

## European View

### **Europe's strategic East: Rethinking the EU's Russia and Eastern neighbourhood policy**

#### EDITORIAL

<b>Europe's strategic East: Rethinking the EU's Russia and Eastern neighbourhood policy</b>	3
Mikuláš Dzurinda	

#### EUROPE'S STRATEGIC EAST: RETHINKING THE EU'S RUSSIA AND EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD POLICY

<b>On Western strategy towards Russia: From 'Putin first' to 'democracy first'</b>	6
Andrius Kubilius	

<b>Boosting the EU's soft power in Eastern Partnership countries</b>	14
Michael Gahler	

<b>Strengthening the EU's resilience to hybrid threats</b>	23
Sandra Kalniete and Tomass Pildegovičs	

<b>The Russian factor in EU security policy and transatlantic relations</b>	34
Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz	

<b>As in Belarus: The beginning of the end of a reign in Russia</b>	40
Bernard Guetta	

<b>The view from Washington: How the new Biden administration views the EU's eastern neighbourhood</b>	47
Anders Åslund	

<b>Democratic Russia: Why it is not a contradiction in terms</b>	54
Leonid Gozman	

<b>Putting democracy at the heart of the EU's Russia strategy</b>	63
Roland Freudenstein	

<b>The taming of the shrew: How the West could make the Kremlin listen</b>	72
Maria Snegovaya	

## CURRENT AFFAIRS

**Finding its way in EU security and defence cooperation:  
A view from Sweden** 80

Calle Håkansson

**German–Norwegian relations in security and defence: What  
kind of partnership?** 88

Bjørn Olav Knutsen

**Closer together or further apart? The impact of the  
COVID-19 pandemic on the conflicts in the EU's eastern  
neighbourhood** 97

Katsiaryna Lozka

## SATIRICAL REVIEW

**Toss a coin to your High Representative** 106

Álvaro de la Cruz

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARIES

**Europe and Biden: Towards a New Transatlantic Pact?** 108

Jolyon Howorth

**The Potential Outcome of the Conference on the Future  
of Europe in a COVID-19 World: Strengthening  
European Democracy** 110

Olivier Le Saëc

**The Strategic Compass: Charting a New Course for  
the EU's Security and Defence Policy** 112

Niklas Nováky

**Retaking the Cities: A Plan for the Centre–Right** 113

Konrad Niklewicz



# Europe's strategic East: Rethinking the EU's Russia and Eastern neighbourhood policy

European View  
2021, Vol. 20(1) 3–5  
© The Author(s) 2021  
DOI: 10.1177/17816858211015531  
[journals.sagepub.com/home/euv](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/euv)



**Mikuláš Dzurinda**

History tells us that defining Russia becomes possible only if we introduce a second element: Europe. The relations between Europe and Russia are pivotal to understanding the state of play in international relations. This reasoning does not apply only to the period when Russia was an empire ruled by tsars or when it took the shape of the Soviet Union: it is still applicable today. As is the case for any great power, Russia under President Vladimir Putin's regime is not operating in a void. On the contrary, its internal and external actions have profound consequences for the international scene and, in particular, for Europe and its neighbours.

In recent years, Russia's foreign and domestic policy has had several troubling dimensions. The illegal annexation of Ukraine's Crimea region in 2014, hybrid warfare, the extraterritorial assassination of dissidents and attempts to influence democratic elections in the West have defined its foreign policy. Simultaneously, preventing political pluralism, suppressing opposition activities, and a lack of respect and a disregard for human rights at home have dominated its domestic policy.

It seems that the West, and most notably the EU, is on the losing end of the struggle for a fair and sustainable world order. The EU's influence in the world is at risk of fading, and if this were to happen it would negatively impact not only the EU but the international democratic community in its entirety. Therefore, the EU should win back respect and take a united and effective stance against the regime in the Kremlin. Currently, the Kremlin is able to undermine EU action by offering some member states economic benefits in the short term. Additionally, all the while that the EU has been unable to weaken Russia's autocratic regime, the Kremlin has been successfully aiding authoritarian regimes and populist forces within the EU. Russian influence inside the EU is a powerful tool of division, but we should not forget that the EU itself possesses instruments that can influence the Kremlin's policies.

---

**Corresponding author:**

M. Dzurinda, Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, 20 Rue du Commerce, 1<sup>st</sup> floor, Brussels B-1000, Belgium.

Email: [ev@martenscentre.eu](mailto:ev@martenscentre.eu)

Since Russia is directly trying to divide and confront the EU, it is high time we reversed these trends. A significant conclusion can be drawn from High Representative Josep Borrell's official visit to Moscow in February 2021. Standard political negotiations that rely on the principles of international law or human rights, or rational arguments, cannot achieve this reversal. Instead, as during the Cold War, pressure from the West is the only effective method.

The EU has an opportunity to apply such pressure: suspending or cancelling the Nord Stream 2 project, despite its imminent completion. The only way to stop it would be a withdrawal of one of the two parties. This implies that Germany should make a decision that will have a profound economic impact on both sides. Consequently, the EU member states should be ready to compensate Germany for the losses it would suffer because of the suspension of this project. The consequences of the German withdrawal would be significant. The EU would gain new international credibility and respect, demonstrating that, when it acts in a unified manner, it can achieve significant goals.

Only strength, power and pressure from the EU can bring about a turning point in the Kremlin's policies. Cancelling or suspending the Nord Stream 2 project would carry some advantages on both the external and internal levels. The regime in the Kremlin would be undermined, and Russian civil society would be encouraged to continue in its struggle for freedom and democracy. These are two of the Union's founding values. Thus, the EU should continue to emphasise their relevance: they are not empty words. They represent a political message that continues to inspire millions of people in their struggle for a better future. Having lived under the Czechoslovak Communist regime, I empathise with the commitment of Russian activists to promote democracy. The EU should never leave them standing alone.

This special issue of the *European View* was produced in collaboration with Andrius Kubilius, Member of the European Parliament (MEP) and standing rapporteur on Russia. In this issue experts and MEPs from various political groups in the European Parliament put forward ideas for an effective EU strategy towards Russia, democracy in the EU's eastern neighbourhood, and transatlantic relations and their role in dealing with the Kremlin. Our comprehensive perspective on the topic includes contributions from Andrius Kubilius himself, as well as from other MEPs from different political groups in the European Parliament. Their contributions give us new ideas and make suggestions as to how the EU should tackle one of its most pressing foreign policy challenges.

One of the most relevant topics in this issue of the *European View* is the question of whether a democratic future lies in store for Russia itself. According to Kubilius, the country could turn into a democracy in the future, and the West should prepare for this by developing a new strategy based on deterrence, containment and transformation. The future of Russia is also analysed by Roland Freudenstein, who contends that a focus on democracy should characterise our strategy with the country. He emphasises that providing support to Russia's democrats represents one of the most prominent examples of the confrontation between democracy and authoritarianism which will characterise the next decade. In addition, Leonid Gozman reminds us that Russian history has included several attempts to

build democracy. Nowadays, Russian democrats are fighting this battle against an archaic and repressive authoritarian regime.

Developing an adequate EU strategy for Russia will require action in concert with the US. Anders Åslund writes that the Biden administration will be actively engaged in Eastern Europe and the eastern neighbourhood. Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz MEP stresses that Russian influence goes far beyond its internal policy and reaches the external level. It is for this reason that re-establishing the transatlantic alliance is pivotal to guaranteeing European security. Maria Snegovaya notes that the EU and the US must consider Putin's regime a domestic problem. Therefore, there is a need to reflect on novel ways to reinforce actions that achieve the final goal of constraining Russia.

Regarding the Eastern Partnership, Michael Gahler MEP explains that Russia is trying to undermine European cooperation with the countries in this programme. To invert this trend, the EU should start resisting Russian influence by boosting its soft power in the region. Bernard Guetta MEP invokes a different course in EU–Russia relations, suggesting new forms of collaboration and cooperation agreements. He writes that this stabilisation should begin with mutual respect for the democratic will of the Belarusian citizens. Furthermore, Sandra Kalniete MEP and Tomass Pildegovičs discuss the EU's resilience to hybrid threats, which have marked EU–Russia relations in recent years. To avoid exposing further vulnerabilities, the authors recommend seven actions to strengthen resilience to disinformation and interference in democratic processes.

This issue of the *European View* also addresses other current affairs topics. Calle Håkansson explains how Sweden is influencing and reacting to current developments in EU security and defence cooperation. Bjørn Olav Knutsen investigates the close German–Norwegian security and defence partnership, which is characterised by both reciprocal trust and divergences. Finally, Katsiaryna Lozka highlights how conflict zones in the eastern neighbourhood have been weakened by the COVID-19 pandemic, and provides recommendations on how the EU can improve its response to the crisis in the region.

I hope that these contributions to the *European View* will let us better appreciate the significance for Europe of developing an effective strategy towards its East. The EU has a pivotal role to play in shaping the international landscape. To do so, it must start to tackle the issues arising in Russia and Europe's eastern neighbourhood.

### Author biography



**Mikuláš Dzurinda** is President of the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies and a former prime minister of Slovakia.



# On Western strategy towards Russia: From ‘Putin first’ to ‘democracy first’

European View  
2021, Vol. 20(1) 6–13  
© The Author(s) 2021  
DOI: 10.1177/17816858211003348  
journals.sagepub.com/home/euv



**Andrius Kubilius**

## Abstract

The article analyses two distinct approaches that Western leaders have taken to relations with Putin’s Russia. It argues that the dominant approach of fostering good relations with Vladimir Putin, prioritising these over support for longer-term democratic change in Russia, has not brought any results and is damaging the interests of Russian society, neighbouring countries and the West. The article analyses the prerequisites for deep change in Russia and argues that there is a need for the EU to comprehensively review and change its strategy towards Russia, putting democracy at its core. It discusses in detail the deterrence, containment and transformation elements of a new EU strategy. The article emphasises that the strategic approach of ‘democracy first’ in relations with Russia also relates to the future of democracy in general and should be a priority of EU–US cooperation.

## Keywords

Russia, Democracy, Transformation, EU, Elections, Success belt

## Introduction

Dreams move the world! Former US President Ronald Reagan (1984) used to say ‘America is too great for small dreams.’ One of his great dreams led to the collapse of the Soviet ‘Evil Empire’. On the European continent we are still living with the very clear big dream of ‘Europe: whole, free and at peace’. This is the dream of living in a peaceful, stable and prosperous neighbourhood. Unfortunately, today that dream remains unfinished. Parts of the former Soviet Union are still deprived of freedom, democracy and human rights. The biggest victim of this unfinished business is Russia, and President

---

### Corresponding author:

A. Kubilius, European Parliament, 60 Rue Wiertz, B-1047 Brussels, Belgium.  
Email: andrius.kubilius@europarl.europa.eu



Creative Commons CC BY: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>) which permits any use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access pages (<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage>).

Vladimir Putin's autocratic regime in the Kremlin is the biggest obstacle to that dream becoming a reality.

The Kremlin is actively using its hybrid strategy to convince us, the West, that we simply need to adapt to 'Putin's Russia', since democracy is not, in its opinion, suitable for Russia. Having always been ruled by tsars, general secretaries or authoritarian presidents, Russia is supposedly a 'special case'. With his aggressive and unpredictable behaviour Putin aims to convince the West that Russia cannot become democratic, even in the distant future. Therefore, he argues, the West needs to cohabit with 'Putin's Russia'. His message to the West is quite simple: do not provoke us with a democratic agenda, because we are unpredictable and dangerous; if provoked, we can respond with poison or even push the nuclear button.

There were and still are many in the West who believe this propaganda and echo the narrative that democracy in Russia is impossible. They believe that the West should simply accept the status quo on the European continent, adapt to a non-democratic Russia and engage with it. We have witnessed many Western attempts to engage with Putin's non-democratic regime. Former US President George W. Bush said that he had looked into Putin's eyes and got a sense of his soul. There have been proposals for a partnership for modernisation and a partnership for peace and so on. Since then, the new initiative of the 'reset' has been put forward. More recently, French President Emmanuel Macron has clearly signalled that he also does not believe in the possibility of the democratic transformation of Russia and is ready to lead the West in yet another effort to adapt to Putin's Russia. All these initiatives of the West intended to adapt to Putin's regime can simply be named 'Putin first'. They have all failed. Not only have they not led to improvements in Putin's behaviour or helped to transform Russia into a democracy, but on the contrary they have provoked Putin to behave even more aggressively. It is high time to draw the proper conclusion and finally move from a 'Putin first' to a 'democracy first' agenda in our relationship with Russia.

There is another side to the story, however. There have always been brave people in Russia, despite the efforts of the Kremlin to silence them. There have always been some in the West, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, who have not lost hope that a democratic transformation of Russia is possible in the long run. Moreover, there have always been some who believe that this transformation of Russia is, in fact, inevitable and that the West can assist Russia in it. This argument is based on the fact that historically Russia has always undergone the same European-style development, just with a significant delay. Russia was the power-centre of the last European empire, which only started to collapse in the 1990s. Since then, Russia has gone through a post-imperial phase. It is precisely because of this painful imperial nostalgia that 'Yeltsin's democracy' was doomed and collapsed, similar to the collapse of democracy in Germany's post-imperial Weimar Republic (Kailitz and Umland 2019). However, history teaches us that post-imperial syndromes, despite their traumatic pain and authoritarian nostalgia, are temporary syndromes which fade with time. This makes us believe that democracy in Russia is possible for the new generation.

Before putting forward ideas for a new Western strategy towards Russia, we need to stress that the main difference between the two distinct Western approaches (Putin first and democracy first) boils down to one thing—whether there is belief that Russia can become a more democratic, more European country, or that it is doomed to authoritarianism for ever. There are two major bodies of evidence which should be convincing enough to enable us to abandon the shallow misunderstanding that democracy in Russia is not possible. The first is based on a better understanding of the historical processes the post-imperial Russia faces. These processes, as with other post-imperial developments, make a democratic transformation unavoidable: (a) the erosion of people's loyalty towards the autocratic and autarkic regime, (b) the erosion of the post-imperial power of the Kremlin, and (c) the inevitable periodicity of Huntington waves (Huntington 1991) of democratisation (Kubilius 2020a; 2020b).

The second body of evidence comes from recent developments within and around Russia, from the democratic revolution in Belarus, continuous public protests in Khabarovsk and the democratic victory of pro-European candidate Maia Sandu in the 2020 Moldovan presidential election, to massive public protests against the Kremlin's criminal attempts to poison and detain opposition leader Alexei Navalny. All these and many other events demonstrate that changes in Russia may come as unexpectedly as they have in Belarus. Furthermore, the democratic revolution in Belarus is one of the major factors that convincingly demonstrates that democratic transformation is as possible in Russia as it is in Belarus or Ukraine. In addition, the Russian autocracy is in retreat and that opens up totally new opportunities for transformation within Russia (Dickinson 2020). Powerful arguments for putting democracy first in the Western strategy on Russia were recently presented by Washington-based D. Fried and A. S. Vershbow, two of the best global experts on Russia (Vershbow and Fried 2020).

These historical tendencies and recent developments around and within Russia are why the EU must prepare for a major democratic transformation in its neighbourhood. With this in mind, on 17 September 2020 the European Parliament adopted a special resolution *On the Situation in Russia: The Poisoning of Alexei Navalny* (European Parliament 2020). This resolution called for EU leadership with the 'utmost urgency to launch a thorough and strategic reassessment of the EU's relations with Russia . . .'. The European Parliament specifically decided to call on the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security, Josep Borrell, 'to review EU policy vis-à-vis Russia and the five guiding principles for the EU's relations with Russia and to develop a new comprehensive strategy, which will be conditional on further developments in the area of democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights by the Russian leadership and authorities'. It also asked 'the Council to immediately start preparations and adopt an EU strategy for future relations with a democratic Russia, including a broad offer of incentives and conditions to strengthen domestic tendencies towards freedom and democracy' (European Parliament 2020, 6). The European Parliament used the same language in the revision of EU strategy towards Russia in its most recent resolution *On the Arrest of Alexei Navalny*, adopted on 21 January 2021 (European Parliament 2021). Thus the European Parliament has very clearly stated that future EU relations with Russia will

depend not on ideas of ‘reset’ or ‘friendship’ with Putin or the Kremlin, but on the democratic transformation of Russia.

It is time for the West to develop a policy towards Russia that is long-term, proactive and focused on helping Russia to return to the path of democratic, European-style development. We should not have any illusions that such a transformation could happen under Putin’s leadership. Putin will not change, but people can change Russia. In Lithuania, we have stayed true to the dream of democracy in Russia for many years. This dream also grounds our initiative of an informal Forum of Friends of European Russia in the European Parliament. In the Forum we have outstanding opportunities to share and discuss ideas on the strategy that the EU needs to implement in order to assist democratic transformation in Russia. Below I present some of those ideas, framing a vision of a new EU strategy towards Russia.

### **On ‘democracy first’ in the EU strategy towards Russia**

The new EU strategy towards Russia should entail three elements—deterrence, containment and transformation. The first two elements are generally understood and already partially in place.

The deterrence strategy has a clear objective of deterring Russia’s military threat. Therefore it is not enough to simply talk about EU ‘strategic autonomy’. Securing NATO’s military presence in the Baltic region is a vital instrument of the deterrence strategy. It is only NATO which has the real capability to deter Russia. The 2017 US National Security Strategy identified Russia and China as major threats to US national security. In its own security strategies, the EU should likewise be capable of detecting the primary source of threat.

A containment strategy is necessary to effectively counter Russia’s hybrid threats in order to prevent the Kremlin from influencing the mindset of our citizens, that is, from ‘occupying’ the hearts and minds of our people, and hence affecting the outcomes of elections and the activities of political parties in EU member states. That is why the EU needs to have a consolidated, well-coordinated and holistic anti-hybrid containment strategy.

There is, however, a third element of the West’s long-term strategy towards Russia, which until now has been almost non-existent. This third element—a strategy of transformation—refers not to thinking about ways to defend ourselves from Russian threats, but to how to assist Russia’s transformation into a democratic, European-style country. While the future of Russia is for Russians to determine, the West can help. This will nevertheless require an appropriate long-term Western strategy towards Russia. A transformation of this kind is the only way for the EU to no longer be situated next to the threat we face today. The underlying idea behind the transformation strategy is simple. Three things can assist Russians seeking a transformation of their country, namely: (a) proper and targeted punishment (preventative sanctions) by the EU of those within and close to the Kremlin who are ready to ‘steal’ or corrupt elections (both inside Russia and

in the ‘near abroad’); (b) the EU’s strategic responsibility and geopolitical leadership in the creation of a ‘success belt’ of Eastern Partnership countries along the Russian border; and (c) an EU strategy for future relations with a democratic Russia, which would allow us to convey to the Russian people what they are missing out on whilst they continue with autocracy.

## **Preventative sanctions: against ‘stealing’ and corrupting elections**

During the summer last year, we watched how Alexander Lukashenko, Belarus’s disgraced leader, rigged the system to ‘steal’ the elections in Belarus: not registering candidates, putting them in jail, fabricating numbers in voting protocols and so on. There was plenty of clear evidence that he lost the election, despite all the efforts of the regime to ensure otherwise (Demidova 2020). And when people went into the streets to protest the ‘theft’ of their victory, the regime unleashed all of its criminal brutality onto the ordinary protesting citizens. The reaction of the EU evolved gradually from statements of concern at the beginning to recent packages of sanctions, though these are still less severe than expected.

The Russian authorities have recently announced new regulations which show that the Kremlin is also ready to steal the forthcoming elections to the State Duma, the lower house of the Federal Assembly of Russia. The recent poisoning of Navalny; his arrest; and the brutality inflicted by OMON, a special police unit, against those who came out in protest are indications that the Kremlin’s suppression of protests will be harsher than that which occurred in Belarus. With this, the Putin regime is showing very clearly that it is ready to pit autocracy against democracy. The EU and other established Western democracies must be clear-eyed about this: this battle is a test of the West—is the West prepared to help defend democratic values despite the brutality of authoritarian regimes? Or are authoritarian regimes stronger than democracies?

US President Joe Biden has promised to convene a global Summit of Democracies; the EU should attend to input new ideas on democracy. We should elaborate and prepare those ideas in the special EU Conference on the Future of Democracy. One of the priorities should be the defence of democratic values against authoritarian brutality. To that end, a new legal instrument—the International Convention of Democracies on the Protection of Democracy (‘Global Magnitsky Act on the Defence of Democracy’)—should be created. This would establish a very clear system of international sanctions and penalties to be imposed on autocrats who steal national elections from their citizens. Similar penalties should be established for those who support autocrats in their attempts to steal elections from their citizens (such as Putin’s support for Lukashenko, which has enabled him to continue to perpetrate brutal crimes against the Belarusian people). Autocrats should be aware of these potential sanctions in advance.

In addition to this mechanism for the preventative defence of democracy against attempts to steal elections, there is also a need for a new and much more effective

mechanism to defend democracy against corruption attempts. As A. Åslund and J. Friedlander (2020) clearly state in their powerful report, *Defending the United States Against Russian Dark Money*: ‘Russian dark money is a quietly powerful influence on the American political system’. The report argues that after the 11 September 2001 terror attacks the US learned how to effectively combat the dark money used to finance international terrorism. Now the same methods should be used to eliminate the dark money connected to Russian oligarchs, especially those who are close to the Kremlin. The fight against Russian dark money or that belonging to Lukashenko should be the most important part of a new common transatlantic agenda for the defence of democracy.

## **The transformational soft power of the EU**

### *The ‘success belt’ and the transformation of Russia*

Transformation in a country such as Russia happens when the people who want serious change start to realise that they form a majority in the society (as was the case in Belarus). In 2019, according to polls by Levada, 59% of Russians were in favour of ‘serious change’ (Arkhipov and Andrianova 2019). Inspiration for transformation can come from the international neighbourhood by power of example. The EU needs to understand that the most important instrument in its transformational soft power towards Russia would be the creation of a ‘success belt’ along the Russian border (including Ukraine and Belarus, in particular), as this would set an excellent example for Russians. One should not underestimate the impact successful, democratic and market-oriented neighbours along its borders could have on Russia. If these countries can succeed, Russia can too. This is why the success belt is the Western ‘weapon’ that poses the greatest danger to the Kremlin’s regime and is feared the most by Putin. His strategic goal in Ukraine and Belarus, as in all the Eastern Partnership countries, is to prevent the development of prosperous, democratic, stable and secure states.

That is why the West should do its utmost to thwart Putin’s strategy, which is now focused on Ukraine and Belarus. The success of Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, Armenia and Belarus is what the West can make happen, and it is currently the only instrument available to the West to help Russia transform into a pro-European country. Therefore, a clear Western strategy on ways to build a success belt along Russia’s borders (starting with Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova) must be among our top priorities. In this regard, the West needs to understand that investing in the development of the success belt is not an anti-Russia policy. It is exactly the opposite: a democracy-first policy from the West that is important for the Russian people.

### *The EU’s strategic vision on relations with a democratic Russia*

Another powerful instrument of EU soft power should be a clear message to the people of Russia about what future relations between the EU and Russia could look like if Russia finally returns to the path of democratic pro-European development. This idea was recently introduced by A. Umland (2017), and has since been elaborated by Tomi Huhtanen (2019). The West has to change the interlocutor and the content in its dialogue

with Russia. Dialogue with Putin is counterproductive, because Putin is not going to change and any overzealous Western attempts to seek dialogue with him will be further regarded as a manifestation of Western weakness. Signs of Western weakness provoke Putin into behaving even more aggressively.

Instead of directly talking to Putin, the EU must engage with the pro-European Russia of the future, addressing the majority of citizens who desire serious change in Russia. The EU should convincingly and understandably demonstrate to that silent majority the potential of EU relations with a post-imperial and non-aggressive Russia (which will happen one day!). The prospects for a pro-European Russia would be strengthened if the EU presented possible models for its integration into Western structures, as proposed by some renowned experts (Bershidsky 2018; Grygiel 2019). These could include a wide spectrum of promising future relations, such as a visa-waiver scheme, a customs union, a free trade and association agreement with the EU, and so on. This ‘EU Marshall Plan for a Democratic Russia’ could be expressly presented now in the EU strategy for relations with Russia.

Finally, this would help ordinary Russians and the Russian elite unconnected with Putin’s kleptocratic regime understand in more concrete terms what they are losing out on today because of the aggressive behaviour of the regime, and what they would gain with the evolution of a pro-European Russia (after Putin) in the long term.

## Conclusion

In sum, this is what the Western strategy towards Russia could look like. To make it happen, the West should have more faith in Russia’s capability to transform and one day embark on the path of democratic European development. Likewise, the West should trust in its own potential to assist Russia on this challenging path of transformation through a long-term strategy of support and consistent implementation. The EU’s joint efforts with its transatlantic partners should be focused here. It is in this way that our dream of a ‘Europe: whole, free and at peace’ can become a reality. Democracy in Russia: the mission *is* possible—and is also our responsibility!

## References

- Arkhipov, I., & Andrianova, A. (2019). Most Russians now want ‘decisive’ change in country, study shows. *Bloomberg*, 6 November. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-11-06/most-russians-now-want-decisive-change-in-country-study-shows>. Accessed 24 February 2021.
- Åslund, A., & Friedlander, J. (2020). *Defending the United States against Russian dark money*. Atlantic Council. November. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/defending-the-united-states-against-russian-dark-money/>. Accessed 24 February 2021.
- Bershidsky, L. (2018). Europe should woo Russia when Putin’s gone. *Bloomberg*, 27 December. <https://www.bloomberqint.com/gadfly/russia-after-putin-could-be-peaceful-with-europe-s-help>. Accessed 24 February 2021.
- Demidova, O. (2020). Светлана Тихановская объявила себя победителем выборов президента Беларуси [Svetlana Tikhonovskaya declares herself the winner of the presidential elections in Belarus]. *DW.com*, 10 August. <https://www.dw.com/ru/tihanovskaja-objavila-sebja-pobeditelem-vyborov-prezidenta-belarusi/a-54507833>. Accessed 2 February 2021.

- Dickinson, P. (2020). Russia in retreat as the Soviet collapse continues. *Atlantic Council*, 10 December. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/russia-in-retreat-as-the-soviet-collapse-continues/>. Accessed 24 February 2021.
- European Parliament. (2020). *Situation in Russia, the poisoning of Alexei Navalny*. Special Resolution (2020/2777(RSP)), 17 September. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0232\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0232_EN.html). Accessed 24 February 2021.
- European Parliament. (2021). *The arrest of Aleksei Navalny*. Special Resolution (2021/2513(RSP)), 21 January. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0018\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0018_EN.html). Accessed 24 February 2021.
- Grygiel, J. (2019). Russia after Putin is not a solved problem. *The American Interest*, 15 August. <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2019/08/15/russia-after-putin-is-not-a-solved-problem/>. Accessed 24 February 2021.
- Huhtanen, T. (2019). What can the EU offer to democratic Russia? *Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies*, 24 September. <https://www.martenscentre.eu/news/what-can-the-eu-offer-to-democratic-russia/>. Accessed January 2021.
- Huntington, S. P. (1991). *The third wave: Democratization in the late twentieth century*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Kailitz, S., & Umland, A. (2019). How post-imperial democracies die: A comparison of Weimar Germany and post-Soviet Russia. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 52(2), 105–15.
- Kubilius, A. (2020a). The end of post-Soviet autocracy? *15min.lt*, 31 July. <https://www.15min.lt/en/article/opinion/a-kubilius-the-end-of-post-soviet-autocracy-530-1355106>. Accessed 24 February 2021.
- Kubilius, A. (2020b). When will a ‘Belarusian’ democratic revolution take place in Russia? *15min.lt*, 16 September. <https://www.15min.lt/en/article/opinion/kubilius-when-will-a-belarusian-democratic-revolution-take-place-in-russia-530-1377642>. Accessed 24 February 2021.
- Reagan, R. (1984). *Address before a joint session of the Congress on the state of the union*. 25 January. <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/address-joint-session-congress-state-union-january-1984>. Accessed 24 February 2021.
- Umland, A. (2017). Preparing for and working towards a democratic Russia. *Open Democracy*, 28 December. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/preparing-for-a-democratic-russia/>. Accessed 24 February 2021.
- Vershbow, A., & Fried, D. (2020). *How the West should deal with Russia*. Atlantic Council. 23 November. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/russia-in-the-world/>. Accessed 24 February 2021.

## Author biography



**Andrius Kubilius** is a Member of the European Parliament in the Group of the European People's Party, standing rapporteur on Russia and a former prime minister of Lithuania. He is also the co-president of the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly.



# Boosting the EU's soft power in Eastern Partnership countries

European View  
2021, Vol. 20(1) 14–22  
© The Author(s) 2021  
DOI: 10.1177/1781685821999847  
journals.sagepub.com/home/euv



**Michael Gahler**

## Abstract

In 2009 the Eastern Partnership (EaP) was established, through which the EU formalised its relationships with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova. The EU's objective was to deepen cooperation; contribute to these countries' economic, political and social development; and improve stability in the region. In the past decade the EU has achieved varying degrees of closer cooperation as well as seeing considerable progress in terms of development in the EaP countries. At the same time, Russia, considering the EaP countries to be within its sphere of influence, has tried to undermine the partnership through means of disinformation and hybrid warfare. This requires the EU to further boost its soft power to counter Russia's destabilising policy in the region. This article outlines the development of the EaP and its achievements, examines Russian influence and disinformation in the region, and finally, points out possible measures to boost EU soft power to address the Russian challenge.

## Keywords

Eastern Partnership, EU, Soft power, Russia, Disinformation, Resilience

## Introduction

European integration, culminating in the establishment of the EU, is a direct result of a very costly historical lesson learnt by the European nations: after centuries of focusing on national interests at all costs, even war, in the competition for power, the European states and their people finally understood that in the long run only cooperation can create a lasting win–win situation for all. Not only has this conviction made the EU the most successful peace project in history but it also laid the foundation for the EU's economic success, through which it has generated prosperity for its 450 million citizens.

## Corresponding author:

M. Gahler, European Parliament, Rue Wiertz 60, B-1047 Bruxelles, Belgium  
Email: michael.gahler@europarl.europa.eu



However, the lasting success of the European project not only depends on internal cooperation and conditions but also on the international environment, especially the near neighbourhood of the EU. Accordingly, close cooperation with neighbouring countries in the east and south is essential to maintaining stability and security, as well as supporting economic, political and social development on the European periphery. At the same time, the EU's neighbours are equally drawn towards cooperation due to the EU's success, and it is from this that the EU's soft power is derived, notably in the economic field. This is especially the case with regard to the Eastern neighbourhood and the former Soviet republics. This interest in closer cooperation from both sides meets within the Eastern Partnership (EaP), which was initiated in 2009 to strengthen relations with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova.

While the EaP can partially be described as a success story, as will be illustrated in the next section, cooperation between the EU and the EaP countries is challenged and even undermined by Russia, which considers the EaP a threat to its (former Soviet) sphere of influence. Therefore, it is indispensable to take Russian politics in the EaP countries into account (section two) in order to define further steps to boost the EU's soft power in the East. Such a boost would counterbalance Russia's anti-EU and anti-Western campaigning (section three). It is also necessary to assess the future prospects for EU–Russia relations with regard to EaP countries (conclusion). The article points out that the EU needs to complement its efforts to develop EaP countries with measures to support the resilience of these countries in order to counter Russia's disinformation campaigns and destabilising influence in the region.

## **Elements and achievements of EU soft power in EaP countries**

EU collaboration with EaP countries aims to facilitate cooperation in the areas of economic development, governance, environmental protection, improved relations with the EU and the strengthening of civil society. Therefore, the EaP is designed as a flexible partnership, offering the respective countries the chance to decide for themselves on the desired level of cooperation. The gradual and differentiated evolution of the EaP through various agreements with its eastern neighbours (for an overview see EPRS 2020, 9) reflects this approach. The initial step was marked by agreements on visa facilitation and liberalisation that entered into force between 2011 and 2017 for five of the EaP countries, including visa-free travel for citizens of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova. In the case of Belarus, a visa facilitation and readmission agreement came into force in July 2020. These agreements provide an important basis for cooperation on the economic level and contribute to a stronger connection between the civil societies of the EU and the EaP countries. These ties are further reinforced through the Erasmus+ exchange programme for students and academic staff, which resulted in 6,200 exchanges in 2019, of which 4,547 people came from EaP countries to the EU (European Commission 2020e, 33). The visa agreements and the Erasmus+ programme, as well as other short-term exchange initiatives for young people, constitute the primary elements of EU soft power as they

strengthen ties, especially on the social level, improve mutual understanding, and offer a direct personal experience of the EU's economic and social success for EaP citizens.

A further step in the evolution of EU–EaP relations was the development of Association Agreements and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) agreements with Georgia (2016), Moldova (2016) and Ukraine (2017). With Armenia, an Association Agreement and a DCFTA have been negotiated but have not been signed due to Armenia's membership of the Eurasian Economic Union (EPRS 2020, 10). However, in 2018 a Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement provisionally came into force. Negotiations with Azerbaijan on a Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement began in 2017.

These agreements, especially the DCFTAs, reflect the strong economic ties between the EU and the EaP countries. The EU is not only the primary or secondary trading partner of the EaP countries, with a share of between 18.1% (Belarus) and 53.6% (Moldova) of the trade volume of these countries (see EPRS 2020, 10–20), but also provides substantial financial support to its eastern neighbours. In terms of financial assistance, Ukraine is at the centre of the EU's support, having received over €15 billion since 2014, of which €4.4 billion was awarded as macro-financial assistance, loans and grants bound by certain conditions and €8.6 billion was in the form of additional loans from the EU's financial institutions. EU member states complemented Union assistance to Ukraine by providing an additional €1.3 billion through bilateral cooperation (European Commission 2021). In December 2020, Ukraine received €600 million in additional macro-financial assistance within the COVID-19 emergency programme for neighbourhood countries and enlargement candidates (European Commission 2020b). Georgia and Moldova also benefit substantially from macro-financial assistance: since 2009 Georgia has received €137 million through three programmes (European Commission 2020c) and Moldova has received €190 million through two programmes since 2010 (European Commission 2020d). Additionally, these countries were awarded €100 million and €50 million respectively in macro-financial assistance in November 2020 under the COVID-19 emergency programme (European Commission 2020a).

Besides financial support, the EU also provides economic support to the EaP countries through the EU4Business programme that supports the projects of small and medium-sized enterprises. With a budget of €787.33 million in 2019, funding for 116 projects in EaP countries, ranging from 19 in Belarus to 47 in Georgia, supporting a total of 78,995 small and medium-sized enterprises, resulted in the creation of more than 117,000 jobs and the generation of €1.3 billion in extra income in the partner countries. The main beneficiaries of this programme were the partners with DCFTA agreements, with more than 50,000 jobs created in Ukraine, 31,000 in Georgia and almost 22,000 in Moldova. Around 4,000 jobs were created in each of the other three EaP countries (EU4Business 2021). Furthermore, the EU supported the employment of young people in the EaP countries between 2017 and 2020 through its EU4Youth project to the amount of €20 million (EU Neighbours 2021).

The financial support and economic cooperation described above are essential elements of the EU's soft power within the EaP countries. However, Europe's economic success is founded on its values and political culture of upholding democracy, the rule of law and human rights. To promote and foster these values in EaP countries is accordingly a crucial element in further strengthening ties and cooperation with the EU. In addition to the aforementioned conditionality of the macro-financial assistance programmes, direct cooperation to improve governance is another indispensable element of EU soft power in EaP countries. Cooperation on governance covers initiatives such as the €2.4 million of election support for Armenia in 2018, 50 projects twinning the ministries and public institutions of EU member states with those of Azerbaijan, and the training of 5,000 people working within the judicial sector in Georgia. In addition, €300 million of support has been provided to assist with Ukrainian reforms in the areas of decentralisation, anti-corruption, upholding the rule of law, public administration reform and public finance management. A further €8m was provided to a programme to prevent and fight corruption in Moldova in 2019. Furthermore, ongoing dialogues such as the justice policy dialogue in Armenia, the biannual dialogue of senior officials within the EU–Belarus Coordination and the EU–Belarus Human Rights Dialogue constitute additional instruments to foster governance development in the EaP countries and bring the EU's soft power to bear (European Commission 2021).

In the context of political dialogue, the European Parliament also plays an important role with regard to EaP countries. Within the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly, established in 2011, Members of the European Parliament engage directly with their counterparts in EaP countries, thereby fostering cooperation. Furthermore, the European Parliament also exerts its soft power through various tools that are especially visible in Ukraine: it conducted election observation missions in 2014, 2015 and 2019; has been engaged in an annual consultation with the Ukrainian parliament within the format of the Jean Monnet Dialogue since 2016; awarded the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought to Oleg Sentsov in 2018; and supports political development through the Young Leadership Programme (EPRS 2020, 7).

Finally, the EU also exerts its soft power in the EaP through the activities of non-governmental organisations, the foremost being the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) which fosters democratic development by engaging with and supporting civil society organisations, political activists and the media. In 2019, the EED supported 11 projects in 4 of the 6 EaP countries in a range of areas from anti-corruption activities to the strengthening of independent journalism and fostering political dialogue (EED 2020).

EU soft power has a positive influence on the EaP countries: this is illustrated by attitudes towards the EU in the region: 49% of EaP citizens have a positive impression of the EU, with Moldovans being the most positive (61%) and Azerbaijanis being the least (44%). This marks an improvement of 4% since 2016, while negative perceptions have also fallen, from 13% to 11%, ranging from 7% (in Georgia) to 12% (in Belarus and Ukraine). A majority of 66% also describes EU relations with their respective country as good, and 60% of all EaP citizens consider the EU trustworthy, while the Eurasian

Economic Union is only trusted by 29%. Furthermore, 53% of EaP citizens describe EU support as effective, with the highest level of agreement in Armenia (80%) and the lowest in Ukraine (46%) (EU Neighbours 2020, 1–2).

## The Russian challenge in EaP countries

While the EU is making considerable efforts to support the economic and social development of EaP countries, it is confronted by strong Russian attempts to undermine such cooperation. Perceiving the EaP countries to be part of Russia's traditional sphere of influence within its 'near abroad', Russia considers the EaP countries' relations with the EU and the West in general to be a threat to its interests. Accordingly, Russia conducts hybrid warfare activities ranging from disinformation campaigns to direct military aggression, as in Ukraine, thus creating political, economic and social instability.

With disinformation being its main tool with which to fight the West, Russia uses a strategy that combines traditional state-controlled media, such as the television broadcaster Russia Today; Internet news websites, such as Sputnik; and sophisticated social media campaigns that use trolls, bots and automated accounts to further reinforce the media messaging (Helmus et al. 2018, 1–2, 22–5). The importance of disinformation to Russian strategy is reflected in the budget dedicated to it. According to RAND Corporation, in 2014 Russia spent over \$1 billion on media activities (Helmus et al. 2018, 8).

In the EaP countries, Russia's ambitions meet several favourable conditions. The first is the prominent role of the Russian language in the region and the existence of strong ties to Russia. For instance, Russian is the primary language in Belarus, and in Moldova 50% of the population has ties to Russia (Boulègue et al. 2018, 21, 29). The second is that Russian media and social media platforms play a significant role in the region. Fifty-three per cent of EaP citizens consume Russian media, with notably high rates in Moldova (66%), Belarus (65%) and Armenia (56%) (EU Neighbours 2020a, 6–7). In Belarus, more than half of the mass media content, including news, is produced in Russia and, in 2015, Russian social media platforms possessed a market share of over 60% while Facebook's market share was less than 15% (Boulègue et al. 2018, 22). In Moldova too, a considerable proportion of media content is of Russian origin (Boulègue et al. 2018, 31). The third favourable condition is that Russia reinforces its disrupting influence in the EaP countries through government-organised non-governmental organisations, such as the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, and through support of the Orthodox Church, which is especially visible in Belarus and Moldova (Boulègue et al. 2018, 24–5, 33). Finally, the shared Soviet past, post-Soviet social experience and shared conservative values provide Russia with the basis to build a strong and attractive narrative (Helmus et al. 2018, 10).

While the communication of pro-Russian statements and anti-Western resentments is central to Russian disinformation, Russia's information warfare in the EaP countries does not primarily aim to achieve a united and closed front against the West, at least not

in the medium term. To maintain its influence in the region and to push the EU back, the Kremlin's foremost aim is to create political instability by reinforcing social and political division and polarisation in order to undermine cooperation between the EaP countries and the West. In addition to disinformation, the direct and indirect support of separatism in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, as well as the annexation of Crimea, illustrates how far the Kremlin is willing to go to achieve that end.

## Addressing the Russian challenge

Boosting the EU's soft power in the EaP countries is not primarily a question of further strengthening the instruments illustrated above. While economic cooperation, as well as the incentive- and conditionality-based approach of EU support, has already proved beneficial for the economic, political and social development of the EaP countries, the lasting success of EU–EaP cooperation largely depends on countering Russian disinformation and its disruptive influence.

The May 2020 European Council Conclusions on the EaP reflect this, stating: 'Strategic communication should remain a key task, in order to promote the visibility and benefits of the cooperation between the EU and the Eastern Partnership countries, not least in the wake of growing disinformation' (Council of the European Union 2020, 6). In that context, the Council has also called for the development of a common narrative, as well as the improvement of the EaP countries' capacity for resilience to disinformation. The latter is an especially crucial aspect for countering Russia's disruptive efforts.

With the project 'EUvsDisinfo', established in 2015, the EU provides a valuable tool to support the resilience of EU member states and neighbouring countries vis-à-vis Russian disinformation campaigns by identifying, collecting and communicating about them. Therefore, further strengthening and promoting awareness of this project in the EaP countries would increase their resilience, and especially that of their societies, to Russian disinformation.

However, this tool alone is not sufficient to strengthen EaP countries' capacity for resilience to Russian influence. Given the importance of the Russian language and high share of Russian-produced content in the media, as well as the presence of Russian websites disseminating disinformation, it is indispensable to support more independent and professional media sectors in the EaP countries. To that end, EED projects such as that supporting the Russian-language online news platform Newsmaker in Moldova and the funding of the online news portal Sova News in Georgia (EED 2020 27, 29) are of the utmost importance in order to counter Russian disinformation through professional journalism that produces content locally. Accordingly, we need greater efforts to boost local content production, especially in Russian, to increase outreach and further improve journalistic professionalism in the EaP countries. Progress in this regard could be achieved through the training of journalists and cooperation between local and EU media companies to set up specialist exchange programmes and share high-quality content produced in the EU. These efforts would need to be accompanied by measures to raise awareness

of Russian disinformation and to increase the EU's visibility at the citizen level through public information campaigns and training to improve media literacy, ideally as part of school curricula.

In the long run, however, Russia's policy in the region is likely to backfire, as we can observe is currently happening in Belarus. Russia's aggressive politics in Ukraine left an impression on Belarusian President Lukashenko, Russia's closest ally in the region, causing him to take a step back from seeking further integration with Russia, and instead to place a stronger focus on the sovereignty and self-identity of Belarus. This process of 'soft Belarusianization' (Boulègue et al. 2018, 21) has led to the further political emancipation of Belarusian citizens, culminating in protests and ongoing calls for democratisation since the rigged re-election of Lukashenko in August 2020. In the light of the risk of a potential military intervention to safeguard Russia's influence in Belarus, the claim of the protesters for their legitimate right to self-determination is accompanied by the constant reiteration that their protest is neither pro-European nor anti-Russian. This statement illustrates the difference between the approaches of the EU and Russia vis-à-vis the EaP countries: Putin's Russia only cares about its influence without taking any interest in the well-being of the people in the region, even being willing to resort to force to achieve its ends. In contrast, driven by the goal of improving stability in its immediate neighbourhood, the EaP is the EU's offer to facilitate the positive development of these countries. As the term 'offer' illustrates, engaging in cooperation with the EU is a matter of free will and choice for independent, sovereign countries, without any intention of coercion.

## **Conclusion: a destructive and unnecessary geopolitical competition**

Cooperation creates a win-win situation for all involved. This is the founding and guiding principle of the EU, which is also reflected in its soft power in international relations through the aspirations of economic and social development. The EU addresses these aspirations in the EaP countries by making substantial and generally successful efforts to facilitate economic, political and social development and transformation. At the same time, the EU is challenged by Russia, which perceives international relations as a zero-sum game and, as a consequence, considers the EaP a threat to its power and influence in its near abroad. Russia is thus conducting intense and sophisticated information warfare campaigns to undermine perceptions of the EU in the EaP countries and to increase social tensions within these states.

Without having any positive agenda for the development of the region and its citizens, Russia solely aims to perpetuate instability to prevent any long-term domestic stabilisation or consolidation and further rapprochement with the EU. This negative and even destructive approach by Russia is forcing the EU into an unnecessary geopolitical competition as regional instability poses a threat to the EU. Accordingly, strengthening the resilience of the EaP countries vis-à-vis Russian disinformation has become an additional key aspect for the success of the EaP and the stability of the region.

In that regard, the EU can provide support to empower civil society as well as to facilitate a more diverse local media landscape in order to boost its soft power. However, one has to acknowledge the fact that the EU's capacity to facilitate resilience to Russian disinformation and disruptive influences has its limits. EU funding and projects can encourage a more active and resilient civil society and contribute to a stronger local media environment, but success in countering the Russian challenge ultimately depends on the consistent and enduring efforts of the EaP countries and their citizens themselves.

## References

- Boulègue, M., Lutsevych, O., & Marin, A. (2018). *Civil society under Russia's threat: Building resilience in Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova*. Chatham House. London. <https://www.chatham-house.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2018-11-08-civil-society-russia-threat-ukraine-belarus-moldova-boulegue-lutsevych-marin.pdf>. Accessed 7 January 2021.
- Council of the European Union. (2020). *Council conclusions on Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020*. 11 May. <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7510-2020-REV-1/en/pdf>. Accessed 14 January 2021.
- EED. (2020). *Supporting people striving for democracy. Annual report 2019*. Brussels. [https://www.democracyendowment.eu/index.php?option=com\\_attachments&task=download&id=338:EED\\_AnnualReport\\_2019\\_Final\\_Web](https://www.democracyendowment.eu/index.php?option=com_attachments&task=download&id=338:EED_AnnualReport_2019_Final_Web). Accessed 6 January 2021.
- EPRS (European Parliamentary Research Service). (2020). *Eastern Partnership 3.0. Principles, priorities and prospects*. Brussels. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2020/651966/EPRS\\_IDA\(2020\)651966\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2020/651966/EPRS_IDA(2020)651966_EN.pdf). Accessed 6 January 2021.
- EU4Business. (2021). Results 2019. <https://eu4business.eu/results/>. Accessed 7 January 2021.
- EU Neighbours. (2020). *East. Annual survey report: Regional overview*. [https://www.euneighbours.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2020-06/EUNEIGHBOURS\\_east\\_AS2020report\\_EaP\\_OVERVIEW.pdf](https://www.euneighbours.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2020-06/EUNEIGHBOURS_east_AS2020report_EaP_OVERVIEW.pdf). Accessed 8 January 2021.
- EU Neighbours. (2021). EU4Youth. <https://www.euneighbours.eu/en/east/stay-informed/projects/eu4youth>. Accessed 7 January 2021.
- European Commission. (2020a). Daily news 25/11/2020. EU disburses €400 million in macro-financial assistance to Georgia, Jordan and Moldova. 25 November. [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/mex\\_20\\_2207](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/mex_20_2207). Accessed 6 January 2021.
- European Commission. (2020b). Daily news 09/12/2020. EU disburses €600 million in macro-financial assistance to Ukraine. 9 December. [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/mex\\_20\\_2357#3](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/mex_20_2357#3). Accessed 6 January 2021.
- European Commission. (2020c). *Erasmus+ annual report. Statistical annex*. <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/381dc9a5-3f4d-11eb-b27b-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>. Accessed 7 January 2021.
- European Commission. (2020d). Georgia. [https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/economic-and-fiscal-policy-coordination/international-economic-relations/enlargement-and-neighbouring-countries/neighbouring-countries-eu/neighbourhood-countries/georgia\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/economic-and-fiscal-policy-coordination/international-economic-relations/enlargement-and-neighbouring-countries/neighbouring-countries-eu/neighbourhood-countries/georgia_en). Accessed 6 January 2021.
- European Commission. (2020e). Moldova. [https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/economic-and-fiscal-policy-coordination/international-economic-relations/enlargement-and-neighbouring-countries/neighbouring-countries-eu/neighbourhood-countries/moldova\\_en#mfa-2010-2012](https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/economic-and-fiscal-policy-coordination/international-economic-relations/enlargement-and-neighbouring-countries/neighbouring-countries-eu/neighbourhood-countries/moldova_en#mfa-2010-2012). Accessed 6 January 2021.
- European Commission. (2021). European Neighbourhood Policy and enlargement negotiations. *Eastern Partnership*. [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/neighbourhood/east-en-partnership\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/neighbourhood/east-en-partnership_en). Accessed 6 January 2021.

- Helmus, T. C., Bodine-Baron, E., Radin, A., Magnuson, M., Mendelsohn, J., Marcellino, W., Bega, A., & Winkelmann, Z. (2018). *Russian social media influence. Understanding Russian propaganda in Eastern Europe*. RAND Corporation. Santa Monica, CA. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/euoparl/detail.action?docID=5352475>. Accessed 8 January 2021.
- Moshes, A. (2020). At a loss. The Kremlin has no winning Belarus strategy. *Russian Analytical Digest*, 257, 7–8. <https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/RAD257.pdf>. Accessed 8 January 2021.
- Nizhnikau, R. (2020). Russia vs. the people of Belarus: Towards a geopolitical revolution? *Russian Analytical Digest*, 257, 9–10. <https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/RAD257.pdf>. Accessed 8 January 2021.
- Yerewan Press Club, Internews Ukraine, Memo 98, Independent Journalism Center, Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics, & Belarusian Association of Journalists. (2016). *Propaganda: Deepening the gap in mutual understanding. Monitoring of the media of EaP countries and Russia*. [https://ypc.am/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/2016\\_Monitoring\\_Propaganda\\_Report\\_ENG.pdf](https://ypc.am/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/2016_Monitoring_Propaganda_Report_ENG.pdf). Accessed 7 January 2021.

### Author biography



**Michael Gahler** has been a German Member of the European Parliament in the Group of the European People's Party since 1999. He currently serves as coordinator of the European People's Party Group in the European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs and is a member of the Subcommittee on Security and Defence as well as the Delegation for Relations with South Africa. He is also a vice-chair of the European Parliament's Delegation to the Joint Parliamentary Assembly of the European Union with the African, Caribbean and Pacific countries and Standing Rapporteur on Ukraine of the European Parliament.



# Strengthening the EU's resilience to hybrid threats

European View  
2021, Vol. 20(1) 23–33  
© The Author(s) 2021  
DOI: 10.1177/17816858211004648  
[journals.sagepub.com/home/euv](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/euv)



**Sandra Kalniete**  
and **Tomass Pildegovičs**

## Abstract

Against the backdrop of the deterioration of EU–Russia relations in recent years, there has been a shift in the awareness of hybrid threats all across the Union. At the same time, there is evidence of a growing political will to strengthen resilience to these threats. While hostile foreign actors have long deployed hybrid methods to target Europe, Russia's intervention in Ukraine in 2014, interference in the 2016 US presidential election, and repeated cyber-attacks and disinformation campaigns aimed at EU member states have marked a turning point, exposing Western countries' unpreparedness and vulnerability to these threats. This article analyses the EU's resilience to hybrid warfare from institutional, regulatory and societal perspectives, with a particular focus on the information space. By drawing on case studies from member states historically at the forefront of resisting and countering Russian-backed disinformation campaigns, this article outlines the case for a whole-of-society approach to countering hybrid threats and underscores the need for EU leadership in a standard-setting capacity.

## Keywords

EU, Russia, Security, Hybrid threats, Resilience

## Introduction

In recent years, the EU and its like-minded partners around the world have woken up to the persistent and acute dangers posed by hybrid threats. While hostile state and non-state actors have long deployed hybrid methods to target the EU, Russia's hybrid warfare in Ukraine in 2014, along with its interference in the 2016 US presidential election, marked a turning point, exposing Western countries' unpreparedness and vulnerability to these threats (Renz 2016). Russia's brazen interference in democratic processes explicitly demonstrated that the EU and its member states lacked response mechanisms to engage with

---

## Corresponding author:

S. Kalniete, European Parliament, Rue Wiertz 60, Bruxelles, B-1047, Belgium.  
Email: [sandra.kalniete@europarl.europa.eu](mailto:sandra.kalniete@europarl.europa.eu)



Creative Commons CC BY: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>) which permits any use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access pages (<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage>).

emergent threats that did not constitute direct aggression but rather sought to undermine their political decision-making, cohesion and capacity for collective action (Marovic 2019). In recent years, we have witnessed numerous other instances of Russian foreign interference in the domestic affairs of EU countries, including meddling in the 2016 Brexit referendum (Sabbagh et al. 2020); financing far-right political parties in France, Hungary and Germany (Rettman 2017); spreading disinformation regarding the downing of flight MH17 (Kent 2020); and conducting targeted assassination attempts in the UK (Corera 2020) and Germany (*Deutsche Welle* 2020). At present, Europe faces a barrage of Russian disinformation regarding the COVID-19 crisis, which is cynically endangering human lives by sowing doubt about the safety of approved vaccines and the credibility of the imposed restrictions (EEAS 2020). While foreign interference or disinformation is a phenomenon by no means unique to Russia, with other state and non-state actors deploying such methods to target the EU for political or commercial reasons, this article will consider the issue of hybrid threats within the broader geopolitical context of EU–Russia relations.

The aim of this article is to examine the EU’s resilience to hybrid warfare from institutional, regulatory and societal perspectives, with a particular focus on the information space. Recognising that a wide range of activities can be subsumed under the umbrella term of ‘hybrid threats’, this article makes the methodological choice to focus on disinformation to ensure analytical depth and allow for deeper consideration of case studies. It will incorporate case studies from various EU member states, particularly the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, which have historically been at the forefront of resisting and countering Russian-backed disinformation campaigns. Consequently, this article advances the argument that the EU’s role in strengthening resilience against hybrid warfare must take a whole-of-society approach, along with facilitating international and inter-institutional cooperation and establishing common standards to mitigate vulnerabilities.

## **The nature of hybrid threats and vulnerabilities**

### *Hybrid threats*

Since Russia’s interference in the 2016 US elections and the Cambridge Analytica scandal, there has been a growing awareness of hybrid threats and foreign interference in democratic processes in Western political and academic circles. These developments have also spawned a rapidly growing research agenda on ‘hybrid warfare’, to the extent that some scholars have now begun to view this term as a buzzword and question its analytical utility (Bērziņš 2020; Renz 2016; Hartmann 2017, 1; Van Puyvelde 2015). The purpose of this article, however, is not to contribute to these conceptual debates, but rather to examine the EU’s resilience capabilities from institutional, regulatory and societal perspectives. Therefore, the article treats ‘hybrid threats’ as an umbrella term that covers a range of destabilising and synchronised civil and military actions (Fiott and Parkes 2019; Szymanski 2020, 2; Heap 2020, 18). These activities can include disinformation campaigns, cyber-attacks, inducing political or economic corruption, infiltrating agents of influence, pressuring independent media and buying up critical infrastructure (Hybrid CoE 2019, 10).

Moreover, it should, from the outset, be clarified that countering hybrid threats is primarily the competence and responsibility of member states. Unlike the EU or other international organisations, national governments have the requisite tools, including ‘intelligence and counterintelligence agencies (both civilian and military), uniformed services (ensuring public order and safety), means of communication with citizens and cyber incident response capabilities’ (Szymanski 2020, 2), to directly counter hybrid threats. At the same time, while national security falls under the purview of each member state’s vital interest, hybrid threats often transcend borders, leaving a critical complementary role to be filled by the EU in support of member states’ efforts (Dunay and Roloff 2017). In other words, the EU (and NATO) can play a key subsidiary role and offer resilience support in instances where member state responses at the national level have proven inadequate (Szymanski 2020, 2).

### *Russian foreign interference*

The effectiveness of Russia’s interference through hybrid warfare can be explained in terms of its ability to identify and exploit vulnerabilities inherent to our democratic societies. By their very nature hybrid threats are multifaceted, ambiguous and covert, rendering them very difficult to deter, identify, counter or attribute (Heap 2020, 8). Crucially, the aim of hybrid warfare is not to directly confront or attack the target, thus eliciting an immediate reaction, but rather ‘to weaken its resolve by covert means of interference calibrated to undermine its internal cohesion’ (Wigell 2019, 262). Moreover, technological developments are happening at an ever-growing pace, often restricting our capability to identify malicious practices *post factum*. The evolution of the available tools increases the reach and effectiveness of hybrid warfare in the pursuit of strategic objectives such as undermining public trust in institutions, gaining geopolitical influence and hampering institutional decision-making capabilities (Hybrid CoE 2019, 10).

Furthermore, the effectiveness of such tactics hinges on their ability to exploit the core principles, laws and values that govern democratic societies. Russia’s deployment of hybrid tools, such as disinformation campaigns, targets the inherent vulnerabilities of open and democratic systems, such as freedom of speech, freedom of the media and freedom of the markets, among others. These freedoms all represent potential avenues for foreign interference. The open pluralism of European democracies has and continues to be exploited to exacerbate existing ethnic, religious, political or economic fault-lines, thereby undermining societal cohesion. Hybrid threats thus represent a highly effective ‘wedge strategy’—a tactic aimed at fomenting polarisation and radicalisation to the point that the principles of democratic societies are stretched to their extremes (Wigell 2019, 270). Critically, once this wedge has been driven and societal cohesion has been undermined, the stage is set for further potentially escalatory hybrid activities that exploit this turmoil and lack of unity (Wigell 2019, 256). Several prominent instances of Russia’s use of wedge strategies in EU member states have involved Russian-backed social media troll and bot campaigns seeking to foment anger and polarisation amidst the ongoing COVID-19 crisis response (EEAS 2020), as well as during the Brexit referendum in the

UK (Kirkpatrick 2017), the *Gilets jaunes* (Yellow Jackets) protests in France (Coffey 2019) and the protests for Catalanian independence in Spain (Emmott 2017).

## Resilience

Finally, it is necessary to briefly establish what is understood by the term ‘resilience’. As evidenced by the emergent body of research on hybrid threats, the concept of resilience has also acquired numerous definitions and subsequent applications. For the purposes of this article, resilience is understood to represent the ability of states and societies to deter, resist and overcome the impact of external interference, particularly in terms of demonstrating institutional capacity, good governance and societal cohesion (Dunay and Roloff 2017). As outlined by a report from the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence: ‘Improving overall resilience requires addressing vulnerabilities and taking a long-term approach to build strong and adaptive infrastructure, ensure social cohesion and sustain trust in government. Resilience not only mitigates the harmful effects of hostile influence, but it can also change the adversary’s overall cost–benefit calculation’ (Heap 2020, 12). Additionally, in the case of the EU and its member states, resilience measures must always respect the fundamental democratic values and freedoms that their societies are built upon.

## Institutional resilience measures

### *Adaptation of political and legal frameworks*

The institutional dimension of the Union’s resilience to hybrid warfare is critical to signalling that there is the political will to take these threats seriously. Therefore, it is necessary to first look at the steps that the EU institutions have undertaken to build their capacity to counter hybrid threats. Since 2014, the EU has adopted a range of legislation in this field, including in policy areas such as energy security, safeguarding of critical infrastructure, data protection, screening of foreign investments and transparency of political funding, among others (Fiott and Parkes 2019; Szymanski 2020, 3). To outline some of the key initiatives, first, in April 2016, the European Commission introduced the Communication *Joint Framework on Countering Hybrid Threats*, which is integral to structuring the EU’s activities in this domain (European Commission 2016). Second, in June 2018, the Commission published the *Joint Communication on Increasing Resilience and Bolstering Capabilities to Address Hybrid Threats* (European Commission 2018b). Third, the EU’s new strategic agenda for 2019–24 explicitly highlights resilience to hybrid threats and disinformation as one of the key future areas of work (European Council 2019a; Bajarūnas 2020, 64). Finally, in December 2019, the European Council Conclusions on countering hybrid threats were adopted, which were historic due to their reference to ‘the possibility for the Member States to invoke the Solidarity Clause (Article 222 TFEU) in addressing a severe crisis resulting from hybrid activity’ (Council of the EU 2019, 6).

### *Establishment of new institutions*

Beyond providing an institutional framework and political–legal basis for the EU’s hybrid resilience measures, several institutional initiatives have produced tangible results on the ground. In 2016, recognising the need to advance European capabilities in hybrid threat analysis and information sharing, the EU established a Hybrid Fusion Cell as part of the EU Intelligence and Situation Centre. This body has served as an important supplementary instrument, providing threat analysis and data collection on hybrid activities targeting EU member states and the neighbourhood (Szymanski 2020, 5; Bajarūnas 2020, 65). Furthermore, after a protracted bureaucratic process, projects aimed at countering hybrid threats have been granted access to the European Defence Fund, ensuring a substantive budgetary basis to underpin the EU’s political commitment. For its part, the European Parliament has also responded by setting up the Special Committee on Foreign Interference in All Democratic Processes in the EU, Including Disinformation (INGE). With a powerful political mandate and a high-profile political platform, the INGE committee has the potential to generate important visibility and political support for the EU’s efforts to investigate and counter foreign interference, including through a series of hearings, testimony sessions and public debates. The INGE committee is due to present a report to the European Parliament containing factual findings and recommendations concerning the measures to be taken to prevent and deter third-state actors from interfering in the functioning of democracy in the EU and its member states.

Moreover, a crucial component of the EU’s institutional effort to deter and counter hybrid threats has been the establishment of three StratCom forces under the auspices of the European External Action Service (EEAS)—one focusing on the Eastern Partnership region, one on the Western Balkans and one on the Southern neighbourhood (Szymanski 2020, 6). The work of the EEAS StratCom forces in uncovering disinformation aimed at the EU in these regions represents a critical first step to raising the costs for the actors engaging in these activities (Fiott and Parkes 2019). Despite its highly limited budget and personnel, since 2015 East StratCom has reported and refuted over five thousand instances of disinformation spread by Russian-backed news operators on the subjects of COVID-19, the attempted poisoning of Alexei Navalny, the US military footprint in Europe, the migration crisis, Daesh, the Salisbury chemical weapons attack and the downing of flight MH17 (Gotev 2018). Furthermore, countries in the EU’s neighbourhood, especially those harbouring aspirations of close Euro-Atlantic integration, have been frequent targets of Russian-sponsored disinformation. For instance, Georgia has been repeatedly targeted by Russian disinformation campaigns that claimed that a health security research facility set up with US support in Georgia was conducting experiments on the local population (Anjaparidze 2020). Furthermore, investment in the EEAS Stratcom capabilities demonstrates a commitment to the external dimension of countering hybrid threats. By assisting accession countries in the Western Balkans and aspiring potential candidates, such as Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, to build resilience, the EU is not only strengthening democratic institutions in these countries, but also directly promoting its own security interests (Bajarūnas 2020, 68). In the light of this track record, it is clear that these newly established institutions should be further empowered by urgently addressing issues of underfunding and personnel deficits, as well as broadening their

mandate. In this regard, the European Parliament has pushed to reinforce the operational capacity of the East StratCom Task Force by including its budgetary resources in the EU's Multiannual Financial Framework, as opposed to allocating funding on an annual basis. The EEAS StratCom force would benefit immensely from an expanded mandate that includes further deterrence capabilities, including the ability to blacklist, publicly attribute or perhaps sanction the foreign actors behind disinformation.

### *Inter-institutional cooperation*

Finally, there have been promising developments with respect to inter-institutional cooperation in building resilience to hybrid threats, notably exemplified through EU–NATO cooperation. The EU and NATO are natural partners in this sphere, operating with broadly similar strategic outlooks, risk assessments and interests in countering hybrid threats, particularly from Russia (Szymanski 2020, 1). In July 2016, the president of the European Council, president of the European Commission and secretary general of NATO signed a joint declaration outlining seven areas of cooperation, including the effort to counter hybrid threats (Tusk et al. 2016; Bajarūnas 2020, 64). A notable tangible development in EU–NATO cooperation has been the establishment of the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (Hybrid CoE) in April 2017, which now includes 27 EU and NATO participant states. This organisation represents a pivotal investment in deepening trust and information exchange between the EU and NATO at the strategic level, expanding the EU's research and analytical capabilities, as well as organising joint exercises to strengthen preparation and resilience capabilities for countering hybrid interference (Bajarūnas 2020, 66).

### **Regulatory resilience measures**

Beyond institutional adaptation to the growing potential of hybrid threats, the EU has sought to utilise regulatory instruments to limit the spread of disinformation, which compromises societal resilience by fomenting polarisation and radicalisation, and undermines trust in public institutions. In particular, the outsized role of large technology corporations, such as Facebook, Google and Twitter, and their algorithms has come under scrutiny, as news consumption has rapidly shifted to social media. Consequently, the power of large digital platforms has dangerously grown to encompass distinctly *political* functions, with their biased and profit-driven algorithms effectively moderating what content is released, shared and proliferated across the digital space without 'sufficient transparency, adequate fact-checking, journalistic values, and accountability to societies and audiences' (Hybrid COE 2019, 14). As demonstrated in the controversy surrounding the role of Cambridge Analytica in the 2016 US presidential election and the Brexit referendum, these opaque algorithms can be manipulated and exploited to perform a range of hybrid information operations that undermine the integrity of democratic processes. The non-transparent nature of the social media environment has also been repeatedly exploited by Russian-supported troll farms, including the notorious 'Internet Research Agency' linked to the pro-Kremlin oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin (Stanford Internet Observatory 2019). These Kremlin-backed organisations have conducted far-reaching troll and bot campaigns, and created thousands of fake accounts, not only on social media networks but

also on discussion platforms, online media forums and video streaming services, seeking to polarise discussions and promote anti-Western narratives.

Under growing pressure to address this threat, the EU first released a Code of Practice to tackle disinformation in September 2018, which was hailed as the first worldwide framework for self-regulation aimed at curbing disinformation. The Code of Practice was signed by social networks and partners from the advertising industry. In December 2018, this step was complemented by the EU Action Plan for disinformation which was intended as a proactive measure to ‘protect the Union’s democratic systems and combat disinformation, including in the context of the upcoming European elections’ (European Commission 2018a, 1). Within the scope of this plan, a Rapid Alert System was set up in March 2019, with the aim of facilitating rapid coordination of member states’ responses to disinformation through an extensive network of national contact points (Hybrid CoE 2019, 15). While both of these initiatives were significant in demonstrating the EU’s growing political will, both have shown notable limitations as the Code of Conduct is entirely voluntary and lacks any substantive enforcement or sanctions mechanism, while the Rapid Alert System remains severely under-utilised (Bajarūnas 2020, 65).

Nevertheless, in recognition of these flaws, there are encouraging signs that the EU will seek to become a standard setter in regulating the digital environment. At this time, two ambitious pieces of legislation are under discussion—the Digital Services Act, which will ensure greater consumer protection in the digital market, and the European Democracy Action Plan, which promises a revision of the regulations on the transparency of funding for European political parties and European political foundations. While there is serious resistance and lobbying expected from the influential big technology corporations, it is imperative that the EU avoids dilution of this legislation. Moreover, the EU’s measures must be implemented as soon as possible, as further delays run the risk of individual member states implementing national legislation, thus creating the nightmarish scenario of a patchwork of 27 national frameworks. In sum, resilience to hybrid threats cannot be attained without an EU-wide set of norms to ensure accountability and transparency standards for online platforms.

## **Societal resilience measures**

Having outlined the institutional and regulatory dimensions of the EU’s approach to strengthening resilience to hybrid threats, it is also critical to consider the role of broader societal engagement. Hybrid threats are difficult to identify and counter, rendering strategic communications and the involvement of all sectors of society increasingly important. The need to increase societal resilience has also been amplified by other processes that have challenged democratic institutions and systems around the world. Indeed, recent years have witnessed an unmistakable ‘democratic deconsolidation’ (Wigell 2019, 274), marked by erosion of the rule of law, rollbacks of judicial independence and curtailing of the freedom of the press, not only around the world, but in several EU member states. The recent attack on the US Capitol is just one of numerous stark reminders of the vulnerability of democratic institutions and values. The EU needs to respond proactively.

Fortunately, the EU has the opportunity to draw on the expertise of ‘front-line’ member states, including the Baltic states, which have long faced the full arsenal of Russia’s interference and disinformation attempts. Seeking to exploit Russian-speaking audiences in Latvia and Estonia, Russia has conducted information operations via social media, its state-owned television platforms and newspapers, and other agents of influence. In particular, Russian disinformation campaigns have sought to promote two central narratives. The first is that the Baltic states are rabidly nationalist, fascist failed states that have been on a trajectory of severe decline since joining the EU and NATO. The second claims that the EU, NATO and the US are exploiting the Baltic states as a launch pad for future aggression against Russia. In addition to these narratives, Russia is attempting to revise history and falsify historical memory, advancing the grand claim of a Russian geopolitical ‘birth right’ to a range of neighbouring countries and territories, including the Baltic states, Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia and Moldova, among others. The response of the Baltic states has centred on a whole-of-society approach that engages partners from the private sector, academia and the non-governmental sector. This outreach has contributed to the implementation of inclusive policymaking that is more attuned to the concerns and needs of the general population (Heap 2020, 31; Marovic 2019).

Effectively engaging civil society remains at the very core of the collective effort to strengthen societal resilience, including through efforts to ‘support information pluralism, invest in civic awareness through education and maintain an independent press that responds swiftly to any disinformation’ (Bajarūnas 2020, 68). In this regard, support for an independent and quality media must be a distinct priority, as journalists and the news media play a critical role in ensuring the integrity and operational capacity of democratic institutions and processes by providing reliable and trustworthy information as well as checking the power of policymakers (Hybrid CoE 2019, 11). A successful instance of such cooperation in the Baltic states has been the involvement of the investigative media outlet *Re:Baltica* in an official fact-checking capacity for Facebook, thus helping to identify and prevent the rapid, uncontrolled proliferation of harmful content (*Re:Baltica* 2020). The integral role of an independent media becomes especially clear during crises or states of emergency (as highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic), when the need for verifiable, transparent information becomes even more pressing. For instance, several EU states have been the target of Russian-driven disinformation campaigns seeking to exploit the societal tensions stemming from the COVID-19 crisis, including by sowing doubts about the safety of Western-purchased vaccines and questioning the credibility of governments’ response measures. Hence it is important to ensure the operational preconditions needed for the journalistic news media and their resilience to fake news and information harassment, as only an informed society can possess the necessary resilience to respond to a crisis or potential hybrid threat in a resolute and robust manner.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the EU has taken a range of notable steps to strengthen its resilience to hybrid threats from third countries in the information space, signalling a shift in awareness and a growing political will to take these threats seriously. While hybrid warfare can constitute a

broad array of activities, such as cyber-attacks, election interference and attacks on critical infrastructure, for the sake of analytical depth this article has focused on the EU's counter-disinformation efforts. It has engaged in a comprehensive examination of the EU's remaining vulnerabilities and potential future measures, in the process articulating the relevance of a whole-of-society approach to building resilience, drawing upon the resources of the independent media, the private sector, academia and non-governmental organisations. At the same time, critical vulnerabilities remain, further underscoring the need for proactive political engagement and resource allocation from the Union. Furthermore, we continue to see that close commercial links between several member states and Russia and the Kremlin's effective lobbying efforts continue to fragment the European Council's political will and unity on foreign and security policy. It is essential that the EU speaks and acts with one voice in its relations with Russia, particularly when it comes to defending fundamental values and countering foreign interference in its democratic processes.

Mapping the way forward, it is clear that the EU must pursue the following actions to strengthen its resilience to disinformation and interference in democratic processes:

1. Empower and broaden the mandate of its institutions that aim to counter disinformation in the EU and its neighbourhood.
2. Expand its investigations into foreign interference, including but not limited to disinformation, and publicly expose, sanction and deter those behind it.
3. Become a global standard-setter in regulating the digital single market, including demanding greater transparency and accountability from digital platforms. This includes the establishment of EU-wide general standards for social responsibility in algorithmic design.
4. Enforce greater scrutiny in monitoring foreign political funding and the financing of political advertising in the EU and its member states.
5. Involve civil society, academia and the non-governmental sector in a whole-of-society approach to countering disinformation.
6. Expand its activities in ensuring media safety and sustainable operation, countering censorship and media persecution, and empowering a quality and independent media.
7. Strengthen cooperation with NATO, the UN (especially UNESCO), the G7 and other like-minded international organisations and partners.

## References

- Anjaparidze, Z. (2020). Russia dusts off conspiracy theories about Georgia's Lugar Center laboratory in midst of COVID-19 crisis. *Jamestown Foundation*, 5 May. <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-dusts-off-conspiracy-theories-about-georgias-lugar-center-laboratory-in-midst-of-covid-19-crisis/>. Accessed 22 February 2021.
- Bajarūnas, E. (2020). Addressing hybrid threats: Priorities for the EU in 2020 and beyond. *European View*, 19(1), 62–70.

- Bērziņš, J. (2020). The theory and practice of new generation warfare: The case of Ukraine and Syria. *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 33(3), 355–80.
- Coffey, L. (2019). Russia exploits ‘yellow vest’ turmoil in France. *The Heritage Foundation*, 8 February. <https://www.heritage.org/europe/commentary/russia-exploits-yellow-vest-turmoil-france>. Accessed 22 February 2021.
- Council of the EU. (2019). *Complementary efforts to enhance resilience and counter hybrid threats – Council conclusions*. 10 December. <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14972-2019-INIT/en/pdf>. Accessed 22 February 2021.
- Deutsche Welle*. (2020). Georgian’s death in Berlin was a Russian-ordered assassination, prosecutors believe. 18 June. <https://www.dw.com/en/georgians-death-in-berlin-was-a-russian-ordered-assassination-prosecutors-believe/a-53860911>. Accessed 22 February 2021.
- Dunay, P., & Roloff, R. (2017). *Hybrid threats and strengthening resilience on Europe’s eastern flank*. George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies. March. <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/security-insights/hybrid-threats-and-strengthening-resilience-europes-eastern-flank-0>. Accessed 22 February 2021.
- EEAS. (2020). Pro-Kremlin disinformation: COVID-19 vaccines. Delegation of the European Union to Azerbaijan. 22 December. [https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/azerbaijan/90950/pro-kremlin-disinformation-covid-19-vaccines\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/azerbaijan/90950/pro-kremlin-disinformation-covid-19-vaccines_en). Accessed 22 February 2021.
- Emmott, R. (2017). Spain sees Russian interference in Catalonia separatist vote. *Reuters*, 13 November. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-spain-politics-catalonia-russia-idUSKBN1DD20Y>. Accessed 22 February 2021.
- European Commission. (2016). *Joint framework on countering hybrid threats: A European Union response*. Joint Communication, JOIN (2016) 18 final (6 April).
- European Commission. (2018a). *Action plan against disinformation*. Joint Communication, JOIN (2018) 36 final (5 December).
- European Commission. (2018b). *Joint Communication on increasing resilience and bolstering capabilities to address hybrid threats*. Joint Communication, JOIN (2018) 16 final (13 June).
- European Council. (2019). *A new strategic agenda, 2019–2024*. Brussels.
- Fiott, D., & Parkes, R. (2019). *Protecting Europe: The EU’s response to hybrid threats*. European Union Institute for Security Studies, Chaillot Paper 151.
- Gotev, G. (2018). Experts lament underfunding of EU task force countering Russian disinformation. *Euractiv*, 23 November. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/experts-lament-underfunding-of-eu-task-force-countering-russian-disinformation/>. Accessed 23 February 2021.
- Hartmann, U. (2017). *The evolution of the hybrid threat, and resilience as a countermeasure*. NATO Defense College, Research Division.
- Heap, B. (2019). *Hybrid threats. A strategic communications perspective*. NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence.
- Hybrid COE. (2019). *Countering disinformation: News media and legal resilience*. Hybrid CoE Papers.
- Kent, G. (2020). Russia’s MH17 web of lies looks set to unravel in court. *Atlantic Council*, 22 July. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/russias-mh17-web-of-lies-continues-to-unravel/>. Accessed 23 February 2021.
- Kirkpatrick, D. (2017). Signs of Russian meddling in Brexit referendum. *New York Times*, 15 November. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/15/world/europe/russia-brexit-twitter-facebook.html>. Accessed 23 February 2021.
- Marovic, J. (2019). *Wars of ideas: Hybrid warfare, political interference, and disinformation*. Carnegie Europe. 28 November. <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2019/11/28/wars-of-ideas-hybrid-warfare-political-interference-and-disinformation-pub-80419>. Accessed 22 February 2021.

- Re:Baltica*. (2020). Re:Check kļūst par oficiālajiem FB faktu pārbaudes partneriem. 25 March. <https://rebaltica.lv/2020/03/recheck-klust-par-oficialajiem-fb-faktu-parbaudes-partneriem/>. Accessed 22 February 2021.
- Renz, B. (2016). Russia and ‘hybrid warfare’. *Contemporary Politics*, 22(3), 283–300.
- Rettman, A. (2017). Illicit Russian billions pose threat to EU democracy. *EUObserver*, 21 April. <https://euobserver.com/foreign/137631>. Accessed 22 February 2021.
- Sabbagh, D., Hardin, L., & Roth, A. (2020). Russia report reveals UK government failed to investigate Kremlin interference. *The Guardian*, 21 July. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/21/russia-report-reveals-uk-government-failed-to-address-kremlin-interference-scottish-referendum-brexit>. Accessed 22 February 2021.
- Stanford Internet Observatory. (2019). *Evidence of Russia-linked influence operations in Africa*. Cyber Policy Center. <https://fsi.stanford.edu/publication/evidence-russia-linked-influence-operations-africa>. Accessed 22 February 2021.
- Szymanski, P. (2020). Towards greater resilience: NATO and the EU on hybrid threats. *Centre for Eastern Studies*, OSW Commentary 328.
- Tusk, D., Juncker, J.-C., & Stoltenberg, J. (2016). *Joint declaration by the President of the European Council, Donald Tusk, the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, and the Secretary General of NATO, Jens Stoltenberg*. [https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/36096/nato\\_eu\\_final\\_eng.pdf](https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/36096/nato_eu_final_eng.pdf). Accessed 22 February 2021.
- Van Puyvelde, D. (2015). Hybrid war: Does it even exist? *NATO Review*. <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2015/05/07/hybrid-war-does-it-even-exist/index.html>. Accessed 22 February 2021.
- Wigell, M. (2019). Hybrid interference as a wedge strategy: A theory of external interference in liberal democracy. *International Affairs*, 95(2), 255–75.

## Author biographies



**Sandra Kalniete** is a Member of the European Parliament from Latvia in the Group of the European People’s Party. She is a member of the Parliament’s Committee on Foreign Affairs, the INGE Committee, the Delegation to the EU–Ukraine Parliamentary Association Committee and the Delegation to the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly.



**Tomass Pildegovičs** is a policy assistant to Sandra Kalniete and a Ph.D. candidate in politics and international relations at the University of Cambridge. He completed his M.Phil. in international relations and politics with distinction at the University of Cambridge in 2019. Pildegovičs also holds a BA in international relations with first class honours (2018) from the Department of War Studies, King’s College London.



# The Russian factor in EU security policy and transatlantic relations

European View  
2021, Vol. 20(1) 34–39  
© The Author(s) 2021  
DOI: 10.1177/1781685821999846  
[journals.sagepub.com/home/euv](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/euv)



**Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz**

## Abstract

Understanding Russia's foreign policy requires an examination of Putin's domestic incentives. Nationalism has been cynically instrumentalised to prop up the current regime. By combining it with, among other things, the malicious deployment of modern communication techniques on an unprecedented scale, Russia has been able to project power at home and abroad. However, Putin's actions have had unintended consequences, and together with the arrival of a new US administration, the EU is presented with an opportunity to devise new solutions—making use of both the carrot and the stick. Re-establishing transatlantic unity and cooperation should not be an end in itself but rather be used as an avenue to implement policies to strengthen European security, some of which would also prove beneficial to Russia.

## Keywords

EU, Russia, Putin, Transatlantic relations, European security

## Introduction

Europe's policy towards Russia has long been one of the most important issues in the context of the continent's security, and it continues to play a significant role in the transatlantic relationship. The country of approximately 145 million people to Europe's east is and will remain a direct or close neighbour to one-third of the EU member states and almost half of NATO members.

Ignoring Russia is therefore not an option. Over the years, various EU member states have adopted quite divergent approaches to dealing with this country. Seen from the perspective of protecting their national self-interests, these different approaches are

---

### Corresponding author:

Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz, European Parliament, 60 Rue Wiertz, Brussels, B-1047, Belgium.  
Email: [wlodzimierz.cimoszewicz@europarl.europa.eu](mailto:wlodzimierz.cimoszewicz@europarl.europa.eu)



Creative Commons CC BY: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>) which permits any use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access pages (<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage>).

justifiable. However, if the EU is serious about its strategic autonomy and geopolitical ambitions, a more unified and coherent framework needs to be adopted—and the arrival of a more transatlantic-minded US administration provides the perfect opportunity for such action.

The rest of this article is divided into four main sections. The first section explains how the Russian leadership in the Kremlin views the world and Russia's place in it. The second looks at some of the methods that the Kremlin has used in recent years to advance its interests on the world stage. The third briefly discusses the new administration of US President Joe Biden and how it is likely to tackle the challenge of Russia. The fourth and final section concludes the article.

## The thoughts of the Russian leadership

In order to make informed policy decisions regarding Russia, it is necessary to understand the thoughts and calculations of the Russian leadership. Nearly 20 years ago, Vladimir Putin and his domestic allies made a strategic choice regarding Russia's development and the direction of the country's political future. Instead of continuing the post-Cold War rapprochement with the West, supporting the growth of a still young democracy and modernising the state and the economy, Putin returned to the traditional approach of distancing Russia from the West and its principles, building an authoritarian and kleptocratic system of governance and modernising the military.

It was an easier path. This approach allowed Putin to instrumentalise a fairly common nostalgia for the great-power status of Russia, and at the same time promised to be safer for Putin himself and for the circle of people on whom his power relied. The weaknesses of this choice were the lack of prospects for long-term development and the risk to its material foundations resulting from the lack of a competitive economy and the unstable price of energy—the bedrock of Russia's economy. The 'shale revolution' allowed the US to significantly increase its domestic production of oil and natural gas, thereby causing a drastic fall in gas and oil prices. This, together with the shift from an energy market dominated by suppliers of raw materials to a buyer's market, to a large extent undermined the value of Putin's choice.

During Putin's first couple of years in power, he used the enormous revenues from oil and gas exports to improve the material conditions of a segment of society and to modernise the army. However, one must also keep in mind that even during those 'fat' years, half of the population living in the provinces (the *glubinka*) barely experienced any positive changes at all. Eventually Putin lost the ability to use financial means as an instrument to buy public support. Under these new conditions, the importance of other instruments to achieve this goal grew—great-power rhetoric and an assertive foreign policy that has since turned into aggression.

This shift strengthened the nationalistic atmosphere in Russia, enabled a gradual limitation of political freedoms and led to a crackdown on the opposition. This course of

action was related to the defence of Russia's alleged special rights in its neighbourhood, particularly in the post-Soviet sphere. In 2013, Putin delivered a speech to the Valdai International Discussion Club, a Moscow-based think tank and discussion forum, in which he formulated a thesis based on the premise that whenever Europe concluded an agreement with Russia, it brought about a long period of stabilisation. He gave two examples: the 1814–15 Congress of Vienna and the Yalta conferences (*Valdai Discussion Club* 2013). In the first case, it was agreed to defend the old order, while in the second, almost half of Europe was handed over to Russia as spoils of war. This type of reasoning is constantly present in the political calculations of Putin's Russia.

The lines between Russia's internal and external policies are blurred. Defending himself against the 'colour revolutions'<sup>1</sup> that threaten to diminish or possibly even strip him of power, Putin has always taken the side of the defenders of the old order, usually the corrupt local rulers who are largely dependent on Russia. His 2014 decision to annex Crimea and wage a hybrid war against Ukraine was intended to prevent that country from moving closer to the EU and to stave off a possible change of leadership to someone more independent. It was simultaneously intended to manufacture stronger support for him at home. He achieved his domestic goal, and the slogan 'Our Crimea' raised his approval ratings to record highs. At the same time, he suffered an exceptionally painful defeat externally, which undermined the entire adventure—he lost Ukraine's goodwill irretrievably and pushed it in the opposite direction.

Over the last decade, however, Russia has managed to regain its influence in such important regions as the Middle East and North Africa. This has been facilitated by the mistakes of US foreign policy and diplomacy, as well as the EU's foreign policy, which has been lacking an unambiguous and strong mandate. Thorough and honest discussions about the EU's shortcomings in this regard should be encouraged at all levels of government.

## **The methods and means of Russian policy**

Russia uses a wide range of methods and means to achieve its policy goals—from the use of force, the hire of armed mercenaries, the corruption of local politicians and the traditional subversive activities of the secret services, all the way to the extremely intensive use of modern communication techniques. Cyber war is not a vague future threat—it is already happening. Recent reports about the hacking of sensitive information contained in the secure databases of 18,000 companies around the world and of a previously unknown number of the most important US federal agencies is a particularly telling example (Geller 2021).

In addition to espionage, Russia uses the digital space for political subversion, disinformation and to manipulate the consciousness of tens of millions of people. The effects of the St Petersburg troll factory can be seen everywhere. All these malicious activities serve political destabilisation, provoking or intensifying social conflicts and influencing the course and results of democratic procedures, among many other harmful effects. The situation remains serious and its further negative development is highly likely. Russia,

accustomed to using diversion in foreign countries throughout its entire modern history, has discovered an exceptionally attractive, cheap and effective type of weapon.

For all of the above-mentioned reasons, Russia is and will remain a serious problem in international relations. Its great-power ambitions are a condition of Putin's political survival—and even of his successor's should he continue Putin's policy. Russia has fewer and fewer advantages in comparison to other countries. In this situation, its armed forces and subversive actions have to play an outsized role. Domestically, there are currently no organised political forces that could control or oversee the actions and decisions of the authorities. Instead, we see a subservient media, a deferential parliament, a fictitious opposition in the parliament and a shattered non-parliamentary opposition. Nonetheless, the strengthening of democratic forces cannot be ruled out, especially as the public is learning more and more about the scale of corruption of the people in power.

Pursuing such a policy, Russia has an obvious interest in weakening NATO, broader transatlantic cooperation and European integration, since it is able to be much more effective in conducting its policy bilaterally with selected countries than with the stronger groups and organisations of which those countries are part.

## **The Biden administration**

The election of Joe Biden to the US presidency creates a very important opportunity for dialogue between the EU, the US and Canada that could and should lead to the development of the broadest possible common view of global problems and challenges. One of the issues requiring such discussion and the creation of an intellectual and political basis for cooperation is the policy towards Russia. The value of working out a common or at least a highly coordinated position would be greater efficiency when dealing with Russia and the limiting of its room for manoeuvre.

Contrary to his predecessor, the new US president is an outstanding expert in the field of international relations, he does not and has never had any ambiguous business interests in Russia, and he is also an extremely reliable partner in the eyes of European public opinion. The appointees to the most senior foreign-policy roles in the Biden administration display an impressive depth and breadth of expertise on both European and Russian affairs. It is an opportunity for engagement and closer cooperation that the EU can ill afford to miss.

## **Conclusion**

Russia has the same rights as other countries—neither fewer nor more. Russia is also bound by international law just as is any other country. This applies not only to its relations with other countries, but also to respect for the rights and freedoms of its own citizens. These rights and freedoms are guaranteed by treaties adopted by Russia. An autocratic system of government based on corruption is reprehensible and harmful to Russia itself, but none of us can replace the Russian people in changing this reality.

Nevertheless, we retain the right to criticise and respond to violations of the rule of law, the harassment of opponents, election fraud and disinforming propaganda.

In recent years, a number of international disarmament agreements to which Russia is a party have expired. It is in the general interest of global security to return to talks on this topic and to conclude further treaties, and it is worth trying to convince other military powers to join such control mechanisms. Russia has a double interest in this—its own safety, naturally, but also a possible easing of the painful financial burden of producing new armaments. Attention should also be paid to the need to regulate the use of artificial intelligence for military purposes.

Europe and the US should consistently condemn Russia's aggression against Ukraine and not recognise its effects, for example in the form of the incorporation of Crimea. Russia should be made aware that the passage of time will not change this common transatlantic stance, but will only mean an ever-higher price for breaking the law. The possibility of a gradual imposition of ever more severe sanctions against Russia should be discussed in the absence of any signals of its readiness to seek solutions to this situation in good faith—with the obvious caveat that such sanctions should preferably target the people most responsible and not affect the general population.

Russia's subversive actions, including the dissemination of disinformation and aggressive propaganda, aim to attack the functioning of democracy in our countries. The response to these actions has to change radically. It should be about both making our societies aware that they are the object of outside manipulation and taking action against the perpetrators. A more deterring approach should be considered too. Civil society in Russia and its right to truthful and accurate information deserve to be supported as well.

The relationship between the transatlantic community and Russia has ebbed and flowed over the past decades. Recent years have also seen profound shifts in behaviour in Washington and Moscow. What seems to be missing is an honest reassessment of the EU's existing approaches. Hopefully the arguments and ideas examined here can serve as a starting point for the necessary discussions about an EU policy on Russia that addresses the new reality.

## Note

1. This term especially refers to the 2003 Rose revolution in Georgia, the 2004 Orange revolution in Ukraine and the 2005 Tulip revolution in Kyrgyzstan.

## References

- Geller, E. (2021). U.S.: Evidence of spying found at fewer than 10 agencies hit by massive hack. *Politico*, 5 January. <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/01/05/russian-spying-national-security-agencies-455216>. Accessed 1 February 2021.
- Valdai Discussion Club*. (2013). Vladimir Putin meets with members the Valdai International Discussion Club. Transcript of the speech and the meeting. 20 September. [https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/vladimir\\_putin\\_meets\\_with\\_members\\_the\\_valdai\\_international\\_discussion\\_club\\_transcript\\_of\\_the\\_speech\\_/?sphrase\\_id=701234](https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/vladimir_putin_meets_with_members_the_valdai_international_discussion_club_transcript_of_the_speech_/?sphrase_id=701234). Accessed 1 February 2021.

**Author biography**

**Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz** is a Member of the European Parliament from Poland in the Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats. He is a vice-chair of the Parliament's Special Committee on Foreign Interference in All Democratic Processes in the EU, including Disinformation. He is also a member of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, the Committee on Constitutional Affairs, and the Delegation to the EU–Kazakhstan, EU–Kyrgyzstan, EU–Uzbekistan and EU–Tajikistan Parliamentary Cooperation Committees and for relations with Turkmenistan and Mongolia.



# As in Belarus: The beginning of the end of a reign in Russia

European View  
2021, Vol. 20(1) 40–46  
© The Author(s) 2021  
DOI: 10.1177/17816858211003718  
[journals.sagepub.com/home/euv](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/euv)



**Bernard Guetta**

## Abstract

It is now impossible to examine the world's largest country without acknowledging the new realities which have changed the situation there. The first is that the idea that Russia irresistible is no longer as compelling as it was even two or three years ago and that this has called into question, and even weakened, the Russian president's authority. The second reality is that it would certainly not be in the interests of the world's major democracies to allow Russia and China to combine forces against them. The third is that the botched attempt to poison Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny in 2020 has raised his status to that of an alternative to the incumbent president. However, the most striking of these new developments is that Russia is at a loss as to how to respond to the democratic protests in Belarus because the options available would have major implications for both Putin and Russia itself.

## Keywords

Russia, EU, China, Belarus, Putin, Democracy, Rapprochement, Modus vivendi

## Introduction

Russia poses nothing but questions. Is it, or is it not, European, as Peter the Great, Catherine the Great and, more recently, former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev wanted? Will it one day accept the loss of the nations that constituted its empire? And what kind of relations might it establish with these countries, Ukraine and Belarus in particular, as they increasingly seek to escape from its orbit?

And there are more questions: Will Russia ever be able to revert to the brief periods of democratisation that it experienced at the beginning and again at the end of the twentieth century? Will it find a modus vivendi with the EU by negotiating new security

---

### Corresponding author:

B. Guetta, European Parliament, Rue Wiertz 60, Bruxelles, B-1047, Belgium.  
Email: [bernard.guetta@europarl.europa.eu](mailto:bernard.guetta@europarl.europa.eu)



Creative Commons CC BY: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>) which permits any use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access pages (<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage>).

and cooperation agreements with the bloc? Or, conversely, will it align itself with Asia by moving closer to China? In other words, more than 20 years after Vladimir Putin took charge, where does Russia stand? And what of Putin, the man who restored strength to Moscow in a bid to make this former superpower a force to be reckoned with once more? Where does he stand?

Some of these are perennial questions that will no doubt continue to be asked for a long time to come, but it has now become impossible to examine the world's largest country without acknowledging the new realities which have changed the situation there.

The first is that Russia's awakening under Putin is no longer as compelling as it was even two or three years ago and that this has called into question, and even weakened, the Russian president's authority. The second reality is that it would certainly not be in the interests of the world's major democracies, either the EU or the US, to allow Russia and China to combine forces against them. The third is that the botched attempt to poison Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny in 2020 has raised his status to that of an alternative to the incumbent president. However, the most striking of these new developments is that Russia is at a loss as to how to respond to the democratic protests in Belarus because the options available would have major implications for both Vladimir Putin and Russia itself.

Six months after the start of the crisis in Belarus, Putin remains hesitant about resorting to brute force, and what Russia does or does not end up doing about Minsk will speak volumes about the status and future of this poor power, whose choices will carry so much weight in determining the global balance of international relations.

The Russian president has so little faith in his Belarusian counterpart Alexander Lukashenko's future that he is casting around for a successor, and is not really even bothering to hide the fact. At the same time, he refuses to let him go because the removal of Lukashenko, a man loathed by his people, would provide a fillip for democracy that might put dangerous dreams into the heads of the Russian people. On the one hand, Putin cannot bring himself to allow freedom to triumph in the most Russian of the lost empire's territories. On the other, he does not know how to bring Belarus to heel without repeating the same mistake he made in Ukraine, where the annexation of Crimea and Russia's intervention in the Donbas region have nurtured an anti-Russian sentiment that was once as unknown there as it still is in Minsk.

It is a dilemma of historic proportions. Outstretched hand or clenched fist: the choice ultimately facing Putin will determine Russia's future relations with its former possessions and, in turn, with the rest of Europe, China and the US. The Russian president's hesitation is therefore not surprising, but it is showing him to be less powerful than he thought he was after having lifted Russia out of the slump in which he found it.

## **Putin's rise**

To better understand the current situation, we need to go back 20 years to a time when things were going well for Vladimir Putin.

When the wealthy elite and the security services shunted former President Boris Yeltsin off into retirement and appointed Putin to replace him in 1999, Russia was feeling demeaned and impoverished, robbed and humiliated. The way in which the Communist apparatus and three dozen predatory individuals had shared out the national wealth among themselves in the name of 'privatisation' had convinced the Russian people that the 'market economy' was simply banditry under a new name and that democracy was nothing more than giving power to the wealthiest. Ten years after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, both extreme wealth and extreme poverty were soaring. Masses of pensioners had been reduced to begging in underpasses and in the Moscow metro. The misplaced plaudits bestowed on the 'shock therapy' of privatisation by the international financial institutions, the US and the most brilliant liberal economists seemed to prove right seven decades of Soviet propaganda. Yeltsin had become so unpopular that Russia was in search of a strongman, a leader with an iron grip who would restore hope and greatness to the nation.

Chaos threatened to engulf Russia, but Vladimir Putin would manage to turn things around in no time. Trumpeting his KGB membership and vowing to make the thieves return their ill-gotten gains, this young man with his strapping torso erased the memory of his predecessor overnight and inspired renewed self-confidence in his compatriots by posing as a Russian superhero, the eagerly awaited avenger of their downtrodden homeland.

The assault on the Chechen separatists in the first decade of the twenty-first century was a heinous bloodbath, but it convinced the Russians that their young master would not cede another inch of the territories conquered by the tsars. In fact, the curbing of the oligarchs simply imposed a new godfather on them and eliminated those who refused to pledge allegiance to him. The move was actually a saving grace for the super-rich, who were able to launder their wealth by rallying around the new centre of power. However, this manifestation of the precedence of politics over money appealed to all sections of society, from the intelligentsia to former KGB agents, the urban middle classes to the military, and right down to those on the bottom rung of the social ladder and the peasantry.

The cynicism of his methods and the spurious pretexts for his policies enabled Putin to impose his authoritarianism on a country aspiring to a return to statehood, and when he annexed Ukraine's Crimea region in 2014, his popularity was greater than ever. Unprecedented in Europe since the Second World War, this annexation was massively applauded by Russians, who felt that their president was simply restoring a piece of their own territory, the 'Russian Côte d'Azur', which former Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev had transferred to Ukraine in 1954 to consolidate his position at the head of the party. In

the eyes of Russians, Putin was not only righting what they considered a historical injustice but also, in the process, washing away the indignities of 1989 and 1991.

Building on this momentum and exploiting the US reluctance to venture onto more foreign battlefields, in 2015 Putin flew to the aid of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, allowing Russia to regain a foothold in the Middle East, and later dispatched mercenaries to Libya, a stone's throw from the European coast.

## **Increasing troubles both at home and abroad**

Everything was looking rosy for Putin. Everything was looking rosy for Russia. Just as the US had bounced back under President Ronald Reagan after he had healed the wounds of its humiliation in Vietnam, Russia was 'back'. But what, then, explains why the awakening of Belarus is causing it so many problems now?

Drawing on the fable by LaFontaine for a moment, it is a case of the frog that wished to be as big as the ox. Russia can take pride in its military victory in Syria, but its failure to get al-Assad to accept the political compromises needed to resolve the conflict means that it is now losing the peace as surely as it won the war. Bound up with a criminal regime that is corrupt to its core and now riven by clan fighting, Russia is getting bogged down in Syria. At the same time, it is failing to win the Middle East game because its only regional ally, the Iranian theocracy, is losing its footholds in Iraq and Lebanon and has completely run out of money.

It is a very similar story with Ukraine. There, Russia has reappropriated Crimea and it is hard to imagine what could make it reverse this annexation. So while Russia may have won a war, its inglorious victory has turned the country where it was baptised over a thousand years ago into one that is as anti-Russian as Poland. The minuses far exceed the pluses, and what card can Putin now play in Eastern Ukraine? Annex the region, with its devastated industries and mines? Take over a territory that would bring it nothing but new economic sanctions and a rebound of political tensions with the EU and the US? March on Kyiv and try to re-establish Ukraine as a protectorate?

None of these are viable options. Russia is getting bogged down in Ukraine, just as it is in Syria. Simultaneously, Russia failed to prevent street protests from overthrowing a trusted leader in Armenia in 2018 and has failed to stop Turkey muscling in as the protector of former Soviet republic Azerbaijan by helping it to win back Nagorno-Karabakh. Elsewhere, Kyrgyzstan is becoming increasingly unruly, Moldova has elected a president who staunchly supports closer ties with the EU, China is making strategic moves in Central Asia, and Belarus, of course, is showing dissident tendencies.

The strongman that the Russians had loved so much now finds himself unable to stem the self-affirmation of Russia's former imperial possessions. Russians no longer believe that he is capable of rewriting history and indeed no longer expect him to do so, given that three decades have now elapsed since 1989.

For Russians under the age of 40, the USSR is not even a memory. The lost empire is as alien to their view of Russia and the world as the colonial empires of France and Britain are to the citizens of those countries. Having reached adulthood long after the collapse of Communism 30 years ago, the urban middle classes of post-Communist Russia share the same values as their counterparts in Berlin, Paris, New York, Cairo, Lagos, Caracas or Warsaw. They aspire to the rule of law, to well-being and to societies that are open to the rest of the world—proof of that is provided by the fact that the populations of Russia's big cities have gone over to the opposition forces, in the same way as those of Budapest, Istanbul and Ankara have over the last few years.

The twentieth century, the century of Communism, ended in 1989. But the twenty-first century is only just beginning, and Putin does not belong in it. He will be seen as a mere hiccup in history, an in-between man whose popularity is waning, all the more so as his track record is far from stellar.

During these past 20 years—20 years that have followed the long Brezhnev stagnation and the immense economic problems caused by the perestroika—Putin has paid little attention to modernising Russia's infrastructure, its roads, hospitals, schools or railways. His handling of the pandemic has been as disastrous as that of former US President Donald Trump. Meanwhile, the country's standard of living is declining and its coffers are running dry because Russia's finances continue to depend on oil prices, which are in freefall—a situation which is likely to be a long-term trend.

As he embodies only imperial nostalgia, Vladimir Putin has become a man of a bygone age. He may remain in power for several more years, given that political assassinations, suppression of any form of protest and lack of a free press have prevented the emergence of a credible opposition and created a political vacuum that engenders fear. But, just as in Belarus, we are witnessing the beginning of the end of a reign in Russia. The muscular young avenger has aged. He has become tiresome. Big cities and younger generations—the useful Russia—have now slipped from his grasp. All that this autocrat achieved in 2020 was to reveal his bewilderment at the goings-on in Minsk; to hide away in fear of COVID-19; to make institutional changes to try to pave the way for a transition he hopes he can control; and to fail, on his own soil, to poison an increasingly troublesome opponent.

This is not to say that Alexei Navalny will be Russia's next president. And this would not necessarily be a desirable outcome anyway, since this astonishingly audacious man is more of a Zorro than a Franklin D. Roosevelt, more anti-mafia judge than the statesman with a clear programme that Russia so badly needs to rebuild itself. But by failing to eliminate him, Putin has dealt himself a major blow.

He has undermined the security services, which made fools of themselves while making a fool of him; he has shown *urbi et orbi* that he has lost his touch; and, in effect, he has inducted a contender for power who has proved, by returning to Russia, that Putin is no longer all-powerful. Putin's failure to eliminate Navalny has shown that it is possible to challenge him in one-to-one combat and survive; that his system has run out of steam; and that the forces that brought him to power, namely the security

services and the wealthy elite, now certainly have to consider the possibility of change—consider changing everything, as the Prince of Salina would say so that everything can stay the same.

## **The challenge of China**

Looking beyond the accumulating difficulties and the obsolescence of its president, Russia has a colossal problem to resolve, the same one faced by everyone else, including the US, Africa, Asia and the EU: the problem of China. It is to Russia that the economic, military and political assertiveness of the world's most populous country poses the most problems, since these two giants—the one in terms of size, the other in terms of population—are separated only by a 4,000 km border that is not always clearly defined. Between the EU and China lies the huge buffer zone of Russia. Between the US and China lies the Pacific Ocean (increasingly a misnomer, but still). Between Russia and China there is nothing, nothing save Siberia, which China is quietly colonising by the strength of its trade, and the once-Soviet expanse of Central Asia, where Chinese President Xi Jinping is rolling out investments that are strategic rather than industrial.

Given its troubled relations with the West because of Ukraine, Syria and its ever-increasing military spending, Russia could of course cosy up to China in order to avoid the risky pursuit of self-sufficiency. This strengthening of links between the two former rivals of the Communist world would be a dream come true for Beijing, but would the West be the only loser in this Great Game?

In the long run, no. In the medium term, the main loser would be Russia, because it does not take much imagination to guess where an alliance between an economy on the verge of becoming obsolete and another that is the most dynamic in the world would ultimately lead. In a one-to-one relationship with China, Russia would soon become the vassal of a powerful overlord, far richer, more enterprising and better armed than itself. Clearly, by moving closer to China, Russia would not only be committing a historic act of self-effacement, but would also be running counter to the social and cultural aspirations of its two key socio-cultural groups.

For fear of being culturally absorbed by Western Europe, Russia has consistently been and still is reluctant to acknowledge itself as European. And yet, quite apart from the fact that it has never considered integrating with Asia, with which it has nothing in common and indeed has always rejected, neither its wealthy elite nor its urban middle classes are currently ready for the choice of China. The former simply aspire to be part of the Western elite, and certainly do not want to marry their heirs to the children of corporate China. The latter dream only of enjoying a Western lifestyle and are well aware that, compared with China, Russia is almost a land of freedom.

## **Conclusion**

Right now, at what is the true start of the twenty-first century, there is an uncertain but very real possibility of a rapprochement between the EU and the Russian Federation. These two pillars of the continent of Europe need each other and, Rome and Byzantium notwithstanding, share the same culture, the same baptism and the same history.

The 27 member states need to secure a reliable energy supply, peace on their eastern frontier and investment opportunities to boost their growth. Russia needs to radically modernise its infrastructure and to stabilise relations with its former possessions. In other words, the EU and Russia need to conclude new security and cooperation agreements guaranteeing mutually beneficial exchanges, real recognition of Europe's borders following the break-up of the Soviet Union and strategic security based on confidence-building measures, such as a Russian withdrawal from Eastern Ukraine or the neutrality of states that are currently as likely to join NATO as they are to be attacked by Russia.

But where could this possible rapprochement be tested? In Minsk, of course. Belarus, a country which is shouting at the top of its lungs that its revolution is not pro or anti anyone, neither pro-European nor anti-Russian, is where the EU and the Russian Federation could begin to stabilise their relations by agreeing to respect both the democratic will of the Belarusian people and their military neutrality. There is nothing impossible about this. It would be a win-win situation for everyone, not least the Belarusians. No one would have anything to lose and, once this step was taken, it would then be possible to work on a new set of Helsinki Accords that would be equally beneficial to the EU, Russia and the countries in between.

Since an alliance with the US over the heads of Europeans is simply not an option for Moscow, and an alliance with China would seriously threaten it, Russia actually has no choice but to make a historic compromise with the countries of Central and Western Europe united within the EU. Such an initiative will not come from Vladimir Putin, who is a man of the past with no vision and who is fearful of everything. The EU has to take the lead. This means that it must spotlight and mark out the path of compromise and address itself publicly to Russia, to its people and to its cultural, industrial and political elites. It should call on them to make this choice and tell them that they have every reason to seek the unification of our continent in an economic partnership and political stabilisation that have been too long coming and that reflect a set of interests which are not only powerful but also shared by all parties.

It is now 2021, exactly 30 years since the Russian empire collapsed. The time has come for the European Parliament to issue an *'Address to our Russian neighbours'* that expresses our hope and desire for mutual understanding and cooperation.

### Author biography



**Bernard Guetta** is a Member of the European Parliament from France in the Renew Europe Group. He is first vice-chair of the Parliament's Subcommittee on Human Rights, and a member of the Committee on Foreign Affairs and the Delegation to the EU–Russia Parliamentary Cooperation Committee. He worked as a journalist and correspondent for French daily newspaper *Le Monde* in Warsaw, Washington and Moscow in the 1980s.



# The view from Washington: How the new Biden administration views the EU's eastern neighbourhood

European View  
2021, Vol. 20(1) 47–53  
© The Author(s) 2021  
DOI: 10.1177/17816858211000484  
[journals.sagepub.com/home/euv](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/euv)



**Anders Åslund**

## Abstract

President Joe Biden and his administration are uniquely knowledgeable about Eastern Europe. Therefore, during his term we should expect an activist and well-informed US policy on Eastern Europe and the EU's eastern neighbourhood. The two main planks of the Biden policy in this region are set to be unconditional support for each country's national sovereignty against Russia and tough love in the fight against corruption in these countries. Ukraine is the natural focal point. The Biden administration will probably let the US Department of Justice pursue its cases against the Ukrainian oligarchs Dmytro Firtash and Ihor Kolomoisky, which is likely to change Ukrainian politics. Eastern Europeans can trust Biden to stand up to Russian aggression as this has been a hallmark of his political career.

## Keywords

Joe Biden, US foreign policy, Europe, Eastern Europe, Ukraine, Russia, NATO, Eastern neighbourhood

## Introduction

US foreign policy is bound to go through a metamorphosis with Joe Biden as president. Few have done more in foreign policy for longer than Biden, so we know where he stands. No US president has known Europe better than Biden: he has attended European security conferences for the last four decades. In particular, he has been greatly engaged in Eastern Europe. As vice president he visited Ukraine no less than six times. To

---

### Corresponding author:

Dr Anders Åslund, Senior Fellow, Atlantic Council, Washington, DC, USA.  
Email: [aaslund@atlanticcouncil.org](mailto:aaslund@atlanticcouncil.org)



Creative Commons CC BY: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>) which permits any use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access pages (<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage>).

understand Biden's policy, it is necessary to forget all that Donald Trump did in foreign policy—even if, to the detriment of US interests, he left behind a number of poison pills, which Biden must now eliminate.

The basis of Biden's policy in Eastern Europe is to stand up to Russian aggression and defend the national sovereignty of its neighbours. We should expect a tougher but more rational and streamlined sanctions policy against Russia. At the same time, Biden has a clear view that democracy can only be saved through decency, that is, through the combating of corruption. US friends in the region should expect more 'tough love', as the US will demand that they really stand up to corruption. Those who do not are unlikely to receive much financial support from the US.

## **Biden and his team**

Barack Obama nominated Biden as his vice president on 23 August 2008 because of Biden's stance on the country of Georgia. Together with the late Senator John McCain, Biden had stood up for Georgia during the Russo-Georgian war, which had taken place on 8–12 of that month. Obama lacked foreign policy credibility in general and particularly in Eastern Europe. He realised that he needed Biden, who has taken great pride in being a hardliner on Russian President Vladimir Putin's authoritarianism and kleptocracy.

As an experienced foreign-policy politician, Biden has a highly qualified foreign-policy team. His first nominations were Anthony Blinken, who has been his top foreign-policy adviser for many years, as secretary of state, and young star Jake Sullivan as his national security adviser. Both are perceived as the best and brightest of Washington's foreign-policy specialists, and they are very close to Biden both personally and in their views. The next level down is also impressive. Victoria Nuland has been nominated as under-secretary of state for policy. Several others have already been appointed or nominated for various roles, and they all appear highly competent and aligned in their views with Biden's policy.

These people have well-known views. They are internationalists and Atlanticists with a strong commitment to values—democracy, freedom, human rights and the rule of law. They believe in multilateralism and want the US to coordinate its policies with other truly democratic states and with the EU. They strongly support NATO.

Some have argued that these people were responsible for the mistakes of the Obama administration, such as not delivering lethal weapons to Ukraine, but they actually formed the opposing camp to that policy (Thiessen 2019). Ukraine seems to have been a dividing line for Biden. He and his people took a hard line on Russia's antidemocratic domestic policies and aggressive foreign policy, and those who wanted a reset or to go soft on Russia do not now hold jobs related to foreign policy. Thus, any deduction that Biden will pursue the same policy as Obama in Eastern Europe is likely to be wrong. Biden knows where he stands, and so do his people.

## Biden's policy on Eastern Europe

Since Biden's people are so knowledgeable and well known, it is easy to deduce the policy they will pursue on Eastern Europe. The essence of their policy can be summarised in two principles: to stand up for the sovereignty of all independent states and to pursue the adoption of universal values in friendly states, also known as tough love. Which policy will come to the fore may be accidental, as certain policy issues will mature regardless of Washington's desires.

Biden repeatedly promised prior to his inauguration that he would call all allies and declare that the US was back, and he has already done so (Shin et al. 2020). A foundation of his policy will be strong support for NATO. Unlike Trump, he will not even think of reducing US troops in Europe, but rather will consider how NATO's defence of Europe can become more effective. The existing demand that all NATO members spend at least 2% of their GDP on defence will remain and, if anything, become even more important, but Biden will never threaten to abandon NATO. Biden has always supported the provision of US military assistance to Georgia and Ukraine. Under Trump, Congress consistently boosted US support for the defence of Ukraine, but now the White House will do so too.

One of the first issues to be addressed will be Biden's long-promised 'Summit of Democracies'. An intense debate has developed in Washington: should Biden just invite those countries that are really committed to democracy and demand that they prove this, or should he invite pretty much anybody? The debate seems to be leaning in the direction of strict rules and a prior commitment to real democracy. Which leaves the question of whether Hungary and Poland will be invited. If they are, what conditions will be imposed on them? The answer to this question will be of fundamental importance to the nature of the Western alliance. In early 2020 Biden (2020a) published an article on his foreign policy in which he stated, 'During my first year in office, the United States will organize and host a global Summit for Democracy to renew the spirit and shared purpose of the nations of the free world'. Yet he carefully avoided stating who would be invited. His vagueness has unleashed discussion of whether the invitation should be demanding in its criteria or not.

Biden stands for diversity and tolerance at home and abroad. Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights will also become quite important in his foreign policy, which again puts Hungary and Poland in an awkward position. Trump's two darlings in Europe might become Biden's black sheep, although he is strongly committed to Poland's real national causes. The Biden administration will put a lot of emphasis on upholding democracy, freedom and the rule of law among its allies. These issues will also be raised in conversations with the countries of the EU's eastern neighbourhood, notably Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova.

The most dramatic situation is likely to develop around Ukrainian domestic policies. Biden knows Ukraine well and he considers it very important. He is therefore likely to engage directly and intensely. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky is clearly in over

his head and does not appear to know what to do. At present, he seems to be no servant of the people but merely of one oligarch, his long-time sponsor Ihor Kolomoisky (Petrella 2019). Biden's arrival in the White House probably offers Zelensky his last chance to gain some spine and straighten out his policies.

The Biden administration is likely to allow the US Department of Justice to work on prominent Ukrainian cases, and it might impose sanctions on obvious Ukrainian culprits. It has long been reported that the Federal Bureau of Investigation has pursued major cases against Kolomoisky for money laundering in the US, including one instance in Cleveland (*Cleveland.com* 2020), and a civil case in Florida called for the forfeiture of \$70 million of his property (US Department of Justice 2020). Allegedly the Trump administration impeded cases against Kolomoisky, since his people provided Trump's personal lawyer, Rudolph Giuliani, with dubious evidence against the Biden family. Under Biden, the US Department of Justice will presumably do its job, and US criminal action against Kolomoisky is likely to ensue, which would affect Ukrainian domestic politics. The embarrassment to Zelensky of Kolomoisky being prosecuted in the US would presumably suffice to end the current Zelensky–Kolomoisky cooperation.

The US Department of Justice has been requesting that Ukrainian gas trader Dmytro Firtash be extradited to the US on charges of bribery since 2014, but the Austrian authorities have, as yet, failed to fulfil this request. Firtash lives in Vienna and is currently out on bail (Hess 2019). The Biden administration is likely to speed up action on this matter, which may have slowed down after Firtash hired two lawyers from the Trump camp. Kolomoisky and Firtash have also been discussed as suitable candidates for sanctioning under the Global Magnitsky Act.

Besides Ukraine, Belarus is likely to be an early focus for the Biden administration. Unlike Trump, who did not comment on Belarus, Biden has made a strong statement: 'I continue to stand with the people of Belarus and support their democratic aspirations. I also condemn the appalling human rights abuses committed by the Lukashenka regime' (Biden 2020b). Biden will clearly add spine to the EU reactions and sanctions on Belarus.

Moldova might be the easiest policy case. A pro-Western liberal, Maia Sandu, has just been elected president, and the US clearly has an interest in supporting her and helping her fight the country's severe corruption. Georgia is currently a complicated case. It has just had elections, whose result the opposition contests. It is unclear what the US can do there, and it is likely to stay cautious.

Biden is strongly in favour of multilateral cooperation, and his administration is bound to engage closely with the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development in Europe's eastern neighbourhood. On the one hand, this should open up more funding for Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. On the other, the US is likely to once again sharply increase the pressure on these governments to improve the rule of law in a fashion that the EU appears to shy away from. Thus, Biden will offer these countries a new opportunity to reform.

Another aspect of Biden's policy regarding the eastern neighbourhood will be its stance on Russia. This is bound to consist of two major parts, negotiations on arms control and sanctions. The rest is currently of little consequence. All along, Biden has been very clear that he will not discuss the fate of third countries with Moscow without their presence or consent. The risk of Biden selling anybody out to Moscow for other purposes does not exist. Biden was vice president when Obama launched his 'reset' with Moscow in 2009, but he was no advocate of that policy, and no one within his circle endorses the idea of a reset. There is no contradiction in pursuing sanctions and arms control negotiations at the same time. All parties are interested in certain aspects of arms control, while sanctions are a separate issue.

The primary aim in US negotiations with Russia on arms control was to prolong the 2010 New START agreement on the limitation of strategic nuclear weapons. The current agreement was set to lapse two weeks after Biden's inauguration. The Trump administration was interested in its prolongation, but was administratively unable to accomplish it. The Biden administration favoured its extension and the Russians were very positive about this, so both parties agreed to prolong the old agreement for five years through a simple exchange of notes. This was an instant win for Biden.

In August 2019, the US completed Trump's withdrawal from the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, which was a major agreement between former US President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. Since 2014, the US has accused Russia of violating the treaty by testing, possessing and fielding a ground-launched cruise missile called 9M729 (Arms Control Association 2019). The Trump administration also wanted China to be covered by this treaty, which China firmly opposed. Russia has indicated that it could make amends, which could facilitate a renewal of the agreement, but such negotiations would require more time.

A third treaty of relevance is the Treaty on Open Skies, designed to reduce the chances of an accidental war by allowing mutual reconnaissance flights by parties to the 34-nation agreement. Trump completed the US withdrawal in November, claiming that Russia has violated this treaty. Russia responded by withdrawing as well. Since this treaty was ratified by the Senate and has legally lapsed, it will be difficult to renew it, despite renewal being in the US interest, as Republican senators are unlikely to support this.

In the last decade, sanctions have become an ever more important tool for US foreign policy as interest in military action has declined. While Biden is likely to activate traditional diplomacy, he is also likely to continue to pursue an active sanctions policy against Russia and in favour of human rights as he did when vice president.

Biden has long advocated support for vulnerable Eastern European states and sanctions on Russia for violating their rights. Since it was obvious that Trump opposed sanctions on Russia, Congress found it necessary to adopt the Combating America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act in the summer of 2017. Unfortunately, this stand-off between president and Congress led to a number of incongruities. In particular, it is no longer clear why the US government sanctions any particular person or entity, or what

the individual or entity must do to enable the sanctions to be eased. Another problem has been that sanctioning seems to have been at the whim of President Trump.

Biden's sanctions policy is likely to differ significantly from the Trump policy. Although no policy has become clear as yet, we should expect substantial changes to US sanctions policy. First, the main authority for sanctions is likely to move from the Treasury back to the State Department. This will lead to better coordination both within the US government and with allies. Second, sanctions have traditionally been the prerogative of the president, because it is difficult to revoke sanctions imposed by Congress. Given that the Biden administration will not suffer from the same level of Congressional distrust as Trump on sanctions, this responsibility is likely to move back to the president. Third, the wild outbreaks of sanctioning that were characteristic of the Trump administration are likely to abate. The US will probably move to passing more predictable and better explained sanctions. Fourth, the reasons for sanctions and the actions needed to have them reversed are likely to be clarified. At present, the common view is that if you have been sanctioned, there is nothing you can do about it, which means that those sanctioned have no incentive to improve their behaviour. Fifth, greater continuity in sanctioning is likely. If a principal has been sanctioned and passes on his companies to a son, the son is likely to be sanctioned as well.

Apart from greater coordination with the EU and other allies and the streamlining of the sanctions process, the US sanctioning apparatus is likely to continue to operate similarly to how it does now. Biden is not likely to opt for any softening. Yet the secretary of the treasury is essentially in charge of sanctions, and since Janet Yellen has not been engaged in sanctioning previously, she might offer some surprises.

An important part of the 2021 National Defense Authorization Act is the Corporate Transparency Act, which requires that all limited liability companies provide the name of their ultimate beneficial owners to the Financial Crimes Enforcement Network. This will offer US law enforcement completely new abilities to follow dirty money in the US and should render the US enforcement of money laundering and sanctions far more effective. Biden has talked about making the fight against international kleptocracy a hallmark of his presidency.

## **Conclusion**

To summarise, Biden's policy on Eastern Europe and the EU's Eastern Partnership is likely to be characterised by great engagement. Biden will stand up for these countries' sovereignty and defence, but he will also pursue good universal values—democracy, freedom and the rule of law—while economic issues will not be high on the agenda. A rising American and international issue is the combating of kleptocracies. Biden has consistently expressed huge support for the EU and for US integration with Europe. He is clearly intent on re-establishing close US cooperation with the EU on sanctions against Russia. However, coordination takes time and Trump caused so much damage that Biden must first undo. Biden faces a dilemma. He needs to act fast and firmly, but that has to be combined with a revision of the Trump policies, which may take some time. Also, it takes quite some time for a new US administration to get the relevant policymakers

appointed and confirmed by the Senate. In the meantime, Biden would do better to act rather than wait, as waiting may arouse new European irritation. The Biden administration should be an ideal partner for the EU and, after some initial hiccups, considerable policy coordination on Eastern Europe seems both possible and likely.

## References

- Arms Control Association. (2019). *The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty at a glance*. August. <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/INFtreaty>. Accessed 2 February 2021.
- Biden, J. (2020a). Why America must lead again: Rescuing U.S. foreign policy after Trump. *Foreign Affairs*, March/April. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again>In early 2020. Accessed 2 February 2021.
- Biden, J. (2020b). Belarus – Statement by Vice President Joe Biden. 27 October. <https://joebiden.com/2020/10/27/belarus-statement-by-vice-president-joe-biden/>. Accessed 2 February 2021.
- Cleveland.com. (2020). FBI raids offices at downtown One Cleveland Center building tied to Ukrainian oligarch. 4 August. <https://www.cleveland.com/court-justice/2020/08/fbi-raids-offices-at-downtown-one-cleveland-center-building-tied-to-ukrainian-oligarch.html>. Accessed 2 February 2021.
- Hess, M. (2019). The extradition case of Dmytro Firtash, A Ukrainian oligarch with global connections. *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 6 December. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/12/the-extradition-case-of-dmytro-firtash-a-ukrainian-oligarch-with-global-connections/>. Accessed 2 February 2021.
- Petrella, S. (2019). Volodymyr Zelensky: Ukraine’s servant of the people? *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 8 May. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/05/volodymyr-zelensky-ukraines-servant-of-the-people/>. Accessed 2 February 2021.
- Shin, H., Murakami, S., & Lewis, S. (2020). Biden reassures U.S. allies in calls with leaders of Japan, South Korea, Australia. *Reuters*, 11 November. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-asia-allies/biden-reassures-u-s-allies-in-calls-with-leaders-of-japan-south-korea-australia-idUSKBN27S0EU>. Accessed 2 February 2021.
- Thiessen, M. (2019). Joe Biden is a hypocrite on Ukraine. *Washington Post*, 8 October. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/10/08/joe-biden-is-hypocrite-ukraine/>. Accessed 2 February 2021.
- US Department of Justice. (2020). *Justice Department seeks forfeiture of two commercial properties purchased with funds misappropriated from PrivatBank in Ukraine*. 6 August. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/justice-department-seeks-forfeiture-two-commercial-properties-purchased-funds-misappropriated>. Accessed 2 February 2021.

## Author biography



**Anders Åslund, Ph.D.**, is a Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council. His latest book is *Russia’s Crony Capitalism: The Path from Market Economy to Kleptocracy*.



# Democratic Russia: Why it is not a contradiction in terms

European View  
2021, Vol. 20(1) 54–62  
© The Author(s) 2021  
DOI: 10.1177/17816858211007069  
journals.sagepub.com/home/euv



**Leonid Gozman**

## Abstract

Doubts about building a stable democracy in Russia are usually associated with the peculiarities of both the country's history and the Russian people's mentality. However, rather than being exclusively defined by a series of tyrants, Russian history is also marked by impressive attempts at democracy building. The long-standing battle continues to rage between those who advocate that Russia should be developed as a European country and those who adhere to the idea of Russia finding its own peculiar way, defined by autocracy. Indeed, we are witnessing a dramatic escalation of this battle. The specific features of the Russian nation have never been an obstacle to the proper operation of democratic institutions. In addition to sharing democratic values and being ready to implement them in real life, the younger generation of Russian citizens is also able to fight for them as they are now entering the political arena. What precludes democracy in Russia is not its history or the psyche of its citizens but its archaic and incompetent state. Russian society is thus now ready for democracy.

## Keywords

Russia, Democracy, Europe, History, Autocracy, Reform

Russia is a European state.

(Catherine II, 1767)

## Introduction

It is indubitably clear that Russia is currently being ruled by authoritarian and archaic means. It is also obvious that the entire world, and primarily Europe, is interested in Russia becoming an established democracy, not least because a democratic Russia will

### Corresponding author:

L. Gozman.

Email: lgozman@mail.ru



Creative Commons CC BY: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>) which permits any use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access pages (<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage>).

stop being a threat to its neighbours. However, many question the possibility of stable democracy existing in Russia. They think that something in this country, be it its history, culture, people's mentality or even climate, makes the ideas of democracy and freedom alien to it, and that this is why it slips back to its natural state of tyranny even after the most impressive and heroic efforts at democratisation.

Interestingly, Russia is the only country of Christian culture to be subjected to these kinds of doubts, and the only country of Eastern Christianity, too. While Ukraine receives criticism for some aspects of its politics, no one suggests that it has a categorical inability to build a democracy.

Russians like me, who have spent most of their lives promoting freedom in Russia, find it extremely difficult to accept that it is categorically impossible for democracy to exist in our country. It is clear, though, that people want us to bolster our convictions with arguments.

Suggestions that Russia is not fit for democracy because of its size or climate hardly deserve a second look. Stable democracies in Norway and Finland, each as cold as Russia, or the huge and scarcely populated Canada, prove that these reasons are fallacious. However, it is true that Russia's seemingly inexhaustible natural resources, ranging from fur under Ivan the Terrible in the sixteenth century to oil under Vladimir Putin, have enabled the government to remain dependent on its own people for a long time. As only a tiny share of the population participated in the extraction, transportation and export of these resources, the labour provided by the majority of the subjects did not equate to their opinions having an impact on the welfare provided by the state or on its leadership. Hence, as a tool to respect and acknowledge people's opinions, democracy appeared redundant. There is a good reason why the majority of the leading hydrocarbon-exporting economies are marked by political regimes opposed to democracy, with Russia accompanied by Venezuela, Saudi Arabia and Turkmenistan on this list. Along with climate and size, the 'resource curse' might be a hindrance; yet it does not render normal development impossible (Sachs and Warner 1995).

## **History: the ever-changing past**

The historical arguments require more serious consideration. These claim that Russia has always been ruled by tyrants, with embryonic democratic institutions emerging much later than in Europe.

Our history is hard indeed. Over seven decades of the twentieth century, three generations of Russians experienced one of the worst dictatorships humankind has ever known. Still, the history of Russia has more to offer than a sequence of ever-changing reincarnations of Ivan the Terrible and Joseph Stalin. As well as the tyrants who are an inalienable part of the Russian path, Russia's story is defined by the names of Alexander the Liberator, Mikhail Speransky, Alexander Kerensky and Boris Yeltsin.

Having borrowed their ideas from Europe, the Bolsheviks nevertheless had much in common with the political traditions of the Russian dictatorship. In particular, they relied on the system of the peasant community, which narrowed the space of individual freedom down to a minimum, and on the principles of the military settlements established by Count Aleksey Arakcheyev, among other elements. Their reliance on these traditions de facto enabled the Bolsheviks to reintroduce serfdom in the form of kolkhozes, which peasants could not leave and at which they had to work without payment, a practice that remained in place until the time of Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev.

However, enslavement has not been the only trend in Russia. In addition to the emancipation of peasants, which came simultaneously with the abolition of slavery in the US, but without a war, the Great Reforms of Alexander II in the nineteenth century introduced two crucial democratic institutions: local self-government and jury courts. Genuinely independent of the government, the courts would deliver rulings that were in direct conflict with the will of the sovereign monarch. Yet long before Alexander, in 1730, Prince Dmitry Golitsyn had also undertaken a heroic attempt to limit the tsarist autocracy by making Anna Ioannovna accept the 'Conditions'—a list of limitations to the powers that she held—before her accession to the throne. The ever-changing Provisional Government that came much later, in 1917, was not successful in preventing disaster; yet it was consistent with the idea of building a democracy. Finally, Yeltsin abandoned the traditional imperial stance of Russian rulers by accepting the freedom of former colonies and vassal territories, and in just a few years established democratic institutions which had never before existed in Russia. Weakened as they are, these institutions remain in place today. Rather than foreign missionaries, Russian people of Russian flesh and blood have taken all these steps towards freedom and democracy.

Along with facts, the history of any country consists of images and myths, which pay particular attention to some elements of history by deeming them crucial and typological, while almost completely ignoring others. Sometimes state propaganda does this intentionally, as was the case in the USSR or as it is in today's Russia, in the fashion brilliantly described by George Orwell in *1984*. Yet, purposeful distortions aside, historical images cannot fully match the actual truth. This is why tourist maps mark the most significant attractions, leaving the rest of the city as a vague scheme. Depicting everything would result in a city-sized map of the city. However, apart from public consensus, choosing sightseeing landmarks is about the preferences of the publishers. The same applies to history. When people discuss Russia, they remember the tyrants not only because they ran the country in certain periods, but also because they seem to be a natural fit for Russia. At the same time, people tend to recall the Novgorod and Pskov Republics much less often, even though these entities could serve as examples of an alternative path for the Russian state. Popular around the world and in Russia itself, the traditional image of Russian history eliminates everything that contradicts the overarching concept. For example, who knows, except for professional historians, that Alexander III, a conservative tsar who consistently rolled back his father's reforms, was nevertheless the first in Europe to prohibit corporal punishment in schools?

The fight for freedom in our country is also about what should be considered natural for Russia and Russians, that is, in terms of the people's perception of history. For most Russian citizens, Stalin represents the main personal symbol of Russia, followed by Ivan the Terrible and Peter I. People see dictatorship as the norm. However, for Russia to develop as a democracy, people need to understand that these three rulers actually destroyed the country rather than building it; for example, the depopulation under Ivan the Terrible was comparable to the aftermath of the Tartar invasion (Kluchevsky 2018). On the other hand, Alexander II; his follower in rural reforms at the beginning of the twentieth century, Pyotr Stolypin; and Yeltsin were actual heroes and constructors.

In reality, Russian history is about the multiannual battle between the champions of the European democratic path and those who believe in Russia's peculiar way of living, distant from democracy and freedom. On the surface, it seems that the democrats will always lose. Anna Ioannovna was 'pleased to tear apart [the Conditions she had signed]' (Gordin 1994, author's translation), imprisoned Golitsyn and proceeded to rule autocratically. Alexander II was followed by Alexander III, February 1917 succumbed to the October Revolution and Putin undid Yeltsin's reforms. Still, anti-democratic forces have never fully prevailed, either. After reactionary periods, a new turn of history has always brought new liberals to power. The reformist team of Alexander II would lead the country out of the deadlock into which Nicholas I had driven it; Yegor Gaidar, as acting prime minister, rebuilt the economy of Russia after its total demolition by Communists. The pendulum swings on, and so does the history of Russia, which is far from predetermined.

## The 'mysterious' Russian soul

Along with appeals to history, the claim that democracy is impossible in Russia is frequently substantiated through references to the specific mentality of Russians, that is, their 'mysterious soul'—with a line or two from Dostoyevsky thrown in for good measure. Democracy is allegedly alien to this soul, freedom is not necessary and slavery is natural. Such allegations are racist.

People resembling Dostoyevsky's characters are not more common among Russians than among, for example, the French or Americans. Rather than a picture taken from life, this is a genius-created myth. Russians do differ from other peoples; however, two questions emerge: Are they any more different from the citizens of European nations than those are from each other? And do these mental differences prevent Russians from establishing democracy at home?

There is no answer to the first question. One can only assume that the perception of Russians as essentially different from other Europeans is not so much rooted in reality, since most people who consider Russians 'special' have never even talked to them, as it is in the perceived threat to Europe traditionally originating from Russia.

On the other hand, numerous facts indicate that Russians easily fit into the democratic context. The twentieth century subjected Russia to harsh experiments, with millions having to leave their homeland and adapt to living elsewhere. Some waves of Russian emigration constituted a representative sample of the population. Consider, for example, the 1.5 million soldiers of the White Army who fled Russia after the victory of the Reds and settled around the world. Their identification as 'White' was more or less a matter of happenstance as many of the fighters ended up 'White' or 'Red' purely by circumstance. Scattered across alien lands with no knowledge of the local language and usually without an education (since many were semi-literate peasants), most of them successfully integrated. The world has no poor Russian ghettos, and a significant part of the American elite, for example, is of Russian origin. The majority of Russians living in democratic countries, such as the Baltic states, are good at understanding the advantages of democratic institutions and skilful in using them. Many of them are politically active. It is important to know whether Russians believe themselves and their compatriots able to lean towards a democratic way of life.

Throughout the country's history, Russian elites have fought to limit autocracy and to participate in governance. However, in most cases this struggle was only about rights and institutions for a limited group of members of the aristocracy. Nonetheless, it is also the case that the barons who forced the English King John to sign the Magna Carta over eight hundred years ago were also only thinking about their own rights, or the rights of other barons at best, and definitely not about the freedom of the entire population. Still, the signing of this agreement provided a framework for the eventual establishment of democracy for everyone.

Russian elites have usually been more pro-European than the majority of the population. Alexander Pushkin even presented the government as the 'only European' in the country (Pushkin 1836/1979). Many Romanovs were Westernisers in essence, even though they limited themselves to establishing institutions that would not restrict their own autocratic rule.

Interestingly, when the Millennium of Russia monument was unveiled in Veliky Novgorod in 1862, the 109 figures that symbolised Russian history did not include Ivan the Terrible, albeit other actors living under his rule were represented. Symptomatically, there were very few debates about including his figure on the monument, which contrasts with the many debates about other candidates. The elites of those times were unanimous in agreeing that despotism destroys a country; logically, Tsar Ivan had no place among the constructors thereof.

While most of the elites were only interested in ensuring their own empowerment, some members of the upper classes were fighting for the emancipation of the entire population, with the Decembrists being the most outstanding example. This was a group of aristocrats that rebelled against the accession of Nicholas I after the sudden death of Alexander I in 1825. The uprising aimed to abolish serfdom and transition the country to a constitutional monarchy or even a republic. Importantly, the Decembrists came from a

privileged class and had no personal interest in this struggle. The rebellion was crushed, its leaders executed and 107 people were deported to penal servitude. However, with their idea of liberating everyone, for decades the Decembrists remained a moral example and heroes to the well-educated and better-off portion of the population.

Notably, the Russian aristocracy and educated classes tended to believe that the entire nation was aligned with them in their aspirations for freedom. In his response from Chita prison to Pushkin's famous appeal, *Deep in Siberia's Mines*, Decembrist Alexander Odoyevsky referred to the times when 'Our enlightened people would rally around the holy banner' (meaning the banner of freedom) (Odoyevsky 2003, author's translation). Traditionally enlightenment was seen as a precondition for the Russian people's readiness for freedom. The intelligentsia of the 1870s aimed to educate people based on its leadership's ideas of a peaceful transition towards a more humane and democratic form of government. Later, even the terrorist organisation Narodnaya Volia (People's Will), which ultimately succeeded in killing Alexander II, saw terror merely as a tool to be used in the transition to self-government by the people. In their suppression of freedom and reinforcement of the idea of a dictatorship as the only possible way to handle Russia, the ideas of the Soviet Communists stemmed from the traditions of the Horde and Ivan the Terrible, and definitely not from the mainstream of Russia's intellectual and political thought.

In terms of the establishment's attitudes, today's situation is closer to that of the times of Ivan the Terrible than the Romanov Empire. The current rulers believe that, if at all, democracy in Russia should come at some later point or be a special 'sovereign' democracy in line with our traditional values. Interestingly, if asked bluntly what these traditional values are, policymakers either do not give an answer or explain that they mean the rejection of same-sex marriage. Nothing positive is suggested whatsoever! In fact, the only traditional value which today's rulers of Russia are trying to legitimise is autocracy at all levels. It is about ensuring the man's absolute power in a family, preventing legislation against domestic violence. It is about ensuring the power of the owners or managers of companies, making it virtually impossible to create a real labour union; while the Chair of the Constitutional Court, Valery Zorkin claims that serfdom was a unifying 'bond' that held the Russian nation together (Zorkin 2014). Certainly, it is about ensuring the power of the supreme state ruler, unchecked by the parliament, courts or law. People have no rights in this system. They cannot claim anything; they can only ask and hope for mercy.

However, the Russian people have a different take on this issue. The European Values Study (GESIS 2020) indicates that Russian respondents gave an average score of more than 7 out of 10 when asked about the importance of living in a democratic country (which is, nevertheless, almost the lowest score in Europe and only slightly higher than the average score in Serbia). Even with no experience of life in a democratic framework, most Russians believe that it is necessary for themselves and their country. The same data indicate that, despite the endless propaganda that Russia has a real democracy compared to what exists in Europe, only half of Russians believe that democracy is present

in their country (GESIS 2020). In contrast, according to the Levada Center (2020), the share of people who think that the regime in Russia is democratic fell 1.5 times between 2015 and 2020, down to a mere 22%.

Analysis of the attitudes of Russians should take into consideration the extreme heterogeneity of our society. The regime's shrinking support base remains quite large. At least 35% of voters firmly vote for Putin, if considering mean organic votes rather than the figures inflated by multiple falsifications. Approximately the same share is permanently against the regime, even if some of these people do not vote because they do not want to contribute to what they see as a meaningless pantomime. The first group includes mostly older and more poorly educated people, with the core age group being over 65 years old, and the politically indifferent populations of villages and small towns. The opposition includes younger and better-educated city inhabitants. The sources from which these groups acquire information are television and the Internet, respectively. People still defined by their Soviet identity dominate the first group. Their thinking goes along the lines of 'the government is distant; we make no difference and have no chance to influence it; it is therefore advisable to avoid problems and behave (and vote) properly'. The government's sole responsibility in the worldview of these people is to maintain minimal order and social welfare, first of all by paying pensions. Defined by the 'estate' into which they were born, this feudal mentality presupposes tolerance towards elite corruption and luxuries: they are the bosses, after all.

Some of these people sincerely hate the opposition, America and the West. However, you will not find anyone who personally loves the government or Putin. They are supported as a tribute to tradition and because, in the opinion of these people, any change is for the worse. This support is extremely passive. They would readily vote for a replacement for Putin. Rather than Putin-voters, these are status quo-voters. They will only wake up if their pensions stop being paid or if their children are sent to war en masse; this thus puts limits on the regime's military adventures. Importantly though, these people never support the regime proactively and voluntarily; no one lines up for solidarity actions to defend the president from enemies and slanderers, but people are paid to participate in pro-regime rallies. When the members of a pro-Kremlin movement got it into their heads to write 'I am a patriot' (Я – патриот) using human figures, which was intended to be seen from space, they failed to mobilise enough people for even the first letter.

The share of the population that opposes Putin exhibits very different behaviours. 'Freedom' was the most popular slogan displayed at the harshly dispersed rallies that took place in dozens of Russian cities in late January 2021. The educated youth is very conscious of the need for democratisation, meaning fair elections, freedom of expression and fulfilment of the other demands of the revolution of February 1917, which fell prey to the Bolsheviks.

In general, Russian society is much more developed and ready for democracy, self-government and constructive conflict resolution than the Russian state. Self-help and

volunteering are on the rise, something that has been particularly obvious during the pandemic, while the state has done almost nothing to help its citizens. Despite clear segmentation being visible in society, there is no split, since the pro-opposition citizens oppose the state bureaucracy rather than their fellow citizens. Despite the long-standing attempts of state propaganda to instigate mutual hatred and open violence, civil clashes have not materialised, at least not so far.

## Conclusion

Russia is the only country of Christian culture about which doubts are expressed about the fundamental possibility of it operating as a stable democracy. Many believe that democracy is impossible in Russia because of Russian history and the peculiarities of the Russian psyche. But Russian history has not been a constant transition from one form of tyranny to another, but a dramatic struggle that continues to this day between the supporters of dictatorship and the supporters of freedom and of a European path for Russia. Among the heroes of this struggle are several Russian tsars, Russian intellectuals and ordinary Russian people. And, in mentality, a Russian is no different from other Europeans. The notion of the specialness of the Russian psyche is a myth traditionally used by authoritarian governments to explain why Russia does not have the same democratic institutions as those that work successfully in other countries. In fact, we have enough evidence that Russians strive for, know how to achieve and can use such freedom no less than other Europeans.

Russia and modern Russian society are ready for freedom. It is therefore its archaic, greedy and utterly ineffective government, rather than Russian history or the mysterious Russian soul, which remains a barrier to democracy in the country.

## References

- GESIS (Leibniz Institute for Social Studies). (2020). *European Values Study*. <https://dbk.gesis.org/dbksearch/GDESC2.asp?no=0009&DB=E>. Accessed 9 March 2021.
- Gordin, Y. (1994). *Меж рабством и свободой*. СПб. Лениздат [Between slavery and freedom]. Saint Petersburg: Lenizdat.
- Kluchevsky, V. (2018). *Русская история* [Russian history]. Moscow: Uwright.
- Levada Center. (2020). Представления о политической системе [Ideas about the political system]. 8 September. <https://www.levada.ru/2020/09/08/predstavleniya-o-politicheskoy-sisteme/>. Accessed 26 September 2021.
- Odoevsky, A. (2003). Струн вещей пламенные звуки. Стихотворения, письма, воспоминания об Одоевском [Strings of prophetic fiery sounds. Poems, letters, memories of Odoevsky]. New Key.
- Pushkin, A. S. (1836/1979). П.Я.Чаадаеву (Из черновиков) [To P. Y. Chaadaev (from drafts)]. In *П Полное собрание сочинений: в десяти томах* [Complete works: in ten volumes], B. V. Tomashevsky (ed.), Наука [Science] 1977–79, vol. 10, Письма [Letters], 740. Leningrad. [https://rvb.ru/pushkin/02comm/1928\\_740.htm](https://rvb.ru/pushkin/02comm/1928_740.htm). Accessed 9 March 2021.
- Sachs, J. D., & Warner, A. M. (1995). *Natural resource abundance and economic growth*. NBER Working Paper 5398, December. <https://www.nber.org/papers/w5398>. Accessed 26 February 2021.

Zorkin, V. D. (2014). Суд скорый, правый и равный для всех [The trial swift, fair and equal for all]. *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 29 September.

### Author biography



**Leonid Gozman** is president of the Union of Right Forces, a professor at the Free University in Moscow and an active participant in the democratic movement in Russia since its emergence. He has served as an advisor to Yegor Gaidar and to Anatoly Chubais in the presidential administration and in the Russian government. He has also been a guest scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center in Washington, DC; professor of psychology and Russian area studies at the Dickinson College, Carlisle, Pennsylvania; and a fellow at the National Endowment for Democracy in Washington, DC.



# Putting democracy at the heart of the EU's Russia strategy

European View  
2021, Vol. 20(1) 63–71  
© The Author(s) 2021  
DOI: 10.1177/17816858211011781  
journals.sagepub.com/home/euv



**Roland Freudenstein**

## Abstract

It is high time for a fundamental review of the EU's strategy towards Russia. After years of fruitless attempts to 'reset' relations with Moscow through a kind of engagement that has all too often ended up in appeasement, the EU and its member states should prepare for a long stand-off and put democracy at the centre of the relationship. This means doing better at defending our democracy against hostile interference from the Kremlin, strengthening democratic movements and the rule of law in the EU's Eastern neighbourhood, supporting Russia's civil society with more determination and creativity, and mentally preparing for a democratic post-Putin Russia. In short, we have to offer more help to Russia's democrats and be more confrontational with the Kremlin. All this has to happen in close coordination with our transatlantic allies and as part of a global effort to support democrats and defend democracy against authoritarianism.

## Keywords

EU, Russia, Civil society, Democracy, Rule of law, Putin

## Introduction

The EU's policy on Russia under President Vladimir Putin has gone through spurts and spasms ever since 2014—the watershed year when the Kremlin's toxic aggression became obvious to a larger audience in Europe and the US. The EU's responses since then have been affected by the disunity on this subject among the member states and therefore have lacked strategic cohesiveness. The events of 2020 and 2021 could become the next watershed moment. The Kremlin's murderous actions against opposition leader

---

## Corresponding author:

Roland Freudenstein, Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, 20 Rue du Commerce, 1st floor, Brussels, B-1000, Belgium.  
Email: rf@martenscentre.eu



Creative Commons CC BY: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>) which permits any use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access pages (<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage>).

Alexei Navalny and the reawakening of Russian civil society upon his return, as well as the aftermath of the humiliating Moscow visit by EU High Representative Josep Borrell in early February 2021, offer an excellent opportunity to fundamentally revise the EU's Russia strategy. The spring and summer of 2021 could—and should—become the moment when the EU rises to the challenge with a more unified approach, comprising a more realistic assessment of the character of the Kremlin's regime and the opposition to it, and a more forward-looking appraisal of Russia's democratic future. Supporting Russia's democrats should become a central feature of the EU's new Russia strategy (Stelzenmüller 2021).

The global context in which this should happen is complex. At the beginning of the third decade of the twenty-first century, it looks very likely that the global struggle between liberal democracy and authoritarianism will be one of the decisive conflicts of our near and mid-term future. On the one hand, COVID-19 has sapped much of the pre-pandemic strength of Europe's economies and societies and continues to consume considerable political energy. Four years of Donald Trump in the White House have deeply unsettled European elites and public opinion regarding the future of the West. The persistence of nativist political parties and autocratic governments in the EU itself continues to inhibit its external support of the rule of law and good governance. On the other hand, however, the robust stance of new US President Joe Biden with regard to Russia, as well as his support for global democracy and his intention to form an alliance of democracies, is excellent news for a revised and more transatlantic approach to relations with Russia and helping democrats in Eastern Europe.

Until High Representative Borrell's Moscow visit in February 2021, the yard-stick of the EU's post-2014 Russia policy consisted of the 'Five Guiding Principles', sometimes also called the Mogherini Principles, of 2016 (European Parliament Think Tank 2018). These were

- full implementation of the Minsk agreements regarding Ukraine,
- closer ties with Russia's 'former Soviet' neighbours,
- strengthening EU resilience to Russian threats,
- selective engagement with Russia on certain issues such as counterterrorism, and
- support for people-to-people contacts.

Like all EU policies, these points represent a compromise—in this case between member states which wanted to be much more ambitious in confronting the Kremlin and those which were hesitant to accept even these principles. But having said that, and in light of the Borrell visit and the Kremlin's doubling down on oppression at home and aggression abroad, it is high time for a re-examination. A closer look at the principles—and their implementation in the last four years—shows how outdated they are. First, the Minsk process is going nowhere because the Kremlin has never taken it seriously. From the outset the EU's mistake was to treat the chief aggressor, Russia, as a mediator between the

victim (the Kyiv government) and Moscow's own satraps (the two 'people's republics' in the Donbas). The second principle, to demand closer ties to the countries of the former USSR, needs to be followed up by much more ambitious action. In addition, the reference to the Soviet Union has to go: these are Eastern neighbours and partners of the EU, full stop. Principle three, strengthening the EU's resilience, is a worthy goal, and there have been partial successes. However, as long as the EU's biggest member state, Germany, still pretends that Nord Stream 2 is a worthwhile project and has nothing to do with the Kremlin's geopolitical schemes, and as long as others remain wide open to Russian influence and money laundering, the strengthening of resilience will not get very far. Principle four, selective engagement, is certainly in order as long as there is agreement on what exactly it should cover, but in reality it has turned out to be little more than a licence for individual countries to cooperate with Russia in whatever field seems appropriate to them. We have seen where this can lead in the examples of Austria, Cyprus and Hungary, among others. Finally, support for people-to-people contacts and Russian civil society is a good principle but has been followed up with too little ambition.

This article postulates that the key paradigm for a new Russia strategy for the EU is democracy: supporting Russia's democrats and treating Russia as a future democratic polity. In order to put this idea at the centre of a strategic revision of its Russia policy, I propose four steps. First, to confront authoritarianism and Kremlin influence in the EU itself. Second, to strengthen democracy among Russia's neighbours. Third, to help Russia's democrats. Finally to prepare, at least mentally, for a democratic Russia that we and the rest of the world can work with.

## Improving our resilience

The EU's support for democracy in Russia begins at home, just as the defence of democracy in the West begins with the international solidarity of democrats. If the Kremlin's domestic oppression and external aggression are two sides of the same coin, so are our democratic resilience and our ability and determination to render global democracy support. The world watches very closely what is happening in Western democracies. Autocrats want the world, and their own opposition, to know how all-powerful they are, and how liberal democracies are weak, hypocritical and doomed to fail. Every weakening of the rule of law in the EU itself is an open invitation to autocrats to double down and ridicule EU appeals for good governance and attempts to include rule-of-law conditionality in bilateral and multilateral agreements. Every instance of successful strategic corruption, such as the Nord Stream 2 project, is an encouragement to continue to weaken and split Euro-Atlantic institutions and chip away at the resolve of their member states.

The EU can forget about being a global player and supporting international norms without the internal enforcement of its values. It is of secondary relevance whether the weakening of the values is caused or promoted more by internal or external factors: it is the undermining of checks and balances in countries such as Hungary and Poland, among others, which is having disastrous effects (Freudenstein 2020). The same is true for elite capture by authoritarian powers, as in the cases of Czech President Miloš Zeman (*Radio*

*Prague International* 2016), former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (Polyakova et al. 2016) and former British Prime Minister David Cameron (Pickard and Payne 2020). All have been accused of having indirect financial ties to the Kremlin and/or the Chinese government and their front organisations or companies, and all have been vocal proponents of Western appeasement vis-à-vis these actors.

The money laundering by Kremlin oligarchs that is happening in places such as Vienna, Nicosia and Budapest has only just begun to be tackled by national authorities (US Department of State 2017). It is high time for a unified approach in the EU as to what constitutes money laundering, the creation of a central whistle-blower institution and a renewed effort to create guidelines for all member states.

The situation is slightly better concerning direct Kremlin support for radical political movements and parties, such as France's National Rally (Rassemblement National, formerly Front National) or Greece's Popular Association – Golden Dawn (Λαϊκός Σύνδεσμος – Χρυσή Αυγή)—at least this problem is widely discussed in public. On countering Russian disinformation, there has also been some progress, with several national foreign ministries creating strategic communication task forces, thereby bolstering the work of the European External Action Service (EEAS) team that has now been in place for several years. In any event, whatever governments do, the centrepiece of our response to hostile influence from the Kremlin has to be civil society: think tanks, political parties, foundations, media and networks such as Bellingcat.

## **Enabling the neighbours: strengthening democracies in the Eastern neighbourhood**

The rise of democracies and democratic movements in Russia's 'near abroad', also known as its 'sphere of privileged interest', or, more simply and almost equally insultingly to the countries concerned, the 'former USSR', has been one of the main foreign-policy headaches for the Kremlin. In fact, these developments are seen as an existential threat by Putin and his regime (Freudenstein 2015). The very simple reason for this is that if democratic movements can overpower autocrats in the countries around Russia, and democracy and the rule of law can succeed in making these countries safer and richer in the long run, then Russians will be encouraged to resist the Kremlin in Russia itself.

The latest example of this is the interaction between democrats in Belarus and Russia after the seriously fraudulent elections in August 2020 in Belarus. The country had looked to be the most stable dictatorship among the six EU Eastern Partners, with the vast majority of its population sullenly accepting the autocracy of Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenko. However, in 2020 a broad-based democratic resistance movement was born which has managed to prevail despite repeated crackdowns and, more than two hundred days down the line, shows no sign of disappearing. Hardly anyone still believes that Lukashenko can manage to return the country to its former 'stability'. Major changes are inevitable; it is not a question of if, but when he will lose power.

The protests in Russia following the arrest of Alexei Navalny in early 2021, the biggest since 2011–12, are very clearly linked to the Belarusian protests of 2020. Russian democrats have taken both courage and methodology from the Belarusians. At the same time, it can be argued that the Kremlin has also learned from Lukashenko how to suppress protesters. But the most important point for the EU's future Eastern strategy is that strengthening the rule of law and/or supporting democracy movements in Russia's neighbouring countries strengthens democrats in Russia itself.

The EU's primary instrument in this regard has, since 2009, been the Eastern Partnership (EaP). The EaP began as a Polish–Swedish initiative in the EU Council before becoming an official policy of the Union exercised by the Commission within the Eastern Neighbourhood policy, with the EEAS at least nominally in charge. Like its parliamentary arm, Euronest, the EaP has been much better than nothing at strengthening democracy in Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia—at least, it has not let these countries fall prey as quickly as they might have to the Kremlin and other authoritarian forces. Summarising the different EaP review and reform processes in recent years, the consensus in Brussels and the national capitals is that the EU must take a more tailor-made (i.e. less one-size-fits-all) approach to the six target countries and place a stronger emphasis on good governance and supporting civil society. But again, there is only so much that the EU institutions themselves, for example, through the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights, can do to strengthen democrats in the East. In this regard, the creation of the European Endowment for Democracy in 2013, at arm's length from the Commission, Parliament and EEAS, was a blessing because it has proven to be much more flexible and less bureaucratic than EU institutions in helping small, local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and media in the EaP countries, and recently also in Russia itself.

Bilateral national initiatives, especially from the more easterly member states, carry at least as much weight as the EU's policy instruments, both on the people-to-people level and also in government-to-government relations. Security cooperation with Ukraine is a case in point: individual member states such as Poland have contributed significantly to its military strength, which is part of its democratic resilience. Most importantly, it is imperative that any idea of 'Russia first' regarding the EU's eastern neighbours—that is, giving the Kremlin a de facto veto over our relations with the six, a reflex that still exists in a few member state capitals—is abandoned for good.

## **Supporting the unsupported: reaching out to Russia's democrats**

Much of what the EU needs to do for democracy in the EaP countries is also true for Russia. Nowhere, with the exception of Belarus, has the crackdown on civil society in recent years been as drastic as in Russia itself. In some respects, the Kremlin's actions against its own citizens have been worse than those in Belarus. For more than 10 years Russia's democrats have been increasingly under attack. Important legal changes

complicating civic activism and eventually driving out most foreign NGOs began in 2012 with the ‘foreign agents law’, which put strong shackles on any entity receiving support from abroad, and the law on ‘undesirable organisations’, which essentially prohibited the existence of some NGOs. The obvious trigger at the time was the 2011 mass demonstrations in Russian cities against election fraud, which shocked Putin. While cracking down on genuine civil society, the Kremlin has also built up a network of ‘governmentally organised’ NGOs which are lavishly supported by the regime, both financially and politically.

Russian civil society and its genuine NGOs have reacted in multiple ways to this oppression. They have developed new ways of financing, often through crowdfunding in Russia itself. They have also adapted their business models, sometimes creating revenue by providing social services, such as family support or searching for missing persons. They have explored new topics alongside the demand for democratic structures. Navalny and his movement have proven that the Kremlin’s systemic corruption is an issue that resonates with Russians far beyond democracy as an abstract concept. A video of Putin’s palace in Sochi, meticulously produced by the pro-Navalny Anti-Corruption Foundation, has been seen by sizeable parts of Russia’s population who had not previously had anything to do with protests. Navalny’s concept of ‘smart voting’ is another such innovation: instead of nominating candidates of its own, the Navalny movement simply makes recommendations as to which non-Kremlin candidates have the best chances of winning elections. This worked to an extent in the 2020 local elections and is making the Kremlin visibly nervous in the run-up to the State Duma elections of September 2021. As long as Lukashenko-style fraud does not occur during those elections, the opposition stands a chance in many constituencies. And if such fraud does take place, the ensuing protests may well reach or surpass the scale of those of 2011–12. Despite and often even because of the authorities’ crackdowns, Russia’s civil society and democratic opposition have developed a degree of resilience that enables them to survive under very extreme conditions. As well as corruption, environmental concerns and particularly residents’ rights in urban areas have recently become topics of interest to Russia’s new NGOs. This focus on the real-life problems of ordinary Russians and their very acute feelings of injustice has allowed these activists to overcome, at least in part, the isolation from the rest of society that the Kremlin wanted to achieve for them (von Ow-Freytag 2018; Havlíček 2021).

EU support for Russia’s democrats has to take into account both the democrats’ new resilience and their more difficult working conditions. Direct financial support is often not advisable because it only exposes them to further persecution. But there are more indirect ways of supporting Russia’s democrats, for example, through visas and scholarships. In this respect, the EU needs a completely new impetus, with a strategic approach to travel facilitation. Support for governmentally organised NGOs must end, in any case.

Furthermore, the EU’s sanctions policy needs to become both broader and more effective, targeting not only officials who are implicated in the crackdown on human rights but also oligarchs who are crucial to the regime. As to officials, the list of targets for travel bans and asset freezes should not only comprise *siloviki* (i.e. operatives in the

police and intelligence services), but civilians in the justice system too, down to the individual judges sentencing political prisoners. The EU should also consider an automation that, for example, puts such judges on the list without the EEAS having to go through a cumbersome procedure to gain the agreement of all the member states.

Finally, every vocal condemnation of illegal crackdowns, violence, arrests and imprisonment from EU leaders, national governments and institutions such as the European Court of Human Rights or the Council of Europe counts. These may not result in the reversal of legislation or the liberation of prisoners, but they do counter the eternal narrative of oppressive regimes vis-à-vis their opponents: that allegedly, in the rest of the world, ‘no one cares’, and that ‘you are completely alone’. Debunking this propaganda is a very important function of international protests.

In all this, our main focus should be young Russians—tomorrow’s leaders. Among the youngest voters (18–24 years old), approval and disapproval of Putin are currently equal (*Moscow Times* 2021). Among this generation fearlessness, creativity and an extremely strong attachment to non-material values are combining in a powerful blend that deserves all the outside support we can provide (*Economist* 2016).

## Thinking the possible: imagining a democratic Russia

Russians do not have a genetic inability to build a democratic state. Obviously, the Russian democrats’ struggle for a free country is bound to be long and hard. As of today, it is impossible to predict when Putin will leave the stage. But no matter whether that moment comes in a few months or years, or a decade down the line, we should start preparing now for a democratic Russia.

There is certainly no guarantee that Russia will become a democracy after Putin’s departure. It is, however, a distinct possibility. Another thing is equally clear: with Putin in power, nothing will fundamentally improve. Russia’s trajectory over the last 20 years has demonstrated that. Of course, it cannot be ruled out that Russians will not freely elect ‘another Putin’. But looking at Russia’s current opposition, including its hero, Alexei Navalny, the dominant spirit among the anti-Kremlin forces is virtually the exact opposite of that of the ex-KGB officer who worked in the shadows for many years, expanding corruption instead of fighting and exposing it, and ignoring and even rejecting universal human rights and liberal democracy instead of embracing them.

The EU and its member states should use the current momentum for a strategic revision vis-à-vis Russia to formulate a set of criteria by which to recognise fundamental change in Moscow. In my view, there are three basic factors. First, there needs to be evidence of a modicum of democratic standards—in other words, some rudimentary public accountability, transparency, and checks and balances between the branches of government, as well as respect for human and civil rights. Second, Moscow needs to end the threats and hybrid aggression against Russia’s neighbours—and that includes recognition of their full independence and sovereignty. Third, there must be an end to the

hybrid interference in the West. In fact, if the change is real, the distinction between the second and third points will entirely disappear, and both spheres will be treated equally. Of course, there is a danger that not all three criteria will be fulfilled at the same speed. To maintain a cohesive stance that combines ‘carrots and sticks’ at that moment will therefore be another tough test for European and transatlantic unity.

## Conclusion

EU institutions, national governments and civil society in the Union must all cooperate to tackle the challenge of developing a new Russia strategy which puts democracy at its centre. We should constantly remind ourselves that a democratic Russia is in our deepest interest. Moreover, supporting Russia’s democrats and preparing for the coming Russian democracy is part of the global battle between democracy and authoritarianism which is likely to mark the decade ahead. Future historians may well look back upon February 2021 as the time when the EU began to get its act together on Russia. There is no time to waste.

## References

- Blockmans, S. (2019). The Eastern Partnership at 10. *CEPS In Brief*, 6 May. <https://www.ceps.eu/the-eastern-partnership-at-10/>. Accessed 10 March 2021.
- Dickinson, P. (2021). Navalny vs Putin: What next? *Atlantic Council*, 28 January. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/navalny-vs-putin-what-next/>. Accessed 10 March 2021.
- Economist*. (2016). Tell me about Joan of Arc: Young people are finding new ways of signalling dissent. 20 October. <https://www.economist.com/special-report/2016/10/20/tell-me-about-joan-of-arc>. Accessed 10 March 2021.
- European Parliament. (2012). Annex. Special measure: Support for the European Endowment for Democracy. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/docs\\_autres\\_institutions/commission\\_europeenne/comitologie/info/2012/O025173-01/COM-AC\\_DI\(2012\)O025173-01\(ANN2\)\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/docs_autres_institutions/commission_europeenne/comitologie/info/2012/O025173-01/COM-AC_DI(2012)O025173-01(ANN2)_EN.pdf). Accessed 10 March 2021.
- European Parliament Think Tank. (2018). The EU’s Russia policy: Five guiding principles. February. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS\\_BRI\(2018\)614698](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI(2018)614698). Accessed 10 March 2021.
- Freudenstein, R. (2015). Facing up to the bear. *European View*, 13(2), 225–32. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1007/s12290-014-0330-6>. Accessed 10 March 2021.
- Freudenstein, R. (2016). Why there will be no Helsinki II. *European View*, 15(1), 3–11. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1007/s12290-016-0396-4>. Accessed 10 March 2021.
- Freudenstein, R. (2020). Macht und Werte. *Dialog Forum*, 1 December. <https://forumdialog.eu/2020/12/01/macht-und-werte/>. Accessed 10 March 2021.
- Gulina, O., Dubowy, A., Kortunov, A., & Melle, S. (2020). *Building bridges. EU–Russia visa liberalisation and visa facilitation dialogue*. EU–Russia Civil Society Forum. October. <https://eu-russia-csf.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/BackgroundNoteEURussiaVisaFacilitationLiberalisationFINAL.pdf>. Accessed 10 March 2021.
- Havlíček, P. (2021). Here’s what Borrell must say and do in Moscow. *EU Observer*, 3 February. <https://euobserver.com/opinion/150783>. Accessed 10 March 2021.
- Lazarová, D. (2016). European Values think tank likens President Zeman to Russian Trojan horse. *Radio Prague International*, 28 July. <https://english.radio.cz/european-values-think-tank-likens-president-zeman-russian-trojan-horse-8218757>. Accessed 10 March 2021.

- Moscow Times*. (2021). Dissatisfaction with Putin surges among young Russians – Levada. 4 February. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/02/04/dissatisfaction-with-putin-surges-among-young-russians-levada-poll-a72835>. Accessed 10 March 2021.
- National Endowment for Democracy, Democracy Digest*. (2020). Russia's 'resilient civil society': Navalny 'puts paranoid Kremlin on the spot'. 15 December. <https://www.demdigest.org/russias-resilient-civil-society-navalny-puts-paranoid-kremlin-on-the-spot/>. Accessed 10 March 2021.
- Paikin, Z. (2021). EU–Russia relations and Europe's global profile. *CEPS In Brief*, 4 February. <https://www.ceps.eu/eu-russia-relations-and-europes-global-profile/>. Accessed 10 March 2021.
- Pickard, J., & Payne, S. (2020). David Cameron pushes ahead with 1bn\$ China fund. *Financial Times*, 15 June. <https://www.ft.com/content/a0b3858e-4e92-4db2-83fd-a6550d0b1427>. Accessed 10 March 2021.
- Polyakova, A., Laruelle, M., Meister, S., & Barnett, N. (2016). The Kremlin's Trojan horses. *Atlantic Council*, 15 November. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/kremlin-trojan-horses/>. Accessed 10 March 2021.
- Stelzenmüller, C. (2021). EU support for Russian democracy is inadequate. *Financial Times*, 9 February. <https://www.ft.com/content/22f49ebf-53db-415d-84c2-4c8f6732218c>. Accessed 10 March 2021.
- US Department of State. (2017). *Money laundering and financial crimes*. <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/inl/rls/nrcrpt/1999/928.htm>. Accessed 10 March 2021.
- von Ow-Freytag, B. (2018). *Filling the void. Why the EU must step up support for Russian civil society*. Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, Policy Brief. Brussels. April. [https://www.martenscentre.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/eu-support-russian-civil-society\\_0.pdf](https://www.martenscentre.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/eu-support-russian-civil-society_0.pdf). Accessed 10 March 2021.

## Author biography



**Roland Freudenstein** is Policy Director at the Wilfried Martens for European Studies in Brussels.

# The taming of the shrew: How the West could make the Kremlin listen

European View  
2021, Vol. 20(1) 72–79  
© The Author(s) 2021  
DOI: 10.1177/17816858211005634  
[journals.sagepub.com/home/euv](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/euv)



**Maria Snegovaya**

## Abstract

The regime that has emerged in Russia under President Vladimir Putin is no longer only Russia's problem. By promoting corruption, kleptocratic practices and the violation of democratic norms in Western societies, and by using chemical weapons on their territories and carrying out assassinations abroad, Putin's regime has become a significant domestic problem for the EU and the US. However, the preventative measures put in place by the West fall short of fundamentally influencing the regime's behaviour. This article offers some suggestions on how to adjust existing European policy to enable it to more effectively influence the actions of the Kremlin on the international stage.

## Keywords

Russia, Putin, EU, US, Neopatrimonialism, Sanctions

## Introduction

From a political science perspective, the ruling regime in Russia today can best be described as neopatrimonial. In such regimes personalistic rulers (usually presidents) hold power through a personal patronage system based on informal relations of loyalty and personal connections, rather than formal institutions (Snegovaya 2013; Gel'man 2016). Such regimes, most frequently encountered in African and post-Soviet countries, tend to draw legitimacy primarily from pay-offs to elites and the broader population.

To ensure the loyalty of the elites, the leaders of neopatrimonial regimes allow their elite members access to various forms of illicit rents, patronage and corruption (Bratton and Van de Walle 1997). Neopatrimonial presidents make 'little distinction between the public and

---

## Corresponding author:

M. Snegovaya, Atlantic Council, 1030 15th St NW, 12<sup>th</sup> floor, Washington, DC 20005, USA.  
Email: [snegovaya@gmail.com](mailto:snegovaya@gmail.com)



Creative Commons CC BY: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>) which permits any use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access pages (<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage>).

private coffers, routinely and extensively dipping into the state treasury for their own political need' (Bratton and Van de Walle 1997, 66). In accordance with that logic, the regime of Russian President Vladimir Putin has established a system of enrichment for Putin's cronies that is based on extracting resources for his closest circles from the public coffers through a system of privileged public procurement, stock manipulation, asset stripping and privileged trade (Goldman 2010; Robinson 2013; Åslund 2019).

Similarly, neopatrimonial regimes ensure the loyalty of the broader population through the redistribution of payments and benefits (mass clientelism) (Van de Walle 2007). In Russia, Kremlin politicians allocate resources to the population to secure political support and mobilise voters through payments from the state coffers in the form of pensions, allowances and wages (Kvartiuk and Herzfeld 2020).

The sustainability of such systems is hence ensured through a constant flow of rents (from taxes, natural resources and state-owned companies' revenues) to the rulers. These rents are then partly redistributed to various population groups to ensure their continuous loyalty. External shocks to rent flows might threaten such regimes, and lead to growing dissatisfaction among the elites and the broader population (Bratton and Van de Walle 1997; Snegovaya 2013). In an effort to seek additional sources of revenue when suffering from external shocks, neopatrimonial rulers might be more inclined to agree to concessions with the West. Any successful sanctions policy targeting regimes of this type should therefore incorporate efforts to target the flow of rent that is at the disposal of such regimes.

## Existing sanctions policy

Western sanctions have so far done very little to seriously threaten the stream of revenues to Putin's regime. Two policies have had a serious effect to date. The first was the Obama administration's and the EU's de facto freeze of Russian companies' access to Western financial markets in 2014, which also deterred Western companies from investing in Russia. The second was the US Office of Foreign Assets Control's April 2018 addition of Oleg Deripaska and six other oligarchs to the Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons (SDN) list, which resulted in the sanctioning of his companies, including Rusal and En+, the world's second-largest aluminium company. The first of these policies, a ban on trading bonds and equities and a ban on loans with maturity periods exceeding 30 days for several of Russia's biggest banks and companies, ensured that Western creditors avoided entering into long-term operations with multiple Russian counterparts. Consequently, until around mid-2016, few Russian banks and companies were able to raise funds in the Western capital market, which had a painful impact on Russia's economy and put pressure on the Russian Central Bank to provide the missing liquidity. The coinciding drop in oil prices further strained the Russian budget and suppressed the value of the rouble. However, by autumn 2016, the de facto freeze on Russian credit operations had dissipated as Western creditors had adjusted their approach, avoiding cooperation with only those companies directly targeted by sanctions. Since September 2016, the Russian government and companies have de facto regained (limited) access to the Western financial markets (Snegovaya 2018). Similarly, while the

2018 sanctioning of Rusal had a seriously destabilising effect on Russia's economy by rattling Russian financial markets (Harrell 2019), it was eventually removed from the list following a 10-month lobbying campaign in the US and Deripaska's divestment of the majority of the company's shares (Zengerle and Ivanova 2019).<sup>1</sup>

The sanctions that remain in effect have a much lesser impact on Russia's economy. They have two main effects. First, they somewhat limit economic growth by shaving off 1%–2% of Russia's economic output (Congressional Research Service 2020, 46). Second, they are deepening the country's technological backwardness by prohibiting Western companies from investing in next-generation oil projects in the Russian Arctic, deep-water and shale fields (Aleksashenko 2016; Fishman 2020).

These effects are moderate at best, and the design of the existing sanctions limits the West's diplomatic leverage over the Kremlin in two ways. First, the existing sanctions do not seriously threaten the revenues accumulated by the Russian regime. If anything, they have had the opposite effect as, to give itself a buffer against threats such as new Western sanctions, over recent years the Kremlin has dramatically increased national reserves (Korsunskaya 2018). Second, the existing sanctions are almost impossible to lift given that there is a lack of clarity about the specific conditions that need to be achieved before their removal. While the 2014 sectoral sanctions were fairly clearly linked to implementation of the Minsk agreements and withdrawal from eastern Ukraine (but not Crimea), the sanctions imposed since then have not been tied to particular benchmarks. Moreover, in the US the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act has made it much harder to lift sanctions without notifying Congress and thus giving it the ability to veto the changes. These qualities of the existing sanctions regime led a recent report by the Russian International Affairs Council to conclude that announcements of new sanctions do not seriously affect the macroeconomic situation in Russia, nor have they led to noticeable market fluctuations (Timofeev 2021).

## How to make it work

There are two ways in which the design of the existing sanctions could be modified to make the West's diplomatic leverage over the Kremlin more impactful. Both, however, would require a significant commitment by Europe and the US, one which has yet to become manifest.

First, existing individual-level sanctions should be combined with the freezing of these individuals' assets that are located in the West. Thus far individual-level sanctions that penalise selected Kremlin-associated individuals who have committed particularly heinous crimes by banning them from entering the EU and the US have not created a serious challenge for the regime. While such sanctions may have consequences for the individuals concerned, they are unlikely to have broader effects on Russia's economy (Congressional Research Service 2020, 50). These sanctions are also unlikely to create splits among Putin's cronies because the Kremlin spends significant resources on directly compensating Russian elites for their financial losses, compels them to repatriate their

capital and brutally represses any suspected dissent (Szakonyi 2018; Ahn and Ludema 2020).

Therefore individual-level sanctions are unlikely to be effective unless accompanied by a systematic effort to fight money laundering, particularly by collecting information about and freezing the assets of targeted Putin allies. For example, the beneficial ownership reporting requirements in the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) might help, should they be rigorously implemented and enforced by the US Department of the Treasury's Financial Crimes Enforcement Network. Despite the fact that sanctions against Russians have been in place since 2014, systematic efforts to identify the assets held by Putin's cronies in Western democracies have only begun recently (Åslund and Friedlander 2020).

Moreover, unless any such effort differentiates between the assets of Putin's cronies and the assets of Russians unconnected to the regime who keep their assets abroad, the effects of such policies may prove counterproductive. Because of a lack of domestic institutional protection, Russians commonly keep their assets outside of their country, which allows them some independence from the regime (Åslund 2019) and serves as one of the main sources of funding for resistance to Putin domestically. Yet so far Western anti-money-laundering initiatives have had an opposite and rather deleterious effect on Russian citizens. For example, the automated exchange of financial account information, introduced as part of the West's anti-money-laundering initiatives in recent years, has exposed data on the foreign assets of Russians in 58 jurisdictions to Russia's federal tax service. This has provided the Kremlin with an opportunity to increase budget revenues by raising additional tax income from the accounts held by Russian citizens abroad (Vikulov 2017). The Kremlin has also actively used these and related anti-money-laundering laws to prosecute domestic opposition (Volkov 2020). At the same time, these practices have done little to expose the assets of Putin's cronies in the West, who tend to legalise assets in Russia before taking them out of the country.

Second, broader sectoral sanctions should target the Kremlin's rent revenues that come primarily from the sale of oil, gas, weapons and/or metals. So far little has been done in this regard.

In 2014 the US and the EU adopted export controls against Russian defence industries, and in 2017 the US Congress passed a law sanctioning foreign companies and governments that engage in 'significant transactions' with the Russian defence sector (Harrell 2019). However, Russia remains the world's second largest arms exporter (*RFE/RL* 2019). In recent years even Turkey, a NATO member, has purchased Russia's S-400 surface-to-air missile batteries, reportedly worth \$2.5 billion (Macias 2020). The West should put more pressure on Russia's defence industry by blocking Russia's access to technologies with major military applications and withholding resources from Russia's military (Harrell 2019).

Under the existing sanctions policy, no major Russian state-owned enterprise has been put under a full asset freeze. The Congressional Research Service estimates that as of early 2020, of the 100 largest firms in Russia only 5 were subject to full blocking sanctions (Congressional Research Service 2020, 49). Sectoral sanction identifications (SSIs) affected 7 of Russia's 10 largest companies, but these were limited to specific sets of transactions relating to debt, equity and/or certain long-term oil projects (Congressional Research Service 2020, 50). Sanctions against Rosneft and Sberbank were limited to banning them from issuing certain types of debt on the US and European markets (Fishman 2020). SDN sanctions on entities were primarily limited to businesses controlled by designated individuals, companies that operate in Crimea, and several defence and arms firms.

The gas industry is particularly immune to sanctions, probably because of the EU's dependence on Russia's gas. The US and the EU have refrained from imposing sanctions targeting gas production or trade in Russia's gas sector (with the exception of Novatek, Russia's private liquefied natural gas producer, sanctioned by the US in January 2020) or Russia's state-controlled gas company, Gazprom (Congressional Research Service 2020, 12, 42). Germany's and other member states' eagerness to preserve their energy ties to Russia led to the EU decision to apply lending and investment restrictions only to the oil sector, not to Gazprom or other companies in the Russian gas sector. Similarly, the EU applied restrictions on the sale of energy exploration equipment, technology and services only to oil, not gas, development projects (Congressional Research Service 2020, 39).

If targeting Russia's gas industry appears too problematic for the EU, companies in other sectors, such as major state-controlled banks, including VEB (formerly Vnesheconombank), and/or Russia's defence industry, should become its priority. Without applying more focus to these policies, sanctions on the Putin regime are unlikely to have any meaningful effect because they will fail to target the regime's ability to sustain the loyalty of its supporters through neopatrimonial networks.

## Conclusion

Western analysts often wonder why the sanctions imposed on Putin's Russia have failed to fundamentally alter the regime's actions on the world stage. This is the wrong question. Most policies introduced by the West were not intended to impose serious economic hardship on Putin's regime but were designed to put long-term pressure on the Russian economy. The sanctions on Russia have a light touch, particularly when compared with Western sanctions against Iran or Venezuela (Fishman 2020). Only a stricter and more comprehensive sanctions regime could change Putin's calculus (Aleksashenko 2016).

This article has discussed several ways to reinforce the design of the existing sanctions. However, a more relevant question might be whether the West is ready to seriously constrain Russia. Despite unprecedented levels of interference by the Kremlin in domestic processes in Western societies (Snegovaya and Watanabe 2021) and the use

of banned chemical weapons on their territories (France, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2018), Western countries remain remarkably reluctant to impose serious economic costs on Putin's regime. A more applicable question, then, is what possible actions on the world stage might the Kremlin commit before the West introduces more meaningful policies.

## Acknowledgements

This article has greatly profited from comments by Sergey Aleksashenko, Anders Åslund, Daniel Fried, Paul Massaro and David Mortlock, to whom I am deeply thankful. Any remaining errors are my own.

## Note

1. Recently, it has become known that the US and Britain are also exploring the possibility of additional sanctions against Russia, from restrictions against oligarchs to more serious measures possibly targeting Russia's sovereign debt market, especially if Russia is again found to have committed a major transgression of the international ban on chemical weapons. However, even in the latter case negative effects could be smaller than previously anticipated given that over the last years the Kremlin has moved away from issuing dollar-denominated debt towards the euro (Mohsin et al. 2021).

## References

- Acemoglu, D., Verdier, T., & Robinson, J. A. (2004). Kleptocracy and divide-and-rule: A model of personal rule. *Journal of the European Economic Association*, 2(2–3), 162–92.
- Ahn, D. P., & Ludema, R. D. (2020). The sword and the shield: The economics of targeted sanctions. *European Economic Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euroecorev.2020.103587>.
- Aleksashenko, S. (2016). Evaluating Western sanctions on Russia. *The Atlantic Council*, 6 December. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/evaluating-western-sanctions-on-russia/>. Accessed 1 March 2021.
- Åslund, A. (2019). *Russia's crony capitalism. The path from market economy to kleptocracy*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Åslund, A., & Friedlander, J. (2020). Defending the United States against Russian dark money. *The Atlantic Council*, 17 November. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/defending-the-united-states-against-russian-dark-money/>. Accessed 15 February 2021.
- Bratton, M., & Van de Walle, N. (1997). *Democratic experiments in Africa: Regime transitions in comparative perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brownlee, J. (2002). . . . And yet they persist: Explaining survival and transition in neopatrimonial regimes. *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 37(3), 35–63.
- Congressional Research Service. (2020). *US sanctions on Russia (R45415 – Version: 9)*. 17 January. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/details?prodcode=R45415>. Accessed 20 February 2021.
- Cooley, A., Heathershaw, J., & Sharman, J. C. (2018). The rise of kleptocracy: Laundering cash, whitewashing reputations. *Journal of Democracy*, 29(1), 39–53.
- Fishman, E. (2020). Make Russia sanctions effective again. *War on the Rocks*, 23 October. <https://warontherocks.com/2020/10/make-russia-sanctions-effective-again/>. Accessed 16 February 2021.
- France, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (2018). Chemical weapons – OPCW report on the Skripal case. 11 April. <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/security-disarma>

- ment-and-non-proliferation/news/2018/article/chemical-weapons-opcw-report-on-the-skripal-case-11-04-18. Accessed 17 February 2021.
- Gel'man, V. (2016). The vicious circle of post-Soviet neopatrimonialism in Russia. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 32(5), 455–73.
- Goldman, M. (2010). *Petrostate. Putin, power, and the new Russia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Harrell, P. (2019). How to hit Russia where it hurts. *Foreign Affairs*, 3 January. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2019-01-03/how-hit-russia-where-it-hurts> Accessed 25 February 2021.
- Korsunskaya, D. (2018). Russia, wary of U.S. sanctions, puts saving before growth. *Reuters*, 31 October. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-economy-budget-analysis/russia-wary-of-u-s-sanctions-puts-saving-before-growth-idUSKCN1N51B9>. Accessed 20 February 2021.
- Kvartiuik, V., & Herzfeld, T. (2020). Redistributive politics in Russia: The political economy of agricultural subsidies. *Comparative Economic Studies*, 63, 1–30.
- Macias, A. (2020). U.S. sanctions Turkey over purchase of Russian S-400 missile system. *CNBC*, 14 December. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/12/14/us-sanctions-turkey-over-russian-s400.html>. Accessed 15 February 2021.
- Mohsin, S., Nardelli, A., & Jacobs, J. (2021). U.S., U.K. weigh Russia sanctions, possibly targeting debt. *Bloomberg*, 4 March. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-03-04/u-s-u-k-weigh-more-russia-sanctions-possibly-targeting-debt>. Accessed 8 March 2021.
- RFE/RL (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty). (2019). U.S. remains world's top arms exporter, with Russia a distant second. 11 March. <https://www.rferl.org/a/us-russia-lead-world-global-arms-exports/29814176.html>. Accessed 15 February 2021.
- Robinson, N. (2013). The context of Russia's political economy. In N. Robinson, *The political economy of Russia* (pp. 15–50).
- Snegovaya, M. (2013). Neo-patrimonialism and the perspective for democratization. *Notes of the Fatherland*, 6, 135–45.
- Snegovaya, M. (2018). *Tension at the top. The impact of sanctions on Russia's poles of power*. Center for European Policy Analysis. July. <https://cepa.org/tension-at-the-top/>. Accessed 20 February 2021.
- Snegovaya, M., & Watanabe, K. (2021). The Kremlin's social media influence inside the United States: A moving target. *Free Russia Foundation*, 11 February. <https://www.4freerussia.org/the-kremlin-s-social-media-influence-inside-the-united-states-a-moving-target/>. Accessed 4 March 2021.
- Szakonyi, D. (2017). Why Russian oligarchs remain loyal to Putin (op-ed). *The Moscow Times*, 1 December. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2017/12/01/centrifugal-forces-why-russian-oligarchs-remain-loyal-to-the-putin-government-op-ed-a59760>. Accessed 16 February 2021.
- Timofeev, I. (2021). Санкции против России: взгляд в 2021 г [Sanctions against Russia: A look at 2021]. *Russian International Affairs Council*, 16 February. <https://russiancouncil.ru/activity/publications/sanktsii-protiv-rossii-vzglyad-v-2021-g/>. Accessed 15 February 2021.
- Van de Walle, N. (2007). *The path from neopatrimonialism: Democracy and clientelism in Africa today*. Mario Einaudi Center for International Studies, Working Paper Series no. 3-07. Ithaca, NY. <https://ecommons.cornell.edu/handle/1813/55028>. Accessed 20 February 2021.
- Vikulov, K. (2017). Automatic information exchange with Russia: Conditions and implications. *Journal of International Taxation*, 28(10), 1–8.
- Volkov, L. (2020). Чеченские авизо для всей планеты [Chechen aviso for the whole planet]. Facebook post, 8 January. <https://www.facebook.com/leonid.m.volkov/posts/2746478772041405>. Accessed 25 February 2021.

- Wadhams, N., & Dezem, V. (2021). U.S. expected to leave Germans out of next Nord Stream sanctions. *Bloomberg*, 18 February. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-02-19/u-s-expected-to-leave-germans-out-of-next-nord-stream-sanctions>. Accessed 15 February 2021.
- Wolfe, S. D., & Müller, M. (2018). Crisis neopatrimonialism: Russia's new political economy and the 2018 World Cup. *Problems of Post-Communism*, 65(2), 101–14.
- Zengerle, P., & Ivanova, P. (2019). Rusal shares soar, aluminum falls as U.S. lifts sanctions. *Reuters*, 27 January. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-russia-sanctions/rusal-shares-soar-aluminum-falls-as-u-s-lifts-sanctions-idUSKCN1PL0S1>. Accessed 15 February 2021.

### Author biography



**Maria Snegovaya, Ph.D.**, is a visiting scholar with the Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies at the George Washington University; a postdoctoral scholar with the Kellogg Center for Philosophy, Politics, and Economics at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University; and a non-resident fellow at the Atlantic Council. Her research results and analysis have appeared in policy and peer-reviewed journals, including *West European Politics*, *Journal of Democracy* and *Party Politics*, and are often referenced by publications such as *The New York Times*, *Bloomberg*, *The Economist* and *Foreign Policy*.



# Finding its way in EU security and defence cooperation: A view from Sweden

European View  
2021, Vol. 20(1) 80–87  
© The Author(s) 2021  
DOI: 10.1177/17816858211004647  
[journals.sagepub.com/home/euv](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/euv)



**Calle Håkansson**

## Abstract

This article addresses Sweden's more ambitious and forward-looking approach to EU security and defence cooperation. This approach represents, in part, an adaptation by Sweden to the post-Brexit political landscape. However, Stockholm is also reacting to the more ambitious policy initiatives coming out of Brussels. This article will look at some of the major developments and initiatives on the EU level and discuss how Sweden has reacted and tried to influence them. It argues that 2021 could be another watershed year for EU security and defence cooperation as the process of developing the Union's new Strategic Compass is in a formative phase. It concludes that it is welcome news that Stockholm is raising its level of ambition and actively attempting to influence this process.

## Keywords

Sweden, EU, CSDP, Strategic Compass, EPF, PESCO, EDF

## Introduction

Since the 2016 Global Strategy, the EU has developed a number of new security and defence initiatives—and with this, the long list of defence acronyms has steadily grown. At a time when Sweden is actively rebuilding its territorial defence, it has also started pursuing a more active and pragmatic approach towards the EU's new security and defence policy agenda. As underlined by defence minister Peter Hultqvist, 'the Swedish government will continue our two-track policy: to strengthen our national defence posture over the coming years and to deepen our international defence cooperation' (Hultqvist 2021). Nevertheless, in the post-Brexit political landscape, Sweden has at times struggled to find its way within the EU.

---

## Corresponding author:

Calle Håkansson, The Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI) and Malmö University, PO Box 27035, SE-102 51 Stockholm, Sweden.

Email: [calle.hakansson@ui.se](mailto:calle.hakansson@ui.se)



Creative Commons CC BY: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>) which permits any use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access pages (<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage>).

This article outlines some of the major developments and initiatives on the EU level and describes how Sweden has reacted and tried to influence them. It also discusses how Stockholm is now trying to find a more forward-looking and ambitious approach to EU security and defence cooperation. It argues that Sweden's active engagement in the development of EU foreign and security policy is necessary and should be welcomed. The article mainly builds on interviews with officials and policymakers in the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and Ministry of Defence (MoD), and in the prime minister's office, as well as with members of the Swedish parliament and representatives from the country's defence industry.<sup>1</sup>

## **Sweden's ambition to belong to the core of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy**

The Swedish government has recently emphasised that 'the EU is our most important foreign and security policy arena. No other actor is a greater guarantor of Sweden's economy, security and peace. Sweden will participate fully in EU cooperation and in shaping it in a way that safeguards Sweden's interests' (Government of Sweden 2020d). The emphasis on the EU as the country's most important security policy arena is something new and a clear signal that Stockholm has raised its level of ambition.

Sweden is coming from a position where it has traditionally been close to the UK and rather sceptical of the EU's institutional development in the field of security and defence. However, this position is starting to change as the UK's departure from the EU is forcing Sweden to rethink many of its concerns and beliefs (see e.g. Fägersten et al. 2018). Today Sweden's ambition is to have a more forward-looking position that would give the country more influence on the development of EU policies. Consequently, it aims to belong to the core of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. It wants to be one of the member states that put forward proposals, and to be seen as an important partner that other member states and the European External Action Service consult and involve in the policy process.<sup>2</sup> This new approach should be regarded, in part, as an adaptation by Sweden to the post-Brexit political landscape.

## **(New) formats of defence cooperation outside the EU**

For Stockholm it is also important that EU security and defence cooperation complements and is mutually reinforcing with the work of NATO and Sweden's other regional, bilateral and multilateral defence formats. While Sweden is not a member of NATO, it has developed and deepened its cooperation with the alliance. Since 2014 it has been an Enhanced Opportunities Partner of NATO (Government of Sweden 2020c). In recent years it has also strengthened its bilateral relations with large European countries such as the UK and France, in part by participating in new multilateral frameworks such as the UK's Joint Expeditionary Force and the French-led European Intervention Initiative (EI2) (Herolf and Håkansson 2020). In 2021 Sweden will host the EI2's annual ministerial meeting (Government of Sweden 2020a). To further strengthen its security and

defence policy relations with France, Swedish special forces will participate in the new French-led task force Takuba in Mali in 2021 (Government of Sweden, 2020C).

## **Finding the right balance in the Strategic Compass**

One of the new EU policy initiatives is the ‘Strategic Compass’ process. It aims to ‘strengthen a common European security and defence culture and help define the right objectives and concrete goals for our policies’ (EEAS 2020; see also e.g. Nováky 2020; Fiott 2020; Koenig 2020; Molenaar 2021). For Sweden it is very important to find the right balance between the EU’s civilian and military dimensions. Sweden will focus on this in the Strategic Compass process, where it will underline the importance of viewing security from a broad perspective. Stockholm advocates a holistic and whole-of-government approach within the Strategic Compass process, according to which both foreign and defence ministers—and at times also interior and justice ministers—need to be involved because of the different security threats the EU is facing today. One of Sweden’s focus areas in the Strategic Compass will consequently be developing and improving the work of the nexus between internal and external security.<sup>3</sup>

Another of Sweden’s top priorities for the EU is to find a balance between the military and civilian sides of the EU’s Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). Sweden has long been a promoter of EU civilian crisis management. Together with Finland, the country worked actively to establish the civilian CSDP in the early 2000s (Björkdahl 2008; Jakobsen 2009). Moreover, together with Germany and backed by other Nordic countries, Sweden took the initiative to strengthen the EU’s civilian crisis management structures and thus promoted the Civilian CSDP Compact in 2018. This compact forms the EU’s new framework for civilian crisis management. Its objectives are to enhance the effectiveness of civilian CSDP missions and to strengthen the EU’s ability to respond to threats across the internal–external nexus (Council of the European Union 2018).

As concerns the implementation of the EU Global Strategy, Sweden has persistently argued that the military and civilian dimensions of the CSDP need to be strengthened in a balanced manner. For this reason, it welcomed and strongly supported the launch of the Civilian CSDP Compact.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, the civilian component of the CSDP will be another of Stockholm’s top priorities for the Strategic Compass. Furthermore, the Civilian CSDP Compact should be fully implemented by 2023, when Sweden holds the EU Presidency. Thus, it will be an area of focus in the time leading up to the Swedish Presidency and during the Presidency itself.<sup>5</sup>

Another aspect of the Strategic Compass that will be discussed is the EU’s mutual assistance clause (Article 42(7)). Sweden developed its own unilateral declaration of solidarity, which is extended to the EU and the Nordic countries; but thus far it has been rather reluctant to discuss the operationalisation of Article 42(7). Nevertheless, there have been some new initiatives in the past couple of years. For instance, during the 2019 Finnish EU Presidency, Article 42(7) was tested through a hybrid exercise, and the EU

institutions have also produced various scoping papers on the subject (Engberg 2021). The defence ministers of Germany, France, Italy and Spain have also stressed the importance of working on the operationalisation of Article 42(7) through regular scenario-based discussions, war games and exercises, which should cover all possible worst-case crisis scenarios (Government of France 2020). The discussions on the EU's mutual assistance clause will consequently continue during the work on the Strategic Compass, and France is expected to seek a political declaration on the subject during its 2022 EU Presidency (Quencez and Besch 2020; Engberg 2021). Thus, it is clear that Stockholm needs to find a more active role in this process.

Finally, in regard to the formal decision-making process within the EU, Sweden now supports the use of qualified majority voting in certain aspects of the Union's foreign policymaking (Government of Sweden 2019). Moreover, in the past couple of years, the EU has launched smaller and fewer CSDP missions, and some new missions have been organised in informal 'coalition of the willing' groupings outside the framework of the EU. Hence, both decision-making procedures and the EU's ambition to develop and launch new military and civilian CSDP missions should be thoroughly discussed during the Strategic Compass process.

## **The EU and partnerships**

Another issue that is currently being discussed in Sweden is how to connect the UK to the EU's and Sweden's foreign and security policies. Most other European states have a formal connection to the UK through NATO, but since Brexit Sweden has been without a link of this kind. The new Trade and Cooperation Agreement between the UK and the EU is now in place, but it does not address the field of security and defence. The Swedish government intends to enter into dialogue with the UK on how the bilateral security policy relationship can be developed (Government of Sweden 2020c).

Discussions are currently underway on establishing a European Security Council to connect the UK and the EU on foreign, security and defence policy issues (see e.g. Nováky 2019; Macron 2019). Sweden, however, considers this a risky undertaking as decision-making would fall (even more) into the hands of the larger states.<sup>6</sup> However, if the EU and the UK cannot find an institutional set-up for foreign and security policy discussions, there is also the risk that even more coordination of foreign and security policy will instead be carried out by the E3 group of France, Germany and the UK (for recent discussions on this format, see e.g. Billon-Galland et al. 2020; Brattberg 2020; Wieslander 2020). A mid-sized nation such as Sweden would then risk losing influence on the decision-making process.

With a view to strengthening partnerships, the EU has also developed the new €5 billion off-budget European Peace Facility (EPF). This means that the EU should for the first time be able to supply partners with 'assistance measures, which may include the supply of military and defence related equipment' (Council of the European Union

2020).<sup>7</sup> Sweden long objected to the EPF, arguing that the EU's capability to provide munitions for combat is a very sensitive issue. Sweden holds that assistance measures need to be preceded by proper risk and impact analyses, and that there must be proper safeguards and rules on the handling and storage of munitions. These points were incorporated in the EPF, which meant that Sweden could support it. Sweden also has the right to constructively abstain when decisions are being made on assistance measures. In such cases money from the abstaining country is not to be used for those measures, something that was important for Sweden in the negotiations.<sup>8</sup>

## **The EU's quest for strategic autonomy: a Swedish view**

The discussions on strategic autonomy intensified after the 2016 EU Global Strategy, which underlined the EU's need to take greater responsibility for its own security. Over time the scope of these discussions has expanded. Today the concept has a broader meaning that encompasses, among other things, security and defence issues, trade and economic policy, health issues, climate and digitalisation (Helwig 2020). For its part, Sweden has been rather reluctant to embrace the idea. Swedish Defence Minister Peter Hultqvist, for instance, has stated that the country 'opposes European Strategic Autonomy in industrial terms' (Riksdagen 2019). Sweden has actively sought to nuance the ways in which 'strategic autonomy' is used in Council conclusions. Scepticism towards the concept is also found in many parts of the Swedish political system.<sup>9</sup> The Swedish government has thus recently argued that strategic autonomy should not mean 'that the EU closes itself to the outside world or reduces cooperation with partner countries. . . . The transatlantic relationship should be safeguarded' (Government of Sweden 2020b). Nevertheless, Sweden is now trying to engage more actively and pragmatically with the idea.<sup>10</sup> As put by Sweden's Minister for EU Affairs Hans Dahlgren: 'in some areas, strategic autonomy must be protected without the EU turning inwards' (Government of Sweden 2021).

## **EU defence industrial cooperation**

New EU initiatives such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund (EDF) are major developments which have revitalised EU defence cooperation. However, Sweden's defence industrial base is privately owned, in part by entities outside the EU. This, together with the country's close industrial and political connections to the US and the UK, has put some strain on the Swedish industry in connection with these new initiatives. Entities owned by third states can now formally participate within the framework of both the EDF and the PESCO, which is something that Sweden has actively and strongly pushed for in the negotiations.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, part of the Swedish defence industry is concerned that it will be at a disadvantage when it comes to taking part in these initiatives, due to its specific ownership structures, enhanced financial risks and greater administrative burdens.<sup>12</sup> In recent years Sweden has also strengthened its industrial cooperation with the UK. And it has recently signed a new trilateral memorandum of understanding with the UK and Italy in connection with the

development of the Future Combat Air System Cooperation (*Janes* 2021). Thus, large-scale Swedish industrial participation in both PESCO and the EDF is still uncertain.

## Conclusion

Since the process of developing the EU's new Strategic Compass is in the formative phase, 2021 could be another watershed year for EU security and defence cooperation. Thus, it is welcome news that Sweden is raising its level of ambition and actively engaging in this process. However, it is still unclear whether the country will succeed in getting the other member states to agree to its political priorities for the Strategic Compass. Furthermore, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced the discussions on strategic autonomy, and Stockholm is trying to adjust to this new political landscape. Finally, the 'no deal' outcome for foreign and security policy between the EU and the UK poses political, military and industrial challenges for Sweden. As a result, Stockholm will continue to work towards connecting the UK and the EU as closely as possible while also developing its bilateral security and defence relations with Britain.

## Notes

1. All interviews were conducted in confidentiality, and the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement.
2. Interview with an official at the Swedish MFA, January 2021.
3. Interview with an official at the Swedish MFA, January 2021.
4. Interview with an official at the Swedish MFA, 2019.
5. Interview with an official at the Swedish MFA, January 2021.
6. Interviews with an official at the Swedish MFA and a Member of the Swedish Parliament, January 2021.
7. The Council has reached a political agreement on the EPF, but a formal decision is expected during the spring of 2021.
8. Interview with an official at the Swedish MFA, January 2021.
9. Interviews with officials at the prime minister's office and with Members of the Swedish Parliament, January 2021.
10. Interviews with officials at the prime minister's office, February 2021.
11. Interviews with officials at the Swedish MFA and MoD, February 2020 and January 2021.
12. Interviews with representatives of Swedish defence industries, January 2021.

## References

- Billon-Galland, A., Raines, T., & Whitman, R. (2020). *The future of the E3: Post-Brexit cooperation between the UK, France and Germany*. Chatham House Research Paper.
- Björkdahl, A. (2008). Norm advocacy: A small state strategy to influence the EU. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 15(1), 135–54.
- Brattberg, E. (2020). The E3, the EU, and the post-Brexit diplomatic landscape. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 18 June. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/06/18/e3-eu-and-post-brexit-diplomatic-landscape-pub-82095>. Accessed 11 February 2021.
- Council of the European Union. (2018). Conclusions of the Council and of the representatives of the governments of the member states, meeting within the Council, on the establishment of a civilian CSDP compact. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/37027/st14305-en18.pdf>. Accessed 11 February 2021.

- Council of the European Union. (2020). Council reaches a political agreement on the European Peace Facility. Press release. 18 December. [https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/12/18/council-reaches-a-political-agreement-on-the-european-peace-facility/?utm\\_source=dsm-auto&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=Council+reaches+a+political+agreement+on+the+European+Peace+Facility#](https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/12/18/council-reaches-a-political-agreement-on-the-european-peace-facility/?utm_source=dsm-auto&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Council+reaches+a+political+agreement+on+the+European+Peace+Facility#). Accessed 11 February 2021.
- EEAS (European External Action Service). (2020). Towards a strategic compass. [https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/towards\\_a\\_strategic\\_compass\\_20\\_november.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/towards_a_strategic_compass_20_november.pdf). Accessed 11 February 2021.
- Engberg, K. (2021). *A European Defence Union by 2025? Work in progress*. Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies.
- Fägersten, B., Danielson, A., & Håkansson, C. (2018). *Sweden and European defence cooperation: Interests in search of a strategy*. Swedish Institute of International Affairs.
- Fiott, D. (2020). Uncharted territory? Towards a common threat analysis and a strategic compass for EU security and defence. EUISS, Brief no.16.
- Government of France. (2020). Lettre des ministres de la défense française, allemande, espagnole et italien. [https://www.defense.gouv.fr/english/salle-de-presse/communiqués/communiqué\\_lettre-des-ministres-de-la-defense-francaise-allemande-espagnole-et-italien-le-29-mai-2020](https://www.defense.gouv.fr/english/salle-de-presse/communiqués/communiqué_lettre-des-ministres-de-la-defense-francaise-allemande-espagnole-et-italien-le-29-mai-2020). Accessed 11 February 2021.
- Government of Sweden. (2019). Statement of government EU policy. Statement made by Prime Minister Stefan Löfven at the Riksdag on 13 November 2019. <https://www.government.se/speeches/20192/11/statement-of-government-eu-policy/>. Accessed 18 February 2021.
- Government of Sweden. (2020a). Joint press release: European Intervention Initiative annual ministerial meeting 25 September 2020. <https://www.government.se/press-releases/2020/09/joint-press-release-european-intervention-initiative-annual-ministerial-meeting-25-september-2020/>. Accessed 3 February 2021.
- Government of Sweden. (2020b). Kommenterad dagordning, Utrikesministrarnas möte den 7 december 2020 [Annotated agenda, foreign ministers' meeting on 7 December 2020]. <https://data.riksdagen.se/fil/602020c8d6929-3907-4AF9-BE94-7E671D64047E>. Accessed 1 February 2021.
- Government of Sweden. (2020c). Regeringens proposition 2020/21:30 Totalförsvaret 2021–2025. [Government bill 2020/21:30 Total Defence 2021–2025]. <https://www.regeringen.se/4a965d/globalassets/regeringen/dokument/forsvarsdepartementet/forsvarsproposition-2021-2025/totalforsvaret-2021-2025-prop.-20202130.pdf>. Accessed 11 February 2021.
- Government of Sweden. (2020d). The Government's statement of foreign policy 2020. Statement made by Foreign Minister Ann Linde at the Riksdag on 12 February 2020. <https://www.government.se/speeches/2020/02/2020-statement-of-foreign-policy/>. Accessed 18 February 2021.
- Government of Sweden. (2021). Statement of government EU policy 2021. Statement made by Minister for EU Affairs Hans Dahlgren at the Riksdag on 20 January 2021. <https://www.government.se/speeches/2021/01/statement-of-government-eu-policy/>. Accessed 18 February 2021.
- Helwig, N. (2020). *EU strategic autonomy: A reality check for Europe's global agenda*. Finnish Institute of International Affairs.
- Herolf, G., & Håkansson, C. (2020). The new European security architecture. In B. Fägersten (ed.), *The Nordics and the new European security architecture* (pp. 7–15). Swedish Institute of International Affairs.
- Hultqvist, P. (2021). Sweden's defense minister: Additional resources are coming to bolster national security, alliances. *Defense News*, 11 January. <https://www.defensenews.com/>

- outlook/2021/01/11/swedens-defense-minister-additional-resources-are-coming-to-bolster-national-security-alliances/. Accessed 11 February 2021.
- Jakobsen, P. (2009). Small states, big influence: The overlooked Nordic influence on the civilian ESDP. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 47(1), 81–102.
- Janes. (2021). Italy, UK and Sweden sign MoU on development of Tempest. 5 January. <https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/italy-uk-and-sweden-sign-mou-on-development-of-tempest>. Accessed 18 February 2021.
- Koenig, N. (2020). *The EU's strategic compass for security and defence: Just another paper?* Hertie School Jacques Delors Centre.
- Macron, E. (2019). For European renewal. *Élysée*, 4 March. <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2019/03/04/for-european-renewal.en>. Accessed 11 February 2021.
- Molenaar, A. (2021). *Unlocking European defence. In search of the long overdue paradigm shift*. IAI Papers 2021:1.
- Nováky, N. (2019). *EU it yourself: A blueprint for a European security council*. Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies.
- Nováky, N. (2020). *The strategic compass: Charting a new course for the EU's security and defence policy*. Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies.
- Quencez, M., & Besch, S. (2020). *The challenges ahead for EU defense cooperation*. The German Marshall Fund of the United States, Policy brief no. 2.
- Riksdagen. (2019). EU-nämndens uppteckningar 2018/19:38 [Committee on EU Affairs 2018/19:38]. [https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/eu-namndens-uppteckningar/fredagen-den-14-juni\\_H60A38](https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/eu-namndens-uppteckningar/fredagen-den-14-juni_H60A38). Accessed 18 February 2021.
- Wieslander, A. (2020). How France, Germany, and the UK can build a European pillar of NATO. *Atlantic Council*, 23 November. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/commentary/article/how-france-germany-and-the-uk-can-build-a-european-pillar-of-nato/>. Accessed 11 February 2021.



### Author biography

**Calle Håkansson** is an associate fellow in the Europe Programme of the Swedish Institute of International Affairs and a Ph.D. candidate at Malmö University. His research focuses on EU foreign and security policy, particularly in relation to the European Commission.



# German–Norwegian relations in security and defence: What kind of partnership?

European View  
2021, Vol. 20(1) 88–96  
© The Author(s) 2021  
DOI: 10.1177/17816858211001228  
[journals.sagepub.com/home/euv](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/euv)



**Bjørn Olav Knutsen**

## Abstract

The article contributes to the debate on European defence cooperation and integration by analysing the German–Norwegian security and defence partnership. I define this partnership as being based upon mutual interests and values, and one in which the minor partner has important resources to contribute which accord with the larger partner's interests and values. The article analyses this partnership within the framework of European integration and Atlantic cooperation, and in terms of how the discourse on strategic autonomy shapes the partnership. The article discusses two specific areas of cooperation, the High North and German–Norwegian collaboration on defence procurement. When analysing this relationship, I argue that Norway applies strategies such as *acting as an external resource*, *adaptation* and *shielding* to influence German policies vital to Norwegian security.

## Keywords

Norwegian foreign policy, German foreign policy, NATO, EU, High North, Cooperation on defence procurement

## Introduction

In the Norwegian government's strategy paper for Germany, made public in June 2019, the government states that Germany is '... Norway's most important partner in Europe' (Norway, MFA 2019b, 4), and furthermore that '... Germany is one of the European countries with which Norway will build more systematic and long-term relations. In particular, foreign and security policy cooperation with Germany will be deepened' (Norway, MFA 2019b, 6).<sup>1</sup> That Erna Solberg's first official trip abroad as prime minister

---

### Corresponding author:

B.O. Knutsen, Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI), P.O. Box 25, 2027 Kjeller, Norway.  
Email: [bjorn-olav.knutsen@ffi.no](mailto:bjorn-olav.knutsen@ffi.no)



Creative Commons CC BY: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>) which permits any use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access pages (<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage>).

in November 2013 was to meet German Chancellor Angela Merkel illustrates the long-standing nature of this partnership (Berglund 2013).

The aim of this article is to achieve a better understanding of how the bilateral German–Norwegian security and defence partnership is evolving and what underpins it. Obviously, the relationship is highly asymmetrical. Germany is more important to Norway than the other way around. Consequently, it is up to the Norwegian authorities to develop strategic thinking regarding the country's relationship with Germany. This is especially true on issues such as protecting the High North and securing German support when important decisions on European security are made. I argue that Norway is pursuing three different, but interdependent, strategies to influence German decision-makers. These strategies are *adaptation*, *acting as an external resource* and *shielding* (Knutsen et al. 2000, 21–3). Adaptation implies a strategy whereby Norway aligns its defence policy with German priorities. Acting as an external resource implies that Norway can further develop its role as a respected partner in international military operations and as a significant military power in Germany's northern neighbourhood. Shielding is a strategy aimed at limiting German or EU influence on Norwegian security. This might be appropriate if there are divergences on security and defence policy that become too large.

Nevertheless, such strategies would be useless if German authorities considered Norway to be of less interest to them. This is, however, not the case. The coalition agreement between the German Christian Democratic Union (Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands) and the German Social Democrats (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands) from 2018 states that Germany will 'together with France, . . . continue the agreed projects of the German–French work plan. . . . The same applies to the German–Dutch and German–Norwegian cooperation that we want to expand' (Koalitionsvertrag 2018, 146). Since both parties are interested in closer cooperation, a security and defence partnership is evolving. I define this partnership as a relationship in which the minor partner has important resources to contribute which accord with the larger partner's interests and values. The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Germany and Norway on cooperation on new submarines, missiles and other naval defence *matériel*, signed in Eckernförde (Germany) on 22 August 2017 is at the core of this partnership.

In fact, studying the German–Norwegian security and defence partnership is interesting because both states are fundamentally dependent upon the functioning of an institutions-based multilateral system (Norway, MFA 2019b; Germany, Federal Ministry of Defence 2016). It is also interesting due to the differing foreign policy outlooks. Norway has a strong Atlantic security identity, with a security and defence perspective that focuses on the north and west (Lindgren and Græger 2017), while Germany's far more European-integration-minded security perspective focuses more on the east and west (White 2019; Eberle and Handl 2020).

In the next section, I further scrutinise the German–Norwegian partnership within the framework of European integration and Atlantic cooperation before analysing the two case studies, the High North and cooperation on defence procurement. Thereafter, I draw

a conclusion and try to pinpoint in which direction the German–Norwegian partnership might head.

### **Common interests and values?**

The 2017 MoU could have served as a starting point for an assessment of the security and defence partnership between Norway and Germany (Norway, MoD 2017). Equally, the same is true of the 2018 coalition agreement between the two ruling German parties. However, such approaches would not have allowed us to understand the real underpinnings of this partnership. Instead, it seems appropriate to take a step back and look at the changing security environment during the 2010s.

What seems to underpin the partnership is the more vigorous German multilateralism since 2014, including Germany's inclination to take the lead in European security (Wright 2018; Aggestam and Hyde-Price 2020). The Russian annexation of Crimea (2014), the migration crisis (2015), Brexit (2016) and the election of Donald J. Trump as US president (2016) have all undoubtedly challenged European security and, more specifically, the transatlantic security community. From a German perspective, these challenges have led to a need for stronger leadership from Germany and the EU in the world (Wright 2018). In a multipolar world, the intensifying China–US rivalry will challenge multilateral cooperation and increase pressure on long-standing norms in international affairs. Furthermore, the US has not only pivoted its foreign policy orientation towards East Asia but is also moving away from multilateralism and a willingness to lead in international affairs (Melby 2017).

The European answer to this challenge is not only to defend the multilateral order, but also to insist on the need to reform institutions such as the UN, NATO and the EU. Obviously Germany is dependent upon a functioning multilateral order and still has a strong civilian security identity (Mauil 2018). This means that Germany defines its security interests within such collective frameworks and as the default and moral way of solving international problems (Eberle and Handl 2020, 48). Hence, the German *White Paper on German Security Policy and the Future of the Bundeswehr* (Germany, Federal Ministry of Defence 2016, 24–5) underlines Germany's commitment to 'maintaining a rules-based international order' and to 'deepening European integration and consolidating the transatlantic partnership'.

The newly established EU 'defence package' of the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence, the European Defence Fund (EDF) and Permanent Structured Cooperation, of which Germany, together with France and the European Commission, is one of the main drivers, is a clear example of both building and reforming the EU's ability to act (Biscop 2019). Furthermore, it represents an effort to defend a European security order based upon integration and collective security. The same goes for the development of NATO, for which Germany provides the foundation for the successful implementation of the decisions made at the ground-breaking 2014 Wales Summit (Major and Mölling 2015). The success of NATO's biggest adaptation since the end of the Cold War depends upon German leadership.

It is this changing European security order that brings Germany and Norway closer together. It is no coincidence that the same day as the Norwegian government presented its *Strategy for Germany* paper, it also submitted its *White Paper on Norway's Role and Interests in Multilateral Cooperation* to the parliament (Norway, MFA 2019b; Norway, MFA 2019a). Germany's Minister of Foreign Affairs Heiko Maas participated in the presentation of both documents, together with his Norwegian counterpart Ine Eriksen Søreide.

In the White Paper, the Norwegian government states that it will '... support binding international cooperation and the multilateral system, enabling us to strengthen our ability to address common challenges and safeguard national and global interests' (Norway, MFA 2019a, 5). The Norwegian approach corresponds well with the German one. The two governments also share many of the same concerns regarding the challenges the multilateral system now faces. From the Norwegian side it is especially worrying that states might choose to solve their challenges 'bilaterally or unilaterally, rather than as part of a larger community' (Norway, MFA 2019a, 6). Hence, Brexit has made Germany an even closer political partner for Norway.

From a Norwegian perspective, several ideational and concrete factors point in the direction of enhanced cooperation between the two countries. These are mutual trust, common values and previous experiences of concrete cooperation efforts. Factors that point in the other direction are the little attention paid to the High North in Berlin, the different attachment to and priority given to the EU, and the differing cultures and traditions between the German and Norwegian militaries.

What the two countries also have in common is a stated will to enhance European defence capabilities, including the European defence industry. Consequently, from 2021 Norway will be taking part in the EDF—the only European Economic Area member to do so. As part of the European Economic Area, the Norwegian defence industry is regulated by the same single market rules as EU member states (Norway, MoD 2015, 11; Norway, MFA 2020a). In addition, since 2006 Norway has had an administrative arrangement with the European Defence Agency. The cornerstone of this participation is defence research and technology activity. These frameworks shape the conditions for the German–Norwegian partnership using EU rules and regulations. But this goes further, as the Norwegian government is adapting its policy to fit the EU's security and defence agenda. Norway is in fact one of the third countries most engaged in the Common Security and Defence Policy through its alignment with the EU in many foreign policy areas such as engagement in EU missions and operations (Hillion 2019, 32). This is the case even though Norway's relations with the EU in this realm are not dependent upon an institutional set-up as they are in other fields of cooperation.

However, due to its Atlantic security identity Norway has an ambivalent relationship with the EU in the field of security and defence. It has previously expressed a hope and belief that the EU will not develop an autonomous foreign, security and defence policy (Norway, NOU 2012, 723). Consequently, Norway still regards the EU as part of a wider

Atlantic framework in which the EU–NATO relationship is at the centre of the wider Western security system. This is an important factor in Norwegian politics, as seen in the Norwegian reluctance to take part in the debate on European strategic autonomy. Norwegian politicians seldom refer to this debate. One of the very few exceptions was Foreign Minister Ine Eriksen Søreide's speech to Parliament on 17 November 2020, but this took a much broader perspective than just security and defence (Norway, MFA 2020b). In fact, the Norwegian perspective seems to be very similar to German Minister of Defence Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer's criticism of the European debate on this issue. Concretely, this refers to the 'European illusions' regarding strategic autonomy: 'Europeans will not be able to replace America's crucial role as a security provider' (Kramp-Karrenbauer 2020). From the German defence minister's perspective, Europe remains dependent on US military protection. Furthermore, she states, the EU needs to take on more responsibility for its own security, especially in the wider European neighbourhood.

To analyse these similarities and differences, I now turn to the two case studies on the High North and cooperation on defence procurement. I will assess the use of the three strategies outlined above in these two areas to answer the question of what kind of partnership is now developing between Germany and Norway.

### **The High North in the German–Norwegian partnership**

The German approach to the High North is still to a high degree linked to climate change and global warming issues. This is evident in both the 2013 and the 2019 versions of the Arctic policy guidelines from the federal government (Germany, Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2013; 2019). The 2019 Arctic policy guidelines nevertheless state that there is the potential for 'non-cooperative behaviour in the Arctic' (Germany, Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2019, 23). This might affect German security interests as set out in the 2016 White Paper on German security policy. In addition, it illustrates how the High North now ranks higher in German military planning. Nevertheless, Germany will still pursue 'a multidirectional policy that unites different factions in NATO' (Kamp 2018, 73). This explains why German policymakers are unwilling to increase the Bundeswehr's presence in the High North substantially (Kamp 2018, 70–1). This must not be seen as an unwillingness to view security developments in the High North as being of interest to Germany. The German participation in 2018 in Trident Juncture, the largest NATO exercise on Norwegian soil since the Cold War, in which 9,000 German military personnel took part, is a clear example of Germany's interest. Germany sees its participation in such exercises as contributing to the security of the High North.

The Norwegian aim is to draw Germany's attention northwards, to achieve binding commitments to reinforcement in times of crisis (Tamnes 2018, 19). This does not necessarily mean collective defence only, but to have Germany as a supporter when important decisions on European security are made. The main Norwegian strategy in this regard is *adaptation* to one of the most important German defence initiatives of recent years, the Framework Nation Concept (FNC). The idea behind the FNC is that a larger country

takes on responsibility for plugging specialised support capabilities ‘into the back-bone provided by the framework nation’ (Saxi 2017, 176). Since the concept was introduced in 2013, it has changed and is now more strongly linked to NATO’s deterrence and defence posture (Major and Mölling 2016). Therefore, ‘Germany will become the indispensable framework nation for most of its smaller FNC partners’ (Glatz and Zapfe 2017, 2). Since the FNC has been even more closely linked to Article 5 commitments, Norway can also apply the strategy of being an external resource by acting as ‘NATO in the North’. In addition, it is a significant defence actor in Germany’s northern vicinities, with several modern military capabilities such as new fighters and frigates. This is further substantiated by even closer cooperation with Germany in the defence procurement field.

### **German–Norwegian cooperation on defence procurement**

Germany is already Norway’s most important partner in the supply and joint acquisition of defence *matériel*. The exception to this is fighter aircraft, where the US still dominates supply. The MoU paved the way for long-lasting cooperation on the acquisition of new submarines, naval missiles and other defence systems (Norway, MoD 2017). The timespan covered by the memorandum is a minimum of 40 years, which is the life expectancy of the 6 submarines Germany and Norway are developing together. The first one will arrive at the end of the 2020s. In parallel, Germany and Norway also agreed in 2017 to develop a common missile based on the Norwegian naval strike missile, ensuring identical missiles in both countries’ navies. It is the submarine agreement that ensures that this German–Norwegian partnership in defence procurement will be in place for a long period of time.

When assessing the importance of the German–Norwegian partnership, the Norwegian government’s budget proposition for 2021 states that: ‘The decision to purchase submarines together with Germany, the agreement on maritime defence cooperation and the close land-based operational cooperation linked to NATO’s rapid reaction force, contribute to further strengthening relations with Germany’ (Norway, MoD 2020, 39). The relationship therefore has depth and there is a high degree of trust between the parties. It is nevertheless important to note that the new European security order, with the rebirth of NATO’s collective defence commitments, is an important precondition for the close partnership in defence procurement.

Within the realm of cooperation on defence procurement, Norway primarily acts as an external resource. Being a respected defence actor in Germany’s northern neighbourhood, Norway acts as a politico-military enabler for Germany. By cooperating on the production of submarines and other defence *matériel*, Norway contributes to enhancing both German and Norwegian military capabilities within naval security. Furthermore, through the MoU, Norway will ensure delivery of the submarines it requires and at the same time contribute to closer cooperation on defence procurement within the EU and NATO. Such an approach also corresponds well with the strategy of adaptation, to both EU and NATO norms, but also to a German-based approach to the design of the

submarines. By basing the procurement on an existing German submarine design, Germany and Norway will avoid an extensive development project, with the risks and costs that this would involve.

From the Norwegian side, there are hardly any limits to how far German–Norwegian cooperation might go. However, from the German side, the aim of the cooperation with its northern neighbour is to exploit military synergies and achieve an overall improvement in Europe’s defence capabilities.

## Conclusions

The German–Norwegian partnership in security and defence is close. It is characterised by a high degree of trust and a common approach to several international challenges and threats. Nevertheless, there are also some important divergences. Even though it might be inappropriate to use the term ‘shielding’ in this context, in the 2021 state budget the Norwegian government originally proposed not to take part in the EDF (Norway, Ministry of Defence 2020, 36). The government’s position changed, however, when it negotiated the 2021 budget proposal with the Eurosceptic Progress Party (‘Fremskrittspartiet’), which insisted that Norway should take part. As they now see it, the government and the Progress Party agree that the development of defence equipment and technology is part of strengthening NATO’s and Europe’s defence. Hence Norway, as part of NATO, needs to cooperate closely with alliance partners in the EU. This also means that Norway can avoid taking part in the discourse on strategic autonomy since it considers cooperation with the EU in this field part of strengthening NATO. This confirms Norway’s Atlantic approach to European security and defence. Even though Germany’s defence minister underlines the need to avoid ‘illusions’ of strategic autonomy, it is nevertheless an important concept when discussing the role the EU will have in a more multipolar world. To avoid such debates might harm Norwegian security interests in the end, and it will also limit how close the German–Norwegian partnership in security and defence can become.

## Note

1. All translations are by the author.

## References

- Aggestam, L., & Hyde-Price, A. (2020). Learning to lead? Germany and the leadership paradox in EU foreign policy. *German Politics*, 29(1), 8–24. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/09644008.2019.1601177?needAccess=true>. Accessed 11 February 2021.
- Berglund, N. (2013). Solberg meets Merkel in Berlin. *NewsinEnglish.no*, 20 November. <https://www.newsinenglish.no/2013/11/20/solberg-meets-merkel-in-berlin/>. Accessed 11 February 2021.
- Biscop, S. (2019). *Fighting for Europe. European strategic autonomy and the use of force*. Egmont Institute, Egmont paper no. 103. Brussels. <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/fighting-for-europe-european-strategic-autonomy-and-the-use-of-force/>. Accessed 11 February 2021.
- Eberle, J., & Handl, V. (2020). Ontological security, civilian power, and German foreign policy toward Russia. *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 16(1), 41–58. <https://academic.oup.com/fpa/article-abstract/16/1/41/5210975?redirectedFrom=fulltext>. Accessed 11 February 2021.

- Germany, Federal Ministry of Defence. (2016). *White Paper on German security policy and the future of the Bundeswehr*. Berlin. <https://issat.dcaf.ch/download/111704/2027268/2016%20White%20Paper.pdf>. Accessed 11 February 2021.
- Germany, Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (2013). *Germany's Arctic policy guidelines*. Berlin. [https://www.arctic-office.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/www.arctic-office.de/PDF\\_uploads/Germanys\\_Arctic\\_policy\\_guidelines.pdf](https://www.arctic-office.de/fileadmin/user_upload/www.arctic-office.de/PDF_uploads/Germanys_Arctic_policy_guidelines.pdf). Accessed 11 February 2021.
- Germany, Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (2019). *Germany's Arctic policy guidelines*. Berlin. <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2240002/eb0b681be9415118ca87bc8e215c0cf4/ark-tisleitlinien-data.pdf>. Accessed 11 February 2021.
- Glatz, R. L., & Zapfe, M. (2017). NATO's Framework Nations Concept. *CSS Analyses in Security Policy*, no. 218. ETH Zurich. <https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/CSSAnalyse218-EN.pdf>. Accessed 11 February 2021.
- Hillion, C. (2019). *Norway and the changing Common Foreign and Security Policy of the European Union*. Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, NUPI report no. 1. Oslo. [https://nupi.brage.unit.no/nupi-xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/2582455/NUPI\\_Report\\_1\\_2019\\_Hillion.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y](https://nupi.brage.unit.no/nupi-xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/2582455/NUPI_Report_1_2019_Hillion.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y). Accessed 11 February 2021.
- Kamp, K.-H. (2018). Defence and security in Northern Europe: A German perspective. In J. A. Olsen (ed.), *Security in Northern Europe. Deterrence, defence and dialogue* (pp. 63–74). London: RUSI.
- Knutsen, B. O., Granviken, A., Holthe, M. R., Kjølberg, A., & Aagaard, F. (2000). *Europeisk sikkerhet i en foranderlig tid: En analyse av Norges utenrikspolitiske handlingsrom* [European security in changing times: An analysis of Norwegian foreign policy room for manoeuvre]. Norwegian Defence Research Establishment, FFI report no. 2000/00046. <https://publications.ffi.no/nb/item/asset/dspace:2219/00-00046.pdf>. Accessed 11 February 2021.
- Koalitionsvertrag. (2018). *Ein neuer Aufbruch für Europa. Eine neue Dynamik für Deutschland. Ein neuer Zusammenhalt für unser Land* [A new start for Europe. A new dynamic for Germany. A new cohesion for our country]. Berlin. March. [https://www.cdu.de/system/tdf/media/dokumente/koalitionsvertrag\\_2018.pdf?file=1](https://www.cdu.de/system/tdf/media/dokumente/koalitionsvertrag_2018.pdf?file=1). Accessed 11 February 2021.
- Kramp-Karrenbauer, A. (2020). Europe still needs America. *Politico*, 2 November. <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-still-needs-america/>. Accessed 11 February 2021.
- Lindgren, W. Y., & Græger, N. (2017). The challenges and dynamics of alliance policies: Norway, NATO and the High North. In M. Wesley (ed.), *Global allies: Comparing US alliances in the 21st century* (pp. 91–113). Canberra: ANU Press. <http://press-files.anu.edu.au/downloads/press/n2504/pdf/ch07.pdf>. Accessed 11 February 2021.
- Major, C., & Mölling, C. (2015). Not a hegemon, but the backbone: Germany takes a leading role in NATO's strategic adaptation. *European Leadership Network*, 23 February. <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/not-a-hegemon-but-the-backbone-germany-takes-a-leading-role-in-natos-strategic-adaptation/>. Accessed 11 February 2021.
- Major, C., & Mölling, C. (2016). *More teeth for the NATO-tiger: How the Framework Nation Concept can reduce NATO's growing formation-capability gap*. Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, Policy Brief no. 19. Oslo. [https://nupi.brage.unit.no/nupi-xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/2395959/NUPI\\_Policy\\_Brief\\_19\\_16\\_Molling\\_Majaja.pdf](https://nupi.brage.unit.no/nupi-xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/2395959/NUPI_Policy_Brief_19_16_Molling_Majaja.pdf). Accessed 11 February 2021.
- Mauil, H. W. (2018). Reflective, hegemonic, geo-economic, civilian. . . ? The puzzle of German power. *German Politics*, 27(4), 460–78. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09644008.2018.1446520>. Accessed 11 February 2021.
- Melby, S. (2017). *USAs ledervilje svikter. Maktpolitiske utfordringer og nye nasjonale forutsetninger* [The USA's will for leadership is failing. Political power challenges and new national conditions]. Oslo: Fagbokforlaget.

- Norway, MoD. (2015). *Nasjonal forsvarsindustriell strategi* [National defence industrial strategy]. Oslo. <https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/e7bfbdb49872449f3bd1eed10812aa4b0/no/pdfs/stm201520160009000dddpdfs.pdf>. Accessed 11 February 2021.
- Norway, MoD. (2017). *Norge inngår omfattende samarbeid om maritimt forsvarsmateriell* [Norway enters into extensive cooperation on maritime defence matériel]. Oslo. <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/aktuelt/norge-og-tyskland-inngar-omfattende-samarbeid-om-maritimt-forsvarsmateriell/id2568087/>. Accessed 11 February 2021.
- Norway, MoD. (2020). *Prop 1S (2020–2021): Proposisjon til Stortinget (forslag til stortingsvedtak)* [Proposition to parliament]. Oslo. [https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/5695ead7edfc43ebb03a581d75cfa674/no/pdfs/prp202020210001\\_fdddpdfs.pdf](https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/5695ead7edfc43ebb03a581d75cfa674/no/pdfs/prp202020210001_fdddpdfs.pdf). Accessed 11 February 2021.
- Norway, MFA (Ministry of Foreign Affairs). (2019a). *Norway's role and interests in multilateral cooperation*. White Paper. Oslo. <https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/5673dadc917448148b491635289ac690/en-gb/pdfs/stm201820190027000engpdfs.pdf>. Accessed 11 February 2021.
- Norway, MFA. (2019b). *Regjeringas Tyskland-strategi 2019* [Government strategy for Germany 2019]. Oslo. [https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/tyskland\\_strategi/id2654427/](https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/tyskland_strategi/id2654427/). Accessed 11 February 2021.
- Norway, MFA. (2020a). *A secure Europe. Norway and the European Union*. Oslo.
- Norway, MFA. (2020b). *Redegjørelse om viktige EU og EØS-saker* [Statement on important EU and EEA issues]. Oslo. [https://www.regjeringen.no/no/aktuelt/redegjorelse\\_201117/id2785875/](https://www.regjeringen.no/no/aktuelt/redegjorelse_201117/id2785875/). Accessed 11 February 2021.
- Norway, NOU. (2012). *Utenfor og innenfor. Norges avtaler med EU* [Outside and inside. Norway's agreements with the EU]. Oslo. <https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/5d3982d042a2472eb1b20639cd8b2341/no/pdfs/nou201220120002000dddpdfs.pdf>. Accessed 11 February 2021.
- Saxi, H. L. (2017). British and German initiatives for defence cooperation: The Joint Expeditionary Force and the Framework Nations Concept. *Defence Studies*, 17(2), 171–97. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14702436.2017.1307690>. Accessed 11 February 2021.
- Tammes, R. (2018). The High North: A call for a competitive strategy. In J. A. Olsen (ed.), *Security in Northern Europe. Deterrence, defence and dialogue* (pp. 8–22). London: RUSI.
- White, T. J. (2019). German unification and shifts in foreign policy. In T. Herzog, T. Nusser & R. Schade (eds.), *25 years Berlin republic: Reflections on/of German unification (1990–2015)* (pp. 11–24). Paderborn: Brill Deutschland.
- Wright, N. (2018). No longer the elephant outside the room: Why the Ukraine crisis reflects a deeper shift towards German leadership of European foreign policy. *German Politics*, 27(4), 479–97. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09644008.2018.1458094>. Accessed 11 February 2021.

## Author biography



**Bjørn Olav Knutsen** is the chief researcher at the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment at Kjeller and an associate professor at Nord University in Bodø. His main research interests are Norwegian security and defence policies, NATO and transatlantic relations, as well as the development of the EU as a security and defence actor. He has previously been a foreign policy adviser to the Norwegian Conservative Party (Høyre) in the Norwegian parliament.



# Closer together or further apart? The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the conflicts in the EU's eastern neighbourhood

European View  
2021, Vol. 20(1) 97–105  
© The Author(s) 2021  
DOI: 10.1177/1781685821999848  
journals.sagepub.com/home/euv



**Katsiaryna Lozka**

## Abstract

The article discusses the impact of COVID-19 on the conflict zones in the EU's eastern neighbourhood, and the EU's and Russia's approaches to addressing the pandemic. It illustrates that the pandemic has led to the further escalation of tensions in the region, while exposing the vulnerabilities of the secessionist territories and the limits to their reliance on external support. Addressing the crisis in its neighbourhood, the EU has largely focused on tackling the long-term consequences of the pandemic, while Russia has resorted to disinformation tactics to exercise influence among its neighbours. In this regard, the failure to push forward any negotiations on the global crisis within the existing mediation formats signals the political impotence of these formats to convey even a symbolic message of cooperation to the populations.

## Keywords

Frozen conflicts, Eastern neighbourhood, COVID-19, Eastern Europe, South Caucasus, Russia, EU

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented challenges worldwide and created unique threats for the breakaway regions in the EU's eastern vicinity. These regions' limited contacts with the international community have not prevented the spread of the virus. However, the lack of international cooperation and the often-strained relations

---

### Corresponding author:

Katsiaryna Lozka, Centre for EU Studies, Department of Political Sciences, Ghent University, Universiteitstraat 8, B-9000 Ghent, Belgium.  
Email: Katsiaryna.Lozka@UGent.be



Creative Commons CC BY: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>) which permits any use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access pages (<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage>).

with the regions' parent states have led to a dilemma regarding how to approach the global crisis. Weak health systems and outdated Soviet infrastructure have made the breakaway regions of Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh and the self-proclaimed republics in Donbas particularly vulnerable (*Crisis Group* 2020). On the one hand, in some cases this situation has created a unique opportunity to bring the secessionist regions in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus closer to their parent states in order to jointly tackle the pandemic. On the other hand, the willingness for and likelihood of such cooperation can be questioned.

This article seeks to examine how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the dynamics of the conflicts in the EU's eastern neighbourhood. It argues that the common challenge has not brought the conflicting parties closer together but has further escalated tensions. At the same time, the global health crisis has exposed the vulnerabilities of the secessionist territories and the limits to their reliance on external support.

The article is structured as follows. The first section examines the situation with the pandemic and the responses of the breakaway regions. The following section considers the strategies of the parent states. Finally, the article looks at the approaches of Russia and the EU towards the conflict-ridden areas in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus in this time of health crisis.

## **Breakaway regions' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic**

Despite poor health infrastructure and a lack of medical personnel, the breakaway regions of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus have largely resorted to a strategy of further isolation as a means of tackling the pandemic. As early as 16 March, Tiraspol decided to close the border with the Republic of Moldova (Balakhnova 2020). As the global pandemic entered its second wave, more checkpoints were introduced by the de facto Transnistrian authorities, restricting the freedom of movement across the Nistru river (OSCE 2020). The Georgian breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia adopted somewhat different approaches after the closure of the borders by their kin state, Russia. Remarkably, Abkhazia opened up limited channels of communication and accepted medical supplies and aid from Russia and international organisations (in particular the World Health Organization) (Emerson et al. 2020). In contrast, with a very limited international presence on the ground and internal unrest, South Ossetia faced a very dire situation (Chankvetadze and Murusidze 2020; *JamNews* 2020).

Amidst the global pandemic, the breakaway regions have not only become further isolated but have also witnessed the continuation or even escalation of violence. Notwithstanding the call by UN Secretary General António Guterres for a ceasefire in March 2020, bombing and shooting in Eastern Ukraine continued. The ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh broke down in July and escalated into a war in September 2020, which left this disputed region on the brink of a humanitarian catastrophe. Before the start of the war, the Armenian website quoted statistics on coronavirus from the 'ministry' of healthcare of Nagorno-Karabakh, putting the overall number of cases at 421 (*Hetq*

2020). This information has not been updated since but the situation with COVID-19 has dramatically worsened. Media sources have reported that the population has been hit particularly hard (*AP News* 2020; *Global Voices* 2020). Unsurprisingly, with the start of the war in September 2020, the issues related to the pandemic became of secondary importance. As Stepanakert-based journalist Lika Zakaryan noted in a conversation with *Global Voices* (2020), ‘Nobody cares about COVID-19 right now’. Significantly, the existing multilateral formats for negotiations to address these ongoing conflicts—the Normandy Format for Ukraine and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group for Nagorno-Karabakh—have been neither visible nor effective in fostering dialogue to cease hostilities and tackle the ongoing pandemic.

With this further alienation of the breakaway regions from their parent states, the COVID-19 pandemic has also exposed difficulties for the secessionist entities in providing security for their people and has demonstrated the limits to their external support. Thousands of pensioners in Transnistria and Eastern Ukraine, whose pensions are paid by Russia, faced difficulties in receiving their payments after the decision of the de facto authorities to close the borders with Moldova and Ukraine respectively (*Uskenskaya* 2020; *Hromadske International* 2020). Struggling with the pandemic within its own borders, Russia, as the patron state of the separatist territories (with the exception of Nagorno-Karabakh), has barely managed to address the health crisis outside it, resulting in criticism from the populations of the breakaway regions. As a human rights activist in Ukraine put it, the de facto leaders of the Luhansk People’s Republic ‘turned against Ukraine and risked their own health and freedom—and in return, Russia cannot even deliver masks’ (*Crisis Group* 2020). However, although the parent states have expressed more willingness to assist their uncontrolled territories, their approaches have so far also been unsuccessful.

## Approaches of the parent states

The parent states have adopted different approaches to dealing with the pandemic in the territories outside of their control. Georgia and Moldova in particular made attempts to extend aid to the uncontrolled territories, with Georgian Prime Minister Gakharia stating that ‘[we] will do everything to protect the health of our citizens on both sides of the occupation line’ (Fenwick 2020). In a similar way, Moldovan President Dodon stressed that no restriction on the freedom of movement would be imposed as ‘Transnistrian region residents are our citizens’ (*InfoTag* 2020).

The responses to the pandemic in Nagorno-Karabakh and Donbas were more constrained because of the continuing hostilities. Despite the highlighted opportunities to stop the war in Eastern Ukraine (Taylor et al. 2020), Oleksiy Reznikov, the Ukrainian Minister for Reintegration of the Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine stated that ‘the “border” between the occupied areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions has been locked’, with ongoing fighting and no information on the coronavirus situation (*EU Today* 2020). In a similar vein, the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, internationally recognised as part of Azerbaijan but partly controlled by Armenia, faced a lack of necessary

aid because of its particular status. This was combined with repeated outbreaks of violence from March, which escalated into a war in September. With the start of the global pandemic, Armenia closed its borders, thereby restricting access to and from the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. Consequently, Nagorno-Karabakh could only receive medical assistance with the authorisation of the Azeri authorities. With Azerbaijan having no direct control over this region, such arrangements could hardly be made. All attempts to raise this issue within the Minsk format or to organise the delivery of assistance via Armenia with the agreement of Azerbaijan have been unsuccessful. As a result, even before the start of outright war, the inter-state competition between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the region meant that the conflicting parties were unable to address the pandemic in the disputed territory.

However, notwithstanding the situations in Nagorno-Karabakh and Donbas, a more cooperative approach by the parent states to bring the breakaway regions closer to them has not borne fruit either. The concerning situation with the virus has only exacerbated tensions among the populations of the countries. In one example, a news report appeared on Georgian television about the hospitalisation of an Abkhazian woman in a Georgian hospital. The truth of the story was, however, quickly denied by the de facto authorities of Abkhazia, causing an escalation of tensions between the conflicting parties (Rozanskij 2020). A similar pattern could be observed in Transnistria: after the closure of the borders with Moldova, Tiraspol restricted the movement of medical personnel (including those with Moldovan passports) on its territory. This restriction generated further tensions because of a general lack of medical personnel in the region (Gamova 2020). Against this backdrop of a lack of cooperation between the secessionist regions and their parent states, external policies, in particular those of Russia and the EU, need to be considered.

## **Russian policies towards the frozen conflicts during the pandemic**

Even before the pandemic, Russia had developed a wide toolbox of strategies to instrumentalise the presence of the breakaway regions with a view to increasing its influence over the countries in its neighbourhood. With the start of the global pandemic, Russia continued to rely on disinformation campaigns and oligarchic structures in some countries to generate mistrust of democratic processes and the way democratic societies were handling the pandemic.

In particular, the elections in Georgia and Moldova in autumn 2020 witnessed disinformation campaigns on social media as well as more direct interference in the electoral process. Investigations conducted by the Dossier Center, a London-based investigative project financed by Mikhail Khodorkovsky, a critic of Russian President Putin, found evidence of financial support for and direct handling of the campaign of the Patriots' Alliance, the pro-Russian party in Georgia (Kiparoidze and Patin 2020). Polarisation in Moldova similarly increased on the eve of the presidential election. During the campaign President Igor Dodon accused his main rival, Maia Sandu, of receiving direct support from foreign governments. A similar observation was made by Russian Minister of

Foreign Affairs Lavrov (*RFERL* 2020). In reality, in early October 2020 the non-governmental organisations the Dossier Centre and RISE Moldova published an investigative report alleging Moscow's manipulation of and provision of direct aid to President Dodon (*RFERL* 2020). It was thus amidst this climate of rising polarisation and deeply undermined trust in state institutions and campaigns that the two countries entered their electoral periods.

In the hot zones of Eastern Ukraine, fighting continued, supported by Russia, despite the pandemic. A lack of communication and knowledge about the situation in the East has dominated the months of the health crisis. At the same time, the patchy information available on social media evinced a particularly worrying situation in the Donbas region, where infected people were placed outdoors in the absence of the necessary facilities and equipment. Additionally, various conspiracy theories seemed to dominate the discourse about the pandemic. For instance, the Telegram (social media app) channels of the 'ministry' of information of the Donetsk People's Republic blamed the US for creating coronavirus with the aim of thwarting the 9 May military parade (*Glavcom* 2020).

Nagorno-Karabakh is the only breakaway region where Russia does not act as the patron state. However, since the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, Russia has managed to increase its influence over both Armenia and Azerbaijan, in particular via the deployment of its peacekeepers as part of the 10 November agreement that formally ended the war (Russia, The Kremlin 2020). Arguably, the early months of the pandemic, characterised by a lack of diplomatic engagement between the Minsk Group mediators and the conflicting parties, contributed to the outbreak of the war and further marginalisation of the Western role in the peace negotiations over the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh.

As a result, the global pandemic did not generally change Russia's approach to the conflict-ridden neighbourhood. Its activities continued to sow doubt about democratic processes and attempted to increase its influence. At the same time, the Russian authorities aimed to compensate for their inability to assist Russian-controlled territories (Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and parts of Eastern Ukraine) in handling the crisis by operating disinformation campaigns and disseminating various conspiracy theories about the origins of the crisis.

## **The EU and the (not so) frozen conflicts during the pandemic**

Amidst the pandemic, the EU adopted a long-term strategy towards its eastern neighbourhood. At the end of March 2020, the European Commission came up with a generous financial support package to assist the countries of the Eastern Partnership in tackling the pandemic and building up their resilience (European Commission, DG NEAR 2020). As the pandemic has progressed and the socio-economic issues have started to become more salient, the importance of the support for dealing with the long-term consequences of the crisis and potentially shaping the image of the EU in its eastern vicinity have become particularly clear. In some cases (for example, Abkhazia), EU-sponsored aid has

reached the secessionist regions via international organisations such as the Red Cross (*Crisis Group* 2020). Overall, the EU has focused on economic aid and reiterated its support for democratic procedures on the eve of elections in some countries (such as Georgia and Moldova). However, the attempts of the EU and its member states to raise the issue of the pandemic within the existing mediation formats and bring the parent states closer to their uncontrolled regions have not been successful.

The situations in Nagorno-Karabakh and Eastern Ukraine witnessed a different approach. With repeated escalations of violence in Nagorno-Karabakh throughout the year, the EU primarily attempted to push forward a ceasefire and negotiations under the auspices of the OSCE, as well as providing humanitarian assistance. After the start of the war in September 2020, the EU allocated around €900,000 of humanitarian aid to help the affected civilian population (European Commission ECHO 2020b). The delivery of humanitarian aid to Eastern Ukraine, which has experienced continued fighting on its territory, also encountered challenges, although non-governmental organisations from EU member states (such as the Czech organisation People in Need) continued their work (European Commission ECHO 2020a). In these cases, the global pandemic became a somewhat secondary issue: it neither eased confrontation between the parties nor prevented its escalation.

Thus when approaching the conflict-ridden zones in its Eastern neighbourhood, the EU has focused on tackling the long-term socio-economic repercussions of the ongoing pandemic. Its toolbox includes the traditional approach of providing financial assistance and expressing support for democratic values. Overall, this approach has not had an impact on the relations between the secessionist regions and their parent states. Furthermore, the prospects for dialogue and negotiations between the conflicting parties remain very poor, if possible at all.

## Conclusion

Tackling the global pandemic has brought unique challenges for the secessionist regions of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, which are experiencing international isolation and repeated escalations of tensions and violence. The health crisis has been tackled in various ways by the disputed regions, with most resorting to a strategy of further isolation from their parent states by closing the borders. This has not improved the situation but has exposed the vulnerabilities of the breakaway regions in maintaining peace and security for their citizens.

The global pandemic has further highlighted the contrasting approaches and confrontation between the EU and Russia in their shared neighbourhood. The Russian authorities continue to rely extensively on disinformation campaigns, support for oligarchic structures and the presence of pro-Russian groups in the conflict-ridden countries to undermine trust in democratic institutions. In contrast, the EU has followed a strategy of addressing the long-term consequences of the crisis by providing financial support to alleviate the socio-economic repercussions of the pandemic. That being

said, the COVID-19 crisis has further destabilised the EU's eastern neighbourhood, in some cases rolling back the already slow process of enhancing people-to-people contacts. The lack of negotiations on this common challenge within the established mediation formats signals the political impotence of these formats to convey even a symbolic message of cooperation to the populations.

With this in mind, I offer the following recommendations for the EU to improve its response to the crisis in its immediate neighbourhood.

First, without undermining the policy of non-recognition, positive engagement with the breakaway regions needs to be developed. To this end, cooperation with international organisations could be one way to overcome the existing obstacles. A positive example of such cooperation can be found in Abkhazia. Amidst the pandemic, this breakaway region both opened up links with Georgia and received EU aid via the Red Cross, which was present on its territory.

Second, and related to the first, overcoming the persistent isolation of the breakaway regions could give more visibility in these regions to their parent states and the EU, which would make it easier to counteract conspiracy theories and disinformation on the ground. Such positive engagement, falling short of recognition, could ultimately foster communication between the conflicting parties and possibly end the unproductive isolation and stalemate into which most peace processes in the Eastern neighbourhood are locked.

Third, both the COVID-19 pandemic in the region and the efforts to deal with it have highlighted the need to revitalise the existing multilateral formats between the conflicting parties. In this regard, the failure of the Minsk Group to address the war and the pandemic in Nagorno-Karabakh is particularly salient as it rendered international mediators barely visible. The same is true of the other mediation formats—the '5+2' format for Transnistria, the Geneva International Discussions and the Normandy Format—which failed even to bring the common challenge of the pandemic to the negotiation table. In these circumstances, the pandemic has highlighted the deplorable state of diplomatic engagement and negotiations in the region, where diplomacy is becoming less of an option than ever before.

## References

- AP News*. (2020). Coronavirus spreads in Nagorno-Karabakh amid heavy fighting. 21 October. <https://apnews.com/article/virus-outbreak-pandemics-azerbaijan-armenia-europe-14f519a45ce899c2c7a52cba7c876850>. Accessed 12 December 2020.
- Balakhnova, V. (2020). Приднестровье закрыло границы. Для кого сделают исключение? [Transnistria closes its borders. Who will they make an exception for?]. *NewsMaker*, 16 March. <https://newsmaker.md/rus/novosti/pridnestrove-zakrylo-granitsy-dlya-kogo-sdelayut-isklyuchenie/>. Accessed 20 October 2020.
- Chankvetadze, N., & Murusidze, K. (2020). Challenges of COVID-19 in areas of protracted conflict. *Middle East Institute*, 11 May. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/challenges-covid-19-areas-protracted-conflict>. Accessed 10 December 2020.

- Crisis Group*. (2020). The COVID-19 challenge in post-Soviet breakaway statelets. 6 May. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/b89-covid-19-challenge-post-soviet-breakaway-statelets>. Accessed 16 October 2020.
- Emerson, M., Akhvediani, T., Cenusa, D., Remizov, A., Movchan, V., Ismayil, S., Poghosyan, B., de Waal, T., & Yahorau, A. (2020). COVID-19 bulletin no 6: COVID-19 in the separatist conflict regions. *3DCFTA.eu*, 29 May. <https://3dcfta.eu/publications/covid-19-bulletin-no-6>. Accessed 12 December 2020.
- European Commission, DG ECHO. (2020a). Eastern Ukraine: 'We can't let them die of thirst'. Blog, 23 October. [https://ec.europa.eu/echo/blog/eastern-ukraine-we-can-t-let-them-die-thirst\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/echo/blog/eastern-ukraine-we-can-t-let-them-die-thirst_en). Accessed 29 October 2020.
- European Commission, DG ECHO. (2020b). Nagorno Karabakh: Additional €400,000 in emergency aid for civilians affected by the hostilities. 30 October. [https://ec.europa.eu/echo/news/nagorno-karabakh-additional-400000-emergency-aid-civilians-affected-hostilities\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/echo/news/nagorno-karabakh-additional-400000-emergency-aid-civilians-affected-hostilities_en). Accessed 30 October 2020.
- European Commission, DG NEAR. (2020). The EU's response to the coronavirus pandemic in the Eastern Partnership. June. [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/coronavirus\\_support\\_eap.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/coronavirus_support_eap.pdf). Accessed 14 October 2020.
- EU Today*. (2020). Made in Russia: Occupied Donbass facing humanitarian crisis. 28 April. <https://eutoday.net/news/politics/2020/made-in-russia>. Accessed 12 December 2020.
- Fenwick, F. (2020). Isolation in isolation: Coronavirus in Abkhazia. *The Organisation for World Peace*, 12 April. <https://theowp.org/isolation-in-isolation-coronavirus-in-abkhazia/>. Accessed 17 October 2020.
- Gamova, S. (2020). Из Приднестровья не выпускают молдавских врачей. Кишинев просит ОБСЕ надавить на Тирасполь [Moldovan doctors are not allowed out of Transnistria. Chisinau asks OSCE to put pressure on Tiraspol]. *Nesavisimaya Gazeta*, 2 April. [https://www.ng.ru/cis/2020-04-02/1\\_7834\\_moldova.html](https://www.ng.ru/cis/2020-04-02/1_7834_moldova.html). Accessed 15 October 2020.
- Glavcom*. (2020). У «ДНР» розкрили «страшну правду» про те, хто і для чого створив корон авірус ['Terrible truth' about who created the coronavirus and for what purpose revealed in Donetsk]. 20 March. <https://glavcom.ua/country/society/u-dnr-rozkrili-strashnu-pravdu-pro-te-hto-i-dlya-chogo-stvoriv-koronavirus-667261.html>. Accessed 16 October 2020.
- Global Voices*. (2020). As war in Nagorno-Karabakh rages, so does a pandemic. 23 October. <https://globalvoices.org/2020/10/23/as-war-in-karabakh-rages-so-does-a-pandemic/>. Accessed 11 December 2020.
- Hetq*. (2020). В Арцахе коронавирусом заразились еще 17 человек [17 more people infected with coronavirus in Artsakh]. 26 September. <https://hetq.am/ru/article/121948>. Accessed 12 October 2020.
- Hromadske International*. (2020). COVID-19 spreads in unrecognized territories of Eastern Europe undetected, untreated. 13 April. <https://en.hromadske.ua/posts/covid-19-spreads-in-unrecognized-territories-of-eastern-europe-undetected-untreated>. Accessed 12 October 2020.
- InfoTag*. (2020). Moldova will be helping Transnistria combat coronavirus pandemic. 3 April. <http://www.infotag.md/rebellion-en/283832/>. Accessed 30 October 2020.
- JamNews*. (2020). Protests in South Ossetia resume after funeral of 28-year-old, president alleges 'a Georgian trace' in rallies. 2 September. <https://jam-news.net/south-ossetia-protest-bibilov/>. Accessed 10 December 2020.
- Kiparoidze, M., & Patin, K. (2020). Investigation alleges Russian money behind political party in neighboring Georgia. *CodaStory*, 31 August. <https://www.codastory.com/disinformation/georgia-russia-election/>. Accessed 15 October 2020.
- RFERL (Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty)*. (2020). Moldovans vote in presidential election charged by accusations of foreign interference. 1 November. <https://www.rferl.org/a/>

- moldovans-vote-in-presidential-election-charged-by-accusations-of-foreign-interference/30923662.html. Accessed 1 November 2020.
- Rozanski, V. (2020). Coronavirus reignites hostilities between Georgia and Abkhazia. *AsiaNews*, 4 June. <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Coronavirus-reignites-hostilities-between-Georgia-and-Abkhazia-49758.html>. Accessed 12 October 2020.
- Russia, The Kremlin. (2020). Заявление Президента Азербайджанской Республики, Премьер-министра Республики Армения и Президента Российской Федерации [Statement by the president of the Republic of Azerbaijan, prime minister of the Republic of Armenia and president of the Russian Federation]. 10 November. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64384>. Accessed 10 December 2020.
- Taylor, W., Pifer, S., & Herbst, J. E. (2020). Opinion: The coronavirus crisis presents an opportunity to end war in Ukraine. *NPR*, 6 April. <https://www.npr.org/2020/04/06/827608458/opinion-the-coronavirus-crisis-presents-an-opportunity-to-end-war-in-ukraine?t=1609797081454>. Accessed 11 December 2020.
- Uskenskaya, A. (2020). “Мы не можем получить наши жалкие пенсии”. Приднестровье закрылось от Молдовы: только ли в Covid-19 дело? [‘We can’t receive our miserable pensions’. Transnistria closed from Moldova: Is it only about COVID-19?]. *BBC*, 27 July. <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-53473215>. Accessed 30 October 2020.
- US Mission to the OSCE. (2020). On illegal checkpoints in the Transnistrian region of Moldova during the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. 8 October. <https://osce.usmission.Gov/on-illegal-checkpoints-in-the-transnistrian-region-of-moldova-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-outbreak/>. Accessed 29 October 2020.

## Author biography



**Katsiaryna Lozka** is a Ph.D. candidate at the Centre for EU Studies at Ghent University and the United Nations University–CRIS (Bruges, Belgium). She is an alumna of the College of Europe in Bruges and Comenius University in Bratislava. Her research interests include conflict zones in the EU’s neighbourhood, the Eastern Partnership and EU–Russia relations.

# Toss a coin to your High Representative

European View  
2021, Vol. 20(1) 106–107  
© The Author(s) 2021  
DOI: 10.1177/17816858211009976  
[journals.sagepub.com/home/euv](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/euv)



**Álvaro de la Cruz**

Over a decade ago, another Spaniard, Javier Solana, held the position of head of European diplomacy which is currently occupied by Josep Borrell. He was famous for his independent approach to the EU's foreign and security policy. He was courageous and effective, a great diplomat and a former NATO secretary general. What often goes unmentioned is that initially there was barely a paragraph in the Amsterdam Treaty describing and delimiting his role. Moreover, for most of his mandate he only represented 15 member states, none of which was a former Communist republic that had been part of the USSR or within its sphere of influence.

Ten years, two high representatives and a Lisbon Treaty later, it is Borrell's turn to be trusted with the EU's top foreign policy job. It is one of the toughest jobs in the entire Union given the member states' different interests and priorities and the fact that unanimous decision-making continues to be the rule in EU foreign policy. Borrell must deal with countries around the world, close neighbour or remote, friend or foe. And to act at full capacity, he has to have unanimity among the 27 member states. He must do this as Europe is under unprecedented enemy pressure, while a virus is striking and immediately after the loss of one of our 'stronger' members, the UK.

Despite these adverse elements, Borrell fights the monsters menacing the EU as the popular Polish fictional character *The Witcher* does in Andrzej Sapkowski's novels. But he is ill-equipped and lacks support. Whether the issue concerns Russia, Cuba, Iran, Venezuela or China, the 'lords' of Europe are divided and often have conflicting interests and priorities. All of this makes our Witcher's fight against the monsters a challenging—if not impossible—one, and forces him to bear the direct criticism of some of these lords, and at best their ignorance. For the inhabitants of the 'Southern Valley', the werewolf

---

**Corresponding author:**

Á. de la Cruz, Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, 20 Rue du Commerce, 1<sup>st</sup> floor, B-1000 Brussels, Belgium.

Email: [ade@martenscentre.eu](mailto:ade@martenscentre.eu)



Creative Commons CC BY: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>) which permits any use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access pages (<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage>).

menacing the ‘Northern Rivers’ is not a daily preoccupation. The plague destroying the lands of the ‘East’ is not a concern for the ‘Kingdoms of the West’, or so their masters say.

Recently, the Witcher experienced an especially brutal encounter with the eastern werewolf on its home turf in Moscow, from which he came back somewhat wounded. But the Witcher keeps sharpening his sword, healing his wounds and returning to the fight as duty calls. It is more than probable that he will fail again, especially as we get used to failure and expectations fall lower and lower. We need to forget our prejudices about his ‘kind’, flaws and methods—they have proven unsatisfactory but, after all, the lords themselves created and agreed to them. Let us stand together with him and face the monsters who come to feast on European democracy and flesh.

Our duty, especially within the EU’s Brussels bubble, is to act as the loyal bard who will even garnish and embellish the stories about the Witcher, singing songs to the villagers about his great victories and his protection of the good people of the land, even if that is not always the case. The only way to unite our lords and kings is to unite the people, and boy, when they are united, the Witcher will vanquish every elf, devil and dragon. Until then, they will advance, multiply and thrive in every corner of Europe, growing in power while we debate the colours on our flags and wage internal battles for the control of a bunch of old castles.

So, whenever the high representative comes to your county, forest, village or harbour, toss him a coin and pour him some ale, oh Valley of Plenty!

### Author biography



*Álvaro de la Cruz is a communications and new media officer at the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies.*



# Europe and Biden: Towards a New Transatlantic Pact?

European View  
2021, Vol. 20(1) 108–109  
© The Author(s) 2021  
DOI: 10.1177/17816858211010610  
[journals.sagepub.com/home/euv](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/euv)



**Jolyon Howorth**

The transatlantic relationship has been subjected to a significant stress test under the presidency of Donald Trump. Across Europe, the initial reaction to the election of Joe Biden was almost universally positive. Yet analysts tend to agree that there can be no return to the status quo ante. The world as we knew it under the Obama administration has changed in very fundamental ways, notably with the rise of an assertive China. Moreover, the Trump presidency has exacerbated the sharp polarisation of political preferences within the US. Bipartisan foreign policy is a feature of the past. Europe cannot assume there will be policy continuity after the next presidential election in 2024. It is time to take stock of transatlantic values and interests—which are not always in harmony—and to attempt to forge a new type of partnership across the Atlantic, one more geared to the realities of an emerging multipolar world. Europe should not abandon its attempts to develop a greater measure of autonomy from—or non-dependence on—the US. And the US should not see such yearnings as threatening. There will be many issues on which Europe and a Biden administration will work in harmony. But there will also be policy areas where friction could well arise, most notably over trade, China, Russia and the future of NATO. It would be in the interests of neither the US nor the EU for the latter to revert to the type of followership that has characterised its relations with the US since the Cold War. Only by recognising the distinctiveness of US and European values and interests will it be possible for the two sides to move towards a more balanced partnership that will confer true strength on their relationship.

---

## Corresponding author:

Jolyon Howorth, Harvard Kennedy School, 79 John F. Kennedy St., Taubman Bldg 416, Cambridge, MA 02138, USA.

Email: [jolyon\\_howorth@hks.harvard.edu](mailto:jolyon_howorth@hks.harvard.edu)



Creative Commons CC BY: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>) which permits any use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access pages (<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage>).

### Author biography



#### Summary

The article's author has been selected for a special issue that will be published in the journal of the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies. The author is a senior research fellow at the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, Harvard University. The article's author has been selected for a special issue that will be published in the journal of the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies. The author is a senior research fellow at the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, Harvard University. The article's author has been selected for a special issue that will be published in the journal of the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies. The author is a senior research fellow at the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, Harvard University.

**Jolyon Howorth** is a Senior Research Associate at the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, a Research Fellow at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University; and the Jean Monnet Professor ad personam and Professor Emeritus of European Politics at the University of Bath. He has published extensively in the field of European security, defence policy, and transatlantic relations.



# The Potential Outcome of the Conference on the Future of Europe in a COVID-19 World: Strengthening European Democracy

European View  
2021, Vol. 20(1) 110–111  
© The Author(s) 2021  
DOI: 10.1177/17816858211009977  
[journals.sagepub.com/home/euv](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/euv)



**Olivier Le Saëc**

Initially planned for 2020, the launch of the Conference on the Future of Europe has been postponed indefinitely due to the pandemic. Scheduled to run for two years, this conference will bring together European institutions, civil society representatives, and citizens of all ages to debate on the future of Europe. Thus, this conference has the great merit of facing the issue of citizen participation, confirming the constant desire of strengthening European democracy. Similarly to the European Convention on the Future of Europe, this conference would also include citizen consultations, supported by a digital platform allowing online debates and contributions. Although it is difficult to predict the concrete outcome of this conference, major changes are not expected, but rather more reform proposals on the EU's architecture and its decision-making processes, which will lead to deeper European integration. However, before the conference can start, the three main EU institutions must still agree on its modalities and, importantly, its chairmanship. It clearly reveals that the main difficulties barring the road to the conference are not of a technical nature, but rather political. Nonetheless, launching the conference as soon as possible would be a tangible, major achievement, confirming that democracy is still fully functional in Europe, despite the COVID-19 pandemic. It would confirm the European Union as an advanced democracy, and probably the biggest democracy in the world.

---

## Corresponding author:

Olivier Le Saëc, Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, 20 Rue du Commerce, 1<sup>st</sup> floor, B-1000 Brussels.

Email: [ols@martenscentre.eu](mailto:ols@martenscentre.eu)



Creative Commons CC BY: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>) which permits any use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access pages (<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage>).

### Author biography



#### Summary

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has not yet passed, the impact of the crisis on the EU's political, economic, and social systems is already being felt. The conference will provide a platform for EU leaders, experts, and citizens to discuss the future of the continent. The conference will also provide a platform for EU leaders, experts, and citizens to discuss the future of the continent. The conference will also provide a platform for EU leaders, experts, and citizens to discuss the future of the continent.

Although it is difficult to predict the concrete outcome of the conference, it is clear that the conference will provide a platform for EU leaders, experts, and citizens to discuss the future of the continent. The conference will also provide a platform for EU leaders, experts, and citizens to discuss the future of the continent.

Nevertheless, the conference will provide a platform for EU leaders, experts, and citizens to discuss the future of the continent. The conference will also provide a platform for EU leaders, experts, and citizens to discuss the future of the continent.

Keywords: Europe, Conference, Future, COVID-19, Democracy

**Olivier Le Saëc, Ph.D.** is a Visiting Fellow at the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies. He is an expert on EU democratisation processes and on EU external policies. He received a PhD in Social Sciences from the University of Montpellier, researched and taught at the Lille Institute of Political Studies and the Universities of Reims and Montpellier. Beyond academia, Olivier Le Saëc worked as a political adviser for the EPP Group within the European Parliament and also for the Directorate for Relations with the Citizens of the European Parliament. Previously, Olivier also worked as an international expert for the implementation of EU programmes in Africa (Tunisia and Ethiopia) and for the West African Development Bank (BOAD) in Togo.

# The Strategic Compass: Charting a New Course for the EU's Security and Defence Policy

European View  
 2021, Vol. 20(1) 112  
 © The Author(s) 2021  
 DOI: 10.1177/17816858211009978  
 journals.sagepub.com/home/euv



**Niklas Nováky**

The EU has embarked on a process to develop a ‘Strategic Compass’ for its security and defence policy. This two-year process began in June 2020 and will conclude under the French EU Council Presidency in spring 2022. A German initiative, it is meant to narrow the gap between ambition and reality when it comes to the Union’s external action; facilitate the development of a shared strategic culture; and clarify the overall image of EU defence cooperation that Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the European Defence Fund (EDF), the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) and other post-2016 initiatives have created. Broadly speaking, the Strategic Compass seeks to boost the EU’s ability to navigate through international challenges. It is driven by the member states and the European External Action Service (EEAS), with the involvement of the Commission and the European Defence Agency (EDA). To be successful, the Strategic Compass process has to be as concrete as possible in outlining how the EU should handle even its most difficult challenges. A compass is only useful if it can tell the navigator where north is. Likewise, for the Strategic Compass to be successful, the EU needs to set a clearly defined strategic north.

## Author biography



**Niklas Nováky, Ph.D.** is a Research Officer at the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies. He focuses on foreign, security and defence policy. He is also the Assistant Editor-in-Chief of the *European View*, the Martens Centre’s biannual policy journal. He is author of the book *European Union Military Operations: A Collective Action Perspective* (Routledge 2018). Dr Nováky has also published peer-reviewed articles on different aspects of EU defence cooperation in some of the most respected academic journals in the field.

## Corresponding author:

Niklas Nováky, Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, 20 Rue du Commerce, 1<sup>st</sup> floor, B-1000 Brussels.  
 Email: [nn@martenscentre.eu](mailto:nn@martenscentre.eu)



Creative Commons CC BY: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>) which permits any use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access pages (<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage>).



# Retaking the Cities: A Plan for the Centre–Right

European View  
2021, Vol. 20(1) 113–114  
© The Author(s) 2021  
DOI: 10.1177/17816858211010517  
journals.sagepub.com/home/euv



**Konrad Niklewicz**

The social and economic role of cities, regardless of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, is set to remain crucial for global development. However, the importance of cities is not mirrored in the European centre–right political agenda. Over recent years, cities have become increasingly distant—in terms of their residents’ self-perception and voting patterns—from the rural parts of Western countries. In this context, cities are striving for more tangible powers, improved rights of self-governance and new development support tools, which would allow them to better address the challenges they face. The European People’s Party (EPP), the leading political family in the EU, should acknowledge the importance of cities and the fact that city-based electorates share particular political expectations. The recent string of elections in various European countries has shown that EPP-affiliated parties and candidates can only win in big cities when they adopt a more city-oriented political platform. The EPP cannot afford to lose urban voters; therefore, it should develop a ‘City Agenda’. Urban-related issues should be at the centre of the EPP’s political activity, as is the agricultural policy. This agenda, drawing on the experience of EPP-affiliated mayors and members of the Committee of the Regions, should identify the challenges cities face and come up with ways to address them. Among the most pressing are climate change–related themes such as public transportation and urban planning, but also the ongoing housing crisis and, more broadly, rising social inequality. This paper suggests that the EPP could promote a new ‘EU Cities Fund’, a city-tailored, directly accessible fund that would add financial heft to the EU’s existing urban policy.

---

**Corresponding author:**

Konrad Niklewicz, Jeżewskiego 5F/18, 02-796 Warszawa, Poland.

Email: [konrad.niklewicz@hotmail.com](mailto:konrad.niklewicz@hotmail.com)



Creative Commons CC BY: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>) which permits any use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access pages (<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage>).

### Author biography



**Konrad Niklewicz, Ph.D.**, is currently heading the City of Warsaw Marketing Department. Formerly director of the Civic Institute, he was a member of the European Commission’s High Level Expert Group on fake news. His research focuses on social affairs and communication. The author of many papers (including *Weeding Out Fake News: An Approach to Social Media Regulation*, Martens Centre, Brussels, 2017), he has served as undersecretary of state at the Ministry of Regional Development and as secretary to the Polish Prime Minister’s Advisory Council. He has also been a visiting lecturer at the University of Warsaw. Before joining the public sector, Konrad Niklewicz worked as an editor and the Brussels correspondent for *Gazeta Wyborcza*.