

In search of a European Russia strategy

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A global multilateral rules-based order, supported by a pro-active and interventionist United States, is gradually being replaced by a more fragmented world, in which geopolitics and geo-economics are becoming the dominant factors and universal rules, norms, and values are increasingly questioned. For the EU such developments are particularly challenging, as it has long perceived itself as a post-Westphalian soft power, mainly projecting its norms and values in its relations with both its direct neighbors and the world at large. A more isolationist US, a more assertive Russia, and the growing global influence of China have raised questions about the EU's place and role in the world, which become even more pertinent after Brexit. Therefore, Commission President Von der Leyen intends to lead a “geopolitical Commission” and we are hearing calls for European *strategic autonomy* or even *strategic sovereignty*.¹

Against this background, the EU will also need a strategic and more effective approach in its relations with Russia, which since the Ukraine crisis have remained in a fundamental deadlock. Recently France has attempted to enter into a broader bilateral dialogue with Russia, which to date has achieved minimal results and suffers from a lack of broader EU support for renewed engagement. As other member states have also been struggling with their (bilateral) Russia policies, including the Netherlands with its own recently published “Russia strategy,” an overarching European approach towards Russia is long overdue, in order to counter Moscow's tendencies to ignore the EU as such and work bilaterally with mainly the bigger EU member states, like Germany and France. Ultimately, the lack of a unified approach serves only Russian interests.

DEADLOCK IN EU-RUSSIA RELATIONS

The Ukraine crisis has led to a paradigm shift in EU-Russia relations, as the annexation of Crimea and Russian military intervention in Eastern Ukraine are perceived as fundamental breaches of international law and the European security order, as constructed after the end of the

Cold War. The fundamental principles and common values, as mentioned in e.g. the EU-Russia Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, have been violated, and trust in a constructive and productive dialogue with Russia has been undermined, including by ongoing disinformation campaigns, which have become essential elements in Russia's conflict with the West.

After a lengthy debate, in March 2016 the EU formulated its “Five principles for relations with Russia”, which constituted a compromise between hard-line EU member states, like Poland and the Baltic states, which primarily wanted to isolate Russia until it cooperated in a political settlement of the Ukraine crisis, and those member states still looking at possibilities for selective engagement and a restart of dialogue and cooperation, irrespective of the Ukraine issue.²

Although the EU's sanctions, especially those connected to Russia's full cooperation in the implementation of the Minsk Agreements, have been constantly extended, criticism about the lack of dialogue with Russia and missed



9 December 2019: President Emmanuel Macron together with President Vladimir Putin at the Elysée Palace. French President Macron has taken the initiative to reanimate negotiations on a political settlement of the Ukraine crisis in the 'Normandy Format' (photo: Frederic Legrand - Comeo/Shutterstock.com)

opportunities for cooperation have gradually increased. The deadlock in EU-Russia relations also hampers the EU in becoming a stronger player in its own Eastern and Southern Neighborhoods and in its efforts to contribute to conflict resolution, as in Syria and Libya. It seems impossible to solve any of these conflicts without involving Russia.

In practice, the principle of selective engagement with Russia on the basis of common interests, being one of the five EU principles for relations with Russia, is interpreted by the hard-line EU member states in a very restrictive manner, even excluding practical cooperation in such areas as the Arctic, digital, the Eurasian Economic Union, regional infrastructure, and the “Northern Dimension”, as suggested in an internal memorandum by EU Ambassador Ederer.³

However, the growing influence of China, increasingly spreading its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to parts of Europe (including in the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries) and the continuing trade wars be-

tween the US and China, turning the EU into a geopolitical and geo-economic battleground, have contributed to some reappraisal of relations with Moscow. In that context, French President Macron has taken the initiative to reanimate negotiations on a political settlement of the Ukraine crisis in the Normandy Format⁴ and to rebuild a wider “architecture of trust” with Russia on the European continent.⁵ Whereas earlier Germany, especially Chancellor Merkel, had been the main driving force in EU-Russia relations after the Ukraine crisis, this role seems to have now shifted to France, although so far Paris has been unable to find broad support for a European reset in relations with Moscow. But in the changing geopolitical and geo-economic environment, Chancellor Merkel, too, has recently been reaching out to President Putin to get his support for a conference on Libya in Berlin. This is yet another example of a growing awareness that the EU, if it wants to be perceived as a geopolitical player in its own right, can no longer avoid at least some forms of selective engagement with Russia, when broader interests coincide.

BILATERAL AND JOINT APPROACHES OF EU MEMBER STATES TOWARDS RUSSIA

The first European attempt at formulating a joint strategic approach towards Russia was the process of negotiating a Common Strategy on Russia in 1999. However, the final result proved to be neither very common, nor really strategic. Basically, it was the lowest common denominator on which consensus could be reached at a time when particularly the bigger EU member states, like Germany and France, were willing to *Europeanise* only part of their relations with Russia, while reserving other parts, like energy relations, to be treated bilaterally as purely commercial dealings, irrespective of broader geopolitical consequences.⁶

Therefore, the more ambitious initiatives for EU-Russia cooperation also originated with Germany and France, when it simultaneously suited their particular bilateral interests in dealing with Russia and/or their broader geopolitical ambitions. In this context, France took the initiative, which led to the adoption in the early 2000s of the Common Spaces between the EU and Russia on economy; freedom, security and justice; external security and research and education, including culture. And the German concept of *Annaeherung durch Verflechtung* (rapprochement through linkage), which Foreign Minister Steinmeier introduced in 2006 and which led to a bilateral German-Russian Partnership for Modernisation, was “uploaded” by Berlin to the EU-level and developed into an EU-Russia Partnership for Modernization.

This state of affairs led to growing frustration among those Central and Eastern European members, which acceded in 2004 and which tried to gain more influence on EU-Russia policies, based on their own historical experiences with Russia. In that sense, EU relations with an increasingly more assertive Russia became already more complicated long before the Ukraine crisis.⁷ The Ukraine crisis has only exposed the failure of a cooperative approach towards Russia, which was based on the assumption that increased economic interdependencies would lead to an ever closer strategic partnership between the EU and Russia and make military conflict in Europe unthinkable. In this sense, the more hard-line EU member states were proven right and their wish for a more geopolitical approach seems justified.

During the Ukraine crisis, Germany would take the lead, together with France, in an EU-supported effort to find a negotiated and non-military solution in dialogue with both Russia and Ukraine. Berlin could gain the trust of other EU member states (including the Central and Eastern European partners) because it could effectively play the role of honest broker, as it accepted that German

business interests would also suffer from the Russian counter-sanctions against the EU.⁸ However, Berlin's opposition to fully include energy relations with Russia, including the construction of Nordstream 2, in a broader European geopolitical approach towards Russia, has damaged its position as a trusted negotiator on behalf of the EU towards Russia in the eyes of Central European states, like Poland.

Therefore, it has now been left to a geopolitically ambitious French President to take the initiative to improve dialogue and identify options for selective engagement with Russia. For France, relations with Russia have always been connected to a broader geopolitical approach, which would enable France (or now increasingly the EU) to act as a more autonomous actor vis-à-vis the United States in particular. In the context of the current geopolitical and geo-economic battles between the US and China, President Macron seems to envisage a window of opportunity for improving relations with Russia by offering Moscow alternative options to increased Russian dependence on Beijing. Furthermore, France also seems to be looking at increased cooperation with Russia in the Middle East and North Africa (Syria and Libya in particular) and in some of the conflict-ridden states in sub-Saharan Africa, in which Russian and Chinese influence is growing as well. But in order to gain European support for a reset in relations with Russia, President Macron would have to convince not only Berlin, but also Warsaw. And the most effective way of doing so seems to be making real progress in the negotiations on a settlement of the Ukraine conflict.

THE NEW DUTCH ‘RUSSIA STRATEGY’

At the end of 2018 the Dutch Parliament requested the Government to draw up a strategy on Russia, arguing that the Netherlands, the EU, and Russia have an interest in good economic and political relations, even though these relations are currently under pressure. However, any such strategy can be effective only if considered in broader multilateral frameworks, like the EU and NATO. Therefore, the letter to Parliament on Russia explicitly refers to the EU's Five principles for relations with Russia. It also explicitly underlines the importance of EU unity, in order to have an effective policy towards a major geopolitical player, like Russia.

In practice, the recent Dutch policy letter on relations with Russia provides mainly an update of a similar document, which the previous Government had sent to Parliament in 2015 and which outlined Russia policy along the lines of “pressure and dialogue,” with the aim of bringing Russia back into compliance with the international legal order and the European security order.⁹



OSCE inspectors visiting the crash site of Malaysian airlines flight MH17 near Hrabovo Village in July 2014. Continuing Russian disinformation on MH17 still weighs heavily in Dutch relations with Russia and ensures that a return to “business as usual” remains politically unthinkable (photo: Alexander Chizhenok/Shutterstock.com)

The new Dutch policy document on relations with Russia, published in December 2019, mainly continues the policy of pressure and dialogue, while providing some more options for intensified dialogue and searching for selective cooperation in areas of joint interest. Such an approach is viewed as a realistic way of dealing with Russia, as Russia has not changed its position on issues of major concern and new developments and incidents (Skripal, OPCW hack, disinformation, election interference) have led rather to more conflict than renewed cooperation. Only in a very few cases, like the nuclear deal with Iran and the bilateral settlement of the unlawful arrest of the Greenpeace ship Arctic Sunrise (registered in the Netherlands), has dialogue with Russia led to concrete results.

Expectations for any major change in Russia’s domestic or international policies in the coming years are rather low. Therefore, no fundamental reset in relations seems warranted, especially as the trial of four suspects for their role in the downing of flight MH17 (in which almost 200 Dutch citizens were killed), will start on March 9,

2020 and cooperation with Russia on bringing the perpetrators to justice still leaves much to be desired. Continuing Russian disinformation on MH17 still weighs heavily in Dutch relations with Russia and ensures that a return to “business as usual” remains politically unthinkable.¹⁰

Therefore, Dutch internal political reasons have dictated that, in the relations with Russia, the focus will remain on “protecting and defending Dutch national security, investing in resilience and promoting the international legal order.” At the same time, the Dutch policy letter concludes, that “it is...crucial to continue engaging in dialogue, seeking to connect and, where possible, working together on areas where we share common interests. Ultimately dialogue is a key means of gaining insight into our mutual differences and promoting our own interests. It is also important for the broader relations between the Netherlands and Russia that we continue to encourage social ties between Dutch and Russian citizens and keep investing in Dutch knowledge of Russia, regardless of how the country develops in the years ahead.”



If the EU strives for a more geopolitical role, the EU High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy should revisit the “Five principles for the relations with Russia.” The new High Representative is Josep Borrell. Here he is pictured with his predecessor Federica Mogherini (photo: Alexandros Michailidis/Shutterstock.com)

While this opening for a wider dialogue is positive in itself, few details are offered in the policy letter, as to how and in which areas dialogue and cooperation can be intensified or strengthened. In that sense, it is as generally formulated as the EU’s principle on selective engagement with Russia, giving only some broad indication of possible issue areas (education, science, environment, and culture) and indicating that on economic cooperation the Dutch Government “will act in concert with our European partners” and “working within the confines of the EU sanctions.”¹¹

CHALLENGES FOR THE NEW “GEOPOLITICAL” EUROPEAN COMMISSION

The new European Commission has presented itself as a “geopolitical Commission” and has been taking first steps to create more synergies between its instruments in trade and assistance with external partners. Early discussions on strategic autonomy have already under the Juncker Commission resulted in some strengthening of European defense cooperation. And now a discussion of industrial policies and protection of European technolog-

ical champions no longer seem taboo.

However, an overarching strategic framework, indicating Europe’s aims and setting clear priorities in the EU’s external actions towards the main global and regional players, remains missing. In principle, the EU still works on the basis of the EU Global Strategy (EUGS, 2016),¹² but this document has been partly overtaken by developments, such as the election of President Trump in the US and the growing conflicts between the US and China, in which the EU has yet to define its own interests. And whereas the EU has recently adopted some strategic documents on China and has replied to China’s BRI with its own connectivity strategy, no such policy document exists on relations with Russia. In the EUGS Russia is characterized only as a “strategic challenge” (instead of a “strategic partner”), but it remains unclear what this would imply for EU policies, except for countering Russia’s political warfare by strengthening resilience (including in Eastern Partnership states) and strategic communication.

If the EU strives for a more geopolitical role, the EU High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy should revisit the Five principles for relations with Russia and rework those general principles into a more strategic set of actions towards Russia, which would not violate the EU's fundamental principles, but still pragmatically explore small steps to restore some forms of selective engagement with Russia, when this suits broader geopolitical European interests.¹³ As German expert Sabine Fischer has recently stated: "The EU should work from this strategic perspective, which is often lacking in its debates and policies. At the same time, any reflection has to start from a sober assessment of what is and is not possible between the EU and Russia. For this, each of the five principles remains of key importance. The new EU leadership needs to initiate an internal debate at the highest level to mitigate the recent divisions and achieve a reunited position on Russia."¹⁴ Especially in its relations with Russia, EU unity is essential if the EU is to be an effective geopolitical player and to counter any further Russian attempts at dividing the EU internally by addressing especially the bigger players, like France and Germany, bilaterally.

CONCLUSIONS

The new geopolitical European Commission has a unique chance of developing the EU into a more autonomous and effective actor, both towards its immediate neighbors and on the global level. In this context, the EU would have to redefine its interests in its relations with its main competitors and partners: the US, China, and Russia. And it would have to complement the present EU Global Strategy (2016) with more detailed and interrelated regional strategies to define Europe's place in the unfolding big-power competition.

In order to develop a truly European approach towards Russia, the bigger EU member states, like France or Germany, would have to reach out to the more critical EU member states to establish a common strategy, in which the widely formulated Five principles for relations with Russia are elaborated into a concrete action plan to address both the Ukraine crisis and define areas for selective engagement, based on common interests. In the longer term, such policies could serve to reconnect Russia to the European security order and enable Russia to return to the modernization of its economy and society.

A European long-term Russia strategy would also assist member states in developing more effective bilateral Russia policies, as only a joint European approach would make any impression on a Kremlin willing to engage in geopolitical hardball.

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