

A new strategy for relations with Russia

Abstract:

This position paper distinguishes the Russian people and Putin's regime and the critical actions proposed in this document are directed towards President Putin's regime, while stressing the urgent need to reach out to the Russian people and show that the EU is welcoming to them.

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Introduction

This position paper distinguishes the Russian people and Putin's regime and the critical actions proposed in this document are directed towards President Putin's regime, while stressing the urgent need to reach out to the Russian people and show that the EU is welcoming to them.

1. State of play of EU-Russia relations

The relations between the European Union (EU) and the Russian Federation have reached their lowest point since the end of the Cold War. This has many causes, among them: the Kremlin's repression of political opponents, including through assassination attempts and abuses of human rights, Russia's annexation of Crimea, the continued military destabilisation of Ukraine, which includes the recent amassing of 100.000 troops at Ukraine's borders, its aggressive actions in the EU's eastern and southern neighbourhoods - marked by violation of other nations' sovereignty - attempts to redraw borders by force, and other brazen breaches of international law. Not least exemplified by the indiscriminate actions against civilians in Syria, the Kremlin's responsibility in the deployment of the Buk missile system used to shoot down the MH-17 airplane and deliberately frustrating and sabotaging every possibility to bring the perpetrators to justice, as well as meddling in electoral democratic processes, the use of hybrid, cyber, disinformation and even sabotage campaigns in EU territory and that of its partners. The Russian government uses disinformation and cyber-attacks and tools to undermine political, economic and social structures in Europe and the US, tries to interfere with elections and supports and funds radical or extremist political forces which often oppose the EU and promote Russia's interests and values, which are often contradictory to those of the EU.

Russian opposition forces, such as Yabloko, PARNAS, Open Russia Foundation, Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation, are under constant intimidation and threat, including through searches of their offices, arrests and imprisonment sentences, assassination attempts (cases of Alexei Navalny and Vladimir Kara-Murza) and actual killings, such as in the case of Boris Nemtsov. Moreover, the Russian authorities have adopted and abused laws on so-called "foreign agents", "undesirable" and "extremist" organisations, in order to repress political and civil society organisations.

The Anti-Corruption Foundation headed by Alexei Navalny was declared an extremist organisation in order to stop it from participating in campaigns. Deplorably, the Putin regime supports and actively promotes the rehabilitation of Stalin by deliberately distorting history, whitewashing his totalitarian regime, whose political repression, deportations, gulags and famines left millions of people dead.

EU-Russia relations remain negatively affected by the Putin regime's disregard for international law and the Helsinki OSCE principles. Worryingly, a law allowing Russia to overrule judgements from the European Court of Human Rights was adopted in 2015 and in 2020 the constitutional changes elevated Russian law above international law.

Against this backdrop, the EU's immediate priority must be to defend the stability of the continent, our own democratic institutions and Europe's security and political order, under challenge by Russia's actions. As long as Russian authorities remain invested in destabilising our democracies and the wider European neighbourhood, the scope for improving relations with the EU will remain limited.

Russian authorities have continuously launched overt and covert operations to undermine European unity, enhance weaknesses and divide the fabric of European societies. In doing so, an ecosystem of disinformation has been deliberately created, through which the Russian society is fed with an image of a hostile Europe and NATO. The poisoning of the Russian citizens information sphere has led to significant animosity and distrust towards Europe and the West, and benefits the chances of survival for Putin's regime significantly. The COVID-19 pandemic is being used by Kremlin propaganda to seed divisions among the EU Member States, portray the EU as unable to cope with the pandemic, to seed doubts about the vaccines confirmed by the European Medicines Agency and discourage EU citizens from vaccination. The Kremlin seeks to rehabilitate Russia's image, particularly through the promotion of the Sputnik V vaccine. In this regard, the funding and human resources for the EU's East Stratcom Task Force must be substantially increased.

Russian leaders have been refusing so far to make any gesture of appeasement on any front whatsoever because they aspire to reaffirm, by using and projecting their military force, the international weight of their country and its preponderance in Russia's former frontiers.

Moreover, Russian citizens continue to be robbed of the possibility to freely choose their leaders and determine the destiny of their country. It was unfortunately too obvious during the 17-19 September 2021 elections which were not democratic elections and did not give any legitimacy to the State.

2. Russia. External challenges and internal contestation

The Kremlin is facing a number of challenges in its neighbourhood. It has reached a deadlock in Ukraine, where Russia's military aggression has brought relations to a historic low. The Kremlin is trying to avoid the same mistake in Belarus while preventing the victory of the democratic movement there. The power of the Russian leaders is challenged by popular demonstrations in Belarus and inside Russia, and for the first time in twenty years an opponent, Alexei Navalny, took on a national dimension, aspiring towards pluralism.

Vladimir Putin's 20 year-long rule is possible only through manipulation of the Russian constitution. In 2020, constitutional reforms were staged to nullify the number of presidential terms served by Putin and maintain him in power until 2036. The "nationwide vote" took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, avoided full referendum procedures and, according to Russian statisticians, was probably the most fraudulent vote in Russian history.

Russia is an authoritarian state run by President Putin and his loyalists, who occupy high-level positions within the national and regional governments, key public institutions and state-owned enterprises. Such vertical power is based on a patron-client relationship and rents, leading to massive corruption. Russia ranks 120 out of 180 countries in the 2020 Corruption Perception Index. Massive state-level corruption prevents the Russian population from quality public services, which remain underfunded, including the public healthcare, which is of a particular importance during the pandemic. Nearly 19 million Russians live under the poverty line.

Internal and external difficulties are thus mounting for President Putin, who is worn down and discredited by too many years in power. His popularity has decreased due to the fall in purchasing power and economic difficulties due to the fall in oil prices. Russia's economic model is increasingly outdated and will in time result in a further serious impoverishment of the Russian people.

Although within business circles as well as within the security forces, the debate is opening up in Moscow on the means of consolidating the regime and the changes that this will require, there is a risk that a weakening regime might resort to even more violence. Day after day the current regime is increasing the image of the West as an enemy and seeking larger division. At this stage, cooperation between the EU and the Russian Federation will become even more difficult, as the regime will be increasingly focused on its survival. This might be a regime that is able and willing to resort to more violence at home and pursue an aggressive security and foreign policy, but with a diminishing ability to sustain initiatives, control political outcomes and consolidate gains over time.

We believe that it is in the interest of both Russia and the EU to improve their bilateral relations. Among others, the EU and Russia have longstanding trade relations, the EU is the largest trading partner for Russia, while Russia is the fifth largest trading partner for the EU, and the EU is the largest investor in Russia.

While Russia is striving to remain a major geopolitical player, this will be difficult to sustain on the long term without more constructive relations with Europe. Moreover, it would be incredibly dangerous for Russian authorities to lock themselves in a privileged partnership with China, which is already advancing its pawns in Central Asia and Siberia and which would in no time vassalage a country that is both fifteen times less populated than itself, entails merely a fraction of its economic power and has the largest land mass in the world, which includes vast reserves of raw materials.

Geography, economic complementarities, and the interests of those on whom Russia's modernisation depends - its new urban middle classes and business circles - who consider themselves Europeans and do not dream of the Chinese model but of Europe's, might eventually push Russia to seek cooperation with the European Union.

3. The way forward: key elements for a new EU strategy towards Russia

With regard to Russia, we must push back, constrain, increase our resilience and engage

The European Union needs to adopt a more assertive, robust strategy towards Russia, with Member States readjusting and unifying their approach to Russia in a way that balances toughness and restraint.

As an outcome of his last visit to Moscow, the HR/VP Josep Borrell has proposed a new strategy the European Union should adopt when it comes to Russia, based on three pillars, push back, constrain and engage, while the Union agreed to maintain its stance grounded within the consensual framework of the five guiding principles for EU-Russia relations: full implementation of the Minsk agreements; closer ties with EU's Eastern Partners and other neighbours; strengthening EU resilience to Russian threats; selective engagement with Russia on certain issues such as counter-terrorism; and support for people-to-people contacts.

Push back and constrain

Sanctions relating to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, to the use of chemical weapons or of cyberattacks should be complemented with Magnitsky-type sanctions concerning egregious violations of human rights in Russia, as in the case of Alexei Navalny's imprisonment since February 2021.

However, the European Union and its Member States cannot be content with a Russia policy limited to the renewal or the extension of economic sanctions, because, while it is good to react, it is even better to act.

In coordination with our transatlantic partners, we should consider adopting additional sanctions should Russia fail to reduce tensions on Ukraine's borders. Sanctions against Russia can only be lifted or mitigated once Russia has fully implemented the Minsk agreements. The European Union must update the EU Human Rights Sanctions Regime, also known as the EU Magnitsky Law, by adding corruption among sanctioned crimes and actively apply sanctions against human rights violators in Russia, including those involved in the persecution and murder of Sergei Magnitsky and persons in the so-called Navalny list. The EU must also address the influence of Russian oligarchs, who remain an important source of funding for Putin's immediate circle.

In the future, it would be helpful for the EU to look more in-depth at the economic consequences of the very sanctions it imposes. In the case of Russia or more recently Belarus, some countries, such as the Baltic States, are suffering disproportionately the consequences of the sanctions on their economies. Here, European solidarity should come into play through specific aid from the EU.

Increase resilience

COMBATING HYBRID THREATS

The EU must also improve its own security due to the threats emanating from Russia aimed at increasing tensions within the Union and its Member States: Hybrid threats, counter intelligence, cyber security, strategic communication, disinformation, close links between the Russian government and populist, secessionist and extremist parties and populist governments need more attention, investigation and active improvement.

The EU must increase its resilience, strengthen and use its capacities to react and call out Russia each time it perpetrates hybrid attack against the EU. Capacities of the EU StratCom must be expanded, as there is a vivid need to cover not only Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans, but also the increasing disinformation in the EU space.

The EU Members States and the EU institutions should enhance their coordination, fight against the threats to our democracies that are to be treated as foreign aggressions, accompanied with proper sanctions, and reflected in broadening the

use of EU solidarity and collective defence clauses (Article 42(7) TEU and 222 TFEU). To counter the paralysis in response to hybrid threats effectively and increase the costs for Russia, the EU should develop avenues that allow for Member States to take collective counter measures on a voluntary basis.

The EU must also step up its strategic communication, especially to counterbalance Russian disinformation, fake news and assertive diplomacy. It should also push key digital players like Facebook and Twitter to become more active in preventing the sponsored dissemination of false information on their platforms, starting with access to data for researchers. This data should feed into the work of the EEAS, allowing for effective monitoring and countering of disinformation campaigns in the EU.

The EU should also take more action against corruption and the corrosive influence of illicit money flows to and from Russian oligarchs and government officials. Assets generated through corruption or other illicit activities at the expense of Russian or European taxpayers should not be stashed in Europe. The EU should call, for instance, all the national governments and the international organisations to publicize the figures of the assets of the main Russian leaders and oligarchs. This could be done not only with respect to Russia but extended to other countries undemocratic regimes.

The Union should also strengthen the freedom of press and media literacy within the EU, to systematically uncover disinformation by state and non-state actors by strengthening the East Stratcom Task Force and to provide accurate information on and promote EU policies, inside the EU as well as externally.

The European Parliament should make the work of its Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation (INGE) permanent and ensure a swift implementation of the incoming INGE proposals.

The EU should establish a Foreign Influence Registration (FIR) scheme: a Commission-managed register of declared activities that are undertaken for, or on behalf of, a foreign state, following examples of the United States, Australia and more recently, the United Kingdom. Lobbyists active on behalf of non-EU states are currently left unregulated and constitute an integral part of the EU political system,

The Union should also increase efforts to curb Kremlin's strategic investments, which often stem from the EU Member States through the financial flows of Russian oligarchs and companies set up to fund Russia's malign interference, and spread corruption in the EU. There is also a need to strengthen the European banking system to detect and prevent money laundering by Russia and others and should be ready, in case of new aggression from the Russian leadership, to call for the exclusion of Russia from the SWIFT payment system. In addition, EU should pay special attention to the issue of double citizenship, as it is often exploited for subversion, while continuing to insist that all Member States fully abandon their "golden passports" regimes.

DEFENCE

The EU must counter Russia's increasingly assertive attitude by developing a true common European defence, with a common strategic culture and credible capabilities, including cyber. This common European defence must reinforce the defence of EU territory, improve deterrence capabilities and enable the EU to project stability into its neighbourhood.

On the one hand, we must accelerate the constitution of a stronger common European defence, which simultaneously reinforces NATO, so that our rejection of the Kremlin's aggression becomes an ability not to let ourselves or our allies be intimidated. However, all developments in the field of security and defence must be without prejudice to the security and defence policies of non-NATO EU Member States, including those that have neutrality policies.

On the other hand, we must affirm, publicly and constantly, our desire to stabilise our common continent by developing cooperation between the Union and the Russian Federation in areas of common interest (such as fighting COVID-19, climate change, and nuclear proliferation), on the basis of shared values and respect for international law, in the case of proven reciprocity and improved behaviour towards the Union and its allies, preferably limited to cases where there is an absolute dependency, but with the aim of not increasing any pressure Russia can exert on European states. We must realise that this potential process will span generations.

We will not be able to move as fast as needed in affirming a European Defence as long as many of the Member States continue to fear that this Common Defence is intended to distance the Union from the United States or at least contribute to a distancing from the US. A stronger EU defence industrial base and stronger military capabilities would not only strengthen the Union but would also simultaneously reinforce the transatlantic alliance.

Therefore, the European Union must increase its efforts to improve the Union's ability to act with a more capable, deployable, interoperable and sustainable set of military capabilities and forces in order to project itself as a strong and self-confident international actor, able to deter Russian military aggression in Europe and towards its allies. The European Defence Fund must have a sufficient level of funding in order to fully foster an innovative and competitive defence industrial base that will contribute to much-needed EU strategic autonomy. Moreover, military mobility and interoperability projects need to be strengthened in order to help Member States act faster and more effectively in the context of a future possible conflict, including by funding dual-use transport infrastructure and simplifying diplomatic clearances and customs rules.

TRANSATLANTIC COORDINATION

Improving transatlantic coordination regarding Russia will be key. Since the European continent cannot be comprehensively defended with the military

means of European armed forces, dependency on the United States is a fact to be reckoned with.

A Union whose ties with the United States would have been renewed and strengthened, whose unity of purpose would have been deepened and whose political and military dimension would have been asserted would thus be better able to call on Russia for the necessary improvement of relations between the Union and the Russian Federation.

To strengthen and unconditionally support the transatlantic alliance, we should find a better balance of political and financial responsibilities between the two main pillars of the Alliance, namely the United States and the European Union. Especially the European pillar needs strong enforcement and a significant boost.

Enhancing resilience to external challenges is an obvious interest that the EU is sharing with the United States and other democratic allies and partners.

ENERGY AND ENERGY SECURITY

Another area of vulnerability is represented by the EU's energy security, taking into account that the EU's main supplier of gas and oil is Russia. The EU must have a clear strategy on how to decrease its dependency on Russian gas and oil, to guarantee its own security; the EU should effectively implement the Green Deal through renewable electricity and a green hydrogen industry, as a way to decarbonise parts of the energy system.

The European Parliament has already manifested its concerns that the Nord Stream-2 project could reinforce the EU's dependence on Russian gas supplies, threaten the EU internal market, finance Russian expansionism in the neighbouring states, in particular in Ukraine, and has called many times for a halt on Nord Stream-2's construction.

REINFORCING OUR SUPPORT FOR OUR NEIGHBOURS AND PARTNERS

The EU must continue supporting the sovereignty and resilience of our partners who are vulnerable to Russian interference and coercion, particularly in the Western Balkans, where our enlargement policy must regain credibility and be backed up by appropriate assistance and support. The EU must make clear that it will not recognise the annexation of Crimea; that it will support free and fair elections and democratic renewal in Belarus, dissuading Russian authorities from asserting control in the country; and uphold the sovereignty and freedom of all Eastern partners to choose their political and economic alliances, and provide tangible and political support should they choose integration, reform, and closer alignment with the EU.

The EU must engage in a number of security programmes with the aim to strengthen security, military, intelligence, and cyber cooperation with countries in the Balkans, Eastern Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, where Russian forces are active and keep, together with NATO, adequate military capabilities on NATO's Eastern Flank.

The EU must also invest, together with NATO, in military and security partnerships with countries such as Ukraine and Georgia, strengthen their ground, air, naval and cyber capabilities, support the domestic defence reforms, the efforts to meet NATO interoperability standards and organise more frequent military exercises in the Black Sea Region to counter Russia's military build-ups. At the same time, the EU must invest in building up the defence capacity of countries in its neighbourhood to dissuade Russian military interventions similar to those in Ukraine. In some cases, the EU might be better placed than NATO to create security partnerships in the Eastern neighbourhood.

The Union should continue to support the fulfilment by Ukraine, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus of the political, democratic, social and legal criteria of the Union on which the EU treaties and charters are based.

The EU must recognise the European aspirations of those neighbouring countries and keep the EU doors open for willing and capable countries. There can be no compromises and concessions to appease Russia or follow its policy of spheres of influence.

Engage

SUPPORTING RUSSIAN PEOPLE AND DEMOCRACY

Equally, in its policies and outreach to Russia, the EU should make it clear that it wishes to engage with the Russian people and supports their aspirations for good governance and also maybe, one day, contribute to the renewal of Russian infrastructure through investments.

The European Union has always shown its interest in developing a more constructive dialogue with Russia. However, the Russian Federation shows no intention to engage in a productive political dialogue with the EU, especially if we address issues such as human rights and fundamental freedoms. While we should not avoid dialogue with Russian authorities and maintain channels of communication open, we should promote more intensively the dialogue throughout multilateral forums, notably the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Arctic Council or the Council of Europe.

As EU-Russia diplomatic relations are difficult, dialogue and engagement with Russian civil society are vital and should always be promoted by the European Union. We remain strongly committed to promoting human rights, fundamental

freedoms and the rule of law in Russia and, therefore, the EU must strengthen its support for independent NGOs and civil society groups that work to promote universal values. As a pluralistic and independent media environment is a key pillar of democracy, we must continue engaging in initiatives aimed at strengthening independent media and media literacy in Russia.

The EU must continue promoting good relations with the Russian citizens in a number of key areas such as education, research, science, culture, the environment and cross-border cooperation. The EU should further promote the participation of Russian students in the Erasmus+ programme, facilitate the mobility of researchers between the Union and Russia and maintain its liberal policies on visas for Russian citizens.

Dialogue with Russian organisations, cultural exchanges and cooperation on scientific projects should continue and be expanded wherever possible, though the EU should draw the line when it comes to infrastructure projects facilitating Russian interests at the expense of common European ones, such as Nord Stream 2.

The EU should continue to operate a relatively open visa policy towards Russians, which should enable fostering exchanges and dialogue at the level of civil society. The latter are the biggest recipients of Schengen visas in the world, most of which are multiple-entry and multiannual. We should consider reducing the visa fee to Russian citizens and leading an effective information campaign to show that the EU is welcoming to the Russian people.

In the undertaking that is to be engaged with Russia, the European Parliament has a specific role to play. In addition and partially different from the official contacts that the Commission and the Member States develop with the Russian authorities, this role consists in identifying persons of interest, with prominent roles in the society, who would be open to setting up a constructive dialogue and in establishing an agenda of public contacts with the Russian civil society, its universities, its major scientific and cultural institutions, its non-governmental organisations, its political movements and its artistic and intellectual circles.

4. Conclusions

Russia's actions on the global arena are provoking more and more anxiety over their involvement in a number of international and national conflicts, blockage of UN resolutions, disinformation or interference in foreign elections. Nevertheless, for the stability of the European continent, it would be important for the EU and Russia, to find common ground and have their interests intersecting at one point,

even though these are scarce. Perhaps climate and environment could be one.

Prospects for economic and political cooperation exist, but they are conditional on restoring mutual trust through Russia's respect of international law and its own commitments stemming from its OSCE and Council of Europe membership, beginning with implementation of the Minsk II Agreements and cessation of hybrid threats against Europe.

We need to strengthen the EU's role as a global player as well as the EU institutions' ability to take the next steps: the Russian challenge is important. It is not the only one, but it could constitute an important sign of the efficiency of the European Union's foreign policy.

Thirty years after the break-up of the Soviet Union, we would like to send the Russian people a message of hope, to make them understand that a partnership based on the rule of law is in the interest of both Russia and the EU, that we are saddened by the state of our relations, that we would like to rebuild them on the basis of law, trust and cooperation, our common culture and our common destiny.

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