

Iris Kempe

Beyond bi-lateralism. Adjusting EU-Russian relations

I. Framework

From the early 1990s, European-Russian relations were driven by two key concepts: building a market-based democracy within Russia and using EU enlargement as a mechanism to promote democratic changes throughout Central and Eastern Europe. The year 2004 can be seen as the turning point in this approach, one that has required reshaping relations between the European Union and Russia, a task that remains incomplete. President Putin's second term in office, which started in March 2004, led to changes in Russia that altered the chaotic but open-minded Yeltsin period into an era characterized by attempts to create a strong state based on (1) recentralisation of the political system, (2) the "dictatorship of law" and (3) a *Souverenaya Demokratiya*. Since 2004, Russia has staked its claim to a new role in the international system as an energy-based power to be taken seriously in international organisations, in conflict resolution and in fighting against terrorism. Even if Russia and the European Union do not share the same values, both partners need each other and widespread linkages have superseded Cold War thinking.

Russia an energy based
rentier state

By 2004 the European Union was a success story of simultaneous broadening and deepening. The EU grew to 27 member-states, eight of them from the former Soviet bloc and sensitive about building new relations with the Kremlin. Since then, however, European integration has suffered from both the failure to adopt the constitutional treaty and a more general enlargement fatigue. Decisionmaking in the EU of 27 depends greatly on national influence and strategic alliance building among members.

The European Union
of 27 member-states

The formula of partnership and cooperation between Russia and the EU is a low ebb. A genuine European position is still steeped in the spirit of the 1990s, when EU enlargement guided democratic transition in Central and Eastern Europe. But neither the rhetoric of a democratic Russia that is an integral part of the West nor an EU strategic partnership with Russia functions any longer. This deterioration of relations affects more than just Russia itself. Moscow sees countries such as Ukraine, Georgia, Belarus and Kazakhstan as its "near abroad," while Brussels regards them as the "new neighbourhood." Disputes with the Kremlin are also carried out by proxy in these states.

Partnership and
cooperation:
an outdated strategic
framework

Individual governments have been using EU institutions to pursue narrow national interests, rather than acting within the Union's framework. To illustrate the current situation one has to differentiate between three groups of actors: first, the group of Russia sceptics, who are guided by legacies of the past and are blocking

cooperation with Russia. The Polish veto of the mandate for a new Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, the problem of the Druzhba pipeline in Lithuania and the conflict surrounding Tallinn's war memorial are all examples. Second are countries, which do not care much about Moscow, such as Portugal and Greece. Third are the proponents of fruitful relations with Russia, such as Finland and Germany.

II. The negative impact of national solo acts

Subordinating European
Solidarity of values for
economic interests

Some countries use tension with Russia in connection with paying historic debts. Others find it useful to distract from other issues (the British position in Iraq for example), while for others it plays a role in domestic politics (competition within Germany's grand coalition, for example). Beyond this instrumentalisation, national solo acts are first and foremost caused by conflicting values. At the same time, economic initiatives driven by the interests of single EU member states are bypassing deadlocked EU-Russian relations while also taking advantage of other member-states' reservations. For example, the North Stream gas pipeline, directly connecting Vyborg, Russia, with Greifswald, Germany, literally bypasses Polish, Lithuanian, Swedish and other countries' economic, security and ecological interests. The current British-Russian conflict combines economic interests on the one hand with strong value dissonances on the other. While the first motive prevents London from overreacting, the British government convinced the Portuguese EU Presidency to issue a statement on July 18 calling on Russia to extradite Andrei Lugovoi. Both cases show how European solidarity of values can be subordinated to economic interests.

III. The character and shortcomings of alliance building

After the turning point of 2004, prioritising a European consensus over national interests in EU-Russian relations has been increasingly difficult. Running Russian relations bilaterally, however, includes the danger of undermining the interests of other EU members, circumventing EU processes and challenging the EU's external capacity in general. Bilateral cooperation does have some positive impact in EU-Russian relations.

The impact of driving forces,
alliances of sceptics and EU
members not being interested
in Russia

Alliance building depends on two main factors: geographic and historic proximity. As a reaction to the American military intervention in Iraq, Paris and Berlin used their historic concept of alliance building with Moscow to add weight to their position. This was also the very moment when the concept of "old" and "new" Europe was born, complicating EU policy toward Russia from the other direction. In their strained relations with Russia, Tallinn, Riga and Vilnius coordinate their positions to provide both carrots and sticks. Even when the Baltic states and the Visegrad countries share very close positions on Russia, the impact of cooperation is still far from its full potential. Furthermore, the EU's Russian policy has been restricted by missing alliances between the leading proponents and the sceptics. The results of the Samara summit were an example of how taking each other more seriously would broaden European opportunities. Only once Merkel took Polish concerns more seriously was a moderate outcome possible. Had she not, a complete disaster in European-Russian relations might have resulted. In addition, the lack of cooperation among the different groups offers the Russians opportunities to play members off against each other and to undermine common EU positions.

IV. Policy Recommendations

Short term

1. The 2004 paradigm change in EU Russian relations also requires readjusting EU Russian policy adequately, a task that has not yet been fully addressed. In a short term Europe has to awake from its illusions about a Westernised Russia. A rentier state that uses energy as a foreign policy weapon is not susceptible to outside influence. So it is time for more pragmatic relations that keep in mind that Europe and Russia need each other for energy and security. At the same time, it would be short-sighted to neglect the risks related to the growing values gap between Russia and the West. In practical terms EU governments and institutions would be well advised to move from lecturing Russia on democracy, freedom of the media and the rule of law in general to pointed criticism targeted to specific issues.

Up to the point criticism

2. The national solo acts have caused more harm than good, therefore it is high time to stop using Russia policy for purposes other than shaping EU-Russian relations. From an institutional perspective, alliance building among member states should be used to its full potential. These groupings should combine EU members with differing historic experiences, geographic proximity and economic interests in Russia. Beyond the European perspective, a dialogue on building an asymmetric partnership with Russia should be put on the transatlantic agenda.

Overcoming national solo attempts

3. Putin has been using conflicts with EU member-states to demonstrate Russia's importance as a global player as well as to pay historic bills, demonstrating his position that the breakdown of the Soviet Union is the biggest tragedy of the 20th century. To reduce the vulnerability of the Central European and the Baltic states would handle this challenge well by overcoming the legacies of the past, which might otherwise burden the EU-Russian relation as a whole. Furthermore the new EU Foreign Policy Representative should create a special representative in charge of an early warning mechanism about upcoming bilateral problems that could also have an impact on the entire EU.

Solving legacies of the past in a European framework

Medium and long term

1. Policymakers should always bear in mind that the last ten to fifteen years in Russia have brought enormous and rapid changes. Continuation of the present situation is probably the last thing that one should expect. The Putin system is at pains to look permanent, but so were its predecessors. Further dynamic development is more likely, and European leaders should be prepared to take the opportunities that present themselves. In this regard upcoming elections – not perhaps the 2007-08 elections but more likely the following ones – should be followed with the considerable attention.

Russia beyond Putin

2. Following Zbigniew Brzezinski's assertion that democratic and Western-oriented states bordering Russia would restrict any kind of post-Soviet power play, the West should pay pretty close attention to the outcomes of the rainbow revolutions in countries such as Ukraine and Georgia. The EU and its member state should offering all forms of support for further domestic transition and integrate these countries into Euro-Atlantic structures.

The importance of a democratic Ukraine

A new Eastern policy

3. Adjusting EU-Russian relations can not be isolated from a Gesamtkonzept of a new European Eastern policy targeted at two main aspects: mapping the future architecture of Europe as a whole and developing further European integration, starting with successfully implementing the European reform treaty. This is a point at which bilateral relations with Russia are, for instance, similar to bilateral relations with the new neighbours, and at which the mechanisms of European policy begin to supersede the mechanisms of individual national policy. Over the long-term, national interests will be pursued within the European Union, but beyond its borders, a common European interest will be pursued.

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Center for Applied
Policy Research
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Maria-Theresia-Str. 21
81675 Munich (Germany)
Telefon +49 · 89 · 2180 1300
Telefax +49 · 89 · 2180 1329
E-Mail redaktion@cap-lmu.de
www.cap.lmu.de