

**EU STRATEGIC AUTONOMY IN THE SHADOW
OF GEOPOLITICAL RIVALRY**

A VIEW FROM MOSCOW

Sergey Utkin



EU STRATEGIC AUTONOMY IN THE SHADOW OF GEOPOLITICAL RIVALRY

A VIEW FROM MOSCOW

- The EU is determined to maintain the transatlantic bond, while Russia tends to interpret the EU’s strategic autonomy precisely as autonomy from the US. The Western unity effort is significantly strengthened by the poor state of the EU’s relations with Russia.
- Russia is ready to pay lip service to the idea of a more capable EU, but instead it sees opportunities in areas where bilateral cooperation with member states is possible. The EU-wide consensus is doomed to remain critical vis-à-vis Russia for the foreseeable future.
- The EU will increasingly focus on gaining autonomy from Russia, primarily in the energy field and in terms of hard security deterrence.
- The EU-Russia geopolitical tension, centred on the common neighbourhood, is long-term and might cause as yet unseen damage to the relationship if it is not handled carefully.



SERGEY UTKIN

*Leading Researcher,
Primakov Institute of World Economy
and International Relations,
Russian Academy of Sciences*

ISBN 978-951-769-670-8

ISSN 1795-8059

Language editing: Lynn Nikkanen

Cover photo: Creative Commons (CC BY-SA 4.0)

This publication is part of the research project ‘European Strategic Autonomy in a Geo-economic World’ conducted by the Finnish Institute of International Affairs.

EU STRATEGIC AUTONOMY IN THE SHADOW OF GEOPOLITICAL RIVALRY

A VIEW FROM MOSCOW

INTRODUCTION: STRATEGIC AUTONOMY FROM A DIFFERENT ANGLE

For the European Union, the debate on strategic autonomy is about its own future in the world. For the United States, it is about its principal allies' future. Yet for Russia, it is about the future of an important neighbouring group of countries that are persistently critical of Russia's policies, foreign and domestic. The angle shapes the attitude to a large extent.

The alienation between Russia and the EU was not the initial intention of either but is now hard to deny. This Briefing Paper shows how the historical ambition of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union to play a role in Europe, or even transform it, ultimately collapsed and was followed by an eventually unsuccessful attempt by the Russian Federation and the EU to come to terms with each other on foreign and security policy. Russia's longstanding suspicion towards the US presence in Europe and the arguments in the post-Soviet space shape the context that widens the gap between Brussels and Moscow. One can speculate that a "strategically autonomous" EU might help bridge this gap against the backdrop of the growing Chinese power, as well as societal and foreign policy changes in the US. This paper argues that it is, however, the ambition to gain strategic autonomy that will be stymied or reshaped by the regional tension with Moscow, which serves to strengthen the transatlantic bond and leaves little room for EU–Russia cooperation.

EVOLVING VISIONS OF A POLITICAL EUROPE

From the early 18th century onwards, Russia put tremendous effort into strengthening its stance as a European power at a time when the destiny of humankind was being determined in Europe. For hundreds of years, the Old World was the major playground of warring coalitions, which left any talk of all-European unity to philosophers and dreamers. Like other countries, Russia had friends and foes in the European realm, perpetuating the tricky balance that collapsed along with the Russian Empire itself during

the First World War. Soviet Russia saw Europe as an important part of the capitalist world that was doomed by the laws of history to accept the communist ideology. The establishment of the Eastern Bloc after the Second World War was interpreted as just another stepping stone in this inevitable transformation.

State socialism went bankrupt shortly before the collapse of the Soviet Union. In this brief historic moment in 1990 the USSR approved the Paris Charter for a New Europe,¹ which was designed to lay the foundations for a new era of cooperation that would run beyond Europe to encompass most of the northern hemisphere, namely the participants of the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). The idea was to build common institutions that would ensure security, human rights and economic cooperation for everyone. The unexpectedly swift disappearance of the USSR and the subsequent turmoil changed the calculus again. Many states in Europe preferred to join the Western alliances rather than push the nascent all-European and transatlantic Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to the fore.

Russia has become increasingly uneasy about the process that deprived it of a voice in the regional structures that were gaining weight and ground and duly becoming the most influential.² For most observers, it was clear that Russia, given its size and its political and military potential, would not be able to follow the example of its Western neighbours in obtaining membership rights in the EU and NATO. It quickly became apparent that this was not Russia's ambition, however. Indeed, Russia and the Western alliances were forced to define their attitude towards each other for the longer run.

The initial attempt implied intensive cooperation at all levels that could theoretically become no less important in terms of decision-making than the actual EU/NATO membership. That was the Russian hope with regard to the NATO–Russia Council established in 2002 and the EU–Russia Common Spaces, including

1 Charter of Paris for a New Europe, 21 November 1990. OSCE, <https://www.osce.org/mc/39516>.

2 See William H. Hill, *No Place for Russia. European Security Institutions since 1989*. Columbia University Press, 2018.

the Common Space of External Security, proclaimed in 2003. This was exactly the time when the EU first cherished the ambition to strengthen and develop its own security and defence policy, along with the unified foreign policy approach.

THE TRANSATLANTIC NUISANCE

One of the reasons, if not the major reason, why the OSCE did not become central to regional security matters, as well as why the political mechanisms of European integration developed at a slower pace than they could have, was the determination of NATO members to maintain and strengthen the transatlantic Alliance as the key to their security and defence policy, also in the new post-Cold War era. While the former Eastern Bloc participants and a number of former Soviet Union republics prioritized the policy of getting rid of the Soviet-turned-Russian military presence on their soil in the early 1990s, US troops and bases in Western Europe continued to be welcomed by national governments.

For Russian conservative political thought, which rapidly gained ground in the Russian debate through the 1990s, this has been a constant security nuisance and a living reminder of the Soviet Union's defeat in the Cold War. It also meant that military and security matters in Europe were justifiably viewed through the lens of NATO and relations with Washington D.C., while the newly baptized European Union was for years often referred to as the European Economic Community even in Russian professional diplomatic and expert circles.

Moscow's resentful attention to the transatlantic ties developed by European nations was not a novelty. It was a constant background tune of the Cold War, when Western Europe's dependence on the US was seen as strong and central but not unbreakable, and any sign of transatlantic discontent was to be welcomed and fostered. France's withdrawal from NATO's integrated military command in 1966 had to be seen as an important glimmer of hope in this regard. Overall, France and Italy with their strong leftist movements were treated as the avantgarde of the Western European transformation desired by the Soviet Union. In this worldview, the European Community was little more than a reactionary attempt to forestall the future, an economic NATO of sorts, even if it did not include

the US. Up until the political spring of the late 1980s, when the USSR started a dialogue with NATO and the European Community, Soviet attempts to reach out to the West were directed towards individual capitals rather than Brussels. Nevertheless, the composition of the CSCE and the Helsinki Final Act that followed in 1975 reflected the realities of the persistent US and Canadian presence in European security matters, acknowledged by the USSR.

Russia's relationship with the US in the 1990s and early 2000s, while relatively constructive, was not devoid of ups and downs. Many downturns were related to European security and focused on NATO's enlargement and actions. The all-European OSCE-centred security order was still an option, reaching its last high point at the 1999 OSCE Istanbul summit. The NATO-Russia cooperation helped to reduce regional tensions further, in spite of remaining issues.

PAST HOPES

When the EU claimed to become a foreign policy actor, this was interpreted in Moscow precisely as the Union's desired ability to stand independently from the US, duly reducing the leverage of the sole superpower. This vision might have been shared by some countries in the EU but opposed by others. The disagreements between "old" and "new" Europe around the 2003 Iraq War on the eve of the planned EU/NATO enlargement revealed the spectrum of views that had to be reconciled. Contradictions reappear occasionally, but the European political elite mainstream remains determined to maintain the close transatlantic cooperation, primarily as a security guarantee.

Nevertheless, the EU's intention was to use the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) in order to acquire autonomous capabilities. When Russia expressed interest in contributing to the EU's efforts, it soon became clear that each side would find it easier to operate without the other.

Proposals to use Russian airlift or develop Russian-Ukrainian airlift projects jointly with the EU were confronted by the EU's determination to build its own Airbus A400M fleet. Negotiations on a possible EU-Russia agreement on crisis management went nowhere, since Russia insisted that the agreement had to allow for the EU's participation in Russia-led operations, ensuring the sort of reciprocity that the EU was unwilling to accept. The bilateral military cooperation that



German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Russian President Dmitri Medvedev in 2010. Source: Wikimedia Commons/kremlin.ru (CC BY 3.0)

developed between Russia and some EU countries until 2014 was in parallel with rather than in support of efforts to build up the EU's own capabilities. The Russian armed forces had to undergo a difficult transformation through the 2000s. Cooperation with the West, which ran via NATO–Russia and bilateral tracks, was, with some exceptions, seen as a confidence-building measure and experience-sharing rather than true mutual reinforcement.

The ad hoc agreement to use Russian helicopters in support of the EU mission in Chad and the Central African Republic in 2008–2009 remains the sole precedent for Russia's direct involvement in European security and defence efforts. The credit for this limited success may be attributable to France and the warm relationship that then French President Nicolas Sarkozy maintained with Moscow.

EU–Russia cooperation on foreign policy required a level of trust that was often unachievable. Nevertheless, on certain issues, such as negotiations around Iran's nuclear programme, the EU and Russia's views converged to a large extent, which helped to shape the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action agreement later torpedoed by US President Trump.

The 2005 EU–Russia Road Map on the Common Space of External Security,³ however vague, still defines

3 Road Map on the Common Space of External Security, 10 May 2005. President of Russia, <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/3589>.

the scope of topics that both sides find important – from the UN and OSCE platforms to non-proliferation, the fight against terrorism, crisis management, and civil protection. The Road Map has been pushed to one side by later developments, demonstrating that decision-makers on either side were not eager to make EU–Russia cooperation a linchpin of their foreign policy.

The attempt to revitalize EU–Russia cooperation on foreign and security policy, reflected in the 2010 Meseberg Memorandum⁴ agreed by then Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and German Chancellor Angela Merkel, did not yield results. Many countries of the enlarged EU did not like the bilateral Russian–German character of the negotiations, and shared distrust towards the Russian leadership. The schism between respective visions and policies has only widened since then.

DIFFICULT NEIGHBOURS

EU enlargement has often been called the most successful, or even the only effective, foreign policy tool of the Union. In spite of enlargement fatigue, the EU

4 Memorandum – Meeting of Chancellor Angela Merkel and President Dmitri Medvedev on 4–5 June 2010 in Meseberg. Russia's Mission to the EU, <http://www.russianmission.eu/sites/default/files/user/files/2010-06-05-meseberg-memorandum.pdf>.



SMM monitors visiting the destroyed bridge in Stanytsia Luhanska, September 2016. Source: OSCE/Evgeniy Maloletka.

remains the beacon for a few neighbouring countries, which, in turn, tend to shape many of their policies accordingly. Russia did not officially oppose EU enlargement, unlike that of NATO. The 2014 Ukraine crisis pushed the EU and Russia into a sanctions spiral that inevitably influenced this attitude, however. By now, a state that is joining the EU is also joining the EU sanctions regimes, which Russia cannot welcome. The stalemate in the EU–Russia visa dialogue and most other negotiation tracks means that new EU members will have to erect previously non-existent barriers to trade and the movement of people vis-à-vis Russia.

Geopolitical considerations obviously have to be added to the technical ones, especially when it comes to the states of the Eastern Partnership. For Russia, the developments across this area are included in important hard security calculations, while the post-Soviet political elites often shape their independent foreign policy with the idea of explicit distancing from Moscow in mind.⁵

In theory, it had to be in the EU and Russia's common interests to resolve the conflicts and wind down the sanctions. In practice, the common neighbourhood has become the playing field for games of power and

influence. Each side is accusing the other of being the source of this unholy transformation.⁶ The EU perceives the engagement with willing neighbours as the most natural process based on commonly acknowledged principles. Thus, the area where the EU feels most capable of acting in its own right is also the one where tensions with Moscow are more pronounced than anywhere else.

The EU and Russia have become locked in a zero-sum game, where developments in the common neighbourhood welcomed and encouraged by one side are all too often rejected, despised or, at best, ignored by the other. The Association Agreements with the EU set the agenda for the EU's cooperation with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, while Russia tends to see them as poorly thought-through documents that might still be abandoned in the future. Russia praises the Eurasian Economic Union as an important regional integration effort, while the EU regards it with suspicion and refrains from dialogue.

The frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space remain the most tragic point of tension dividing the EU and Russia. Russian attempts to find solutions, such as the 2003 Kozak Memorandum for resolving the Transnistrian conflict in Moldova, are not welcomed in the EU, while the EU's appeals fall on stony ground in

5 Sergey Utkin, *New Nations – New Interests. The Foreign Policy of Post-Soviet States*. In: *What Has Remained of the USSR: Exploring the Erosion of the Post-Soviet Space*. Finnish Institute of International Affairs Report No. 58, February 2019: https://www.fiaa.fi/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/fiaa_report58_what_has_remained_of_the_ussr_web.pdf.

6 Does Putin admit any responsibility for 'new Cold War'? BBC, 17 December 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-europe-55356699>.

Russia. These disagreements peaked with the Ukraine crisis, which resulted in the diametrically opposed visions and policy agendas in Moscow and Brussels. The prospect of reconciliation in Donbas on the basis of the Minsk agreements remains bleak. Russia presents itself as an advocate of the rebels, harshly criticising the Ukrainian government, while the EU decisively backs Kyiv. Even in Karabakh, where Russian mediation helped to stop the autumn war in 2020 and establish the peacekeeping mission, the EU does not find it appropriate to express open support.

The initial vision of EU–Russia cooperation in crisis management implied that the parties would help find political and security solutions for most of the post–Soviet conflicts. In reality, none of them has been truly resolved, while new ones have emerged. The EU’s acute reaction to the 2020 political crisis in Belarus, a country that forms part of the Union State with Russia, shows how easily EU–Russia tensions may intensify and proliferate to ever new areas.

THE EU’S NEW CLOTHES

The ongoing debate on strategic autonomy in the EU still leaves room for different interpretations of the term.⁷ For an outside observer, however, the intra–EU discussion has not led to any substantial shift. The thick red lines for the EU–Russia relationship are set by events that happened earlier, primarily the Ukraine crisis. Russia is no longer seen as a true partner country in the EU, even if communication continues and some bilateral commercial projects proceed in the narrower realm left untouched by sanctions. The continuous stalemate means that for the foreseeable future Russia will neither develop any military industrial cooperation with EU members nor contribute to any of the EU security– and defence–related initiatives. Even in those areas where the EU and Russia might act independently in parallel, such as in the crisis–torn regions of Africa, the Mediterranean or the Gulf of Aden, mutual understanding beyond tactical conflict avoidance will be hard to achieve.

The popular conspiracy theory that often surfaces in the Russian public debate is that the current crisis in the EU–Russia relationship is designed and managed

by the US, which makes it the EU’s task to break free from the external control. The consequent interpretation of the EU’s strategic autonomy as something that would make the EU redefine its interests and relaunch a pragmatic partnership with Russia is unfounded. The growing divergence between the principles and directions of the EU’s and Russia’s policies is obvious. The EU’s composition, which, even after the United Kingdom’s departure, includes a number of Russia’s harshest critics, puts the EU’s lowest common denominator with regard to Russia at a very low level indeed. The attitude of the Baltic states, Poland and some other critical voices is not defined by personalities taking key positions in those countries, so it will most probably remain as it is through the election cycles.

While the poor state of EU–Russia relations is well known, Russian officials prefer to present Russia as being open to improvement, leaving the ball in the EU’s court. As Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov put it in 2020, “*we are by no means opposed to the EU’s greater independence in international affairs. Some time ago, we even offered Brussels to cooperate on crisis management and the development of military technical capabilities. Even today, we consider the EU as a potential participant in the Greater Eurasian Partnership concept proposed by President Vladimir Putin. We believe this would benefit the European Union as well, combine regional integration potentials and facilitate European economic operators’ access to Eurasian markets.*”⁸ At the same time, the minister repeatedly expressed indignation over the EU’s position towards Russia, which could, in his words, lead to a suspension of political dialogue.⁹

Whatever the arguments against doing that, Russia still finds it expedient to underline the EU’s multi-layered dependence on the US. Meanwhile, the strategic autonomy debate is developing with a number of international power centres in mind. Among them, the EU is most concerned about China and Russia rather than the US. This concern is due to energy flows from Russia, but also to the presence of Russian capital in the EU, as well as the EU’s ability to stay the course in the common neighbourhood in spite of Russia’s objections. In the EU, a decrease in energy interdependence vis-à-vis Russia is now often set within the framework of the commonly accepted “green deal” and the

7 See Niklas Helwig, *EU Strategic Autonomy: A Reality Check for Europe’s Global Agenda*. Finnish Institute of International Affairs Working Paper No. 119, https://www.fiaa.fi/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/wp119_strategic_autonomy-2.pdf.

8 Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s interview with *Trud* newspaper, 21 August 2020. MFA of Russia, https://special.mid.ru/en/web/guest/evropejskij-souzes/-/asset_publisher/60iYovt2s4Yc/content/id/4293771.

9 Lavrov warns of possibility that dialogue with EU leaders could be suspended. Interfax, 13 October 2020, <https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/70118/>.

Energy Union, duly making this determination even more long-term than the current geopolitical and security considerations would suggest. While this will have consequences for all energy suppliers, a number of governments and lobby groups in the EU have singled Russia out as the country that it is most dangerous and unacceptable to be dependent upon, as evidenced by the Nord Stream 2 case.¹⁰

The EU's transition to the green economy will take time, which means that the traditional economic basis of the EU-Russia relations will not disappear overnight. However, the measures that the EU will be taking imply that the transactional market relationship, at best, will not become more advanced than it already is, unless there are profound shifts in the structure of Russian exports.

THE RUSSIA CHALLENGE

While it is easy to conclude that the EU's strategic autonomy in the foreseeable future will be shaped by viewing Russia as a challenge rather than by enlisting Russia's help, the consequences of that are harder to grasp. On the one hand, the challenge unites the EU, as it did in the case of the Ukraine crisis and sanctions policy. On the other hand, Russia is a capable global actor with advanced hard power capabilities, and it might become increasingly uncomfortable to have it as a *de facto* adversary just next door.

The scope for damage limitation and confidence-building measures is shrinking. Western powers as well as Russia are betting on strategic patience rather than any adjustment of their principled positions. Multiple issues in the EU-Russia common neighbourhood remain unresolved, forming a proverbial and in some cases actual powder keg. Unless carefully dealt with, these issues have the potential to blow apart the already damaged relationships across the region. Too often, Russian power circles end up among the alleged perpetrators of disconcerting or tragic incidents, which serves to intensify Western concerns. While Russia officially rejects all allegations as unfounded, the EU treats many of them as well-established facts that are not easy to put aside for the sake of dialogue with Moscow.

The tensions with Russia mean, among other things, that the EU's or EU members' drift away from

Washington D.C. is increasingly unlikely. The EU wants to acquire capabilities to act independently in cases where the US is not involved, but it will also welcome the continuous US military and political presence in Europe as a tool of deterrence against Russia. Even the turbulent four years of Donald Trump's presidency did little to sever the transatlantic bonds. The newly elected President Biden will make it much easier for the European allies to align with US policies on multiple issues, including Russia. While in Russia this will be presented as evidence of the EU's dependency, the EU itself will see it as a reflection of a welcome Western consensus on values and principles.

In one sense, the Russia challenge will limit the EU's efforts to achieve strategic autonomy. Cooperation on major hard power issues will, to a large extent, remain within NATO or will involve the US via bilateral mechanisms. Consensus-building in global multilateral institutions will primarily be attempted within the Western camp of countries, intentionally pushing Russia and China aside. The consolidation of the West may fail or deliver little, but it is nonetheless being attempted, while China and Russia are bracing for the impact. Russia's leverage in the common neighbourhood will often effectively run counter to the EU's goals, duly limiting the EU's results in this respect.

For Russia's part, the deterrence policies pursued by the West will also be perceived as a challenge and will trigger a reaction, even if Russia does not completely preclude limited cooperation. The most successful dialogue will develop bilaterally with certain EU governments rather than with the Union as a whole. This would, of course, exclude issues left by the member states to the EU's communitarian competence. While Russia would still pay lip service to the idea of a more capable EU in order to snub the US, it would rather take advantage of opportunities in those areas upon which deeper integration and common EU policies have no bearing. The tricky balance of competences and political will between member states and Brussels, which is eventually in the EU's hands, will be a strong determining factor in this regard. /

10 Nord Stream 2: MEPs call for halt to Russian gas pipeline. BBC, 22 January 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-55756282>.