

EU–Russia Relations: Effects of the 2014 Ukraine Crisis

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Abstract

The 2014 Ukrainian crisis has laid bare the differences between the European Union and Russia, forcing these two actors to re-examine their relations with each other, as well as with those in the so-called shared neighbourhood. The violence seen in Ukraine and arguably supported by Russia has shaken the EU out of any complacency it may have felt about the benign influence and effects of its integration project. The question therefore has to be asked, where now for EU–Russia relations? This article examines precisely that question. Argument focuses on the EU in particular, concluding it has two important challenges ahead. First, it can only forge a unified Russia policy if it debates rather than ignores the different foreign policy beliefs of its member states. Second, the EU must confront the reality of Russia today and decide on a policy that can divert the two actors from their current conflictual path but without paying the price in respect of the EU's self-professed normative identity.

The effects of Ukraine's troubles in 2014 have been felt across the European and Eurasian space. Those troubles reflect the persistent failure of successive political administrations in Ukraine to build a functioning political and economic system that can serve as the base for Ukrainian prosperity. However, Ukraine's crisis is not entirely home-made, Ukraine is part victim of geopolitics, forced by its economic woes and the effects of a global economy to choose between two competing regional projects, the European Union and Eurasian Economic Union. In the space of little more than six months, Ukraine has both rejected and signed an Association Agreement with the EU. Characterised by the EU as a "symbolic moment",¹ the June 2014 signing of the Agreement was indeed symbolic—of a rejection of the Russian-backed alternative. Ukraine was joined in the moment by Georgia and Moldova, a further sign that Russia was losing hold over the region. An optimistic analysis would conclude that states in the shared or common neighbourhood between the EU and Russia are able to make their own choices in respect of orientation westwards or eastwards. Such an analysis would be complacent in the extreme, given Russia's ongoing role in the Ukrainian territory. Ukraine's territorial integrity is still not assured and the EU can be of little or no help in securing it; there is the real risk that eastern Ukraine will become another frozen conflict. Additionally, Putin's hold on office and Russia's immediate internal stability are dependent on Russia retaining power in the region.

These are trying times, not least for EU–Russia relations. Ukraine's troubles have made clear just how vital these two actors are for the stability and prosperity of

the European space, widely conceived. In short, EU–Russia relations matter.

Marking Failures

That 2014 is a significant year in EU–Russia relations is unquestionable, whether it will remain as the low point in their post-Cold War dealings is still a matter of speculation. In trying to answer the question of what the relationship will look like moving forward, most analysis to date has reflected on what has gone wrong, a necessary first step in determining the future path. There is much to reference here but I will concentrate on just four interrelated failings on the basis that they illuminate or relate most closely to the events of 2014.

First, the legal framework for the relationship remains, in some sense, unresolved. The basis continues to lie in the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), effective as of 1997 and designed to have a shelf life of ten years. Attempts to establish a new framework were ongoing from 2008 until March 2014 (halted by Russia's annexation of Crimea), the protracted negotiations reflecting different ideas about how the relationship should move forward. What is particularly striking here is that theoretical assumptions about the effects of an institutionalised relationship, such as that established by the PCA, have proven to be overly optimistic. Despite six monthly summits and a regularised framework for meetings between ministers and other officials, a gulf remains between the EU and Russia. From the EU perspective, this is of Russia's making. Ministers and officials are given limited stays in Brussels to ensure they are not socialised into the Brussels way of thinking and doing and Russia has proved willing to resist discussion of unpalatable issues, even to subvert EU agendas.²

1 European Union External Action Service (2014), <http://eeas.europa.eu/top_stories/2014/270614_association_agreement_en.htm>

2 Private conversation with officials.

A second failure relates to the differences between EU member states that have made the construction of a single EU foreign policy a near-impossible task. Nowhere has this been more obvious than in respect of Russia. There remains, however, an interesting gap between what we understand at the theoretical level but expect in the realm of practice. Worth citing is the Renshon and Renshon insight that:

“It is unlikely that any researcher or critic can go wrong demonstrating how senior decision makers fail to measure up to an iconic and mythical model in which perceptual acuity is unaffected by character psychology cognitive limitations, information processes are not influenced by standard heuristic devices, and problem framing is not influenced by the efforts of existing and often strongly held belief systems.”³

Theorists of foreign policy analysis have long accepted that understanding how individual leaders make sense of the world is vital to understanding the nature of decision-making. In referencing the EU, we have perhaps all too often forgotten that decisions are the product of these individuals. Once we remember that leaders are themselves the product of their environments and that their decisions reflect individual viewpoints, values, history and cognitive processing, it becomes entirely unsurprising that EU foreign policy should often look amorphous, even contradictory. Until 2014, the voices of those who have been sceptical of Russian motivations and intentions, Estonia, Lithuania, Poland, for example, have been relatively disregarded, in the greater interest of treating Russia as a strategic partner and not allowing personal bias to interfere in that process. In assuming *any* actor could be wholly rational and objective in its decision-making, the EU has not managed to harness effectively the range of members’ perspectives to agree an optimal Russia policy.

Third, there is the matter of Russia’s mistrust of EU motivations and intentions, especially as a result of continued enlargement and the European Neighbourhood and Eastern Partnership policies (ENP and EaP). The EU has again not been unaware of the issues and some sympathy has to be felt for the difficult choices it has faced. Russia’s fears could best be allayed by a drawing of clear boundaries around the EU, a clear and unambiguous declaration that the EU had expanded as far as it would. This would be a difficult and dangerous proposition, entailing discussion of what constituted the European identity, an inevitable ‘othering’ of those outside

and a politically unpalatable airing of dirty laundry as the differing opinions of the member states were laid bare. At a more normative level, the EU would be justifiably criticised for elevating Russia’s concerns about dealings with separate sovereign states above the rights of those self-same sovereign states. This would be to undermine all that the EU is supposed to be and to represent. Of course, in many ways, the ENP and EaP are precisely the signifiers of the EU boundaries, the consolation prize for those the EU does not anticipate welcoming as members. But as ever, it is perceptions that matter and Russia and many ENP and EaP states do not see partnership in these policies as exclusionary clauses in respect of eventual EU membership.

Finally, Brussels has not captured the depths of Russia’s perceptions of the EU, its suspicions, and the possible consequences of those. Insufficient emphasis on the separate roles of personality and ideology in the enactment and interpretation of foreign policy are the root causes of this failing. The EU must learn to hear those members which hold greater insight into the workings of the Russian political environment and the dominant personalities within it. In part, business interests have played their part in the over-optimistic calculations of certain states, Germany and Italy certainly but France too. The UK has been more circumspect given its own tribulations with Russia but even there the voices that counselled for a more robust approach did not hold sway. Liberal ideas about interconnectedness and interdependence have led such states to a belief that actors like Russia are constrained by their economic and political relations with others; under-theorised and under-employed in practice, however, is an understanding of the role of intervening variables and the calculations made in respect of them. In reality, foreign policy is about a series of trade-offs, including in respect of beliefs as leaders weigh up, for instance, security against freedom, economic prosperity against sovereignty, power against relations with others. Those EU member states whose own experiences told of greater risks failed to convince in terms that western European members could accept, their counsel was deemed to be over-personalised and, ironically, ideologically mis-informed.⁴ The EU must do more to meet the challenge of avoiding prejudice while not ignoring meaningful and relevant information. It is well past time also for the EU to realise that its self-perception is not necessarily a shared one. This seems obvious but it is a matter side-stepped by the EU. Association

3 Renshon, Jonathan & Renshon, Stanley A. (2008) ‘The Theory and Practice of Foreign Policy Decision Making. *Political Psychology*, 29(4): pp. 509–536.

4 In conversations with EU officials undertaken in respect of other projects, this was a consistent theme, that the newer member states had to be socialised into the Brussels way and that their views of Russia were personal and rooted in ‘old’ ways of thinking.

and deepening integration with the EU are presented as a matter of democratic choice; often asked but never answered is how much choice neighbouring states really have in a globalising world with a large trading bloc on its doorstep. The EU needs to engage with this question.

Ultimately, what has been exposed in 2014 is a fundamental lack of trust on Russia's part, a surfeit of complacency on the EU's and a pressing need to reconceptualise the EU–Russia relationship. This will require the EU to look beyond its dominant ideological inclinations and to consider properly the separate belief systems of its member states and decide where this leaves Brussels in foreign policy-making terms. After that, the EU will need to look more deeply at Russia, to engage in the type of reflection that the “pulling and hauling” of its everyday politics with Russia understandably does not allow.

The Way Forward in EU–Russia Relations

In respect of the first of these failures, no immediate action can be taken. EU sanctions against Russia remain in place and look set to do so for some time to come as long as Russia is perceived to be contributing to rather than resolving Ukraine's problems. However, this too shall pass and the EU will be left with the stark choice of resuming or rewriting relations with Russia. Mogherini, the new EU Foreign Affairs head, has declared that Russia is no longer a strategic partner,⁵ suggesting a rewrite will ensue. This would be the most appropriate course of action. The EU cannot follow the same route it did after the 2008 hot war in Georgia, that is normalising relations as quickly as possible. Comparisons have understandably been drawn between Georgia and Ukraine but actually what is most notable is that after Georgia, Russia accepted the EU as broker in post-conflict resolution, precisely the opposite is true of Ukraine. The EU cannot escape the fact that Russia does not perceive it in benign terms and this must guide its own policy response.

Brussels must do more to understand the role of beliefs in its member states' foreign policies. Dwelling on Germany's response over Ukraine, for instance, is worthwhile. German business interests have most often been cited as explaining Germany's reluctance to impose sanctions and these certainly play a role. Also considered is the role of leadership in German–Russian relations, Merkel's relationship with Putin deemed less cosy than that of her predecessor and Merkel credited with achieving a more objective position on Russia; although

where that will or should take Germany is still debated. Relatively little attention has been paid to the nature of German foreign policy itself, however, how it most often reflects a conciliatory rather than conflictual approach and what that might mean for what is heard and decided in Brussels. The same consideration has to be given to those members with the longer and more exposed relationship with Russia, the Baltics, Finland and Poland to name the more obvious. NATO has understood the need for reassurance, the EU must do the same but also facilitate free and frank discussion of perceptions of Russia and policy proposals in respect of it. These will be difficult waters to navigate, what is at stake is the EU's identity as a normative power and it will have to work hard to resist a retreat from normativity when trying to assert its power. Nonetheless, to address both the second and fourth failings, the fears of all its member states must be treated as real and not dismissed as symptomatic of Cold War thinking.

In respect of the last two failures, the EU must stay its course. It cannot allow Russia to drive it into a situation where it effectively has a right of veto over EU affairs. This is not to say the Russian perspective should be ignored. The EU should continue to offer space for dialogue but the boundaries and expectations of what might be achieved need to be clear from the outset. Putin has made clear that Russia wants to rewrite the rules of the post-Cold War international system⁶. It would be all too easy to dismiss this as the product of a repressive and outmoded leader but there are elements in Putin's foreign policy discourse that warrant reflection on the EU's part, not least whether the European security architecture, of which the EU is part, is fit for purpose and whether it is overly inclusive or exclusive. At the very least, such an exercise should carve out the necessary space for understanding the Russian viewpoint from a less reactive, more measured perspective. The EU must be instrumental in bringing about a wider discussion that includes NATO, the OSCE and the Council of Europe. This will locate discussions about expectations of non-EU members within the wider context and so insulate the EU against more focused and unreasonable criticism.

Existential Crises

2014 has delivered an unusually complex set of pressures, affirming some leaders' long-held views of Russia, challenging the views of others, forcing the EU to question the most basic elements of its relations with this challenging neighbour. The debates that the EU

5 In Valentino, Paolo (2014) 'Mogherini: Putin non rispetta i patti Ma la diplomazia resta l'unica strada'. *Corriere della Strada*, 1 Sept 2014, <http://www.corriere.it/esteri/14_settembre_01/mogherini-putin-non-rispetta-patti-ma-diplomazia-resta-l-unica-strada-90968ad6-3197-11e4-a94c-7f68b8e9ffdd.shtml>

6 See, for instance, his speech to the Valdai Club in October 2014, <http://valdaiclub.com/valdai_club/73300.html>

will inevitably already be engaged in are unenviable. For its member states and the EU itself, Russia represents a varying existential case. States such as Lithuania and Poland believe Russia is a threat to their very existence, signalled by their invocation of NATO's Article 4 obligation to consult if a member feels threatened. Others believe that being forced into a course of action that is antithetical to European values is itself an existential crisis, that what the EU does in respect of Russia must be consistent with its identity as a normative power or the EU will itself become undefined and undefinable. 2014 has brought the EU into tricky territory, exposing the fissures in the European integration project. This is not in and of itself necessarily a bad thing. How the EU responds might be.

In policy-making circles, a weighing up of Russia's actions will have long been underway. The scales are not balanced in Russia's favour, there is little in its actions in either its foreign or domestic environments to suggest a charitable analysis should hold sway. The voices of certain central and eastern European states look prophetic

in the face of Russia's annexation of Crimea, its green men, its support of separatists in eastern parts of Ukraine, its "humanitarian aid" convoys that do not respect borders and its swift breach of the Minsk agreements, as signalled by its support of separate elections in the break-away regions of Luhansk and Donetsk. At home, Russia has passed ever more repressive laws that actively deny the rights of the LGBT communities, NGOs, journalists and political dissenters. State control of mainstream and social media has been tightened and legislation passed that constitutes early steps in bordering the internet. The EU has let many of the developments within Russia pass with little comment, consistent with a respect for sovereignty, but more consistent with an acceptance that it can do little to halt this retreat from liberal democratic principles. 2014 will remain infamous for many things, but it is vital the EU realise that its normative identity will not be served by keeping its head in the sand. Events call for a clear-eyed gaze and frank, even if regretful, assessment of the EU–Russia relationship as it is and not how the EU wishes it could be.

About the Author

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ANALYSIS

Central Asia's Dilemmas and the Paradoxical Lessons of the Ukrainian Crisis

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Abstract

Factoring in Central Asia's perception of the Ukrainian crisis means above all acknowledging: 1. The lack of factual data such as sociological surveys on which an analysis could rely; and 2. accepting to put each element of the sentence in the plural: there are several Central Asias, and several Ukrainian crises. Each of the five Central Asian countries has its own perception of the Ukrainian crisis. Each of these perceptions is far from monolithic and can be divided into several components—very schematically, political regimes, intellectual elites and activists, and public opinion. And there are at least three Ukrainian crises—EuroMaidan, Crimea, and Eastern Ukraine—each with a distinct meaning: street revolution against a regime, annexation of part of the territory, and new secessionist conflict.

A Majority Pro-Russian Stance

In the five countries of Central Asia the political authorities have all issued relatively similar statements: all have appealed for a peaceful resolution to the crisis, and have called for the avoidance of military engagement and civilian victims. They have recognized the legitimacy

of the Crimean referendum, with Nazarbayev going as far as to call the government in Kiyv "neo-fascist." Only Kyrgyzstan has done some jockeying by first recognizing Maidan as a legitimate change of power, before going back on its declaration. This massive pro-Russian stance differs from that adopted by Central Asian states dur-