



Putting democracy at the heart of the EU's Russia strategy

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Abstract

It is high time for a fundamental review of the EU's strategy towards Russia. After years of fruitless attempts to 'reset' relations with Moscow through a kind of engagement that has all too often ended up in appeasement, the EU and its member states should prepare for a long stand-off and put democracy at the centre of the relationship. This means doing better at defending our democracy against hostile interference from the Kremlin, strengthening democratic movements and the rule of law in the EU's Eastern neighbourhood, supporting Russia's civil society with more determination and creativity, and mentally preparing for a democratic post-Putin Russia. In short, we have to offer more help to Russia's democrats and be more confrontational with the Kremlin. All this has to happen in close coordination with our transatlantic allies and as part of a global effort to support democrats and defend democracy against authoritarianism.

Keywords

EU, Russia, Civil society, Democracy, Rule of law, Putin

Introduction

The EU's policy on Russia under President Vladimir Putin has gone through spurts and spasms ever since 2014—the watershed year when the Kremlin's toxic aggression became obvious to a larger audience in Europe and the US. The EU's responses since then have been affected by the disunity on this subject among the member states and therefore have lacked strategic cohesiveness. The events of 2020 and 2021 could become the next watershed moment. The Kremlin's murderous actions against opposition leader

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Alexei Navalny and the reawakening of Russian civil society upon his return, as well as the aftermath of the humiliating Moscow visit by EU High Representative Josep Borrell in early February 2021, offer an excellent opportunity to fundamentally revise the EU's Russia strategy. The spring and summer of 2021 could—and should—become the moment when the EU rises to the challenge with a more unified approach, comprising a more realistic assessment of the character of the Kremlin's regime and the opposition to it, and a more forward-looking appraisal of Russia's democratic future. Supporting Russia's democrats should become a central feature of the EU's new Russia strategy (Stelzenmüller 2021).

The global context in which this should happen is complex. At the beginning of the third decade of the twenty-first century, it looks very likely that the global struggle between liberal democracy and authoritarianism will be one of the decisive conflicts of our near and mid-term future. On the one hand, COVID-19 has sapped much of the pre-pandemic strength of Europe's economies and societies and continues to consume considerable political energy. Four years of Donald Trump in the White House have deeply unsettled European elites and public opinion regarding the future of the West. The persistence of nativist political parties and autocratic governments in the EU itself continues to inhibit its external support of the rule of law and good governance. On the other hand, however, the robust stance of new US President Joe Biden with regard to Russia, as well as his support for global democracy and his intention to form an alliance of democracies, is excellent news for a revised and more transatlantic approach to relations with Russia and helping democrats in Eastern Europe.

Until High Representative Borrell's Moscow visit in February 2021, the yard-stick of the EU's post-2014 Russia policy consisted of the 'Five Guiding Principles', sometimes also called the Mogherini Principles, of 2016 (European Parliament Think Tank 2018). These were

- full implementation of the Minsk agreements regarding Ukraine,
- closer ties with Russia's 'former Soviet' neighbours,
- strengthening EU resilience to Russian threats,
- selective engagement with Russia on certain issues such as counterterrorism, and
- support for people-to-people contacts.

Like all EU policies, these points represent a compromise—in this case between member states which wanted to be much more ambitious in confronting the Kremlin and those which were hesitant to accept even these principles. But having said that, and in light of the Borrell visit and the Kremlin's doubling down on oppression at home and aggression abroad, it is high time for a re-examination. A closer look at the principles—and their implementation in the last four years—shows how outdated they are. First, the Minsk process is going nowhere because the Kremlin has never taken it seriously. From the outset the EU's mistake was to treat the chief aggressor, Russia, as a mediator between the

victim (the Kyiv government) and Moscow's own satraps (the two 'people's republics' in the Donbas). The second principle, to demand closer ties to the countries of the former USSR, needs to be followed up by much more ambitious action. In addition, the reference to the Soviet Union has to go: these are Eastern neighbours and partners of the EU, full stop. Principle three, strengthening the EU's resilience, is a worthy goal, and there have been partial successes. However, as long as the EU's biggest member state, Germany, still pretends that Nord Stream 2 is a worthwhile project and has nothing to do with the Kremlin's geopolitical schemes, and as long as others remain wide open to Russian influence and money laundering, the strengthening of resilience will not get very far. Principle four, selective engagement, is certainly in order as long as there is agreement on what exactly it should cover, but in reality it has turned out to be little more than a licence for individual countries to cooperate with Russia in whatever field seems appropriate to them. We have seen where this can lead in the examples of Austria, Cyprus and Hungary, among others. Finally, support for people-to-people contacts and Russian civil society is a good principle but has been followed up with too little ambition.

This article postulates that the key paradigm for a new Russia strategy for the EU is democracy: supporting Russia's democrats and treating Russia as a future democratic polity. In order to put this idea at the centre of a strategic revision of its Russia policy, I propose four steps. First, to confront authoritarianism and Kremlin influence in the EU itself. Second, to strengthen democracy among Russia's neighbours. Third, to help Russia's democrats. Finally to prepare, at least mentally, for a democratic Russia that we and the rest of the world can work with.

Improving our resilience

The EU's support for democracy in Russia begins at home, just as the defence of democracy in the West begins with the international solidarity of democrats. If the Kremlin's domestic oppression and external aggression are two sides of the same coin, so are our democratic resilience and our ability and determination to render global democracy support. The world watches very closely what is happening in Western democracies. Autocrats want the world, and their own opposition, to know how all-powerful they are, and how liberal democracies are weak, hypocritical and doomed to fail. Every weakening of the rule of law in the EU itself is an open invitation to autocrats to double down and ridicule EU appeals for good governance and attempts to include rule-of-law conditionality in bilateral and multilateral agreements. Every instance of successful strategic corruption, such as the Nord Stream 2 project, is an encouragement to continue to weaken and split Euro-Atlantic institutions and chip away at the resolve of their member states.

The EU can forget about being a global player and supporting international norms without the internal enforcement of its values. It is of secondary relevance whether the weakening of the values is caused or promoted more by internal or external factors: it is the undermining of checks and balances in countries such as Hungary and Poland, among others, which is having disastrous effects (Freudenstein 2020). The same is true for elite capture by authoritarian powers, as in the cases of Czech President Miloš Zeman (*Radio*

Prague International 2016), former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (Polyakova et al. 2016) and former British Prime Minister David Cameron (Pickard and Payne 2020). All have been accused of having indirect financial ties to the Kremlin and/or the Chinese government and their front organisations or companies, and all have been vocal proponents of Western appeasement vis-à-vis these actors.

The money laundering by Kremlin oligarchs that is happening in places such as Vienna, Nicosia and Budapest has only just begun to be tackled by national authorities (US Department of State 2017). It is high time for a unified approach in the EU as to what constitutes money laundering, the creation of a central whistle-blower institution and a renewed effort to create guidelines for all member states.

The situation is slightly better concerning direct Kremlin support for radical political movements and parties, such as France's National Rally (Rassemblement National, formerly Front National) or Greece's Popular Association – Golden Dawn (Λαϊκός Σύνδεσμος – Χρυσή Αυγή)—at least this problem is widely discussed in public. On countering Russian disinformation, there has also been some progress, with several national foreign ministries creating strategic communication task forces, thereby bolstering the work of the European External Action Service (EEAS) team that has now been in place for several years. In any event, whatever governments do, the centrepiece of our response to hostile influence from the Kremlin has to be civil society: think tanks, political parties, foundations, media and networks such as Bellingcat.

Enabling the neighbours: strengthening democracies in the Eastern neighbourhood

The rise of democracies and democratic movements in Russia's 'near abroad', also known as its 'sphere of privileged interest', or, more simply and almost equally insultingly to the countries concerned, the 'former USSR', has been one of the main foreign-policy headaches for the Kremlin. In fact, these developments are seen as an existential threat by Putin and his regime (Freudenstein 2015). The very simple reason for this is that if democratic movements can overpower autocrats in the countries around Russia, and democracy and the rule of law can succeed in making these countries safer and richer in the long run, then Russians will be encouraged to resist the Kremlin in Russia itself.

The latest example of this is the interaction between democrats in Belarus and Russia after the seriously fraudulent elections in August 2020 in Belarus. The country had looked to be the most stable dictatorship among the six EU Eastern Partners, with the vast majority of its population sullenly accepting the autocracy of Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenko. However, in 2020 a broad-based democratic resistance movement was born which has managed to prevail despite repeated crackdowns and, more than two hundred days down the line, shows no sign of disappearing. Hardly anyone still believes that Lukashenko can manage to return the country to its former 'stability'. Major changes are inevitable; it is not a question of if, but when he will lose power.

The protests in Russia following the arrest of Alexei Navalny in early 2021, the biggest since 2011–12, are very clearly linked to the Belarusian protests of 2020. Russian democrats have taken both courage and methodology from the Belarusians. At the same time, it can be argued that the Kremlin has also learned from Lukashenko how to suppress protesters. But the most important point for the EU's future Eastern strategy is that strengthening the rule of law and/or supporting democracy movements in Russia's neighbouring countries strengthens democrats in Russia itself.

The EU's primary instrument in this regard has, since 2009, been the Eastern Partnership (EaP). The EaP began as a Polish–Swedish initiative in the EU Council before becoming an official policy of the Union exercised by the Commission within the Eastern Neighbourhood policy, with the EEAS at least nominally in charge. Like its parliamentary arm, Euronest, the EaP has been much better than nothing at strengthening democracy in Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia—at least, it has not let these countries fall prey as quickly as they might have to the Kremlin and other authoritarian forces. Summarising the different EaP review and reform processes in recent years, the consensus in Brussels and the national capitals is that the EU must take a more tailor-made (i.e. less one-size-fits-all) approach to the six target countries and place a stronger emphasis on good governance and supporting civil society. But again, there is only so much that the EU institutions themselves, for example, through the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights, can do to strengthen democrats in the East. In this regard, the creation of the European Endowment for Democracy in 2013, at arm's length from the Commission, Parliament and EEAS, was a blessing because it has proven to be much more flexible and less bureaucratic than EU institutions in helping small, local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and media in the EaP countries, and recently also in Russia itself.

Bilateral national initiatives, especially from the more easterly member states, carry at least as much weight as the EU's policy instruments, both on the people-to-people level and also in government-to-government relations. Security cooperation with Ukraine is a case in point: individual member states such as Poland have contributed significantly to its military strength, which is part of its democratic resilience. Most importantly, it is imperative that any idea of 'Russia first' regarding the EU's eastern neighbours—that is, giving the Kremlin a de facto veto over our relations with the six, a reflex that still exists in a few member state capitals—is abandoned for good.

Supporting the unsupported: reaching out to Russia's democrats

Much of what the EU needs to do for democracy in the EaP countries is also true for Russia. Nowhere, with the exception of Belarus, has the crackdown on civil society in recent years been as drastic as in Russia itself. In some respects, the Kremlin's actions against its own citizens have been worse than those in Belarus. For more than 10 years Russia's democrats have been increasingly under attack. Important legal changes

complicating civic activism and eventually driving out most foreign NGOs began in 2012 with the ‘foreign agents law’, which put strong shackles on any entity receiving support from abroad, and the law on ‘undesirable organisations’, which essentially prohibited the existence of some NGOs. The obvious trigger at the time was the 2011 mass demonstrations in Russian cities against election fraud, which shocked Putin. While cracking down on genuine civil society, the Kremlin has also built up a network of ‘governmentally organised’ NGOs which are lavishly supported by the regime, both financially and politically.

Russian civil society and its genuine NGOs have reacted in multiple ways to this oppression. They have developed new ways of financing, often through crowdfunding in Russia itself. They have also adapted their business models, sometimes creating revenue by providing social services, such as family support or searching for missing persons. They have explored new topics alongside the demand for democratic structures. Navalny and his movement have proven that the Kremlin’s systemic corruption is an issue that resonates with Russians far beyond democracy as an abstract concept. A video of Putin’s palace in Sochi, meticulously produced by the pro-Navalny Anti-Corruption Foundation, has been seen by sizeable parts of Russia’s population who had not previously had anything to do with protests. Navalny’s concept of ‘smart voting’ is another such innovation: instead of nominating candidates of its own, the Navalny movement simply makes recommendations as to which non-Kremlin candidates have the best chances of winning elections. This worked to an extent in the 2020 local elections and is making the Kremlin visibly nervous in the run-up to the State Duma elections of September 2021. As long as Lukashenko-style fraud does not occur during those elections, the opposition stands a chance in many constituencies. And if such fraud does take place, the ensuing protests may well reach or surpass the scale of those of 2011–12. Despite and often even because of the authorities’ crackdowns, Russia’s civil society and democratic opposition have developed a degree of resilience that enables them to survive under very extreme conditions. As well as corruption, environmental concerns and particularly residents’ rights in urban areas have recently become topics of interest to Russia’s new NGOs. This focus on the real-life problems of ordinary Russians and their very acute feelings of injustice has allowed these activists to overcome, at least in part, the isolation from the rest of society that the Kremlin wanted to achieve for them (von Ow-Freytag 2018; Havlíček 2021).

EU support for Russia’s democrats has to take into account both the democrats’ new resilience and their more difficult working conditions. Direct financial support is often not advisable because it only exposes them to further persecution. But there are more indirect ways of supporting Russia’s democrats, for example, through visas and scholarships. In this respect, the EU needs a completely new impetus, with a strategic approach to travel facilitation. Support for governmentally organised NGOs must end, in any case.

Furthermore, the EU’s sanctions policy needs to become both broader and more effective, targeting not only officials who are implicated in the crackdown on human rights but also oligarchs who are crucial to the regime. As to officials, the list of targets for travel bans and asset freezes should not only comprise *siloviki* (i.e. operatives in the

police and intelligence services), but civilians in the justice system too, down to the individual judges sentencing political prisoners. The EU should also consider an automation that, for example, puts such judges on the list without the EEAS having to go through a cumbersome procedure to gain the agreement of all the member states.

Finally, every vocal condemnation of illegal crackdowns, violence, arrests and imprisonment from EU leaders, national governments and institutions such as the European Court of Human Rights or the Council of Europe counts. These may not result in the reversal of legislation or the liberation of prisoners, but they do counter the eternal narrative of oppressive regimes vis-à-vis their opponents: that allegedly, in the rest of the world, ‘no one cares’, and that ‘you are completely alone’. Debunking this propaganda is a very important function of international protests.

In all this, our main focus should be young Russians—tomorrow’s leaders. Among the youngest voters (18–24 years old), approval and disapproval of Putin are currently equal (*Moscow Times* 2021). Among this generation fearlessness, creativity and an extremely strong attachment to non-material values are combining in a powerful blend that deserves all the outside support we can provide (*Economist* 2016).

Thinking the possible: imagining a democratic Russia

Russians do not have a genetic inability to build a democratic state. Obviously, the Russian democrats’ struggle for a free country is bound to be long and hard. As of today, it is impossible to predict when Putin will leave the stage. But no matter whether that moment comes in a few months or years, or a decade down the line, we should start preparing now for a democratic Russia.

There is certainly no guarantee that Russia will become a democracy after Putin’s departure. It is, however, a distinct possibility. Another thing is equally clear: with Putin in power, nothing will fundamentally improve. Russia’s trajectory over the last 20 years has demonstrated that. Of course, it cannot be ruled out that Russians will not freely elect ‘another Putin’. But looking at Russia’s current opposition, including its hero, Alexei Navalny, the dominant spirit among the anti-Kremlin forces is virtually the exact opposite of that of the ex-KGB officer who worked in the shadows for many years, expanding corruption instead of fighting and exposing it, and ignoring and even rejecting universal human rights and liberal democracy instead of embracing them.

The EU and its member states should use the current momentum for a strategic revision vis-à-vis Russia to formulate a set of criteria by which to recognise fundamental change in Moscow. In my view, there are three basic factors. First, there needs to be evidence of a modicum of democratic standards—in other words, some rudimentary public accountability, transparency, and checks and balances between the branches of government, as well as respect for human and civil rights. Second, Moscow needs to end the threats and hybrid aggression against Russia’s neighbours—and that includes recognition of their full independence and sovereignty. Third, there must be an end to the

hybrid interference in the West. In fact, if the change is real, the distinction between the second and third points will entirely disappear, and both spheres will be treated equally. Of course, there is a danger that not all three criteria will be fulfilled at the same speed. To maintain a cohesive stance that combines ‘carrots and sticks’ at that moment will therefore be another tough test for European and transatlantic unity.

Conclusion

EU institutions, national governments and civil society in the Union must all cooperate to tackle the challenge of developing a new Russia strategy which puts democracy at its centre. We should constantly remind ourselves that a democratic Russia is in our deepest interest. Moreover, supporting Russia’s democrats and preparing for the coming Russian democracy is part of the global battle between democracy and authoritarianism which is likely to mark the decade ahead. Future historians may well look back upon February 2021 as the time when the EU began to get its act together on Russia. There is no time to waste.

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