



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

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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.

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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.