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Russia as a Strategic Partner?

An Expert Survey by Atlantic-Community.org

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Introduction

In February 2009 Atlantic-Community.org conducted an online poll to determine what our 3000 members considered the transatlantic policy priorities for this year. The poll results demonstrated a strong interest in fostering strategic relations with Russia.

Atlantic-Community.org, the internet think tank on foreign policy, has therefore conducted this four-part *Expert Survey: Russia as a Strategic Partner?* in May and June 2009. Twenty-one experts from eleven EU countries and the United States participated in this survey. They represent leading institutions such as the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Yale University, Charles University, the Polish Institute of International Affairs, and many others. For a full list of participants, please see page 12.

Atlantic-Community.org has asked twenty-one experts from EU and North American think tanks and universities for their assessment of relations between the West and Russia. We also wanted to know whether the experts felt the global economic crisis was a window of opportunity to enhance cooperation. Moreover the policy analysts shared with Atlantic Community their recommendations on how to make EU countries act more cohesively towards Russia. We publish the results of this survey in four parts.

This expert survey sought to gather the opinions and policy recommendations of leading Western specialists concerning appropriate foreign policies for the European Union, and the United States toward Russia.

The survey included four questions:

1. Do the West and Russia have more common or more conflicting interests? (Page 5)

While the majority of participants believe that common interests prevail – such as free trade, non-proliferation, stability in the Caucasus and Central Asia, and fighting terrorism, organized crime and climate change – differences in the way Russia and the West approach these challenges on a geo-political level will prolong existing tensions.

2. Can the United States and the European Union turn Russia into a strategic partner within the next three years? (Page 6)

Prospects for a strategic partnership with Russia seem unlikely, according to the experts surveyed. However, many believe that Russia and the West can indeed cooperate on a variety of tactical issues, and in some cases already do in such areas as economics, research and development and space programs. Half of the participants consider more time or even a new government in Moscow necessary precursors for improved cooperation.

3. Is the global economic crisis a window of opportunity to enhance cooperation between the US and the EU on the one side and Russia on the other? (Page 8)

The global economic crisis has not spared Russia, whose economy has been particularly affected by collapsing world trade, lack of finance and low oil prices. However, respondents agreed that the financial crisis is not severe enough to drastically improve cooperation and were worried that Russian policy would rather be characterized by increased protectionism and an aggressive foreign policy used to distract the public from worsening domestic conditions.

4. On a policy level, which processes need to be initiated to make EU countries act more cohesively vis-à-vis Russia? (Page 10)

Experts emphasized the critical influence that energy and security issues have in any united European policy toward Russia. Some respondents claim that the growing importance of energy supply, transit routes and oil and gas prices will eventually forge a common EU energy policy with adherence to the principles of the European Energy Charter. Security issues could also prompt a collective EU defense strategy, especially if Russia continues an aggressive foreign policy.

In light of the great success of this survey, Atlantic-Community.org plans to conduct a follow-up survey in which we will ask leading Russian experts to comment on these findings and add their perspective on Russia's position towards the West in general and NATO and the EU in particular. We will also ask them what is required from the Russian perspective to form a strategic partnership.



1. Russian Mindset is Barrier to Improved Relations with the West

Experts from Europe and the US polled by Atlantic-Community.org believe that despite current tensions, Russia and the West have more common than diverging interests. But decades of mistrust have clouded the Russian mindset, and Moscow can't yet see all that they have in common with the West.

While the still new Obama Administration may change the tone of foreign policy between the US and Russia, the policy experts believe the onus is on Moscow to open up to the concept that there could be common interests with the West in order for any potential strategic partnership to succeed.

Fourteen of the twenty-one experts polled by Atlantic-Community.org felt that the West and Russia shared more common interests than conflicting. The experts from eleven EU countries and the United States argued that Russia needed to recognize that they shared many interests with the West - such as free trade, non-proliferation, stability in the Caucasus and Central Asia, fighting terrorism, organized crime, and climate change.

At present, many of these issues were interpreted differently by the West and Russia which has led to misunderstandings. **Katinka Barysch** of the Centre for European Reform in the UK said: "Objectively, they have a lot of common interests but they interpret the situation very differently at times." This gives rise to the feeling that Russia and the West have less in common than they do.

In fact, **Elzbieta Stadtmuller** from the University of Wroclaw in Poland explains that "Russia is not aware of such common interests because it is attached to the realistic paradigm and sees international politics as 'loser-winner' relation," while the West has by and large shifted towards a win-win game.

Janusz Bugajski from the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington remarks that "the current government in Moscow does not share the long-term strategic targets of either NATO or the EU." While **Jeffrey Mankoff** from Yale University adds that "a genuine partnership will have to accept that Russia remains apart from the West, but nonetheless shares a range of common interests."

If the common interests outnumber and outweigh the conflicting interests, can the United States and the European Union turn Russia into a strategic partner in the next three years? Read the experts' responses in the second installment of Atlantic-Community.org's four part survey: A Future with Russia as a Strategic Partner?

Although this poll was done specifically with analysts from the US and the EU, we'd like to ask Russian experts on their nation's relationship with the West whether they agree with the thesis above. Is it just the Russian mindset that requires change or is there more the West could do to bring about a strategic relationship?



2. A Future with Russia as a Strategic Partner?

In the second part of our expert survey on relations between Russia and the West, respondents tell Atlantic-Community.org that they remain largely skeptical of the potential for a strategic partnership between Moscow and the EU and US, however they believe that there will be some limited cooperation.

Although a majority of the EU and US experts polled by Atlantic-Community.org stated that Russia and the West share more common than diverging interests, only three out of twenty-one believe that these commonalities can be used encourage Russia into a strategic partnership with the West within the next three years.

More than a third of the experts believe that the West cannot turn Russia into a strategic partner at all. While half of the participants do not rule out a move towards a more cooperative relationship, they consider more time or even a change of government in Moscow a necessary precursor. These experts also mention a range of conditions which would need to be met for such a relationship to proceed. Many see room for improved cooperation, but would not go as far as using the term strategic partnership to describe it.

Dr. Andres Kasekamp from the Estonian Foreign Policy Institute states that there is "no hope with the current regime" in Moscow for the development of a strategic partnership between Russia and the West.

While **Lukasz Kulesa** from the Polish Institute of International Affairs sees the possibility of a different kind of relationship: "On the tactical level, there can be partnership(s) formed, but not a strategic one."

Sami Faltas, from the Center for European Security Studies in The Netherlands was not so positive. "You can define the term strategic partner anyway you like, but if you take it seriously, this seems unlikely," he said. Faltas did go on to say that he was convinced that the West's and Russia's "common interests outnumber and outweigh the conflicting interests. However, the conflicting interests are such that they are likely to often lead to serious political clashes."

Prof. Dr. Hans J. Giessmann, of the Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management in Germany, says that "the Russians seem more ready for [strategic partnership] than the US, although less enthusiastically than 15 years ago. In the short run two areas look particularly promising: arms control and non-proliferation. If the two succeed here this might set a solid starting point for more..."

A partnership is possible according to **Milan Znoj** from Charles University in the Czech Republic, "if there is good will on both sides." **Dr. Hans-Georg Ehrhart** from the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy in Germany argues the EU and the United States "could convince Moscow by a coherent and long-term oriented approach based on openness and pragmatism."

Interestingly, **Jan Závěšický** of the International Institute of Political Science of Masaryk University in the Czech Republic suggests that the "US and EU and Russia have already been in a strategic partnership" and furthermore "they are broadly cooperating in a large scale of issues reaching from the economics, security, state of law, research and development, raw materials, [and] space programs."

Is the global economic crisis a window of opportunity to enhance cooperation between the US and the EU on the one side and Russia on the other side? Stay tuned for the experts' responses in the third installment of Atlantic-Community.org's four part expert survey.



3. Economic Crisis not Severe Enough to Change Kremlin Policy

In the third part of our survey, experts agree that the economic crisis is a small window of opportunity for enhanced Western-Russian cooperation, but not (yet) severe enough to make Moscow more amenable. The Kremlin might continue with its assertive foreign policy to deflect from increasing social tensions.

Russia has been hit especially hard by the economic crisis. **Katinka Barysch** of the British Center for European Reform calls it the "triple whammy of collapsing world trade, lack of finance and low oil prices" and adds that "Russia needs foreign investment, technology and market access more than before." Its economy depends more on the West than in recent years, when the skyrocketing oil and gas prices gave the Kremlin the confidence for an assertive foreign policy vis-à-vis NATO and its "near abroad."

For this and other reasons, one might assume that the global economic crisis would constitute a window of opportunity to enhance cooperation between the US and the European Union on the one side and Russia on the other.

The experts from Western think tanks and universities interviewed by Atlantic-Community.org are, however, not particularly optimistic in this regard. Nine of the 21 analysts see a chance for increased cooperation, but most of them add qualifiers and conditions. Nearly a third (six) declined to speculate on this matter, while another third of the experts was quite outspoken in describing the prospects of a more cooperative Western-Russian relationship as unlikely.

Janusz Bugajski with the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington DC points out that "Russia's brewing domestic problems precipitated by the global financial crisis will not ensure that its expansionist ambitions are aborted. On the contrary, in order to deflect attention from mounting social and regional disquiet, the Kremlin may further cultivate the sense of besiegement to threaten and destabilize various neighbors in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus and test Western reactions."

Even **Katinka Barysch**, who had stressed Russia's dependence on foreign investment and market access in this crisis, considers enhanced cooperation unlikely: "The crisis is fuelling protectionist and nationalist tendencies in Russia and the leadership looks unlikely to proceed with reforms at a time when discontent among workers and pensioners is rising."

Heiko Pääbo from the University of Tartu in Estonia comments that the "economic crisis slowed down Russia's growing self-confidence to confront to the US and Europe," but has not changed the Kremlin's ambitions, which would require a change of government or an economic crisis as severe as in the beginning of the 90s.

Eugeniusz Smolar from the Center for International Relations in Poland agrees. Russia's economic difficulties are not yet big enough to make Russian leaders "more cooperative and change their policies in two important areas: energy and relations with the neighbors."

The role of Russia's energy policy in any partnership is a common theme among most of the survey participants. **Ivo Samson** from the Research Center of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association suggests that Russia may continue to "try to use the energy policy as an instrument to divide Europe on various issues."

The longevity of the crisis is a factor highlighted also by **Marek Madej** of the Polish Institute of International Affairs. Like many analysts he adds that the prospects for increasing cooperation also depend on the economic policies adopted by the West, and points out that even the European Union and the US have different approaches.

While several experts, for instance **Teemu Naarajärvi** from the University of Helsinki, are concerned about protectionism, **Jan Závěšický** with the International Institute of Political Science of Masaryk University in the Czech Republic, is reassured by Prime Minister Putin's remarks against trade restrictions at the World Economic Forum in Davos.

Although the economic crisis might not lead to a new partnership between Russia and the West, it will certainly bring the European Union and the US closer together, argue **Maciej Mróz**, University of Wrocław, and Heiko Pääbo. However, greater unity within the European Union is even more vital. Therefore the next and final installment of this survey will outline policy recommendations to make EU countries act more cohesively vis-à-vis Russia.



4. Broad EU Debate Needed on Russia's Role

Cohesive European policy towards Russia will only happen if frank debate about the nation's desired role is expanded and deepened, according to experts from 11 European nations surveyed by Atlantic-Community.org.

In the final installment of our survey of Russian experts, we asked them to analyse what policy processes could be introduced to establish a united European position towards Russia. Many experts felt that it was difficult for Europe to have a common position towards Russia as the Union's member states all prioritize different aspects of their relationships with Russia. For example, strong states, such as Germany and France, prioritize economic issues, while Poland has concerns about Russia's imperial attitude, while others, like the United Kingdom, want to see Moscow improve human rights and press freedom.

Some experts felt that only another conflict or an energy crisis could bring the European Union to a united position on Russia. It was felt that a common energy policy was of vital importance as that more than anything else was used by Moscow to exacerbate the differences between European approaches to Russia.

It is clear that there are many policies that Europe could introduce in order to bring about a more united position on Russia, including discussions on the role of NATO and other international bodies, like the EU's Eastern Partnership, but that this process needed to start with analysis of and goals for the relationship. Europe must decide whether it values a stable Russia or one that is transformed.

Without open and ongoing dialogue on how Europe perceives Russia and what it wants from Moscow, the Center for European Reform's **Katinka Barysch** said "even seemingly unimportant EU policy decisions become a battle field for the contrasting views of the EU member states." That dialogue needed to result in a "new, broader, realist approach to Moscow," according to **Luca Ratti** from the American University of Rome.

This process would also involve, according to **Ivo Samson**, from the Slovak Foreign Policy Association, the European Union determining the limits of its "political tolerance" to Russia and work out the "red line Russia is not allowed to cross" whether that be its approach to Georgia or cutting off energy supplies. It would also help to stop thinking in Russophile and Russophobe labels as member states can vacillate between positions depending on the issue.

Similarly, **Dr Hans J. Giessmann**, from the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy, said the European Union needed to "agree on key interests among us." He said it was vital that Europe work out what role Russia would play in the European security order - "security because of, against or with Russia."

Controversially, some experts felt nothing encouraged European cohesion towards Russia more than Moscow's aggressive policies. Both the Polish Center for Foreign Affairs' **Lukasz Kulesa** and the Center for International Relations' **Eugeniusz Smolar** felt that allowing Russia to be "assertive" and "overreact" was the "greatest facilitator of unity." "The more aggressive it is in conducting its foreign and security policy, the easier it is to achieve cohesion," Kulesa said.

Another approach to encouraging policy cohesion was to encourage "real common policies on energy and security," according to **Sami Faltas** from the Center for European Security Studies in The Netherlands and many other experts. Energy policy was of huge importance to the European-Russian relationship because - **Heiko Pääbo** from the University of Tartu in Estonia said - "this is the main Russian tool in the EU to disintegrate its cohesive position towards Russia."

Marek Madej of the Polish Institute of International Affairs said Russia would need to accept the principles of an Energy Charter and the European Union would need to support "member states in their disputes over gas and oil prices/transit routes etc with Russia." While the Estonian Foreign Policy Institute's **Andres Kasekamp** said the European Union should consider liberalizing its internal energy market and applying its own competition rules.

With regards to what the European Union could do, **Dr Michael Brzoska** from the Institut für Friedensforschung und Sicherheitspolitik suggests that "the EU has to become a more credible actor for its own members [who feel] threatened by Russia or seeking to make separate deals with Russia. This can only be a slow process of confidence-building by the member states themselves."

While **Merijn Hartog**, of the Centre for European Security Studies, said NATO needed to rethink decisions like holding war games in Georgia "in times like these as it is evident that Russia sees it as clear provocation."

List of Survey Participants

Katinka Barysch, Centre for European Reform, United Kingdom

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Janusz Bugajski, Center for Strategic and International Studies, United States of America

Leonidas Donskis, Vytautas Magnus University, Lithuania

Dr. Hans-Georg Ehrhart, Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy, University of Hamburg, Germany

Sami Faltas, Centre for European Security Studies, The Netherlands

Dr. Hans J. Giessmann, Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, Germany

Merijn Hartog, Centre for European Security Studies, The Netherlands

Andres Kasekamp, Estonian Foreign Policy Institute, Estonia

Lukasz Kulesa, Polish Institute of International Affairs, Poland

Teemu Naarajärvi, University of Helsinki, Finland

Marek Madej, Polish Institute of International Affairs, Poland

Dr. Jeffrey Mankoff, Yale University, United States of America

Maciej Mróz, University of Wrocław, Poland

Heiko Pääbo, University of Tartu, Estonia

Luca Ratti, American University of Rome, Italy

Ivo Samson, Research Center of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association, Slovak Republic

Eugeniusz Smolar, Center for International Relations, Poland

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