



# BUILDING THE EU'S STRATEGY FOR RUSSIA

A NEVER-ENDING CHALLENGE FOR THE MEMBER STATES

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# Can the EU develop a unitary strategy towards Russia?

## INTRODUCTION

When interpreting the relationship between the European Union and Russia, analysts (Trenin, 2021), journalists (Sahuquillo, 2021) and European officials (Borrell, 2021a) agree that it is bottoming out in a way not seen since the Cold War. This claim is not novel. Several incidents in the last decades, such as the Georgian-Russian War in August 2008 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014, already generated this perception of a tough stand-off between them. However, the difference today is that it might be the first time since the fall of the Soviet Union that the EU-Russia relationship has deteriorated so rapidly in such a short period of time

Over the past months, there has been little room for engagement and cooperation. Furthermore, the expulsion of diplomats on both sides and the imposition of sanctions have been the norm. Among the scenarios that have undermined the relationship between the two old acquaintances are the poisoning and subsequent imprisonment of the political opponent Alexei Navalny; the ruinous EU High Representative's visit to Moscow and the recent build-up of Russian troops close to Ukraine's border.

In the midst of these troubled times, the EU needs to step forward and resolve a prolonged issue for which it has long been criticised, namely the lack of a common strategy towards Russia. However, it is not an easy task. The relation between Russia and the EU is more of a Janus-faced one. The EU has been divided between those countries that see Russia as a traditional ally while being a stable enemy/adversary for most of the remaining ones. Consequently, the following research question arises: To what extent can the EU develop a unified foreign strategy towards Russia? This concern is relevant since the EU aspires to develop a geopolitical profile beyond its economic and norm setting power (Borrell, 2021b, p. 24). In order to succeed in this goal, the relationship with its closest neighbour Russia has to be addressed at once should Brussels seek to take part as an equal partner in the global powers' game which is increasingly developing in the multilateral world of the 21st century.

In order to find an answer to the research question, the paper follows a precise structure: firstly, the EU-Russia relationship and perceptions of each other since the fall of the Berlin Wall up to today will be explained. Secondly, there is an examination of the different ways the EU has recently attempted to build a common strategy and policy for Russia. In the sub-section, it is touched on the challenges and obstacles the EU faces when it comes to creating such a strategy. Lastly, after consciously assessing the material at disposition in the conclusion, a series of recommendations are provided in relation to the subject matter.

### RUSSIA-EU RELATIONS (1991-2015): FROM COLLABORATION TO CONFRONTATION

At the beginning of the 90s, with the fall of the Soviet Union and the reunification of Germany, the latter arose as the most assertive EU Member State with regard to the new Federation of Russia. Influenced by the *Ostpolitik* of Chancellor Willy Brandt (1969-1974), which had brought political recognition and economic cooperation between both states, Germany promoted at EU level an integrative and cooperative Russian policy known as the *Neue Ostpolitik*, German for “the New Eastern Policy”. The idea behind this support was that peace and stability in Europe could only be achieved with Russia, not in opposition to it (Meister, 2014, p. 2).

The goal was to see a creation of a European Russia, not as a potential EU Member State, but more like a permanent partner who would accept EU-devised norms and principles as well as closely cooperating with the EU on foreign policy (Trenin, 2021). Consequently, from the German point of view, Russia should not be isolated (see Dempsey, 2021). Along the same lines, Meister (2014, p. 1) pointed out that the concept of “change through rapprochement” was the policy to be followed. Indeed, in 1994, the EU and Russia signed the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement which came into effect in 1997. This agreement was intended to serve as a legal framework for the development of relations based on “respect for democracy, the principles of international law and human rights” (EU, 2016). Additionally, it established the objective of supporting Russia’s efforts to “consolidate its democracy”, to “develop its economy”, and to complete the “transition into a market economy” (EU, 2016).

However, Russia envisaged a different picture of the relationship that was to be forged with the EU. As Dugin (2012) described it, Russian leaders foresaw the creation of a ‘Greater Europe’ composed of a common economic space ranging from Lisbon to Vladivostok. This economic space was meant to be established on the grounds of security cooperation between North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organization to uphold stability across the continent (Menkiszak, 2013).

### Changing the way they looked at each other

The European Union Eastern enlargement of 2004 and 2007, along with the one of NATO, marked the beginning of the end for neither of the two visions becoming a reality. The entrance of countries such as Poland, Latvia, Estonia or the Czech Republic into the bloc brought about wariness towards the Russian giant thereby creating a schism between the EU and Russia. As a consequence, the EU found itself divided between two groups. On the one hand, there were those which have traditionally engaged in dialogue with the Kremlin, namely Germany, France, Italy and Greece. On the other hand, there were those empathising with the containment of any deep relation with Moscow, most of them being former Soviet Republics.

The opposition displayed by the ex-Soviet countries did not paralyse negotiations and agreements. Proving this point is the EU-Russian agreement on visa facilitation and readmission that was signed during the 2006 Sochi Summit. Nevertheless, Mankoff (2012, p. 161) maintained that the EU’s internal divisions resulted in rather limited policy goals towards Russia. Conversely, Russia’s mounting scepticism that sees the EU as a Trojan horse of NATO and the USA nudged the Kremlin to identify Europeans as a would-be enemy able to threaten its national security (Milosevich-Juaristi, 2018).

Mankoff (2012, p. 147) suggested that for Russia, the expansion of both NATO and the EU to the East changed its security landscape and fueled its post-imperial anxieties about strategic isolation and encirclement. Therefore, the Kremlin prompted a policy for the EU characterised by the maxim *divide et impera*. In other words, aware of Europeans’ internal division, Moscow sought to permanently drive a wedge between the Member States. Russia

could reach its goal by looking for the creation of bilateral agreements with those in Europe who favoured its stance. Simultaneously, Russia circumnavigates any attempt of Brussels to address the situation *vis-à-vis* (Mankoff, 2012, p. 156).

This tactic is quite evident when looking at Russia's Foreign Policy Concepts. As the following graph illustrates, Moscow has never considered the EU to be a single actor who seeks a common and collective goal. On the contrary, it only highlights those individual European countries that "are interested in cooperation with Russia", as stated in the 2020 Russia's Foreign Policy Results. France, Germany and Italy are mentioned almost with no exception since 2000, confirming the Kremlin's priorities. Coincidentally, Schmidt-Felzmann (2014) argued that these countries are most frequently blamed for the EU's inability to punch its weight in relations with Russia.



Moscow has also sporadically mentioned other countries such as Spain, the Netherlands, Norway or Finland. In this case, their presence in the document depends on specific events that were relevant and contributed to the Russian Foreign Policy framework. Finally, no mention whatsoever of Eastern European States can be found.

In this section, the effectiveness of Moscow's strategy based on division has proven relatively successful since the EU's capacity in foreign and security policy to counterbalance Russia has remained weak through the years (see Schmidt-Felzmann, 2014).

### The turning point: Ukraine's invasion in 2014

Events over the past decade have changed the landscape. Most notably, the Ukraine crisis of 2014 catalysed a turning point within the EU. In an unexpected move, the German chancellor Angela Merkel got all the EU Member States on board to impose sanctions on Russia. She managed to do so in 2014 after Russia annexed Crimea and invaded Ukraine's eastern Donbas region. Since then, more than ever before, Europeans became mostly united on the need to deter Russia from further foreign adventurism, as Leonard (2021) pointed out, by maintaining tough sanctions and implementing new ones targeting Russian individuals and entities. Indeed, the newly launched EU Global Human Rights Sanction Regime was first used with Russia, following the jailing of the Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny.

However, as Dempsey (2021) remarked, sanctions themselves are not a strategy but a tool. In fact, they might weaken the EU's goal to become a world-wide champion of human rights if the Member States adopt an incoherent behaviour. The EU's credibility is questioned when, adversarially to the imposition of sanctions, plans take place such as Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron's pressure on the Council of Europe to restore Russia's voting rights which had been revoked after Moscow seized the Ukrainian peninsula in 2014 (Weise, 2019). Poland, Georgia, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania and others opposed this decision., These acts of benevolence towards Russia deteriorate the EU's foreign authority and undermine its possibilities to develop a common and cohesive policy since smaller countries opposing Russia, who are actually the most affected ones, are ignored by the big European powers.

### FIVE PRINCIPLES FOR A NEW START

Despite some incoherencies among the EU Member States, current Russian authoritarianism and military drift, its increasing hard-nosed anti-west speech, and alleged

interference in EU politics have had a crucial effect on Brussels' approach. Where Russia was considered a strategic partner of the EU between 1991 and 2014, the EU Global Strategy 2016 reframed this consideration and stated that Russia currently represents an essential strategic challenge (European External Action Service, 2016, p. 33; Milosevich-Juaristi, 2018).

Then, in the same year, the former EU High Representative, Mrs Mogherini, and EU foreign ministers agreed on five guiding principles for EU-Russia relations. Paikin (2021) upheld that they aim to carve out a new equilibrium between toughness and engagement. The principles under scrutiny were: (1) full implementation of the Minsk agreements; (2) closer ties with Russia's former Soviet neighbours; (3) strengthening EU resilience to Russian threats; (4) selective engagement with Russia on specific issues such as counterterrorism; and (5) support for people-to-people contacts (Russell, 2018).

Five years later, these principles appear to have collapsed into the lack of capability from the EU to reach the stated objectives and reduce tensions between the interested parties. In fact, Kapoor (2021) suggested that the EU wrongly expects Russia to be willing to deal with the same issues that Brussels considers to be of interest. For instance, the support to Russian civil society fuels accusations of intrusion in its own domestic affairs. In addition, Mr Borrel, throughout his current HR's mandate, has been stumbling to the common strategy towards Russia. As a matter of fact, Trenin (2021) highlights that an impasse regarding this matter has characterised the pursuit of any such a common strategy.

The diplomatic disaster of Borrel's visit to Moscow last February proves this failure, almost costing him his position (Von der Burchard, 2021). While he was at a meeting with the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to discuss EU-Russia relations, the Kremlin decided to expel three European diplomats for allegedly attending demonstrations in support of Navalny. On his return to Moscow, instead of finding the support of Europeans following such a humiliating gesture, some Members of the Parliament called for his resignation.

*Divide et impera.* Once again, Russia achieved in accentuating division among Europeans to keep them from being united against their common adversary. According to Trenin

(2021), the incident epitomises, on one hand, that the EU sanctions against Russia in place since 2014 were not able to change neither the Kremlin's foreign nor its domestic policies and, on the other hand, that Russia is ready to give a bold response to European criticism. In other words, the Kremlin will tolerate no interference in Russian internal affairs.

In fact, just two months after, under the guise of routine military exercise, Russia amassed more than 100,000 troops on Ukraine's border and in annexed Crimea threatening what was approved under the Minsk agreements (Borrell, 2021c). This can be understood as being a controversial movement meant to intimidate or, as Milosevich-Juaristi (2021) put it, "a mere show of force and joint provocation to Ukraine, the EU, the US and NATO". And it worked. For some days, all these actors were in suspense, asking Russia to pull its troops back. During the very same days, Russian President Vladimir Putin took an aggressive stance in his state of the nation speech warning the West not to engage in provocations or cross red lines (Putin, 2021). Furthermore, Mr Putin added that such steps would be met with solid retaliatory measures. Through these actions, Russia shows that, despite sanctions and the trans-Atlantic cooperation used to counterbalance its power, it still has the power to intimidate its neighbours. By extension, it proved that it is willing to maintain its sphere of influence in Eastern Europe too.

### **Push back, contain, and engage**

The High Representative Borrell (2021b, p. 88) described the Kremlin's attitude as Russia's return to the logic of empires that is based on the extreme defense of national sovereignty, international recognition of its zones of influence and the determination of changing the rules of the global game. He emphasized that to negotiate and peacefully settle conflicts with these new empires - referring to China and Turkey too- the EU needs to learn the language of power.

Nevertheless, the EU is failing again to react swiftly with a clear message to the Kremlin in opposition to Russian aggressive diplomatic and military movements. As Sasse (2021) underlined, apart from rhetorical condemnations, the EU should commit to additional personal sanctions against politically influential individuals with financial assets abroad

and address the possibilities to stop or put on hold the controversial pipeline project Nord Stream 2.

Currently, Mr Borrel's new plan of action to pursue what his predecessors could not (a common strategy towards Russia) goes through adopting a three-pronged approach: push back, contain and engage (Foreign Affairs Council, 2021). The first one consists of repelling Russia's infringement of international law and human rights. The second one aims to constrain Russia when it seeks to increase its pressure on Europe, including disinformation and cyber-attacks. The last one focuses on the EU's engagement with Russia once it has an interest in doing so. It remains unclear how the High Representative wants to achieve his objectives.

This lack of information is what the EU needs to answer imminently if its goals are to find a definite consensus among the Member States. Otherwise, their trust in EU institutions' ability to handle Russia might be jeopardised. Moreover, as Bildt *et al.* (2021) accentuate, some are worried that Brussels will become even more marginalised in the EU-Russia relationship at the expense of the Member States such as France and Germany who might take the lead. In doing so, a further marginalisation of medium and small-sized states would take place. However, although a common unitary strategy towards Russia seems closer than ever due to an increasing consensus among EU Member States of the threats coming from Russia, division still remains. For instance, the recent purchase of the Russian vaccine has become a new thorn for the EU.

Still, due to the EU's nature - a *sui generis* organisation that merges supranationalism with intergovernmentalism - even the most important and influential members are not able to come up with a foreign policy that does not take into consideration its ties to the Union (Trenin, 2018). Therefore, national interests can be seen as being aligned with those of the EU. Arguably, it is only by engaging in dialogues and compromises that a shared foreign strategy towards Russia can be realised.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper has outlined, identified and critically analysed, the different ways the EU has tried to approach Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Starting with the German -and by extension, European- stance of the 90s, the EU enlargement brought broader opinions about the Russian-EU relation due to distinct historical ties. Then, the Ukraine crisis of 2014 marked a meaningful turning point that significantly influenced the successive events as the EU began to realise that Russia might not be the strategic partner it had dreamt of. During these different periods, it was evident that EU Member States do not agree on how foreign strategy of the EU towards Russia should be conducted. Since decisions in this field of the Common Foreign and Security Policy require a unanimous vote, domestic priorities and differences in power between European states have mostly prevailed over EU aspiration for being a strong and united geopolitical power.

As explained in the introduction, this paper sought to provide an answer to the question: To what extent can the EU develop a unified foreign strategy towards Russia? As previous literature suggested, this paper confirmed that single Member States' relations with Moscow contribute to the EU's incapacity to develop a unitary foreign policy towards Russia. Nonetheless, this essay proved that other factors have likewise to be taken into account. Indeed, Russia's quarrelsome strategy to undermine the bloc's cooperative actions by piling on the fault-lines that run between the Member States play a fundamental role too. So far, we can consider that Russia's strategy has been successful.

In this respect, EU officials failed to look at Russia with a jaundice eye, overconfidently expecting the Kremlin to eventually bend down to Brussels' demands and accept the 'European way of life'. For the time being, Mr Borrell's 'push back, contain and engage' strategy sounds promising, and it might have the potential to be backed by EU Members. In this sense, it is relevant to keep a keen eye on the upcoming elections in Germany where the Green Party -with a harder stance against Russian human rights violations- have chances to win. Moreover, the recent sanctions against prominent EU officials such as the president of the EU Parliament, David Sassoli, and the vice-president and EU commissioner for values and transparency, Věra Jourová, shows that Russia is looking for

an open confrontation *vis-à-vis* with the EU. Thus, it remains to see if this belligerent scenario is what Member States need to finally close ranks around the EU and agree on a common strategy.

Albeit Borrell's strategy needs a more pragmatic policymaking to make these three main lines possible. Some suggestions are proposed regarding the strategy.

- **Push back vs Russia:**

- a. Reducing energy and trade dependence and scrutinising the security risk of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline.
- b. Speaking out against human rights violations and advocating democratic values. In this sense, the sanctions should target Russian economy and Russian free enterprise.

- **Constrain Russia by:**

- a. Decoupling the EU's strategy from the US'one. Take the lead and find its own voice
- b. Increasing security, military and intelligence cooperation with countries in the EU's neighbourhood to reduce Russia's leverage

- **Engage with Russia:**

- a. On pragmatic and technocratic fields such as climate change, trade, energy, counterterrorism, travel and scientific cooperation.
- b. In multilateral forums such as the OSCE, the Council of Europe and the Arctic Council.

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