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## Russia and the EU - the helix of alienation

### Introduction: EU-Russia relations in crisis

It is more than five years since, in November 2013, the then Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich suspended the signing of the EU association agreement that had taken so long to negotiate. As a result, the so-called 'Euromaidan' mass protests led to a pro-European turn and the separatist war in Eastern Ukraine which provoked an accelerating crisis between the EU and Russia.

Initially, EU-Russia relations were rather constructive: In 1994, an agreement on partnership and cooperation was signed, followed by a 'Common Strategy' in 1999. In 2003, four 'common spaces' of deepened cooperation were created, and in 2010 a 'partnership for modernization' was upon. It must be admitted that none of these far-reaching visions were completely implemented, but they set up a comprehensive framework. At the same time, episodes of disagreement and conflict between Russia and the EU accumulated. The list of these events is long, but some highlights were the NATO eastward enlargement (1999, 2004, and 2009) and EU eastward enlargement (2004 and 2007); the NATO forces' strike on Serbia in 1999, the wars in Georgia (2008), in Ukraine (since 2014) and in Syria (since 2015); or domestic cases of violation of human rights as with Chodorkovski/Yukos (2003) or Pussy Riot (2012).

With the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, regarded by the EU as illegal, the EU-Russia crisis reached a preliminary peak. It was followed by a series of Western 'penalties' that put EU-Russia relations on hold to a great extent: economic and diplomatic sanctions (that were answered by Russian bans on EU imports); the exclusion of Russia from the G8; the suspension of the NATO-Russia Council and most bilateral and European dialogues<sup>2</sup>; and the withdrawal of Russia's voting rights in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe that led Russia to consider leaving the organisation. Negotiations about a renewed partnership agreement have been suspended since 2014. The political high-level dialogue is limited to a few crisis sessions such as the Minsk I and II negotiations (2014-2015) or the talks in the 'Normandie' format. Mutual trust

is lost, relations are shaped by distrust and reciprocal accusations. The new turn in the EU-Russia conflict is that the EU has linked the renewal of most suspended forms of cooperation with a Russian release of Crimea—which has created a stalemate situation on both sides.

### Perceptions matter

The differences between Russia and the EU are ultimately rooted either in diverging values where the EU pursues a normative approach while Russia pursues a pragmatic one; or in the different approaches towards their common neighbours in the post-Soviet space where a competition of European and Eurasian integration has developed.<sup>3</sup> Both issues are substantially related to perceptions and sensitivities.

While European statesmen have persistently underlined that EU and NATO eastward enlargements would not be anti-Russian, president Putin accused the NATO eastward enlargement of "crossing a red line" at the Munich Security conference in 2007. Before this, in 2005, he caused controversy when he called the breakdown of the USSR the 'greatest geopolitical disaster' of the past century.

For Russia, the westward drifting of post-Soviet countries meant a loss of importance and a threat to its inner political stability. Indeed, after the experience of the Baltic states that turned away from Russia quickly after their independence in 1991 and took a democratic path, Russia was concerned that others could follow. After all, a number of democratic mass protest movements took place in the region, namely the protests in Yugoslavia that led to the fall of leader Milošević in 2000, the Georgian 'rose revolution' in 2003 that put an end to the Shevardnadze era, the Ukrainian 'orange revolution' in 2004, the 'tulip revolution' in Kyrgyzstan in 2005 that kicked out of office longtime president Akayev, and the 'Euromaidan' in 2013-2014 that led to the departure of president Yanukovich. A Russian protest movement emerged in the winter of 2011-2012, but could be stemmed.

These mass protests were—from a Russian

view—provocations supported by the West aimed at destabilising the region and expanding its influence.<sup>4</sup> From a Russian perspective, a struggle for influence is going on in the post-Soviet space, where Russia would not yield more than absolutely necessary with regard to its capabilities. While Russia still had to soft-pedal during the turmoils in Kiev in 2004, it had the power in 2014 to confront the West, and this it did.<sup>5</sup>

Not by chance, Ukraine was the catalyst of the current EU-Russia crisis. From Russia's standpoint, Ukraine belongs to the Eurasian heartland. In his speech in celebration of the admission of Crimea to the Russian Federation on March 18, 2014, Putin openly denied Ukrainian national sovereignty: "We are one people. Kiev is the mother of all Russian towns", he said.<sup>6</sup> During his speech, a huge euphoria on the occasion of the 'return' of Crimea to Russian territory was observed. The appeal to patriotic feelings during the Ukraine crisis and the annexation of Crimea strengthened president Putin's support by the people—his approval ratings climbed to a new peak.<sup>7</sup>

### **Russian attempts to keep the post-Soviet space together**

However, most attempts to bind the post-Soviet space were non-violent. On December 8 1991, Russia, Belarus and Ukraine founded the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) which all post-Soviet countries (except the three Baltic states) later joined. Referring to foreign policy neutrality, Turkmenistan downgraded itself to an adjunct member in 2005. Georgia left the CIS in 2009 as a consequence of the military clash with Russia in South Ossetia in 2008.<sup>8</sup> Around that time, Ukraine distanced itself from the CIS, regarding itself as a participating (and not a member) state. In May 2018, Ukrainian president Porochenko signed a decree to leave the CIS, citing the lack of solidarity during the Russian annexation of Crimea as his reason for taking this step.

In the 2000s, Russia outlined a 'multipolar world' viewing Russia as the centre of a Eurasian economic space. Putin's proposal to the EU was an 'economic area from Lisbon to Valdivostok'. These proposals were most widely ignored in the EU. When six CIS member states (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine and Belarus) concluded the Eastern Partnership with the EU in May 2009, Russia raised a protest as it felt threatened and not involved in the project. Subsequently, Russia

fostered the deployment of an alternative Eurasian integration project. In 2011, at that time Prime Minister Putin outlined a 'Eurasian Union' with common industry, technology and energy policies of its member states, a common trade area and free border traffic.<sup>9</sup> The Eurasian Union was designed as a major economic player with Russia as its centre, designed to fill the gap between the European and the Asian-Pacific economic areas.<sup>10</sup> Its core idea was to develop a European-Eurasian economic partnership that could replace the transatlantic one in the long term.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, in May 2014, Kazakhstan, Russia and Belarus founded the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), Armenia and Kyrgyzstan joined shortly after. The EEU could build on a customs union of the three states dating back to 2010 that had been created in the framework of the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC) founded in 2000. Moscow hoped for the quick admission of Tajikistan, Mongolia, Ukraine and Uzbekistan which still hasn't happened as yet. Ukraine is no longer interested in this form of integration, all the more so, after it signed an Enhanced Association Agreement with the EU in March 2014. Georgia and Moldova, too, are tied with the EU by respective Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) agreements. Azerbaijan has declared it would join the EEU if it became more attractive.

The evolution from EurAsEC to EEU reveals how difficult Eurasian integration has turned out to be. EurAsEC was founded by Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan in 2000, with Moldova, Ukraine and Armenia having an observer status since 2002. Uzbekistan joined in 2006 and left the organization in 2008. Together with Tajikistan (and neutral Turkmenistan), Uzbekistan has not yet joined the EEU, arguing against Russian's claim to power in this project.

Russia's ultimate goal is to secure its stance in the post-Soviet space. Therefore it keeps on trying to advance Eurasian integration. At a visit to Tashkent in October 2018, almost 800 agreements and memorandums on interregional industrial and banking projects worth 27 billion USD between Russia and Uzbekistan were signed.<sup>12</sup> Before this, Putin had visited Baku and Dushanbe, inspecting the potential partners and trying to restore confidence.<sup>13</sup> An interim conclusion on Russia's Eurasian integration could be that, although the structures exist (CIS, EEU), the process is fragile due to uncertainties regarding its final shape, Russia's claimed leader-

ship role, and its limited economic attractiveness. It appears that countries with rich economic potential and low economic dependence from Russia are hesitating to join the project.

### Securing authoritarian rule

The coexistence of European and Eurasian integration can explain a lot of the conflicts that have evolved between Russia and the EU, but another problem is rooted in their fundamentally different value systems. The—at times—lecturing style of Western consultants in post-Soviet Russia, together with a decline in the attractiveness of the liberal democratic model<sup>14</sup> has led to Russia's disinterest and rejection. Since Putin came in power in 2000, Russia has progressively evolved into an authoritarian, patriarchal political system. Meanwhile, in order to maintain power and stability of the system, the Russian leadership has overtly reverted to repressive and manipulative measures that are implemented by the Russian security services both home and abroad.

There are numerous cases where people have been 'cleared' because they were regarded as a threat to the 'Putin system'. Most prominent examples are the imprisonment of oligarch Michail Chodorkovski in 2003 and the subsequent divestiture of his Yukos corporation; the killing of a number of journalists, among them Anna Politkovskaja in 2006; or the poisoning of ex-intelligence officials Alexander Litvinenko in 2006 and Sergey Skripal and his daughter in 2018; the imprisonment of 'Pussy Riot' band members in 2012; or the (to date unexplained) murder of opposition politician Boris Nemzov in 2015.

Furthermore, legislative measures have been taken in order to limit foreign democratic influence in Russia, such as, the Act on 'foreign agents' in 2012, or the Act on the registration of foreign media as 'foreign agents' in 2017.<sup>15</sup> These repressive measures were intended to intimidate and restrain civil society engagement, critical thinking and the free media. They have repeatedly provoked protest in Europe as observers have become increasingly worried about democracy and the rule of law in Russia.

### Polarizing Western societies

Besides securing regional supremacy and domestic rule, in recent times another field of conflict has appeared that could be summarized as an attempt to destabilize and weaken the Western liberal democracies.

For several years, the Russian government and pro-Kremlin forces respectively, have attempted to influence the European public with disinformation campaigns on the internet. Media agencies, troll farms and bots disseminate polarising comments, fake news and propaganda on their sites and via social media channels. Prominent examples were the US presidential elections in 2016 and the European discourse on migration. The ultimate goal of these activities is to influence the public mood in accordance with Russia's views.<sup>16</sup> For this reason, the EU installed the 'EastStratCom' Task Force in 2015 to gain an insight into the scope of these activities and develop a counter-strategy.<sup>17</sup> Russia gives particular attention to anti-European and right-wing movements, giving media and financial support. Such support is known to have been provided for the French *Rassemblement National*, the Italian *Lega*, the Austrian *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ)*, and the German *Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)*.<sup>18</sup> The Kremlin seeks to strengthen populist thinking and to destabilise the democratic order in Europe.

Moreover, Russia is suspected of being responsible for a number of hacker attacks and cybercrimes directed at diverse public and private institutions worldwide. In April 2018, four Russian citizens were arrested by Dutch security services and accused of attempting to hack the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) in Den Haag. The British government has accused the Russian military intelligence service (GRU) of being responsible for a number of recent cyberattacks, such as the hacker attacks on the World Doping Agency in 2017 and on the US democrats in 2016.<sup>19</sup>

In order to weaken the EU's integrity, Russia has repeatedly exploited discord within Europe and reinforced it. An example is Russia's ostentatious solidarity and convergence with the 'victims' of European financial discipline as with Greece and Italy that were offered credit without any demands for economic or social reforms, in contrast to European loans. Member states that were critical of certain EU policies regarding democratic rule or migration—such as Hungary or Bulgaria—have also recently made approaches to Russia. The EU seems to be most vulnerable at its Eastern and Southern periphery where disagreement with EU policies and a lack of prosperity reinforce anti-European positions. Of course, tensions and erosions in Europe are made by Europeans themselves and cannot be attributed to Russia.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, Russia deliberately polarizes, profiting from the

damage that it creates.

## Conclusion: Enduring alienation or temporary crisis?

EU-Russia relations may have hit rock bottom, but they are not beyond a point of no-return. In order to stop the helix of conflict and alienation, Europeans should avoid any kind of provocation and hostile rhetoric but, at the same time, stay true to their values. They should keep on reaching out a hand to Russia, and enable the return to dialogue and cooperation even if Crimea ends up as part of the Russian Federation. There needs to be proposals made to Russia to make political adjustments without losing its face.

Moreover, Europeans must abandon the unrealistic idea of a Russian democratisation process following the Western model and accept that Russia cuts its own path. Nor should they give the countries in its Eastern neighbourhood the choice of whether to integrate into Europe or with Russia. The EU should take Russia's ideas about regional integration seriously and reflect on how to shape its relations with its Eastern neighbours and Russia, bearing in mind the ideas of compatibility and complementarity. How about seizing the idea of a European-Eurasian economic partnership that does not replace, but complements the transatlantic partnership? Such a constellation would presumably reduce the present competition and give all involved actors a long-term perspective. Finally, a serious and equal dialogue with Russia is an inalienable precondition to turn the tables. For the time being, much lost confidence has to be restored.

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<sup>1</sup> Economy and Environment; Freedom, Security and Justice; External Security; and Research and Education.

<sup>2</sup> For the description of the relations from a European perspective, see "The European Union and the Russian Federation", Delegation of the European Union to Russia, accessed December 14, 2018, <https://eeas.europa.eu/delega->

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<sup>3</sup> Caroline von Gall delivers a detailed analysis on both fields, see, „Das Partnerschafts- und Assoziierungsabkommen zwischen der Europäischen Union und Russland“, in *Die Beziehungen zwischen der EU und Russland. Spannung und Kooperation*, ed. Peter-Christian Müller-Graff (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2017), 5-22.

<sup>4</sup> Indeed, many involved organisations received financial support from European or US-American sponsors.

<sup>5</sup> Thus the assessment of Ekkehard Klug, „Die EU, Russland und der Ukraine-Konflikt“, in *Russland und Europa. Facetten einer Beziehung*, ed. Alexander Trunk (Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang Edition, 2017), 31.

<sup>6</sup> „Address of the President of the Russian Federation“ [Russian original: „Обращение Президента Российской Федерации“], Moscow, Kremlin, March 18, 2014, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>.

<sup>7</sup> „Infografik: Wie beliebt ist Putin?“, *dekoder*, accessed December 17, 2018, <https://www.dekoder.org/de/article/infografik-putin-beliebtheit-umfragewerte>.

<sup>8</sup> Georgia had abandoned from the organization already before as it was not participating in the meetings of its Council of the defence ministers since 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Putin presented the new integration project in a contribution in *Isvestija* on October 4, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> See „Putin calls for 'Eurasian Union' of ex-Soviet republics“, BBC, October 4, 2011, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-15172519>; Uwe Halbach, „Wladimir Putins Eurasische Union“, *SWP-Aktuell*, no. 51 (November 2011), [https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/aktuell/2011\\_A51\\_hlb\\_ks.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/aktuell/2011_A51_hlb_ks.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> Uwe Halbach, „Wladimir Putins Eurasische Union“, *SWP-Aktuell*, no. 51 (November 2011): 2, [https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/aktuell/2011\\_A51\\_hlb\\_ks.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/aktuell/2011_A51_hlb_ks.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> „Uzbekistan and Russia sign documents for US\$27 billion“, *UzDaily*, October 19, 2018, <https://www.uzdaily.com/articles-id-46228.htm>.

<sup>13</sup> Elina Rustamova, „Expert on Putin's visit: Moscow is looking for a way to restore lost confidence“ [Russian Original: Элина Рустамова „Эксперт о визите Путина: Москва ищет пути восстановления утраченного доверия“], *Podrobno.uz*, October 5, 2018, <https://podrobno.uz/cat/politic/ekspert-putin-edet-v-tash/>.

<sup>14</sup> Related to signs of decline as the financial crises, social challenges, migration policies, or foreign policy fails.

<sup>15</sup> Russia declared this law a reaction on US claims towards „Russia Today“ to register as a „foreign agent“ in the United States.

<sup>16</sup> Details on Russia-led media activities are described, among others, in Patrick Gensing, Silvia Stöber, „Neue Medien in Deutschland. Russlands linke Offensive“, *ARD-Faktenfinder*, November 28, 2018, <http://faktenfinder.tagesschau.de/ausland/russlands-linke-offensive-101.html>, and Sascha Lobo, „Putin's Geniestreich“, *Spiegel Online*, November 28, 2018, <http://www.spiegel.de/netzwelt/netzpolitik/wladimir-putins-wirkmaechtige-propaganda-in-sozialen-medien-a-1240829.html>.

<sup>17</sup> See „Questions and Answers about the EastStratCom Task Force“, *EEAS*, accessed December 19, 2018, [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage\\_en/2116/%20Questions%20and%20Answers%20about%20the%20East%20StratCom%20Task%20Force](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/2116/%20Questions%20and%20Answers%20about%20the%20East%20StratCom%20Task%20Force), and „EU weitet Kampf gegen russische Desinformation im Internet aus“, *Deutsche Welle*, December 17, 2018, [https://www.focus.de/politik/ausland/eu-weitet-kampf-gegen-russische-desinformation-im-internet-aus\\_id10077676.html](https://www.focus.de/politik/ausland/eu-weitet-kampf-gegen-russische-desinformation-im-internet-aus_id10077676.html).

<sup>18</sup> See Sascha Lobo, „Putin's Geniestreich“, *Spiegel Online*, November 28, 2018, <http://www.spiegel.de/netzwelt/netzpolitik/wladimir-putins-wirkmaechtige-propaganda-in-sozialen-medien-a-1240829.html>.

<sup>19</sup> See „Den Haag und London werfen Russland Cyberattacken vor“, *Reuters*, October 4, 2018, <https://de.reuters.com/article/russland-hackerangriffe-id-DEKNhME1B6>; David Lewins, „Cybercrime: The Spark which started Russia's cyber crusade“, *Berkeley Political Review*, April 7, 2017, <https://bpr.berkeley.edu/2017/04/07/cybercrime-the-spark-which-started-russias-cyber-crusade/>.

<sup>20</sup> Christian Wipperfürth, „Welche Russlandpolitik ist angemessen?“, *Pforzheimer Zeitung*, October 6, 2018, <http://www.cwipper-fuerth.de/2018/10/08/welche-russlandpolitik-ist-angemessen/>.

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