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# The EU's Relations With a Future Democratic Russia

A Strategy

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## Summary

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Since its unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, President Vladimir Putin's Russia has become the greatest threat to peace and stability in Europe. Even before launching the invasion in February 2022, Russia had become the source of many of Europe's security problems and challenges. Russia's behaviour is due to its autocratic government and the absence of political checks and balances on Putin. However, if Russia were a democracy, European security and the EU's relations with Moscow might look very different. This policy brief discusses what a democratic Russia would mean for Europe. It presents a strategy that the EU could follow in its relations with a democratic Russia—a strategy that includes both carrots and sticks. It is necessary to have such a strategy ready now so that the EU can show the Russian people, even during this time of war, that there is a chance to have a more normal life if Russia were to be transformed. That said, for any of this to happen, Putin's Russia must lose the war in Ukraine.

**Keywords** EU – Russia – Democracy – Strategy – Future relations – Reform



# Introduction

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At the time of writing, tensions between Europe and Russia have risen to levels not seen since the Cold War, due to Moscow's aggression against Ukraine. Before starting the war, the Kremlin had demanded that Europe and the US provide it with security guarantees that would have undermined the rights of militarily non-aligned European countries to decide their own foreign and security policy and to apply for NATO membership if they wished.<sup>1</sup> In response, Western leaders tried to engage in dialogue with the Kremlin to discuss Russia's 'security concerns' with President Vladimir Putin. Despite these efforts, Putin started an unprovoked war, which has destabilised Europe's security order and will leave it destabilised for years to come.

An analysis of why Russia has descended to playing the role of a brutal aggressor is therefore indispensable. Its behaviour and ideology offer evidence to suggest that the Kremlin is the new totalitarian regime on the European continent. As this regime is the originator of the war against Ukraine, we must gain a clear understanding of how Russia can free itself from this totalitarian type of state capture.

History teaches us that democracies usually do not go to war. On the one hand, this is due to the political checks and balances within democracies, which generally prevent them from acting erratically on the world stage. On the other, it is due to the unwillingness of rational voters to vote knowingly for politicians who would take their country to war with another democracy and therefore compromise the welfare-creating benefits that come from socio-economic interdependence between democracies. In other words, it is unlikely that a democratic Russia would threaten Ukraine with war and call into question the basic principles that have governed European security since the end of the Cold War.

This policy brief looks at what a democratic Russia would mean for the West and how the EU should conduct relations with it if a democratic Russia were to emerge. It argues that the development of a democratic Russia would be immensely positive for the EU, the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries and Russia itself. A democratic Russia could expect to receive new opportunities for cooperation with the EU, which would enhance the security and prosperity of

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<sup>1</sup> M. Seddon, H. Foy and A. Williams, 'Russia Publishes "Red Line" Security Demands for NATO and US', *The Financial Times*, 17 December 2021.



both Europeans and Russians. The EU and a democratic Russia could cooperate in security, trade and technology, climate change and energy, education and research, the rule of law and people-to-people contacts. Broad cooperation between the EU and a democratic Russia would also play a role in consolidating Russia's democratic reforms and protecting its democracy against possible authoritarian impulses.

To some, it may seem frivolous to discuss how the EU should cooperate with a future democratic Russia when the Kremlin is waging war against Ukraine and destroying the principles that have governed European security for decades. However, factoring in the increasing unpredictability of global politics, this conflagration may in fact facilitate the end of Putin's rule. If this were to happen, the EU and the West more broadly need to have strategies ready that they could use to engage with and support a democratic Russia. It is for this reason that developing a strategy on how the EU should cooperate with a democratic Russia is a worthy exercise. Also, a clear message from the West in the form of such a strategy that shows the Russian people how they could live a more normal life at home in Russia might encourage them to support Russia's transformation.

The rest of this brief is divided into five sections. The first section discusses how Putin's Russia has become the new 'sick man of Europe' and explains what has caused it to fall ill. The second outlines how Russia's sickness could be cured by reintroducing liberal democracy in the country and what a democratic Russia would mean for Europe and the world. The third analyses several factors that caused democracy to fail in Russia in the 2000s. The fourth outlines a strategy that the EU could follow in its relations with a future democratic Russia—a strategy that includes both carrots and sticks. The fifth and final section concludes the paper.

## The sick man of Europe

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In the nineteenth century, Tsar Nicholas I of Russia called the Ottoman Empire the 'sick man of Europe'. This label stuck with the Ottoman Empire until its dissolution in the 1920s. Today Russia is the sick man of Europe because it has become the primary source of many of the security and defence-related problems and challenges that Europe has to deal with.

Russia has always been part of Europe's historical processes. However, European methods often reach Russia after a delay. For instance, more than



a century later, in 1917, the Russian elite tried to replicate the 1789 French Revolution. This ended with the Bolshevik Revolution in October of the same year. Similarly, Soviet Russia was the last empire on the European continent to crumble, after 1990, while the other European empires collapsed in the decades that followed the Second World War. Post-imperial psychological and mental traumas accompany the collapse of empires and all the former European empires that underwent painful defeats and dismantled their imperial pasts have suffered from them. Russia was and still is suffering similar post-imperial-mentality pains. During the 1990s, Russia's young democracy under President Boris Yeltsin was unable to cope with all the changes brought about by the end of its empire; it succumbed to post-imperial nostalgia and ultimately was taken over by Putin's authoritarianism.

This post-imperial-restoration mentality, which developed in the Kremlin, is why Russia has become Europe's new sick man. Due to its prolonged focus on post-imperial restoration, Russia's economic and political capabilities have become weaker and weaker. Even the Kremlin itself has increasingly been forced to face the reality that its power is waning within Russia, and that its political influence is waning in Russia's neighbourhood. This is why we have seen nervous behaviour from the Kremlin lately, particularly with regard to its neighbourhood.

There are several reasons for this nervous behaviour:

- *The end of 'authoritarian loyalty'.* Recent events in Belarus and Kazakhstan, and trends in Russia itself have shown that, after 20–25 years, people's loyalty to authoritarian regimes is ending. This loyalty could potentially be temporarily prolonged with the help of the army or security forces, but this would not change the growing trend of popular discontent. The main reason for this discontent is that the post-Soviet authoritarian regimes can no longer guarantee a steady improvement in people's quality of life. The estimation that only 38% of Russian voters voted in the 2021 State Duma elections suggests that people's dissatisfaction is eating away at all post-Soviet authoritarian regimes.<sup>2</sup>
- *The post-imperial fringes are receding.* People have been protesting against authoritarian governments in other Eurasian countries too. In recent years popular revolts, uprisings and protests have erupted

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<sup>2</sup> A. Lohsen and H. A. Conley, 'Where Does Russian Discontent Go from Here? Russia's 2021 Election Considered', CSIS, 23 September 2021.



in neighbouring Armenia (2018), Belarus and Kyrgyzstan (2020), and Kazakhstan (2022). These protest movements illustrate the systemic nature of the discontent among the populations of Eurasian autocracies, which worries the Kremlin. Russia's 2008 war with Georgia and its ongoing conflict with Ukraine since 2014 have created anti-Kremlin and pro-Western majorities in these countries. In Moldova, the pro-Kremlin President Igor Dodon has been replaced by the pro-Western Maia Sandu. Azerbaijan is moving towards Turkey; Armenia also promises to reconcile with Turkey. China and Turkey are asserting themselves in Central Asia, and even the withdrawal the troops of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization from Kazakhstan quickly after the deadly anti-government protests in Almaty in January 2022 can be explained by Chinese and Turkish pressure on the Kremlin. Only Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenko seeks comfort and support from Putin. However, Putin's continued support for Lukashenko makes Putin toxic in the eyes of the Belarusians and undermines the popularity of Belarus's further rapprochement with Russia.

- *The implementation of the European Green Deal.* Russia's economic and geopolitical influence is based on the EU's energy dependency. In 2021, the EU imported almost 40% of its natural gas from Russia.<sup>3</sup> However, the EU's plans to combat climate change and implement the European Green Deal, aimed at reducing the consumption of hydrocarbon products, will, in the long term, lead to a change in the structure of Russia's economy, which is based on the extraction and export of natural resources. Even before the war, the European Commission was forecasting that by 2035 the EU would be consuming around 70% less imported gas. The Kremlin therefore considers the European Green Deal the biggest security threat to the regime as it poses a danger not only to Russia's current economic structure but also to its authoritarian power structure.

It is a Putin paradox that his policies, have caused outcomes that are the opposite of what he was and is trying to achieve. Since the outbreak of war, the EU has decided to speed up the implementation of the Green Deal and become independent from Russia's energy supplies. Other examples of Putin's actions having opposite outcomes are the decisions of Finland and Sweden to apply for NATO membership and the forging ahead with Ukraine's integration into the EU.

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<sup>3</sup> Eurostat, 'EU Imports of Energy Products – Recent Developments', April 2022.



# Taking the medicine

Authoritarianism and post-imperial nostalgia can no longer guarantee the loyalty of Russian citizens and cannot heal Putin's Russia. The only lasting remedy that could act as a cure is democracy. This is the goal that the West must focus on.

Unfortunately, with its war against Ukraine and due to Putin's zero-sum understanding of security, the Kremlin has also made it clear that any serious dialogue with Russia on strengthening security on the European continent is impossible. In addition, the Kremlin has demonstrated that authoritarian Russia is the biggest threat to peace and security in Europe. Therefore, the main objective of the West in the war is to ensure that the Kremlin is no longer able and no longer willing to wage such wars in Ukraine or anywhere else within Europe.

There is only one way to achieve this goal—the eventual transformation of Russia into a democracy. Only a democratic Russia will no longer be a threat to Ukraine or the European continent. Any other option would only temporarily stave off these threats.

'Democracy in Russia' may seem a distant fantasy. Some may quote the various opinion polls from Russia which show that most Russians support Putin and his war against Ukraine.<sup>4</sup> However, the results of such opinion polls should not be surprising given the Kremlin's propaganda within Russia. In addition, many Russians may be afraid of speaking out publicly against the war as this has been criminalised—Russians expressing opposition to the war (or, as Russia puts it, spreading 'fake' information about the military) face prison sentences of up to 15 years.<sup>5</sup> However, the Russian people are not incapable of living in a democracy.

It is worth remembering that before the Second World War, most of people in Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan supported Hitler's plans to expand eastwards. They rejoiced at the occupation of Paris, they supported Japan's imperial expansion into the Pacific and China, and they cheered the 'success' of the Japanese army at Pearl Harbour. However, following the costly defeat of both Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan in the Second World War, today German and Japanese citizens are happy that their countries are resilient and stable democracies. And they are not unhappy that after the war the democratic world forced and helped them to

<sup>4</sup> *Statista*, 'Do You Approve of the Activities of Vladimir Putin as the President (Prime Minister) of Russia?', June 2022.

<sup>5</sup> *Reuters*, 'Russia Fights Back in Information War With Jail Warning', 4 March 2022.



become democracies as the only way to ensure that Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan could not be recreated and to eliminate the potential threat of another war.

Similarly, today's West must realise that the only path to security and stability in Europe is democracy in Russia. Any dialogue with Putin or his appointed successor, who might be an equally, if not more brutal dictator, will not improve security on the European continent. On the contrary, such dialogues will only encourage a dictator to be more aggressive. The only path to democracy in Russia is Russia's defeat in its war against Ukraine.

## How will democracy come to Russia?

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It is difficult to speculate about when, how and in what way Putin's rule will end, but it is likely to come as the result of a 'black swan' event that will happen quickly and unexpectedly. We can presume that losing the war in Ukraine and painful sanctions on the Russian economy will eventually bring about this event. We also do not know whether what (or who) follows Putin will be more democratic and cooperative than Putin himself. However, on both questions, we can work with probabilities.

The probability is that the end of Putin's rule will not be voluntary. Predictions about him withdrawing to a ceremonial post while handing power to younger Putin-era technocrats have been made often (most frequently in 2018) and have never materialised for a simple reason: it could not be guaranteed that he would not be imprisoned (or worse) with anybody else in charge. This means that his departure is likely to be accompanied by a high degree of instability.

This expected instability brings us to the second question: which system of governance will follow the Putin era? It is important to emphasise that we are not talking about the immediate aftermath of his departure (which may be unstable and violent) but the longer-term shape of Russia as a polity. There is no guarantee that this will be a democracy. Claiming that it will be one makes it easier for the sceptics of a democratic Russia to dismiss the scenario. Equally, however, it is wrong to assume that Russians are incapable of building a democratic state and society. Russia in the 1990s was, arguably, a democracy and even had rudimentary elements of civil society. Moreover, it can be assumed that when Putin leaves the Kremlin, Russia will be in terrible shape because of the unsustainable policies he has enacted and



strengthened over the past two decades: there is systemic corruption, economic stagnation, a lack of innovation, an addiction to the export of fossil resources, and the internal and external use of force and military power, all of which has culminated in the all-out war on Ukraine since February 2022. All of this means that any new regime has an incentive to differ from its predecessor, at least in several vital aspects. And that difference may be precisely in Russia's internal systemic set-up and relationship with the rest of the world.

The transition to democracy in Russia will be difficult and unstable. The state will have to re-establish its monopoly on the use of force. A new constitution will have to be worked out, and genuinely free and fair elections under the auspices of international observers will need to be held after stabilisation. But there is no reason to assume that Russians have only two options: dictatorship or chaos. The West should therefore prepare for the scenario of Russia becoming a democracy. Sticking to the narrative that 'Russia will never be democratic, and we have to accept this' increases the risk of making new mistakes should the democratisation of Russia occur.

In the West, we also often forget that when we look at the development of democracy in a given country, it is essential to focus not only on the transformational change itself—that is, the morning after the revolutionary night when democrats instead of authoritarians arrive in the offices of power—but on the longer-term question of how to stabilise a young democracy. This is essential to ensure that it does not fall back onto a reliance on voter nostalgia, populism or angry nationalism, which can very quickly open the gates for a new wave of authoritarianism.

As the examples of the late 1990s and 2000s show, lonely, isolated young democracies in the post-Soviet space, left without the proper care and tutoring of the EU, can fail quickly. They are swept up in waves of disillusionment, nostalgia, radicalism, nationalism and populism, and collapse, opening the gates to authoritarian rule. After the democratic revolutions of the 1990s, only those Central European and Baltic states to which the EU offered integration prospects from the very beginning of the 1990s were able to survive and stabilise their democracies.

Only the EU can stabilise the young democracies on the European continent. The EU's 'soft power' is in its partnerships with its neighbours to strengthen their democracies and rule of law, and its economic cooperation with its neighbours, including their integration into the single market. For the EU's neighbours these relationships result in economic growth; the adoption of European regulations and the *acquis Communautaire*; and the establishment of European traditions surrounding political parties, parliamentarism and time-tested political ideologies. All of this adds up to what could be called an 'integration package'. This package,





offered by the EU to the young Central European and Baltic states in 1993, alongside the Copenhagen Criteria, has helped these countries stabilise their democratic paths, reform, integrate with the EU and, since 2004, become members of the Union.

The EU offered Association Agreements to Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia in 2013, allowing these countries to increasingly consolidate their development along the lines of European integration. And while these countries' political elites are still testing the limits of democratic functioning, with the Kremlin making significant efforts to hinder their progress and consolidation of success, without the partnership of the EU, progress in these states would be impossible. However, the EU's partnerships with these countries could have been more ambitious if Brussels and some major EU capitals had not established a habit of first looking to the Kremlin to see if a more ambitious EU partnership with Ukraine or the other countries of the EaP might upset the Kremlin—a kind of 'Russia first' policy that was more implicit than explicit. This has been a major mistake because the creation of a resilient and democratic Ukraine would have been a step towards a democratic Russia. Such a Ukraine would have been a powerful symbol and a source of inspiration to Russian citizens, demonstrating to them—through its existence—that Russia itself could have also chosen a different path in its political development. The hesitation of the West to be more ambitious in its policy towards Ukraine's integration led the Kremlin to develop the wrong perception: that Ukraine had been abandoned by the West, and that the West would not defend Ukraine against a Russian military invasion. It was this perception that encouraged Putin to start the war.

The lessons from the Ukraine war crisis will push the EU to show more geopolitical leadership and to take strategic responsibility for stability, peace and the integration of its neighbourhood in the Western Balkans, Ukraine and the other EaP countries. A more ambitious integration plan for these countries will be established.

However, we must be realistic: the EU would hardly offer the prospect of EU membership to a democratic Russia. Therefore, it is essential to start discussing what concrete, pragmatic relations the EU could offer to such a state. We need to define this now because once things start moving in Moscow they will probably move fast. This means that there may not be time for a sustained effort to lay the intellectual groundwork for the EU's relations with a democratic Russia if it is necessary to start from scratch. This is also why, in September 2021, the European Parliament adopted a report on the direction of EU–Russia relations that asked the Council of the EU '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'.<sup>6</sup> When Russia transitions to democracy, the joint plans drawn up by the EU and a democratic Russia to stabilise this democracy need to be put into practice immediately.

## What went wrong last time?

Between 1990 and 2000, joint plans between the EU and Russia to help stabilise Russia's democracy did not exist. This resulted in the chaotic Yeltsin democracy of the 1990s being replaced by Putin's authoritarian rule of the 2000s. This is why joint plans between the EU and a future democratic Russia are needed today, to allow Russian citizens to realise how many opportunities to live a more normal life they are missing out on because the authoritarian rule and lack of democracy in Russia have separated it from the Western world and especially from the EU.

That being said, the authors do not agree with the sentiment that the authoritarian restoration in Russia in the 2000s happened because of mistakes made by the West in the 1990s. There were not that many mistakes. The West in general and Europe in particular were helpful during the Russian transition, while also dealing with their own challenges (e.g. German reunification and assisting Central and Eastern European countries to reform). The restoration of authoritarianism in Russia after Putin came to power was predominantly due to Russia's own mistakes, not somebody else's.

However, it is essential to learn lessons from that period to minimise the probability of future authoritarian restorations in Russia. First, from 1991 to 2004, the Russian elites felt that the doors of the free world were not truly open to them. This later developed into a standoff with the West and increasing post-imperial resentment. It was not, however, all the West's fault, and through his propaganda Putin exploited some issues to boost the anti-Western and anti-European narrative. However, the mistakes outlined below did have negative impacts.

The EU was slow to open its markets to Russia. Russia's WTO accession negotiations only ended with a deal in 2010, and were only formalised in 2011. By then, Putin and his cronies had already consolidated control over the Russian economy, and its subsequent WTO accession in 2012 was no longer helpful to sustaining a

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<sup>6</sup> European Parliament, *Direction of EU–Russia Political Relations*, A9-0259/2021, 16 September 2021.



free-market democracy. The EU–Russia Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, signed in 1994 and effective from 1997, contained no free-trade provisions.

In terms of trade and WTO accession negotiations, Europeans demonstrated considerable hubris. They made excessive demands, making it look like the EU wanted to exploit the West’s victory in the Cold War for economic gain. Russia went through tough negotiations with the Europeans on WTO accession; this had considerably affected the confidence of the Russian elites and was frequently discussed in the Russian media, helping Putin to promote anti-Western and anti-EU sentiment in the early 2000s.

The relatively fast track to EU and NATO accession provided to Central and East European countries contrasted with no clear path for Russia’s European integration. In the early 2000s, Russia’s possible accession to the EU and NATO was still a matter of high-level public debate. The fact that its neighbours had relatively easily acceded to the EU and that there was no sufficient ‘special plan’ in place for Russian European integration (even without formally joining the EU and NATO) helped Putin to build anti-European sentiment, portraying the European integration of the former Communist states as building new dividing lines, and as something that was being done against Russia. The EU’s bureaucratic ‘common spaces’ approach did not address this issue.

Delays to visa regime liberalisation for Russians also contributed to Putin’s anti-European narrative; visa-free travel for Russians would not have done much harm to Europe but would have given it influence over future Russian policies. If a visa-free travel regime had existed between the EU and Russia since the 1990s, losing it would have hurt Putin’s position following Russia’s subsequent aggressive policies at home and abroad.

Probably the most critical mistake made by the EU and the West more broadly was that the restoration of Russian authoritarianism was not detected early on, and that the EU did not lay out the political crossroads clearly for Russia, that is, offering the choice of remaining democratic, integrating and succeeding, or backsliding into authoritarianism, resulting in isolation and disarray. European politicians continued to deal with Russia as if it were a democratic country, perhaps with some irregularities. Putin’s autocratic trend was not adequately punished. Ironically, as mentioned above, the EU only agreed to Russia’s WTO accession after complete authoritarian consolidation in Russia had already happened—essentially rewarding Putin, rather than the democratic Russia of the 1990s, with market access.



# Towards an EU strategy

The EU's strategy for cooperation with a democratic Russia should be to increase mutual security, prosperity and interdependence, and show ordinary Russians that Russia would be better off as a democracy than it could ever be as an autocracy. This would help fight the Kremlin's narrative that bringing democracy back to Russia would cause 1990s-style economic chaos, personal hardship and national humiliation. If the Russian public could see that a democratic Russia would bring income growth, security, and better education and healthcare, it would be more supportive of change. For this reason, Putin considers successful neighbouring democracies with functioning market economies and the rule of law as a danger to his power because they could prove to Russians that democracy is also possible in Russia. Therefore, the EU's more ambitious policy for the European integration of Ukraine and other neighbouring countries would also act as an incentive for Russia's transformation.

The EU's cooperation with a democratic Russia should be based on four conditions. First, there needs to be evidence that basic democratic standards are being established in Russia—that is, rudimentary public accountability, transparency, checks and balances between the different branches of government, and respect for human rights. Second, a democratic Russia would have to commit to respecting the rules-based international order. This means that a democratic Russia would have to end the Putin regime's aggression (hybrid and conventional) against Russia's neighbours, come to terms with their independence and sovereignty, and abandon the quest for a sphere of influence. Third, a democratic Russia would also have to commit to ending its hybrid interference in Western societies through disinformation campaigns. Fourth and finally, Russia would have to come to terms with its invasion of Ukraine, agreeing to pay damages and extraditing war criminals to international tribunals.

The danger is that not all criteria will be fulfilled simultaneously. To maintain a cohesive stance that combines 'carrots and sticks' at that moment will therefore be another tough test for European and transatlantic unity.

What would be problematic would be a situation in which Russia acquires elements of democracy and stops attacking the West but maintains its aggressive, or at least hegemonial, stance vis-à-vis some of its neighbours. In the long run, this is unlikely, but it might create a headache for a short time. Russia under Yeltsin was not free from such tendencies. In such a situation, a careful but explicit



conditionality should be enacted by Russia's democratic partners to incentivise it to let go of the culturally ingrained idea of empire. In fact, there should be a reversal of the flow of assistance in Russia's relations with its neighbours: countries such as Ukraine should actively participate in helping to build Russian democracy, based on their own experiences, and thereby remove the remnants of the lopsided relationship empire implies.

Finally, acknowledging Russia's responsibility for the war with Ukraine and unequivocally trying to make amends by contributing to the rebuilding of the country and cooperating with the prosecution of war crimes would ideally go hand in hand with the other conditions. But there is no guarantee that this would happen at the same time. Nevertheless, it should be considered essential for any substantial improvement in relations between the EU and a democratic Russia.

The challenge for a future democratic Russia and its supporters will be to win over the hearts and minds of Russian citizens to the idea that democracy is better than empire. Success in this regard will be connected to material aspects such as prosperity (or lack thereof). But there also needs to be a coordinated intellectual effort to create a cultural blueprint for a democratic Russia. In short, Russia needs to reinvent itself as a society. This is not mission impossible. Not only did Germany and Japan do something similar after 1945, but so did Britain under Margaret Thatcher after 1979, Chile after the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet and Spain after the dictatorship of Francisco Franco—all of these countries redefined themselves and their role on the world stage.



## Foreign, security and defence policy

A democratic Russia would have to define its relations with its neighbours. The EU itself has experienced how the painful problems of neighbourly relations can be overcome: the coal and steel industries in Europe were brought together so that there would no longer be any temptation for Germany or France to try to grab ownership of the minerals and industries of the Ruhr or Saar. In the long term, relations between a democratic Russia and Ukraine should be the same as the current relations between Germany and France or Germany and Belgium.

It will also be imperative for the EU to coordinate closely with its allies: the US and other NATO allies, first and foremost, but also democratic partners around the globe. Ideally, the US and the EU would form the core of a global alliance to support a democratic Russia. A democratic Russia would be a significant achievement, and its pursuit demands a global effort. The EU and the US could also offer to re-admit a democratic Russia to the G8 (now G7), from which it was expelled following its aggression against Ukraine in 2014.

The EU could also cooperate with a democratic Russia in security and defence. Such cooperation could increase the trust and confidence between both parties. A democratic Russia could, for example, be invited to contribute to the EU's civilian missions and military operations as a third country. There is already a precedent for this: in 2008–9, Russia contributed helicopters to EUFOR Tchad/RCA, an EU military crisis-management operation on the territories of Chad and the Central African Republic. A democratic Russia could also negotiate an administrative arrangement with the European Defence Agency, facilitating its participation in agency-run projects and EU security and defence initiatives such as Permanent Structured Cooperation.

## EU association

The EU has significant soft power that enables it to help its neighbours stabilise their democracies, restore or establish the rule of law, modernise economically, and prevent disillusionment and populism from destroying them. The EU achieves this by persuading neighbouring countries to adopt the EU's legal norms, rules and standards and thus open the door to the EU's vast and prosperous single market, which guarantees the growth of their economies. Financial support for modernisation and integration is also available.



One might think that the EU could offer a democratic Russia the same path it offered the Central and Eastern European countries after the Cold War, that is, rapprochement and integration with the EU. However, Russia, in terms of its size and the scale of its problems, is not the kind of country to which the EU could apply the same instruments of rapprochement or integration that it has used or is applying to Lithuania or Montenegro, or even to Poland and Ukraine.

The EU's cooperation with a democratic Russia should be based on the 'all but institutions' idea that Russia would eventually become a European Free Trade Association member and join the Schengen area, along the way harmonising laws, standards and regulations, and thereby increasing the flows of people, capital, goods and services between Russia and the EU. The EU could also offer to admit a democratic Russia into its EaP programme if Russia was interested in participating in it. This would facilitate the access of a democratic Russia to various kinds of EU assistance and capacity-building programmes, which would help to consolidate democracy in the country.

## Trade and technology

The lack of free-trade agreements (FTAs) with the developed world was an obstacle to diversifying the Russian economy and developing the non-oil industries in the 1990s and 2000s. Such FTAs would have helped to boost Russia's non-oil economy; instead, their absence contributed to preserving the oil-dependent economic structure, which paved the way for the oligarchic and later authoritarian regimes. A democratic Russia would need to confront this problem by launching reforms to diversify the economy's structure away from oil and gas dependence. Access to the European market would be crucial in this respect.

The EU has never offered Russia a true FTA, which has helped to create a feeling among the Russian elite that Russia is considered a 'second-class partner' compared to other post-Communist states. Opening up markets and concluding FTAs can be painful for politicians in any democratic country, which is why FTAs are often met with public resistance. But if the question is, what should Europe sacrifice to give Russia a democratic chance, the answer is probably an FTA.

An EU–Russia FTA would have several advantages. First, the Russian economy would enjoy a boost under its new democratic government, solidifying the popularity of democracy and European integration and helping to prevent potential new authoritarian restorations. Second, Europe would improve its image



among Russians with this new open-door policy, which would be an improvement on its image in the 1990s and 2000s. Third, Russia would be bound to its human rights commitments through clauses in the FTA (see below), meaning the loss of significant market access should breaches occur.

It is important to note that FTAs with Russia should contain human rights clauses, meaning that if Russia failed to follow through on its human rights commitments, the FTA could be suspended or terminated. This would serve as leverage in creating a free-trade architecture with Russia, as Russian interests would only be served if the country remained democratic, and potential future authoritarian governments would not be able to enjoy its benefits.

## Visa liberalisation

A visa-free travel regime between the EU and a democratic Russia would benefit democratic Russia and its people. It would also provide the EU with a stick that it could use if democratic developments in Russia backslid, that is, the Union could threaten to abandon the visa-free travel regime as a punishment if Russia did not stay on the path of democracy at home and of non-aggression abroad.

## Climate change and energy

A changed relationship in energy would need to develop between a democratic Russia and the EU as a result of the implementation of the Green Deal strategy to combat climate change. The Kremlin has so far not paid much attention to the fight against climate change, has not fulfilled its commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and has not undertaken major structural transformations to its economy. Even without the sanctions imposed for its war against Ukraine, Russia would have faced enormous challenges when the EU implemented its Green Deal commitments to reduce gas imports by 60%–70% by 2035 and to impose a pollution levy on unclean imports in the form of the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism.<sup>7</sup> The imposition of sanctions has brought forward the implementation of these reductions. This means that Moscow will inevitably receive less and less revenue from its hydrocarbon exports. In a democratic Russia this could have dramatic consequences for the public finances and the welfare of its people, which

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<sup>7</sup> European Commission, 'Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism: Questions and Answers', 14 July 2021.





could push them to support populist politicians who might call for Russia to again distance itself from democracy. Therefore, the EU and a democratic Russia would need to find ways to mitigate any negative economic implications that the Green Deal might have within Russia.

As part of its climate change–related cooperation with a democratic Russia, the EU will therefore have to help Russia modernise its economy, which currently relies on revenue from hydrocarbon exports. This will be a challenging task for Russia because of its specific characteristics. Therefore, clear agreements and guidelines are already needed on what an EU–Russia agreement on economic modernisation might look like and what resources could be used to provide such support.

Overall, the partnership between the EU and a democratic Russia in the energy field should eventually become similar to that which currently exists between the EU and Norway. Such a partnership would not pose any geopolitical problems and would not create any geopolitical dependencies of the kind currently seen, where authoritarian Russia supplies Germany with almost 50% of its gas.

## The rule of law and justice

One of the most difficult challenges for a democratic Russia will be restoring the rule of law and constitutionalism. The EU should not rely only on human rights and conditionality clauses in trade agreements and its engagement with Russia in general, although these would also play a role. It will also need to focus on supporting an open Russian civil society, boosting people-to-people contacts between Russia and Europe, increasing cultural and educational exchanges, and so on. It will ultimately be up to Russian society to ensure that any democratic reforms that the country might undertake are protected against the worst authoritarian impulses by a robust constitution. This requires, first and foremost, a culture of democracy and checks and balances to emerge in Russia and be embraced by the entire Russian society.

Restoring the principles of the rule of law and constitutionalism will require Russia to prepare and adopt a new constitution. It will also require the involvement of many lawyers and other specialists in the field of public administration who are not tainted by the crimes of the current regime. A democratic Russia will first need to select from the current bureaucracy those experts in law and public administration that can continue with their work because they have not been involved in the implementation of the crimes of Putin’s regime and yet are also



sufficiently qualified. This will require a democratic Russia to follow the experience of the South African Justice and Reconciliation Commissions. The EU also has a great deal of experience in this area, both positive and negative. How these experiences could be brought to bear and how the EU could assist in this area needs to be discussed. It is equally essential for the EU and the representatives of Russia's democratic community to discuss how the EU can most effectively help train young, qualified professionals who can immediately take up positions of responsibility after the democratic transition.

The EU's cooperation with a democratic Russia should also include conditions which would make the Union's commitments to the country contingent upon progress in democratisation and the pursuit of non-aggressive foreign policies. Conditionality should be used for all cooperation mechanisms, especially for grants, concessional lending and blended instruments. All projects that the EU might undertake with a democratic Russia should meet the EU's environmental, social and governance standards and include procedures assuring transparency, accountability and zero tolerance for corruption.

Furthermore, after the transition to democracy, the truth will emerge about many of the known and, perhaps, currently unknown crimes of the Putin regime, both within and outside Russia's borders, whether in the form of human rights violations, the seizure of public or private property, the poisoning of opponents or the waging of wars. All will have to be documented and legally assessed. It is likely that international legal mechanisms, including international tribunals, will be sought to investigate such crimes. Experts from the EU and the Russian democratic community must discuss how global justice can be most effectively meted out.

## Infrastructure

In its initial cooperation with a democratic Russia, the EU should prioritise projects that will raise the quality of life of ordinary Russians to show them the socio-economic benefits of being a democracy. Thus the area of infrastructure is also important for developing cooperative projects between the EU and a democratic Russia. These projects could, among other things, focus on building, renovating and retrofitting various types of infrastructure in Russia, especially in poor and disadvantaged regions. This might involve schools, hospitals, roads, police stations and other communal utilities. Such infrastructure projects would promote social cohesion and people's well-being in Russia.



The EU should also explain clearly why it is interested in cooperating with a democratic Russia on various infrastructure projects and why the Union should take credit for the resources that it invests in a democratic Russia. If the EU were to help build a solar or a wind farm in a small Russian town, for example, the people living in that town should be made aware that they owe their better air quality to the EU.

## Education and research

Russia has always had great potential to produce talented people, scientists and discoverers. This potential has not always been given sufficient space to develop, especially during periods of authoritarian government. A democratic Russia would need to look for opportunities to use the EU's support programmes to allow this talent to develop to its full potential.

It is essential to draw attention to the fact that, since last spring, the Kremlin has begun to implement new laws that have separated the Russian higher education space from that of the EU. As a result, it has become more difficult for Russian students and academics to study or work in European universities, and more challenging to invite Western academics to teach in Russian universities. This could impact the future study of Russian law and the humanities, which are based on European values. In turn, eventually, this may become a challenge for democratic Russia when it seeks to recruit young people with a European or global education, especially in the humanities, into the civil service, because there simply will not be any. That is why the EU must take the initiative and, in consultation with experts from the Russian democratic community, look at ways in which the EU's university programmes could fill these gaps.

Furthermore, while in the short term, a democratic Russia would likely have to rely on outside experts to provide advice on structural reforms in Russia, in the long run, democratic reforms should be designed and implemented by Russians. Therefore, from the very start, the EU should invest in building the capacity of a democratic Russia. This could include opening European universities to Russian students and scholars (e.g. through Erasmus and special scholarships), funding partnerships between European and Russian universities and think tanks, or supporting the internships of Russian public- and private-sector professionals in European institutions and companies.



# EU institutional capacity to implement this strategy

Democracy in Russia is not only essential for Russia but important for the entire European continent. Hence the EU needs the institutional capacity to develop and implement a strategy for future relations with a democratic Russia. Keeping in mind that most pro-democracy opposition leaders have been forced to leave Russia and are now establishing themselves within the EU, implementing such a strategy will demand special institutional arrangements that are different from the traditional EU diplomatic representation channels.

With this institutional challenge in mind, the European Parliament, in its resolution of 7 April 2022, proposed two new institutional arrangements: (1) appointing an EU special envoy for a democratic Russia who would be ‘responsible for building and developing relations with a democratic Russia, in particular with democracy defenders in exile and those who have remained in Russia and want the country to return to the path of democracy’; and (2) establishing and supporting a Democratic Russia Hub to help ‘coordinate a continuous dialogue of EU institutions with the democratic Russian community to develop, together with the civil society of Russia, an EU strategy for a future democratic Russia to improve the integration of new emigrants from Russia through educational programmes, and to organise annual EU summits with the democratic Russia community in exile’.<sup>8</sup>

## Conclusion

If the ongoing war in Ukraine ends in a Russian military defeat, a democratic Russia will become a possibility. The success of a future democratic Russia and its ability to stabilise and create prosperity for the Russian people is not only in the interest of the Russian democratic community but is also one of the EU’s fundamental interests. The establishment of a democratic Russia on the eastern side of the European continent would change the security situation in Europe, and this is one of the EU’s primary concerns. Therefore, the EU must have a strategy ready to help the Russian people to achieve the democratic transformation of

<sup>8</sup> European Parliament, ‘Increasing Repression in Russia, Including the Case of Alexey Navalny’, 2022/2622(RSP), 7 April 2022.



their country. It is equally essential for the EU to have a strategy ready for helping democratic Russia to stabilise its democracy and become a resilient European state.

The swift creation of a genuine common market, investment and travel space between the EU and a newly democratic Russia would greatly help to achieve successful reforms in Russia and create checks against the possible future resurgence of authoritarianism and neo-imperialism. Moreover, if such a package was offered by the EU now—in return for Russia taking actual steps towards democratisation—it would create a vast public relations advantage for Europe against Putin and eliminate the argument from the Kremlin that the expansions of the EU and NATO are acts against Russia that aim to draw new dividing lines. It would also be a good idea if the Russian opposition could negotiate some preliminary parameters for future free trade, investment and travel agreements with the EU, which could then be publicly announced.

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## Credits

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