the papers of economic agencies, law enforcement agencies” (Lavrov, 2014h).

Appendix no. 2: Theme “Russia's neutral perception of the Eastern Partnership” (table)

Categories/Codes	Example
<b>Russia’s expectations of EaP</b>	
Russia will evaluate EaP based on its activities	“Let us hope that its [EaP] practical implementation will be carried out exactly as our European colleagues have told us today” (Lavrov, 2009b).
Russia is satisfied with the way their concerns were addressed	“[We] noted these assurances” (Lavrov, 2009b).
Russia might join some EaP’s programs	“We, of course, will study the proposals on our connection to some or other projects within the framework of the “Eastern Partnership”, we do not exclude it for ourselves and we will consider each specific project according to its merits” (Lavrov, 2009e).
Russia believes EaP to be transparent	“We trust that the “Eastern Partnership” as a project of the European Union will be implemented in a transparent and non-politicized manner” (Lavrov, 2013b).
Russia wants to participate in EaP negotiations	“We would be interested that as we approach the signing of certain agreements with the European Union, consultations between the expert representatives of our countries would take place in order to understand how the obligations that will be imposed on the Republic of

	Moldova in case of signing the relevant agreements with the EU will be met” (Lavrov, 2013c).
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Appendix no. 3: Theme “Russia's negative perception of the Eastern Partnership” (table)

Categories/Codes	Example
<b>EaP is what Russia has been accused of</b>	
Not Russia, but the EU through EaP sees the post-Soviet region as a sphere of influence	“[] historically conditioned, mutually privileged relations between states in the former Soviet Union try to pass off as a certain “sphere of influence”. If we accept this logic, then the European Neighborhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership fall under this definition” (Lavrov, 2008).
Not Russia, but the EU through the Eastern Partnership is pressuring Belarus to make a decision on the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia	“I mean, in particular, the statements voiced in due time from the mouths of official representatives of the European Union, which, in fact, directly conditioned the invitation of the Republic of Belarus to the “Eastern Partnership” on the refusal to recognize South Ossetia and Abkhazia” (Lavrov, 2009d).
Not Russia, but the EU through the Eastern Partnership forces focal countries to choose between Russia and the EU	If we compare our, in my opinion, honest and friendly position with what some representatives of the European Union are doing, it is from the other side that unapologetic pressure is exerted on the focus states and statements are made such as, “You have to choose - either back to the dark past or with us into a bright future” (Lavrov, 2013g).
Not Russia, but the EU through EaP spreads misinformation to influence the state of affairs in the region	“Such “simple” slogans [Russia spreads misinformation] can be hammered into the head without explaining anything. A person in front of the TV hears the same repeated phrase and it settles in his head“ (Lavrov, 2013i).
Not Russia, but the EU through EaP does not	“Russian President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly said that everyone must respect the sovereignty of the Ukrainian

respect the sovereignty of Ukraine	state, and we will all have to respect the choice that the Ukrainian people will make. Western Europeans, on the other hand, say: everyone must respect the choice of the Ukrainian people in favor of Europe“ (Lavrov, 2013h).
<b>Eastern Partnership does not meet the interests of the focal countries</b>	
Eastern Partnership puts countries before a choice: Europe or Russia	“You will have to choose whether to be a colony of Russia or part of the free world.” This is unacceptable. In this game, the legal rights of these countries are completely disregarded, and these countries themselves are not shown any respect” (Lavrov, 2009a).
Invitation to a free trade area under the EaP is unprofitable for the focal countries.	“We have never said that Ukraine is facing a choice: to participate in the EU or in the CU. No one is calling it to the EU, but they are inviting it to a free trade zone, which will be quite unprofitable for the Ukrainian economy“ (Lavrov, 2013i).
EaP countries have not had the opportunity to discuss the terms of entry into the program	“Nobody was going to cooperate equally with all the others either, because the Eastern Partnership program was invented, which was written in Brussels. It was offered to Armenia, Azerbaijan, Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia and Belarus as an already completed thing, it was not subject to negotiation: “Here is what we can offer you from the benevolent shoulder.” 27.10.2014
Public support for the European path of development in the EaP countries is overrated and unjustified	“What is the main reason for these protests? The reason is that the government, fully within its powers and competence, has decided not to sign or initial documents with the EU now. And what a howl has been raised!“ (Lavrov, 2014h).
<b>Eastern Partnership does not meet the interests of the EU</b>	
EaP is a minority interest and utilizes resources that are needed in other areas of EU foreign policy	A new Commission has been formed in the EU, [] who will have to endure a serious struggle over where to direct the main resources - to continue the adventure in Ukraine, Moldova, etc. within the framework of the “Eastern

	Partnership” (for which an aggressive minority in the EU is in favor) or to listen to the “Eurograndes” (the countries of southern Europe) and pay attention to what is happening on the other side of the Mediterranean Sea (Lavrov, 2014j).
EaP prevents EU from developing interactions with Russia	The Eastern Partnership program, [] was used [] to counteract the strategic interests of both Russia and the EU in the joint search for new sources of development. (Lavrov, 2014e).
<b>EaP does not meet the interests of Russia</b>	
Eastern Partnership - an attempt to make the post-Soviet space a sphere of influence for the EU	"The Eastern Partnership has simply turned into an instrument of feverish exploration of geopolitical space” (Lavrov, 2014c).
EaP is a threat to Russia-led Eurasian integration	“It became clear that it [EaP] was conceived on the basis of the logic of “zero-sum games” as a tool to counteract integration processes involving Russia“. (Lavrov, 2014d).
EU discriminates Russia against EaP countries	“According to some information available to us, a number of EU members, using the EU consensus principle, are firmly insisting that visa facilitation in relations with Russia should not precede, but follow visa facilitation for the Eastern Partnership countries” (Lavrov, 2013a).
EU tries to upset Russia's relations with post-Soviet countries through EaP	“Those who thought in the categories of “either-or” and those who put the main task of the Eastern Partnership project to detach our neighbors from Russia, even artificially, with the use of blackmail, have seen that everything is not so simple” (Lavrov, 2013h).
Eastern Partnership forces focal countries to make Russia-influencing decisions without consulting Moscow	“It is not by chance that the agreements with the Eastern Partnership countries were prepared in secret. No one has shown them to anyone. it is interesting to understand how they can affect our relations, to what extent these agreements can take into account the interests of the

	Russian Federation as the largest partner of Kiev and Chisinau” (Lavrov, 2013i).
Russia was not invited to participate in EaP-based projects	“Initially, after the announcement of this program by the European Union, we expressed our readiness to participate as an observer, as well as to participate in the implementation of practical projects together with the EU and the so-called focal states of the Eastern Partnership in cases where such projects can be formulated and are of mutual interest. As a result, we were neither invited to be observers nor presented with any such projects“ (Lavrov, 2013g).
Free market agreements with EaP countries are a threat to the Russian economy	“Signing a free trade zone agreement with Ukraine would mean only one thing. If we simultaneously kept our free trade zone and did not use the right contained in the CIS Agreement on Free Trade Zone to protect our industries and economy in case of risks, then what has already been described by presidents and our experts many times would happen: Ukraine would immediately open 85% for European goods, which would flood the Ukrainian market, and Ukrainian goods, unable to withstand competition with European ones, would flood abroad. And Russia and Belarus would be the most obvious candidates to receive these goods. Thus, our production of similar products would be killed.” (Lavrov, 2013i).