



The Russian factor in EU security policy and transatlantic relations

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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

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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'¹ 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.

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