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EU-Russia relations and the crisis in Belarus: toward a more “geopolitical” Europe?

Although “business as usual” has not resumed between Brussels and Moscow since the conflict over Ukraine erupted into war in 2014, some have suggested that EU-Russia relations have gradually settled into a new normal¹. While EU unity continues to be maintained with respect to sanctions, Brussels appears at the same time to have adopted a more restrained approach to relations with countries in Russia’s so-called near abroad, having negotiated a Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with Armenia compatible with Yerevan’s obligations as a member of the Moscow-backed Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).

Nonetheless, the current situation in Belarus has highlighted the fragile state in which the European security order still finds itself, with Russia continuing to prioritize the dynamic of its rivalry with the West over a genuinely collective approach to problem-solving. Although Brussels and Moscow share an interest in a managed transition away from Alexander Lukashenko, clashing visions of the regional order continue to militate against substantive EU-Russia cooperation aimed at buttressing regional security and advancing the interests of the Belarusian people. Opponents of the Lukashenko regime and EU leaders alike may insist that the current crisis is not about geopolitics, but it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that geopolitics remains an inevitable and central consideration overshadowing EU-Russia relations in the shared neighbourhood. In the context of a shifting global order, this leaves EU members – and France in particular – with difficult decisions to make regarding how to balance resolve and dialogue in their relationship with Russia.

¹ Andrey Devyatkov, “[An EU-Russia Modus Vivendi in the East?](#)”, Carnegie Moscow Center, January 17, 2018.

Great power status and Russia's place in Europe

Russian foreign policy in recent years has increasingly been seen through the lens of Moscow's declared "pivot to the east" and its deepening strategic partnership with Beijing. That said, Russia's bicontinental geography remains key to its claim to great power status. Russia is intent on remaining a leading security actor in Europe not only because that is where the bulk of its population and core interests lie, but also because it is a national identity-related imperative.

Russia's pretention to great power status is more than an instrumental means to various foreign policy ends. Nor can it be attributed exclusively to an inability to cope with its relative decline on the world stage. Rather, it is fundamentally related to the country's engrained sense of possessing a special historical and political mission. Unlike the British and French empires, Russia's imperial expansion took place overland, which helped to break down psychological barriers between the "self" and the "other". While Britain *had* an empire, Russia *was* an empire. As such, Russia's sense of nationhood was created – and was therefore only considered meaningful – in a multi-ethnic context. The very formation of the Russian state in the 15th century, paired with the fall of Constantinople, fostered a feeling of having a special status – a feeling that later became linked to Russia's place in Europe as that status was recognized by other great powers in the 18th century.

It is easy to understand why many contend that the current crisis in Belarus remains less prone to geopolitical considerations than the 2013-14 Ukrainian revolution. Belarus has a weak national identity when compared with Ukraine and is more linguistically Russified. Moreover, unlike Ukraine, Belarus is firmly entrenched within the EAEU and the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) military bloc. Nor are anti-regime protestors in Belarus clamouring to join Western institutions such as NATO or the EU. However, today's events are not occurring in a vacuum – they are taking place in the wake of a conflict over Ukraine that has dramatically affected the level of trust between Moscow and Western capitals and has left Belarus as Russia's last remaining buffer state.

Moscow's ability to remain a leading and credible security player in Europe would take a significant hit if it were to lose its last remaining regional ally, as would the notion – not unrelated to its great power identity – that the cultural boundaries of the "Russian world" extend beyond the borders of the contemporary Russian Federation. Russia would also be faced with the prospect of having to defend the entirety of its front in a theoretical war against NATO, rather than being able to use a Russian-aligned Belarus to seal off the Baltics by way of neighbouring Kaliningrad. As Michael Kofman has noted, such considerations are crucial for Moscow's military planning given that any NATO-Russia war is more likely to be fought across the entire European theatre than be limited to a specific region².

Drivers of Russian Interests in Belarus

In short, Moscow cannot allow even the possibility that Minsk will be lost to the West. In "poaching" Ukraine away from Russia's geopolitical and regulatory orbit, Brussels not only produced a rupture in its relations with Moscow but also helped to render the European security order more fragile. This is the inevitable by-product of a post-Cold War Europe beset by rival visions of order, with Brussels' insistence on the right of small states to choose their (effectively

² Michael Kofman, "[Putting the Russia Problem in Perspective](#)", *Frivärld Briefing*, n° 6, 2020.

geopolitical) orientation clashing with Moscow's calls for an "equal relationship" with the West – which would presumably be accompanied by a veto over the orientation of these states.

While some see the Kremlin's failure to intervene in the 2018 Armenian revolution as an indication that it might remain passive so long as protestors do not openly align themselves with Western institutions, Belarus is situated directly in the European theatre and is a fellow Eastern Slavic state. This raises the geopolitical and psychological stakes significantly for Moscow. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that – with the exception of the annexation of Crimea, which was perceived to have reversed a historical injustice – public approval ratings of the Russian government have actually *decreased* following international military interventions³. This held true for the 2008 Russo-Georgian war as well as the 2015 intervention in the Syrian civil war, according to research conducted by the Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VTsIOM)⁴. There is every reason to believe that the Russian public would not look favourably upon yet another instance in which the Kremlin appears to prioritize geopolitical concerns over domestic socioeconomic challenges, particularly given the role already played by Russia in subsidizing the heavily dependent Belarusian economy.

Despite relations between Lukashenko and the Kremlin having soured in recent years as Minsk has gradually sought to assert its independence from Moscow, Russian President Vladimir Putin has largely failed to place himself above the dispute between the protestors and the Belarusian regime, not least due to the highly personalized nature of Russia-Belarus relations throughout Lukashenko's tenure. This only renders the situation more acute for Moscow, enhancing the risk that Russia's image will deteriorate in the eyes of the Belarusian population if the current standoff drags on.

Fears that a revolution in Belarus may set a precedent for what could happen in Russia when Putin comes up for re-election in 2024 are ultimately secondary dynamics when compared with the geopolitical and identity-related questions surrounding Russia's place in Europe. This should give pause to those who contend that ideological rivalry between a liberal West and an illiberal Russia is the primary driver of the current contest over the shape of the Euro-Atlantic security system. Rather, the gradual shift of Russia's political regime in an illiberal direction is the partial result of the consolidation of Euro-Atlantic institutions that largely exclude Russia, which has encouraged the Kremlin to securitize its relationship with the West both internationally and domestically, with perceived threats to the Putin regime viewed as existential threats to Russia's strength, standing and even survival.

The Russian elite is eager to avoid a repeat of the Ukraine debacle – where Kyiv remains on a Western path of integration despite the military campaign in the Donbass – and an intervention in Belarus would likely come with domestic political costs for the Kremlin. Even so, while a post-Lukashenko Belarus that moves to deepen ties with the West would drastically increase Russia's sense of insecurity, a Russian-backed clampdown on protestors would also cause EU-Russia relations to deteriorate further. That either outcome would exacerbate tensions serves to underline the fragile nature of the security situation in Europe. Western capitals cannot countenance the notion that the future of Belarus will be decided by (or through) Moscow irrespective of the desires of the Belarusian people, while the Kremlin views with consternation any perception of Western interference in the domestic affairs of Belarus.

³ Polina Beliakova, "[How does the Kremlin Kick when it's Down](#)", *War on the Rocks*, August 13, 2019.

⁴ Quoted in *Ibid.*

The challenge for the EU – and for France

The years since the Ukraine crisis have witnessed the conflict between Russia and the West over the shape of Europe's security architecture become engulfed in a more general great power rivalry of global scope – a trend that has now solidified given China's increasing assertiveness in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. This situation has only encouraged Moscow to look past Brussels and prioritize its rivalry with Washington, effectively considering the EU to be a mere outgrowth of American power. The poisoning of Alexei Navalny and the situation in Belarus have further strained EU-Russia relations, with Germany appearing increasingly unable to balance the imperative of preserving EU unity with its erstwhile desire to maintain a special relationship with Russia – both core pillars of Berlin's post-Cold War foreign policy.

In this context, French President Emmanuel Macron's push for a European *rapprochement* with Russia has failed to garner much momentum. Macron's initiative, paired with his controversial comments on the "brain death" of NATO, is clearly aimed at advancing his vision of a "geopolitical" and strategically autonomous Europe. However, Paris alone does not control the EU's foreign policy, leaving Moscow with little reason to tone down its broader confrontation with the West in exchange for the (unrealistic) prospect of better relations with Brussels.

Macron's pursuit of this *rapprochement* has matured since its inception. Initial hopes that Russia could be pried away from China were unrealistic, given that Moscow's entente with Beijing serves as a key power multiplier for the Kremlin in the context of continued – and likely abiding – hostile relations with Washington. Instead, the Elysée has gradually begun to demonstrate greater concern for the policy priorities of eastern EU member states, while framing dialogue with Moscow in more realistic terms – as a means to regulate the often-conflicting interests that are inherently constitutive of a multipolar Europe in which the EU is but one actor among many⁵. To an extent, Paris is attempting to position itself at the heart of the European security system by taking up the role played by London in the 19th century – not without defined interests of its own, but interacting flexibly with all camps in the pursuit of a stable equilibrium.

In the context of fraught relations with Russia and Turkey and a growing systemic rivalry with China, the EU will have – at the very least – an instrumental interest in partnering with the United States to balance against potential threats and challenges to its east. A Gaullist approach to dealing with Washington – viewing deeper ties with Russia as a means of buttressing Europe's independence from the US – cannot provide a full solution to the EU's 21st-century problems. At the same time, excessive European reliance on the US could lead the world toward a rigid and unstable bipolar contest between the transatlantic alliance and the Sino-Russian compact.

With global politics increasingly framed by the US-China rivalry, Brussels and Moscow have a shared interest in a multipolar world order that provides them with the ability to be independent decision-makers and term-setters. Moreover, the EU's emphasis on rules-based interaction overlaps somewhat with Russia's desire for strong multilateral institutions and mechanisms such as the UN, where Moscow's power is enshrined as a permanent member of the Security Council. In this context, the US pivot toward China represents both an opportunity and a challenge for the

⁵ Benjamin Haddad, "[Dans un monde sans leader, une diplomatie française agile](#)", Institut Montaigne (blog), October 14, 2020.

EU – a chance to shape a more sustainable and less antagonizing American presence in Europe, but also a possibility that it will be co-opted into Washington’s cold war with Beijing and have its core interests disregarded by a United States whose primary concern has shifted to managing order in the Asia-Pacific.

As Mark Leonard has astutely noted, the European and global orders are no longer mutually reinforcing⁶. Current global dynamics do not favour an EU-Russia *rapprochement*, while the fragility of the European security order renders any *modus vivendi* decidedly tentative. The challenge for Brussels – and for Paris – is to find a way to craft a delineated role for Washington on the European continent while simultaneously developing new mechanisms for regulating and nurturing its relationship with Moscow. The latter could include cooperation between Russia and the EU on issues relating to the global order and the wider European space (including the Middle East), serving as a basis for dialogue in the absence of agreement on the norms that should govern security relations within Europe proper.



⁶Mark Leonard, "[Geopolitical Europe in Times of Covid-19](#)", Europe’s Futures, September 21, 2020.

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