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### Towards a new deal with Russia?

The latest perception of Russia in Europe has deteriorated from being a difficult partner to being a potential enemy that not only fuels tensions in the post soviet space, but actively engages in military conflicts like as in Georgia in 2008 or in eastern Ukraine since 2014. Russia no longer hesitates to demonstrate its readiness to military confrontation and its (alleged) military power to the Europeans, among others, by ostentatiously appearing in NATO airspace with military aircraft.<sup>1</sup> Since the escalation of the Ukraine conflict with the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in spring 2014 and the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine, EU – Russian relations seem to have reached their lowest point since the end of the Cold War. Already suffering from years of estrangement and stagnation, there appears no light at the end of the tunnel for the time being. Instead of sitting the current crisis out and waiting for the (politically) correct moment to continue business as usual, the EU should rather reconsider its policy towards Russia and move towards a more pragmatic and realistic approach.

#### **Rhetoric and reality**

In 2014, the Europeans witnessed the outbreak of another violent conflict on its continent, in eastern Ukraine. The evident involvement of Russia in fanning and maintaining this conflict has aggravated long standing tensions in EU – Russia relations that might have been predictable to the attentive observer years ago.<sup>2</sup>

At least since the launch of the EU's Eastern Partnership initiative in 2009, the growing potential for confrontation between Russia and the EU in Eastern Europe has become obvious. Owing to Russia claiming influence over its "near neighbourhood" regions, the six post soviet states targeted by the Eastern Partnership<sup>3</sup> have since then been more or less forced to make a choice between European rapprochement or closer cooperation with Russia. The launch of the Eastern Partnership itself can be interpreted as a reaction of the EU to Russia's imperialistic behaviour in Georgia in 2008, and therefore to a crisis that might be perceived as a dress rehearsal for what is happening at present. With its

military engagement in Georgia in 2008, Russia could test Western patience and its willingness to support countries under pressure, and at the same time it could test its own capacities for a military engagement outside its territory. It is no surprise that the deterioration of European – Russian relations escalated in 2013 when news came of Ukraine's choice, the biggest and – from a Russian perspective – most important country in its sphere of influence.<sup>4</sup>

However, relations had been suffering for a long time, a finding that might be surprising given the tremendous efforts of both the EU and Russia on the diplomatic stage. Since the EU enlargement dynamics reached the post soviet region (with the Baltic republics joining the EU in 2004), and in particular with regards to the military expansion of the Western sphere (NATO enlargement of 1999, 2004 and 2009)<sup>5</sup>, Russia has felt threatened and constrained – a point of view that has constantly been ignored by the West. Rhetoric about a common space "from Lisbon to Wladiwostok" – be it from the Russian or the European side – has never really found a way into reality.

The European – respectively Western – expansion into the post soviet region coincidentally took place at a time when, on the one hand, Vladimir Putin came to power, establishing an authoritarian rule, and when Russia witnessed a remarkable and stable economic growth the first time since the establishment of market economy. Both these factors, the political stabilisation and the economic recovery in the early 2000s, led to an increasing self-confidence and a self-perception of a Russia that could, after years of humiliation and domestic crisis, again constitute a great power, or at least a regional power in the post soviet territories. As a consequence, Russia did not feel adequately treated by its Western counterparts when it was considered to be an addressee of the EU's Neighborhood policy, finding itself among countries such as Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, the Caucasus republics and North African Mediterranean neighbouring countries. As a result, Russia was offered an alternative, higher-ranking cooperation by the EU with the concept of four

common spaces that was affirmed as a new foundation for mutual cooperation in 2005. From the EU's perspective, the four common spaces concept was designed as an alternative to the Neighborhood policy to meet Russia's special needs after its rejection of the EU's Neighborhood approach.

In 2010, with the launch of the EU-Russia Partnership for Modernization during the EU-Russia summit in Rostov-on-Don, cooperation was upgraded again to a higher level. Nevertheless, any real potential for cooperation between Russia and the EU failed to be implemented by either side due to a major misunderstanding: Whereas Russia expected a technical cooperation aiming at modernizing the country's economy and infrastructure, the EU had a broader understanding of modernization including a pluralistic society, rule of law, and respect for human and civic rights. In short, the EU had an approach of cooperation based on norms and values that were non-negotiable, whereas Russia rejected any interference into its domestic political situation. From a European point of view, any cooperation with Russia that did not take into account the norms and values the EU insisted on was considered to be dishonourable - a precondition that has, in fact, led us to where we are now.

### **On the wrong track**

Due to these fundamentally different expectations, Russia and the EU have not succeeded in finding common ground of cooperation in recent years: Negotiations towards a renewed Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) have not advanced since their launch in 2008; the Partnership for Modernization fell into stagnation and never exceeded the level of micro-projects; and the visa dialogue has not moved forward since the Visa Facilitation Agreement of 2007. The rhetorical upgrading of relations in 2013, when the concept of "Strategic Partnership" was proclaimed<sup>7</sup>, did not have much to do with the lack of substance that has increasingly characterized relations.

Lately, as a response to Russia's annexation of Crimea, considered by the Europeans to be illegal, and Russia's destabilizing role in Ukraine, the EU suspended negotiations for a new PCA and for a visa free regime, cancelled the 2014 EU-Russian summit, and put many projects on hold. Additionally, since March 2014, the EU has imposed sanctions on Russia in the form of asset freezing, visa bans and economic sanctions<sup>8</sup>. Last but not least, the Europeans agreed

with its Western partners to temporarily exclude Russia from the Group of Eight (G8), returning to the G7 format without Russia, and deprived Russia from its G8 presidency that it held in 2014. As a response, Russia has taken measures including a ban on certain food imports from European countries. Symbolically, Russia's head of state president Putin is conspicuous by his absence from high-level international meetings, for instance from the Davos World Economic Forum in January 2015. To summarise, Russia's distance from Europe has widened enormously and mutual confidence has been deeply shattered.

Driven by events, the EU in 2014 has turned from an approach with moderate conditions to a rigorous isolationist approach, aiming at bringing Russia to reason by cutting its economic and political room for manoeuvre. Unfortunately, to date, this isolationist approach has not solved any of the outlined problems and has aggravated some of the existing challenges of the EU – Russia relationship:

- It pushes Russia further away from Europe and the West, compels the country to enforce its own regional integration projects (Eurasian Union), and leads to a further isolation of Russia instead of its integration into the international community;
- It encourages Russia to continue and enhance its "divide et impera" approach towards single EU member states, aimed at benefitting from advantageous bilateral cooperations and weakening the EU as a whole;
- It reduces any opportunities to calm the situation and rebuild confidence;
- It does not solve the conflict in Ukraine, or any other frozen conflict in the post soviet region;
- It not only fails to further the democratization or modernization of Russia, but carries the risk of destabilizing Russia and enforcing president Putins authoritarian rule;
- It does not take into account the situation in Russia and president Putin's motivation for his tough authoritarian and neo-imperialistic rule – the maintenance of his own power.

To put it simply: The EU's past approach towards Russia has led to nowhere. The EU should take the opportunity to find a more realistic and pragmatic approach towards relations that takes account of

Russian interests and the conditions arising from the political reality in Russia.

### **Beyond illusions: towards a pragmatic approach**

Which options do we then have? First, the EU could continue or even enforce the isolationist approach including sanctions, the temporary freezing of cooperation projects and the occasional exclusion of Russia from the international community. In the medium term, the EU could continue to reduce its energy dependence on Russia via a common energy strategy, including all EU member states, and thus try to cut ties with Russia as much as possible. However, it is very improbable that all EU member states with their very different interests and attitudes towards Russia would agree to one consistent policy. Moreover, this approach has unpredictable consequences with regards to Russia's future and leave Europe uncertain about its biggest Eastern neighbour.

Secondly, the EU could gradually return to the customized and broad cooperation agenda, ignoring the reasons that once led to the suspension of that cooperation - the annexation of Crimea and the Russian destabilizing interference in Ukraine. In that case, the EU would lose its credibility and, most probably, restore the problems and inadequacies of its policy towards Russia. Relations would suffer under the same misunderstandings and ineffectiveness as it did even before the Ukraine crisis. Furthermore, many questions would remain unanswered: How to proceed with the Modernization Partnership, as long as the notion of "modernization" is not clear to both partners? How can a European security order be drawn up as long as there is distrust and hostility? How can Eurasian integration and European integration be linked to each other, for example in its economic dimension? Would it be possible to integrate some countries in both the Eurasian Union and the EU, and how?

These questions certainly have to be faced and answered in the long run. Meanwhile, a third alternative could help both the EU and Russia out of the crisis: a pragmatic approach led by the desire for cooperation in areas where common interests exist. This would certainly cover the established trade and investment relations, bringing together markets and business people and increasing the economic interconnection of Russia in the world. For that purpose, the current sanctions and constraints should be lifted, especially as their effect is controversial.

Furthermore, to facilitate people-to-people contacts, the EU should, in the end, establish a visa-free regime for Russian citizens. By increasing the contacts and exchanges between people, the EU could demonstrate its liberal values and serve as an attractive example. With regards to the current conflict in Ukraine, an international peace-keeping initiative under UN mandate could help depoliticize the situation and free both the EU and Russia from the impasse.

The EU member states have to get together seriously and discuss their common – and single bilateral – interests towards Russia, without hiding themselves behind nice-sounding declarations. Finally, in the long term, the EU cannot avoid starting a *dialogue with Russia* on their future relationship from an economic and political perspective and in terms of security. Crucial issues that have to be covered are the regional cooperation of the EU and Eurasian Union, the role and borders of NATO and Russia's relations with the alliance, the role of Russia as a regional power, the EU's relations with its Eastern neighbours, and much more. Even if these questions have been on the agenda for years, they have obviously not been properly and consistently addressed. Interestingly enough, Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov raised the same question that was already posed 20 years ago, a question that brings it to the point and that is still awaiting a satisfying answer: Do we want a European order with Russia, without Russia, or against Russia?<sup>9</sup> It might be difficult and unpleasant – but Europe can't escape that question.

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### **References**

1. See „Russische Bomber lösen NATO-Alarm aus“, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung online*, 29.10.2014, <http://www.nzz.ch/international/europa/russische-bomber-loesen-nato-alarm-aus-1.18414344> (last access 6 May 2015).
2. *The tensions have been discussed by a minority of scholars and almost not been acknowledged in the political arena.*
3. *Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan.*
4. „EU leaders give Kiev until May to prove it wants to look West“, *Reuters*, 25.2.2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/02/25/us-eu-ukraine-idUSBRE91OoU420130225> (last access 6 May 2015).
5. *In 1999, Poland, Czech Republic and Hungary joined NATO,*

in in 2004 Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia joined NATO, and in 2009 Albania and Croatia joined NATO.

6. For an overview of the EU – Russia relations, see the European External Action Service site on EU – Russia relations, [http://eeas.europa.eu/russia/index\\_en.htm](http://eeas.europa.eu/russia/index_en.htm) (last access 6 May 2015).

7. For the strategic partnership idea, see [http://eeas.europa.eu/top\\_stories/2013/030613\\_eu-russia\\_en.htm](http://eeas.europa.eu/top_stories/2013/030613_eu-russia_en.htm) (last access 6 May 2015).

8. For details, see [http://europa.eu/newsroom/highlights/special-coverage/eu\\_sanctions/index\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/newsroom/highlights/special-coverage/eu_sanctions/index_en.htm) (last access 7 May 2015).

9. Sergey Lavrov asked the question in the context of the security architecture, see speech of Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov at the 51st Munich Security Conference on 7 February 2015, <http://www.russland.ru/lavrov-auf-der-muenchner-sicherheitskonferenz/> (last access 7 May 2015). The notion dates from the mid-1990s and had constantly been used, among others, by German foreign minister Klaus Kinkel (1992-1998) or federal chancellor Gerhard Schröder (1998-2005).