

Why Europe still lacks a Russia policy



The European Union's relations with Russia have failed to progress beyond the rhetoric of good intentions, writes **Bronislaw Geremek**, the former Foreign Minister of Poland who is now a member of the European Parliament. He explains how and why EU policymakers should go back to the drawing board

Russia and Europe have been pondering each other's nature for centuries. Europe tended to see Tsarist Russia, like Stalinist Russia, as despotism incarnate. It was a view shaped by history, tradition and religion. Russia has long seen much of Europe as territory for political or even imperial expansion. Both sides thus have preconceived ideas and stereotypes, and indulge in bouts of nostalgia, pain and hope. History warns us that misunderstandings and contradictions between Russia and Europe are inevitable.

One has to have a sense of humour when assessing the current state of EU-Russia relations. Russia's fascination with modernity has made the United States, not Europe, the exemplar; America is seen by Russians as the model of economic and technological success, while Europe is seen as little more than America's poor relation. Europe is the only territory over which Russia still entertains ideas of exercising a superpower role; Russia's submissive attitude to whoever is master in the White

House seems to be balanced by haughty and sometimes arrogant behaviour towards the European Union.

For its part, the EU has shown itself incapable of articulating a coherent policy towards Russia. The Partnership and Cooperation Agreement that came into force eight years ago and the St. Petersburg summit Declaration just over two years ago in May 2003 dealt with "four common spaces" but did not venture further than the rhetoric of good intentions.

The European institutions in Brussels lack the sort of facilities for observation and analysis – in-house think tanks – that could help the EU to formulate an action strategy for Russia. For proof of this one has but to look at some of the strategy documents published over the last few years. An honourable exception has been Cecilia Malmström's report which was approved by the European Parliament in June. Her report reflected a growing awareness that it is high time the EU redefined its policies in relation to Russia.

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Relations between Russia and the EU are both economically and politically crucial. Europe profits from Russian oil and natural gas, and is also extremely interested in the Russian marketplace. The EU is Russia's largest economic partner with more than half of Russia's exports bought by European customers, while 60% of foreign investment in Russia is from Europe. In political terms, the EU and Russia have a shared concern for peace and stability on the European continent.

Yet although the economic interests of Russia and the EU are fast converging, in political terms their interests are now widely divergent. In particular, there are security issues. The war in Chechnya has dramatically increased the threat of terrorism, even though the Russian government still does not appear to envisage a political solution to the conflict. But for Russia the uncomfortable truth must be that all the conflicts that have flared since the dissolution of the Soviet Union have been lost causes; the Georgian government is in confrontation with Abkhazia and Ossetia; Nagorny Karabakh is the subject of litigation between Azerbaijan and Armenia; in Transnistria the remains of the 14th Soviet Army founded a regime that proclaims the separation of this territory from Moldavia. One may wonder what sustains these conflicts internally, and whether they are being used as instruments of an imperial policy. In any case, the European Union cannot ignore these conflicts or Russia's responsibility for them. And the EU should not countenance any policies that consider ex-USSR territory as Russia's natural, indeed imperial, sphere of influence. Georgia's

Rose Revolution and the Orange Revolution in the Ukraine are not to be forgotten.

There is also the problem of democracy in Russia itself. Ever since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia – which had never experienced democracy at any point in its history – seems to have linked economic modernisation to the introduction of democracy. This was evident during Boris Yeltsin's chaotic rule, and in Vladimir Putin's early declarations, when he announced his famous formula of "the dictatorship of the law". But the reality of recent years has been that the law is being ridiculed, trials and convictions are driven by political reasons, the dominant force is the Exception of the State rather than the Rule of Law, and we have witnessed the almost complete submission by the Russian media to the will of the Kremlin.

The Kremlin and President Putin's administration hold the real power, and prevail over the whole country. The Kremlin has been steadily appropriating the country's natural wealth, and at the same time circulating virulent nationalist propaganda. The social frustrations of most strata of Russian society, together with their nostalgia for the Soviet past, are being exploited to sustain support for the leader in the Kremlin. And all this is being done in the name of Russia's ideals. The orthodox church is presented as the only means of defence against the liberal West and radical Islam. The army actively participates in the forging of this new ideological amalgam, and makes sure it is widely propagated. And the presidential administration bestows privileges in the same fashion and on the scale as the old



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Nomenklatura. Mr Putin's imperial inclinations have an authoritarian ring that cannot strengthen anyone's sense of security in Europe.

So what should the European Union be doing in the face of all these developments? First, it should not declare that establishing good relations with Russia is a priority. Relations are as good as they can be in the current circumstances – the two sides' reciprocal interests are already being served, at least in economic terms. The EU should only envisage Russia playing a greater role in Europe on condition that it accepts its rules. The EU should not abandon Estonia

to fend for itself over Russia's refusal to recognise the Estonian-Russian border. It should not accept Russia's use of its energy resources as a means of exerting political pressure on its neighbours.

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If the EU is united and steadfast on such issues it will be immune to any pressures that Russia may try to exert. Russian business and industry, meanwhile, will find there is no ready alternative to European markets. President Putin must be defeated in his attempts to divide Europe, and the EU must have a common policy towards Russia so that it will be effective in furthering its own interests. The courage shown by Javier Solana, Alexander Kwasnietki and Valdas Adamkus during Ukraine's Orange revolution are good examples of how the European Union is learning to prevent dangerous confrontations.

In contrast, the approach taken by a number of European states of being nice to Russia can only weaken the position of the EU. It is time to abandon any private strategies in relation to Russia, and the short and shameful history of the Paris-Berlin-Moscow axis was a ringing example of how not to go about it. History must not be ignored, and taking note of history's lessons, mistakes can be avoided. We must look, too, to the future. It is possible that a modern, democratic Russia that respects rights and liberties may yet appear on the political scene. The European Union would then have a great partner to work with. □

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