

The Russian Challenge to the European Union

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Abstract:

After a decade of sporadic cooperation between newly emergent Russia and the countries of the West, differences have mounted to the point where the two sides now confront one another with alternative visions of a future Europe – especially Central and Eastern Europe – and relations that mirror some of the worst days of the Soviet-Western cold war. The central issues in the dispute include Moscow’s commitment to rebuilding ‘Greater Russia,’ the European Union (EU)’s goal of surrounding itself with stable democratic states, and the fact that these goals conflict in post-Soviet Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. The revival of the Russian economy and political system under Vladimir Putin has enabled Moscow to use various forms of coercive diplomacy, including outright military intervention, to pursue its goals. The EU’s support for democratic governances in the region is viewed in Moscow as a direct challenge to Russia’s interests and to the Russian state itself. The result has been a confrontation between the two sides, as Russia challenges the very nature of the liberal international system put into place by the EU and its U.S. allies in the post-World War II period. It is important to note that the US-Russian relationship overlaps with and contributes to the standoff in Europe.

Keywords: Russia, European Union, United States, ‘Greater Russia’, liberal international system, confrontation

A quarter century after the end of the cold war and the collapse of the USSR relations between the Russian Federation and the European Union (EU) are frozen, in large part as a result of Russia’s military intervention in Ukraine and the ensuing economic and political sanctions imposed on Russia by both the EU and the United States. But, the friction between the two sides extends much further than to issues related to Russia’s policy toward Ukraine. Over the course of the past decade Russia has increasingly challenged the existing global order to which the member states of the EU have been strongly committed for more than half a century. It has also begun to challenge

the Union itself, as well as the democratic institutions upon which the national governments of the EU are based.¹

The focus of most of the other essays in this special issue centers on the foreign policy of the EU and their approach to relations with the Russian Federation. Here, however, the primary questions concern the factors that explain the shifts in Russian policy from the early to mid-1990s, when Russian leaders were committed to joining the international system dominated by the European Union and the United States, to the present confrontation between Russia and the West.² Why has the relationship deteriorated as it has? The argument developed to respond to this question will unfold as follows. I will first discuss briefly the essentially unsatisfactory nature of relations, from the Russian perspective, between the Russian Federation and the West in the 1990s and their role in determining the central goals that have driven Russia's evolving sense of identity and ensuing policy since Vladimir Putin came to power at the turn of the century. I will note the aspects of Western policy that seemingly led to the decision in Moscow around 2005 that cooperation with the West on terms of equality was impossible and that Russia should forge ahead to achieve its own objectives, even if that resulted in confrontation with the West. This decision resulted in the so-called 'gas wars' with Ukraine in 2006 and 2009, the Russo-Georgian war of August 2008, and more recently the intervention in Ukraine, including the absorption of Crimea, since 2013 and the ongoing military support for the government of President Bashar Hafez al-Assad of Syria, an assessment of which will comprise the final substantive section of the article. All of these Russian policies contributed to the growing confrontation in relations between Russia and the EU.

1. From the Short-lived Honeymoon to the Policy Shift under Putin

During the 1990s, when Russia was attempting to adjust to its new and reduced post-Soviet status and seemed willing to join with the West, Europe and the U.S. generally ignored Russia's interests and expanded their own involvement into what had been the Soviet sphere of domination. This expansionist approach, which included NATO intervention in former Yugoslavia despite strong Russian opposition and growing criticism of political developments in Russia itself, culminated in the middle of the 2000s with the extension of both the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the EU into Central Europe and the Baltic region, the EU's commitment to a new Eastern Neighbourhood Policy even further east, and

¹ Evidence of this effort can be seen in the recent meddling in the electoral process of some countries in the EU, support for right-wing political movements that are nationalistic and authoritarian in orientation, and similar attacks against the United States. See Schindler (2016) and Browstein (2017).

² It is important to note that it is impossible to discuss Russian-EU relations without taking into account the impact of the United States and of US-Russian relations on the former. See Kanet (2012), pp. 147-177. The current article, in part, builds on this earlier analysis.

Western support for the ‘colour revolutions’ that deposed Moscow’s allies in Kyiv, Tbilisi, and Bishkek and brought to power groups committed to closer ties with the West.

Although Russian policy toward the West began to shift already by the mid-1990s, as the United States and its NATO allies intervened militarily in former Yugoslavia and otherwise ignored or challenged Russian interests³, it was not until Vladimir Putin became president – and most clearly, after the Bush Administration’s largely unilateral decision to invade Iraq, the expansion of both NATO and the EU eastward, and the challenge of the ‘colour revolutions’ – that Moscow decided that achieving its priority foreign policy objectives on the basis of cooperation with the West was impossible. The result has been a shifting sense of identity that differentiates Russia from Europe and a growing challenge to the dominant position of the West, both in Central and Eastern Europe and globally, as Russia has pursued the goal of reestablishing its position as the preeminent regional power across Eurasia and as a top global actor.

The Western initiatives that impacted relations with Russia so very strongly had their roots in the 1990s, but expanded with the decisions of the United States to intervene militarily in Iraq as part of the new ‘war on terror’. Moscow, as well as several U.S. allies, strongly opposed that policy, which set the stage for a broader deterioration of East-West relations. The second set of developments that more directly impacted Russian relations with the European Union negatively included EU and NATO expansion, the EU’s Eastern neighbourhood policy, and EU support for the colour revolutions. Initially, although Russian leaders strongly opposed NATO’s expansion eastward, they did not oppose post-communist states joining the EU in a similar fashion.

By the early 2000s, however, the Russians recognized that EU membership not only would cut into future markets for Russian exports, but was also part of a much more comprehensive economic-political-social approach – part of the European Union’s game plan for integrating East European states and societies into the Western order and, thus, undercutting Russian long-term interests in the region. The development of the Eastern Neighbourhood program, which aimed at tying six former Soviet republics closely to the EU, without granting full membership, along with visible support for the political uprisings in several post-Soviet states referred to as the colour revolutions were important factors in the evolving tensions in Russo-EU relations. As viewed in Moscow, these were but barely disguised efforts of Western governments and Western NGO’s to shift the political orientation of these countries toward closer ties with the West.⁴ As Vladimir Putin has noted much more recently, “We see what tragic consequences the wave of so-called

3 For a detailed discussion of this change see Kanet and Ibryamova (2001), pp. 985-1001.

4 On Russian resistance to colour revolutions see Polese and Ó Beachán (2011), pp. 111-132; on the argument that the West *de facto* manipulated the colour revolutions see Roberts (2014); on the role of Poland in supporting democratic elements in Ukraine see Petrova (2014); and on the growing ideological divide between Moscow and the West see DeBardeleben (2015).

color revolutions led to. For us this is a lesson and a warning. We should do everything necessary so that nothing similar ever happens in Russia” (Korsunskaya, 2014). Thus, by about 2005 the leadership in Moscow viewed the continued entrance of post-communist states into Western political, economic and security institutions as a long-term challenge to Russia’s commitment to reestablish its dominant position in Eurasia and to reclaim its role as a major global power. This development impacted directly on relations between the two sides. President Putin’s commitment that his government would reestablish Russia’s role as a global power through a combination of assertive domestic and foreign policy initiatives and the good luck of exploding world market prices for energy Russia began to reemerge as a major player in Eurasian and world politics. It was about this time, as well, that Putin noted that the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) had been the most catastrophic geopolitical event of the twentieth century and that he began asserting that NATO and the United States were serious threats to Russian and international security.⁵

President Putin’s wide-ranging attack on the United States and the West at the Munich Security Conference in 2007 represents a rhetorical watershed in Russian foreign policy, for it announced that Russia was once again a major international actor and would no longer follow the lead of the West in pursuing its foreign and security policy interests. But, it also indicated that Russia saw itself as a pole in the international system separate from and in conflict with the West. It is at roughly this time that Moscow also began to assert itself rhetorically in response to Western charges that it was corrupting or abandoning democracy (Putin, 2007). For example, in response to EU and US criticisms of the quality of Russian democracy, the Russians argued that they had their own special form of ‘sovereign democracy’ that was much stronger on the sovereignty aspect, what Nigel Gould-Davies terms ‘sovereign globalization’ (Gould-Davies, 2016). But, concrete Russian policy actions targeting Western interests, including those of the EU, began to emerge at the same time.

The initial major confrontation with the European Union concerned the ‘gas wars’ of 2006 and 2009 between Russia and Ukraine, which included the cut-off of natural gas supplies to EU member countries in mid-winter as a spillover result from the conflict between Russia and Ukraine; the military intervention in Georgia in 2008, when the Georgian president decided to use his new US-built military to force the reintegration of secessionist territories; and economic boycotts and cyberattacks against new EU member states with which Russia was in increasing political disagreement. All of these conflicts had their roots in the West’s push eastward and Russia’s determination that further

⁵ In a speech to the Russian people in 2005 President Vladimir Putin stated: “The collapse of the Soviet Union was the biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the century. For the Russian people, it became a real drama. Tens of millions of our citizens and countrymen found themselves outside Russian territory. The epidemic of disintegration also spread to Russia itself” (Putin, 2005).

Western encroachment into what Moscow viewed as its legitimate sphere of influence had to be stopped – and reversed.

In the case of the gas wars the issue was the longstanding division over both costs of Russian supplies to Ukraine and Ukrainian transit charges for Russian gas being marketed to Europe. Until the overthrow of the pro-Russian government in Kyiv as a result of the Orange Revolution, this issue had been worked out each year. Now, however, with an EU-friendly government in Ukraine, this issue became one of relative political status of the two countries and resulted in a showdown in which Moscow accepted the costs to its longer term economic relations with the EU for failure to deliver gas supplies that resulted from the complete shutdown of gas flowing to Ukraine that was part of Moscow's goal of showing Ukraine who was the dominant actor in the dispute.⁶ As part of the commitment to reestablishing Russian dominance in post-Soviet space, Russia could not be seen as backing down in the dispute with Ukraine, even if that resulted in the longer-term cost of the EU's pursuing a strategy of diversification of its sources of energy away from such heavy reliance on Russia (Umbach, 2010, pp. 122-140) and contributed to the deterioration of relations between Russia and EU.

In many respects the underlying issue that led to the five-day war between Russia and Georgia in August 2008 and its contribution to the deterioration of Russian-EU relations had similar roots, Russia's total opposition to the continued shift of former Soviet republics toward integration into Western-dominated institutions. The Rose Revolution had brought to power in Tbilisi a government committed to closer ties to the West, including first and foremost NATO membership and expanded ties to the EU. In other words, from Moscow's perspective, developments were likely to move directly counter to Russia's reestablishing its preeminent position within former Soviet space. Even though NATO was not yet prepared to accede to President Bush's desire to admit Georgia to membership in 2008, Georgian president Saakashvili decided that the refurbished military that NATO and the United States had provided through the Partnership for Peace program could be used to resolve the longstanding problems associated with the secession by and 'frozen conflicts' with both South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The result for Georgia was a total disaster. Russian forces overwhelmed the new Georgian army, the secessionist provinces declared their formal independence, emulating the Kosovo example, and the Russian Federation officially recognized that independence. The Russian military intervention sent a clear message to several audiences – the Georgians, the Ukrainians, and the Americans most clearly – that after more than a decade of verbal opposition to NATO expansion, Russia was now in a position, and willing, to use military means to prevent it, even if this meant a further deterioration in relations with

⁶ For a discussion of Russian policy in the gas wars see Moulioukova and Kanet (2017), pp. 275-298.

both the United States and the countries of Western Europe, including Western sanctions imposed to ‘encourage’ Russia to reconsider the wisdom of its policy.⁷

Besides these broad negative developments in East-West relations that impacted negatively on the Russian-EU relationship, several other factors contributed to the increasing fridity of the relationship. Most important was the entrance of former communist states which brought with them concerns about and animosities toward Russia based on decades, or centuries, of past dealings (DeBardeleben, 2009, pp. 93-112; Schmidt-Felzman, 2014, pp. 40-60). Russia’s willingness to coerce and bully small neighbors revived serious fears among new EU members about the prospects for their longer-term security in the face of an increasingly assertive Russia. In 2007, for example, after the Estonian government decided to move a Soviet war memorial from the center of Tallinn to its international military cemetery, Russians – in both Estonia and in the Russian Federation – mounted attacks on the Estonian government in Tallinn and its embassy in Moscow. This was followed by the cut off of Russian oil and coal deliveries and a massive cyber-attack that virtually closed down the entire information technology sector of this former Soviet colony. In addition, after bilateral disagreements with Russia Poland and Lithuania used their ‘veto’ power to prevent reopening the negotiation of a new partnership agreement between the EU and Russia for more than a year and a half. At a joint meeting between the EU and Russia in May 2007, these and other issues split the two sides and precluded any meaningful agreement on issues deemed important by either side (Lowe, 2007).⁸

Thus, during the period of Putin’s second term as Russian President and into the Medvedev presidency Russian relations with the European Union and with its major member countries had deteriorated significantly. Russia no longer saw the EU as a largely irrelevant institution around which it was easily able to maneuver. Even though the European Union lacked a unified response to relations with Russia at this time on issues such as energy dependence, overall relations declined significantly. Despite various efforts on both sides, relations did not improve significantly during the four years of the Medvedev presidency. Russian challenges to the EU’s claims to moral authority and the charge that the EU pursued a double standard expanded during this period (see Neumann, 2016; Kanet, 2015, pp. 503-522; and Facon, 2008).

Thus, by the time that Vladimir Putin turned over the presidency to Dimitri Medvedev in 2008 relations between the Russian Federation and the EU had deteriorated significantly – both as part of the general developments in East-West relations that included the US, but also for reasons independent of the Russo-American confrontation. The four years of the Medvedev presidency did little to change the overall nature of

⁷ For a discussion of Russian policy leading to the five-day war in August 2005 see Nygren (2011), pp. 101-120.

⁸ See also Dempsey (2007b); Dempsey (2007a) and The Economist (2007).

Russian-EU relations, even though Medvedev was able to pursue a somewhat more liberal foreign policy (Trenin, 2014).

2. The Ukraine Crisis and the Collapse of EU-Russian Relations

In a series of articles published prior to the 2012 presidential elections in Russia, then prime minister and presidential candidate Putin laid out his new foreign policy program which was now focused on “preserving Russia’s distinct identity in a highly competitive global environment” (Putin, 2011; 2012). Abandoning the remnants of earlier efforts to integrate into the West-dominated international system, Putin emphasized the uniqueness and distinctiveness of Russian civilization and how Russia represented the core of a special Russian world composed of people who associate themselves with traditional Russian values, such as the Eastern Slavs of Belarus and Ukraine. He also argued that Russia should be the center of a large geo-economic unit, or Eurasian Union, consisting of political, cultural, economic and security ties between the states of the former Soviet republics. Putin argued the importance of defending indigenous values in a highly-globalized world and highlighted how this new vision promotes that path. He maintained that Europe has taken a negative turn from its historical model that existed prior to the 1960s and now possesses a ‘post-Christian’ identity that values moral relativism, a vague sense of identity and excessive political correctness (Gessen, 2014). Putin concluded that European countries have begun “renouncing their roots, including Christian values, which underlie Western civilization” (Voice of Russia, 2013). Putin rather emphasizes the values of old Europe, while stressing Russia’s unique ones rooted in the Orthodox Christian tradition. These values include the union between a man and a woman and the sanctity of family, religion, the centrality of the state and patriotism (Trenin, 2014). This set of arguments is relevant to relations with the West, and the EU in particular, since it lays the ideological groundwork for Russia’s merger with post-Soviet states into a Eurasian political and economic union, in direct competition with the EU’s Eastern Neighbourhood Policy and the incorporation of countries in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus into a broad EU-centred political-economic system.

By the time of the presidential election campaign of 2012, Russian leaders clearly viewed the emergence of a special relationship between the EU and additional post-Soviet states such as Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia and Georgia as a direct challenge to long-term Russian interests in the region and a threat to the campaign to reestablish Russia’s role as the dominant regional power and a major global actor. In part, as noted by Mikhail Molchanov, this confrontation between Russia and the EU resulted from the latter’s decision that those countries that opted for involvement in the EU’s Eastern Neighbourhood Policy had to forego any special economic ties with other international institutions, such as Mr. Putin’s proposed Eurasian Union. In many respects, closer

economic ties to the EU were actually economically disadvantageous to countries like Ukraine which could market its industrial products in the emerging Eurasian Union, but was hardly competitive in industrial production when dealing with the countries of the European Union (Molchanov, 2016, pp. 380-395; Molchanov, 2017, pp. 211-34).⁹ Since the EU insisted on an ‘all or nothing’ approach from those to whom they offered Neighbourhood status, countries such as Ukraine were forced to make a choice between a westward or eastward orientation.¹⁰

Therefore, when Russia began to push its Eurasian integration project, the geopolitical confrontation with the EU escalated.¹¹ This is important for our understanding of the Russian explanation of their policy in the Ukraine crisis and its impact on overall relations with the European Union. As Foreign Minister Lavrov has stated in repeating the points already made by President Putin, “The EU Eastern Partnership program was also designed to expand the West-controlled geopolitical space to the east.... There is a policy to confront the CIS countries with a hard, absolutely contrived and artificial choice – either you are with the EU or with Russia. It was the use of this approach to Ukraine that pushed that country...to a profound internal political crisis” (Lavrov, 2014).

After Vladimir Putin resumed the presidency of the Russian Federation in 2012 he moved forcefully to implement plans for the consolidation of the Eurasian Union. In the western portion of former Soviet territory this meant that Russia and the EU were both actively pursuing six states – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. In reality, the competition focused on Armenia and Ukraine and, to a lesser extent Moldova. Russia initiated a major pressure campaign to ‘encourage’ these countries to opt for EEU membership – from economic and security threats targeted against Armenia, should the latter decline to join the organization, to major loans to Ukraine as part of a membership package (Blank, 2013). By summer 2013 it was clear that Georgia and Moldova were prepared to counter Moscow and to strengthen their ties with the European Union, that Belarus and Armenia would join Russia’s Eurasian Union, and that Azerbaijan would remain outside both organisations. Ukraine, under the government of President Yanukovich, attempted to play off the EU and the EEU as long as possible and eventually scheduled a signing ceremony with the European Union for fall 2013. When Yanukovich announced in November 2013 that Ukraine

9 As Putin argued in his speech in Sevastopol justifying the occupation of Crimea, the West’s actions in eastern Europe such as support for the colour revolutions and the NATO membership promise to Georgia and Ukraine were offensive in nature. BBC News (2014).

10 The dramatic deterioration of US-Russian relations at this same time also contributed to the general decline of the EU’s relations with the EU. For example, U.S. legislation passed in 2012 targeting Russian political leaders associated with President Putin for their presumed role in the death of the Russian civil rights lawyer Sergei Magnitsky received a very hostile response in Moscow. (Seddon and Buckley, 2016)

11 Richard Sakwa maintains that EU policy has consistently attempted to exclude Russia from Europe. See Sakwa (2015b) and Sakwa (2015a).

would, instead, join the Eurasian Union (Grytsenko, 2013) massive demonstrations against his government broke out that eventually resulted in his fleeing the country, in a new Western-oriented government coming to power and to direct Russian military intervention in Ukrainian affairs, including the Russian incorporation of Crimea and support for Russian and Russophone secessionist elements in southeastern Ukraine (Barkanov, 2015, pp. 228-230).

Almost immediately the European Union and the United States introduced sanctions against Russia as punishment for its military intervention in Ukraine and in the hope of convincing the Russians to rethink their policy and to withdraw their support and their troops from the *de facto* Ukrainian civil war. As Peter van Ham has noted,

Since Russia's annexation of Crimea (in March 2014) and its on-going support for anti-government rebels in eastern Ukraine, relations with the EU have deteriorated. The EU no longer considers Russia a strategic partner and has made it clear that its sanctions policy will remain in place until Russia is prepared to recognize the integrity and sovereignty of its neighbours. (Van Ham, 2015, p. 3)

3. The Russian Challenge to the European Order

More than three years after the outbreak of the crisis in Ukraine, of Russian intervention in that crisis, and the introduction of Western sanctions, little has changed in the overall relationship. Russia has proven to be more resilient than many in the West had expected and, despite the collapse in international energy prices and the costs associated with the sanctions imposed by the European Union and the United States, the Russian economy appears to be in the process stabilizing, with growth of 1.1 and 1.2 percent predicted for 2017 and 2018 (Nelson, 2017, p. 6). More important, the sanctions and the ensuing domestic economic problems in Russia have not influenced the political leadership – or the general population, for that matter – to initiate a significant shift in Russian policy. In fact, Russia's assertive policy in Ukraine, as well as more recently in Syria, have become an important part of the Putin regime's strengthening of its political support among a large portion of the population – this is despite the economic malaise already noted as a result of the economic sanctions.

As we have demonstrated throughout this discussion, Russian relations with the EU have declined precipitously since the turn of the century and the commitment under President Putin to reestablish Russia's dominant role in regional and global affairs. Given the Russian political elite's commitment to re-establishing Russia's place as a major global power, as well as its own control over the Russian domestic political system, assertive nationalism by the Russian Federation has become an important instrument in accomplishing both of those objectives. The EU, which a quarter century ago was

viewed in Moscow as a benign development, is now seen as a competitor for influence in post-Soviet space and as an impediment to Russia's reestablishing itself as the dominant actor in Eurasia and as a major player in global affairs. This competition lay at the root of the confrontation that exploded in Ukraine in 2013-14 and that continues to sour relations four years later.

Prospects for a significant improvement in relations in the foreseeable future are not good, since the longer-term goals of Russia and those of the EU contradict one another.¹² The Russian leadership's commitment to reestablish a dominant position across as much of Eurasia as possible come into direct conflict with the specific EU objectives of stabilizing post-Soviet space in eastern Europe and the more general objectives that have been in place ever since the Second World War of establishing and strengthening, along with the United States, the liberal international order that has been dominant for the past quarter century.

As Russian leaders from Vladimir Putin to Sergei Lavrov have made most clear in recent years, Moscow does not accept the fundamental principles that underlie the current international system and will do whatever it can to undermine that system. Military intervention in Georgia and Ukraine, cyber attacks against a range of post-communist states, support for radical nationalist groups in EU member countries, meddling in the electoral processes of democratic states in Europe and North America are all tools that Russia has used in recent years to help to weaken the Western-dominated international system in place since the end of the cold war.¹³ The confrontation between Russia and the European Union will continue until one side or the other abandons some of the objectives that have been central to its policy – in effect, to its sense of identity – which is highly unlikely to occur in the near future.

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¹² The following argument is based on the assumption that the commitment to an integrated Europe that has characterized the EU for the past half century continues to flourish. The author is well aware of the negative implications of the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom and the rise of authoritarian and nationalist political movements across many EU countries for the continued strengthening of integration.

¹³ For a more complete discussion of this issue see Kanet (2017).

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