

Analysis

The EU and Russia: Stumbling from Summit to Summit

By Sabine Fischer, Paris

Abstract

Russia-EU relations are in crisis. The EU-Russia Summit on May 18 in Samara ended without tangible results, providing further evidence that both sides are drifting apart. The situation has not improved since then. By planting a Russian flag in a titanium capsule on the seabed under the North Pole, Moscow opened a new symbolic battlefield with “the West.” However, mutual economic and political interdependencies make it very unlikely that a “New Cold War” will emerge. At the same time, both sides have to change and adapt their policies if they want to return to a constructive partnership.

Tough Times for EU-Russia Relations

Relations between the EU and Russia today are in very bad shape. The two sides’ inability to open negotiations on the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) during the May Summit in Samara was only the latest evidence of the mounting problems, which have accumulated in recent years. Commentators on both sides interpret the latest developments (not only in EU-Russia relations, but in the relationship between Russia and “the West” in general) as the possible beginning of a “New Cold War.”

The German government, which had made the improvement and further development of relations with Russia one of the central goals of its EU presidency, finally had to accept a summit without tangible results. Repeating the experience of the Finnish presidency, Chancellor Angela Merkel had no choice but to announce relatively minor deals in the fields of trade and trans-border cooperation, while the burning problems remained unsolved. In contrast to preceding summits, however, both sides traded blows, openly demonstrating disagreements over political developments in Russia and the course of EU-Russian relations. With the Portuguese traditionally setting different geographic priorities for their EU presidency term, the meat issue between Russia and Poland unsolved and upcoming elections in Russia, it remains to be seen whether the parties will make much progress at the next summit in Mafra in the latter part of October 2007.

Bones of Contention

The concrete causes underlying the failure of the Samara Summit where the Polish-Russian meat conflict and the turmoil surrounding the movement of the Soviet war monument in the Estonian capital Tallinn at the end of April, shortly before Russia celebrated its traditional World War II Victory Day on May 9. The

meat issue had strained relations between Russia and Poland since autumn 2005, but came to the fore of the European debate when Warsaw issued a veto against the opening of the PCA negotiations in September 2006. While Moscow insisted that Polish meat did not meet Russian import standards, the Polish side accused Russia of abusing trade relations in order to exert political pressure. Extensive mediation attempts by the Finnish and German EU presidencies did not succeed in softening the parties’ positions. Until one month before the summit, Poland’s hard-line approach toward Russia had little support within the EU. Some of the other Central Eastern European members, namely the Baltic States and the Czech Republic, voiced cautious support without, however, explicitly joining the Polish veto. Other member states criticized the veto, expressing concerns about stable relations with Russia.

Shortly before the summit, and fortunately for the Polish Government, the meat issue was replaced as the main bone of contention by a far more symbolic conflict between Russia and Estonia. The Estonian government’s decision to transfer Tallinn’s Soviet war monument to a military cemetery outside the city center provoked harsh reactions among ethnic Russians in Estonia and from the Russian government. After violent demonstrations in Tallinn, Russian youth organizations close to the Kremlin besieged the Estonian embassy in Moscow, forcing the Estonian ambassador to leave the country temporarily. At that point, shortly before and during the Samara Summit, the EU finally reached a common position. While reactions to the movement of the war monument had been rather ambivalent, displaying approximately the same cleavages as responses to the Polish-Russian meat conflict, the unfriendly treatment of an ambassador representing an EU member state finally forced the other member states to rally around Estonia and clearly criticize Russian actions.

Both the meat and the monument conflicts seem to be temporary phenomena. However, they reveal structural changes in Russian and EU policies, which strongly affect their bilateral relationship.

The EU Takes a Harder Line on Russia

The Eastern dimension of the EU's foreign policy has undergone significant changes since the 2004 EU enlargement. After an initial period of re-orientation, these changes have become more tangible since summer 2006.

Before 2004, EU member states could be divided into two groups regarding relations with Russia. One group, containing some of the bigger member states like Germany and France, emphasized Russia's economic importance and supported a pragmatic relationship safeguarding EU economic interests instead of criticizing authoritarian tendencies in the Russian political system. The other group, most explicitly represented by Great Britain, denounced anti-democratic tendencies and human rights violations in Russian domestic politics and regularly – although with little effect – spoke out in favor of a tougher approach towards Moscow. However, between 1992 and 2004, no EU member perceived an immediate security threat emanating from Russia. As a consequence, the debate about Russia within the EU almost completely lacked classical geopolitical and security considerations. This de-securitized discourse on Russia came to an end with the accession of the Baltic States, Poland and the Czech Republic. Central European states and societies share a traumatic and violent history with Russia, which leads them to an extremely critical attitude towards Moscow and to a policy of “containment” of Russian influence in Europe.

The inclusion of the Central European perspective shapes the overall European political process on two levels. The new EU members pushed for a more active EU policy toward the states adjacent to EU and Russian borders. Furthermore, they took a much tougher stance in direct relations with Russia, on a bilateral as well as on the EU level. The new members saw the “Orange Revolution” in Ukraine as a window of opportunity to accelerate the democratization of a key country in the so-called “common neighborhood” and its closer alignment with the EU. From their perspective, such a development promised not only a desirable spread of democratic values beyond EU borders, but also a significant improvement of their national security. Consequentially, the Baltic States and Poland pushed vehemently for strong EU involvement to support the democratic forces in Ukraine during the conflict over the presidential elections, and they suc-

ceeded. After the victory of Viktor Yushchenko, they strongly supported the new Ukrainian government's attempt to build a democratic regional coalition with Georgia and Moldova outside the Russian sphere of influence. Domestic developments in Ukraine after the March 2006 elections, when Yushchenko lost much of his power, and the parallel stagnation of Ukraine's policy of democratic regional leadership weakened the regional vector of the new members' eastern policy. On a bilateral level, however, the influence of the new members on EU policy toward Russia has become stronger than ever.

Thus, enlargement has added a new dimension to the Russia-policy of the EU, which is characterized by strong historical and security components. The new Central European members have effectively influenced the development of the EU's relations with its big eastern neighbor several times since 2004. As a consequence, it has become even more difficult for the EU members to forge a united position regarding Russia. Combined with the EU's inability to adopt a constitution since the failed referenda in France and the Netherlands in 2005, the rise of the new members has led to paralysis of the Union's eastern policy. Nevertheless, after the European Council in June there is some hope for improvement. The compromise on a new treaty (replacing the constitutional project) promises to bring more unity to European foreign policy making, potentially strengthening the EU's position vis-à-vis Russia. However, the ultimate outcome of this project depends on further intergovernmental negotiations within the EU and its future remains uncertain.

Russia Has Less Respect for the EU

Russia's foreign policy has evolved in recent years as well. A new Russian self-consciousness as a global actor, an “energy superpower” and center of gravity in a multi-polar world shaped these changes. This development was accompanied by a changing image of the EU, which forms the basis of Russia's policy towards Brussels and the EU member states.

The *Russian Federation Foreign Policy Review*, published by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in March 2007, sheds light on Russia's current understanding of the EU. Economically, Russia still sees the EU as its most important partner. However, on the political level, the Review emphasizes bilateral relations with individual EU members. Not surprisingly, Russia particularly seeks to develop ties with countries that advocate a pragmatic Russia policy within the EU and figure as Russia's most important economic partners.

This policy marks a shift in the way the Russian elites perceive and talk about the EU. During the

1990s, Russia's leaders did not see the EU as an independent political actor on the international stage. However, at the beginning of his first term, Putin made economic and political relations with the EU his top priority, thus signaling Russia's new recognition of it as a political actor. At the same time, the EU expanded its foreign policy influence by further developing its Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and preparing its eastern enlargement, which boosted its political weight in the post-Soviet space. For a period of three to four years, Moscow's foreign policy elites seemed to be getting used to the idea that supranational institutions in Brussels could play a role independent from the member states' capitals.

Now, however, Moscow is less inclined to view the EU as an important actor. The reasons for this loss of interest are partly to be found within the EU, namely in the constitutional crisis and the paralysis of decision-making processes described above. But the shift also is a function of the fact that Moscow, according to its new self-understanding as a global power, claims to act with utmost independence. The harmonization of values and norms, which is at the core of EU identity and foreign policy, is contradictory to this concept. A third reason for the Russian elite's downgrading of the EU's status is the Russian leadership's changing understanding of global politics. The perceived decline of U.S. capacity to shape international developments according to American interests broadens Russia's room for maneuver. These two developments are perceived as mutually reinforcing and weaken, from a Russian perspective, the EU as a supranational actor. As a result, bilateralism is now the dominant approach in Russia's relations with the EU and its member states.

A Difficult Global Context

The global context of EU-Russian relations is reinforcing the growing distance between the two sides. This dimension has been gaining importance in recent years for several reasons: The U.S. has intensified its activities on the territory of the former Soviet Union in the framework of the global fight against terror – and by doing so has provoked increasing disapproval from Russia's leaders. Moscow is also concerned about the efforts of some of the Central Eastern European EU members to build up close relations with the U.S. The ongoing debate about deploying parts of an American global missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic has proved this once again. It has fuelled the historical conflicts between Moscow and its western neighbors, and added to the fragmentation of the EU's Russia policy. Additionally, Russia's new self-understanding, together with its changing perceptions

of the EU and the U.S., produce a greater readiness in Moscow to confront Washington on a global level. During Putin's first term, the EU seemed to replace the US as the focal point of Russian foreign policy, after the heavily U.S.-oriented Yeltsin years. Now, Russia has returned to a "U.S.-first" policy, without, however, necessarily striving for cooperation and mutual benefit. This new approach does not take into consideration the EU's transatlantic sensitivities. Global conflicts like Kosovo, Iran, and the missile defense system, in which Russia and the U.S. find themselves on opposite sides of the political fence, thus have an immediate impact on relations between Russia and the EU.

What Comes Next?

The current crisis does not imply a "failure" of Russia-EU relations. The assumption that a "New Cold War" is looming on the horizon between Russia and "the West" is simply wrong. Political and economic interdependencies alone, which have constantly been growing between Russia and the EU, but also the U.S. since 1992, do not allow for mutual isolation of both sides. The context of a globalized world, in which these interdependencies evolve, also prevents renewed isolation.

The current crisis is not the first, and maybe not even the worst, in the EU's relations with Russia. Surprisingly, historical memory does not seem to reach back to the quarrel between Russia and "the West" over the Kosovo War in 1999, which was solved not the least thanks to Putin's pragmatic approach before and after the terrorist attacks against the United States in September 2001. Nonetheless, Russia and the EU face a period of serious stagnation and conflict in their relationship, which is very unlikely to end before the presidential elections in Russia in March 2008.

Improving EU-Russian ties depends on a number of factors. Moscow has to find a constructive basis for its relations with the new EU members. Developments before and during the Russia-EU Summit in Samara made it very clear that the Central Eastern European member states have sufficient weight to influence decision making in Brussels to Moscow's detriment. Russia has clearly overestimated the potential of its bilateral approach, and this overreach is likely to repeat itself in the future.

The current EU with 27 members has to find a common position on what kind of relationship or partnership it wants to have with Russia. Achieving such a united position has only become more complicated as the union has grown. Furthermore, the EU should be aware of the fact that its policy can have geopolitical implications, which might not be intended collectively, but can be perceived as a potential threat by Russia.

The EU also has to recognize the limits of its influence on domestic developments (not only) in Russia and put this in due proportion to its goals. The EU must also take into account the global/transatlantic context of EU-Russia relations.

Quick solutions are not on the horizon and policy makers should think in terms of years rather than

months. At the same time, neither side can afford to turn its back on the other. Therefore, relations between Russia and the EU will not come to an end or fail, but develop more slowly and remain characterized by recurrent conflict in the foreseeable future.

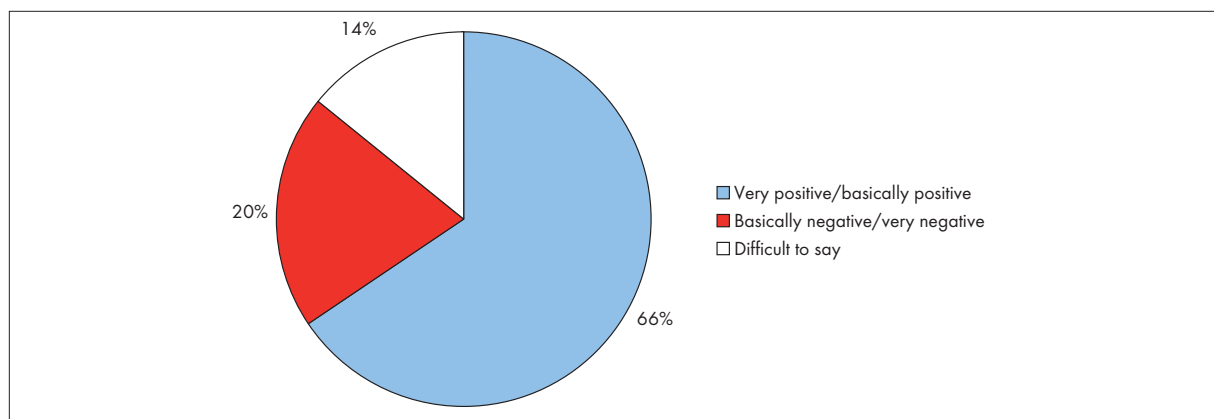
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Tables and Graphs

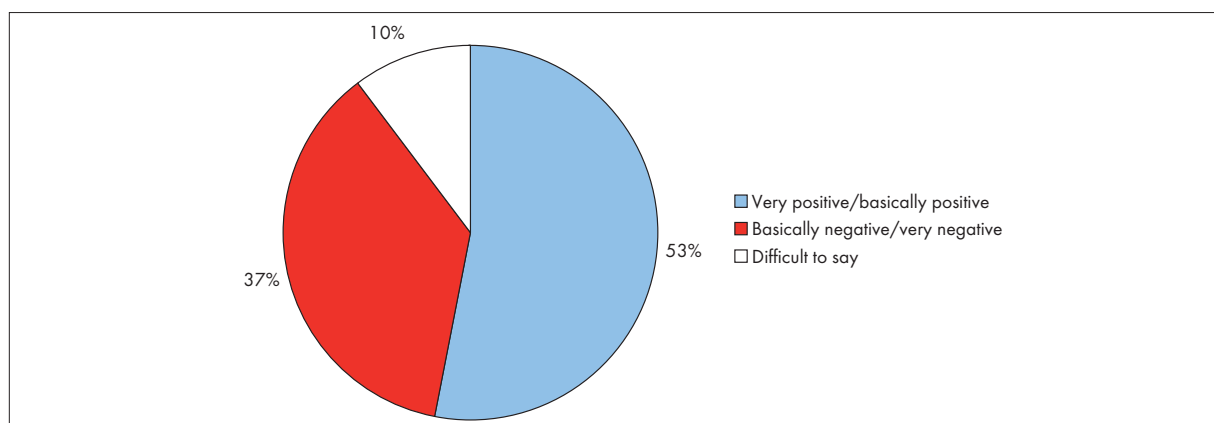
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On the Whole, What Are Your Feelings Towards the USA (August 2007)?



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