



EU dialogue with Russian society: A reality check

European View
2021, Vol. 20(2) 220–225
© The Author(s) 2021
DOI: 10.1177/17816858211050130
journals.sagepub.com/home/euv



Robert Pszczel

Abstract

Engagement with Russian civil society is the least contested part of the EU's current and expected future approach to Russia. There is broad agreement on the need to conduct a dialogue with Russian citizens and to facilitate people-to-people contacts, as well as to support civil society as such. However, this general goal is not fully matched by a clear understanding of what the basic features and sentiments of Russian society are today. This article seeks to sketch an unvarnished picture of Russian society, knowledge of which is essential for the effective design and successful conduct of any engagement activities (their formats, channels of communication and content). The key problems include the lack of enthusiasm among ordinary Russians for the European project, and their growing confusion—fuelled by authoritarian control and disinformation—about European institutions and norms.

Keywords

EU, Russia, Civil society, Engagement, Public opinion, Europe

Introduction

The European political world is still reverberating with echoes of the recent spat induced by the last-minute initiative of French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel to convince other EU member states ahead of the 24–5 June European Council meeting to restart high-level meetings with Russia (Fleming et al. 2021). Egos have been bruised, and accusations of a lack of European solidarity and disregard for the opinions of Central and Eastern European countries, as well as counter-claims about a lack of realism, are flying high and low. This debate will no doubt go on, but the immediate task should be to fill with substance those elements of the EU's Russia policy which either have been agreed or have officially been put on the table.

Corresponding author:

Robert Pszczel, Fundacja im. Kazimierza Pułaskiego, ul. Oleandrów 6, 00-629 Warsaw, Poland.
Email: office@pulaski.pl



The most concrete and promising elements are included in the new policy prescription presented by High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell on 16 June. Developed together with the European Commission, this Joint Communication on EU–Russia relations is built around three main pillars: (1) pushing back, (2) constraining and (3) engaging (European Commission 2021). The 24–5 June European Council meeting took into account this report in its discussion on EU–Russia relations (European Council 2021, 6).

This paper focuses on the third pillar of the Joint Communication from the point of view of the intended addressee, that is, Russia, or more specifically, the Russian people. Such engagement includes two parts: the relationship with the Russian authorities (this topic will be left to one side as it is worthy of a separate analysis) and the relationship with the broader Russian civil society. In a recent blog post, for example, High Representative Borrell (2021) emphasised:

Crucially, we [the EU] must continue to engage with Russian civil society and citizens. Our quarrel is with the policy choices of the Russian government, not the Russian people. So, we should strengthen people-to-people contacts, which could include more visa facilitation for young people, academics, or other cross-border exchanges. We must continue to support Russian civil society and human rights defenders and be more flexible and creative in the way we do so.

The giant of the Renaissance, Leonardo da Vinci, is famously credited with the advice that ‘Nothing can be loved or hated unless it is first understood.’ It certainly makes sense for the EU to follow this credo in its relationship with Russia by taking a closer look at Russian society. This article argues that, currently, Russian society does not closely resemble its European counterparts. Its dominant frames of reference are geared more to the past than to the future. Moreover, the authoritarian model of governance in the country complicates efforts to hold an authentic dialogue with truly independent representatives of civil society. This calls for a modest and tailored approach, while keeping more ambitious goals of engagement for the future.

Europeanness in Russia

Instinctively, many observers hope that the Kremlin’s disdain for European norms, values and traditions (e.g. the rule of law, human dignity, individual rights and freedom of speech) is not reflected in Russian society. Protests are apparently inevitable (Lemon 2020). Under conditions of real freedom, it is assumed that Russians would choose the European vision and opt for shared values. Much attention is given (for good reason) to those Russians who are fighting to transform Russia into a normal European country, who seem to epitomise such a vision. The EU’s own Agreement for Partnership and Cooperation with Russia, concluded in 1997, speaks of ‘the historical links existing between the Communities, its Member States and Russia and the common values that they share’ (Official Journal of the European Communities 1997, 1).

The problem is that at present the evidence offered by the Levada Center, a non-political Russian polling and sociological research organisation, suggests something

different. In 2021 only 29% of Russians considered Russia a European country (down from 52% in 2008), and even fewer feel themselves to be European (27%; down from 35% in 2008) (*Levada Center* 2021a). What is perhaps most depressing is the fact that such sentiments are even stronger among the youngest group of Russian adults (aged 18–24)—a bare 23% in that age group regard Russia as a European country, while a whopping 74% do not see themselves as European (*Levada Center* 2021a).

Another poll conducted by the Levada Centre, this time asking Russians to name their preferred prominent personalities in the world, does not inspire optimism either. Not for the first time, former Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin tops the list (39%), followed by his predecessor Vladimir Lenin, then Russian poet Alexander Pushkin and Tsar Peter the Great (*Levada Center* 2021b). Russian President Vladimir Putin is high in the rankings too (even if slipping), and the only non-Russians include Albert Einstein with 9%, followed by Napoleon Bonaparte and Adolf Hitler (each with 5%) (*Levada Center* 2021b). By choosing such role models (in particular those responsible for millions of deaths), Russian society seems quite far away in its sentiments from the European mainstream. It is no wonder that 70% of respondents support the idea of reviving Gulag-like prison labour in Russia (*The Moscow Times* 2021).

This bleak picture is reinforced by the Russians' stated preference for events that generate pride (*Levada Center* 2020). The Soviet Union's victory over Nazi Germany in the Second World War comes first, followed by Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Crimea region in 2014 and the Soviet/Russian conquest of space.

Implications of the data

All these indicators point to a society that is stuck in the past. The shadow of the empire hangs over ordinary Russians (i.e. admiration of Stalin, and almost religious pride in the Second World War victory and the annexation of Crimea). The lack of confidence in Europe can be linked to this as well—the world has moved on but Russia has not moved with it. Of course, the Kremlin has reinforced and nurtured such sentiments through its anti-democratic and anti-European policies, never missing an opportunity to belittle European unity and the value of its institutions. Most recently in an opinion editorial, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov compared Europeans to a choir mindlessly following the lead vocalist, that is, the US (Lavrov 2021). In addition, in his zeal to denigrate Europe, Lavrov even falsely claimed that European schools teach that Jesus was bisexual (Lavrov 2021).

This imperial nostalgia comes at a price. Russian historian Mikhael Khodarkovsky is probably right to argue that the lack of democracy in Russia is a hangover from the loss of its empire. And this creates a negative feedback loop—without dropping this imperial sentiment Russians are not likely to improve the state of democracy in their country. As Andrei Kolesnikov puts it: there can be no modernisation without de-Stalinisation (Kolesnikov 2021). But how can this happen when the state is de facto criminalising the search for objective history? A recent piece of legislation approved by Putin forbids making comparisons between Stalin's Soviet Union and Hitler's Germany (Parfitt 2021), as

if the 1939 Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact and its secret protocol, which divided Central and Eastern Europe into Nazi and Soviet spheres of influence, was never concluded.

Russian society is clearly suffering from a deficiency of democracy. Russia is progressively being turned into a dictator's dream, what some commentators have called a 'managed administrative utopia' (Meduza 2021). Russia's best and brightest are either abroad or in prison—and the silent majority is losing its appetite for protest. The State Duma elections in September 2021 were the least competitive in modern history, with only a token number of opposition candidates being allowed to stand. Access to information—the essential nourishment for free debate and scrutiny of rulers, and a key ingredient in opinion-forming—is becoming severely restricted (Tkachev 2021). A National Surveillance Programme is also being developed, modelled on the Chinese camera-state (Коммерсантъ 2021). And all this is happening in the open, with Kremlin-linked figures such as Vladislav Surkov (former deputy prime minister and adviser to Vladimir Putin) even trying to present an ideological justification for reduced liberties ('An overdose of freedom is lethal to a state') (Foy 2021).

Russian society is thus deprived of any real political choice, is suffering from political apathy and, thanks to the Kremlin's constant propaganda barrage, continues to distrust those who are branded as external and internal enemies. In short, it is politically disoriented and traumatised.

Moreover, the implied deal of the first decade of Putin's rule (i.e. accept 'managed democracy' in return for improved standards of living and modernisation) is no longer on the table. Corruption is rampant, and social and economic inequalities are reaching unacceptable levels: according to some estimates the 500 richest individuals in Russia own half of the nation's wealth (Prokofief 2021). The real monthly wage median in the country (after accounting for the Moscow discrepancy) is a paltry 25,000 roubles (or €290 at the early July exchange rate) (RTVI Новосту 2021). Ordinary people are preoccupied less with new holidays abroad than with the rising price of energy and poor infrastructure. It is no wonder that, during his latest Direct Line public conversation, Putin was asked to intervene personally on issues of leaking pipes and firemen's salaries. Climate change (long downplayed by the authorities) is leading to the literal collapse of buildings in Russia's north. The 'shadow economy' is not shrinking—people do not trust the authorities, and they cannot function properly in a legal framework that is ridden with chaos and corruption. Political obsessions with conspiracy theories are even blocking regional development, as in the Kaliningrad region (Goble 2021). Yes, the Russian people are a sturdy lot—but with everything that is going on around them they are trying to cling to what they have, rather than dreaming of a Russia that is catching up with EU countries in terms of affluence and quality of life.

As if all of the above was not enough, Russia is currently reeling from the worsening pandemic situation. The number of COVID-19 cases, particularly those of the Delta variant, is growing. The Kremlin's disinformation campaign against foreign vaccines has come back to bite Russia with a vengeance—many Russians, traditionally distrustful of the government, are even more reluctant to get a dose of the local Sputnik V vaccine (of which there are shortages anyway).

Conclusion

So how do you develop ‘people-to-people contacts’ between the EU and Russia in such conditions? Some experts suggest ensuring ‘the survival of Russian civil society’ by preparing ‘to host Russian political emigrants’ in our countries and providing some form of support ‘for the repressed that remain in Russia’ (Domanska 2021). Selective visa liberalisation may be a sensible policy too. And on top of that, the EU and the rest of the Western community must do more to undermine the Kremlin’s hold over the Russian people’s access to information. But perhaps most importantly, the level of ambition should be modest and realistic—for now. Once Russian society is able to heal itself and Russia regains the respect of its neighbours, a real and in-depth conversation will become possible, and the topics of such dialogue could even include issues of integration (as argued by Sławomir Debski of the Polish Institute of Foreign Affairs) and convergence.

Right now, however, whatever the EU chooses to do, it must be aware that engaging with Russian society today means dealing with a traumatised, disoriented and generally distrustful nation. Russians’ ability and freedom to self-express and identify their own real interests are severely hampered by authoritarian pressure. Moreover, any channels or frameworks for communication might be tainted by Soviet-like interference from the state apparatus. One should also keep these conditions in mind when forced into conversations with representatives of the Russian regime, for they are the ones who are responsible for the current predicament of Russian society.

References

- Borrell, J. (2021). How to deal with Russia? EEAS blog, 28 June. https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/100901/How%20to%20deal%20with%20Russia. Accessed 13 July 2021.
- Domanska, M. (2021). How the EU can engage Russian civil society. *Carnegie Europe*, 29 June. <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/84858>. Accessed 13 July 2021.
- European Commission. (2021). *Joint communication on EU–Russia relations: Push back, constrain and engage*. Communication, JOIN (2021) 20 final, 16 June. https://ec.europa.eu/info/files/joint-communication-eu-russia-relations_en. Accessed 13 July 2021.
- European Council. (2021). European Council meeting (24 and 25 June 2021) – Conclusions. EUCO 7/21, 25 June. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/50763/2425-06-21-euco-conclusions-en.pdf>. Accessed 14 July 2021.
- Fleming, S., Pop, V., Khan, M., Peel, M., & Foy, H. (2021). Berlin and Paris propose reset for EU relations with Moscow. *Financial Times*, 23 June. <https://www.ft.com/content/03528026-8fa1-4910-ab26-41cd26404439>. Accessed 13 July 2021.
- Foy, H. (2021). Vladislav Surkov: ‘An overdose of freedom is lethal to a state’. *Financial Times*, 18 June. <https://www.ft.com/content/1324acbb-f475-47ab-a914-4a96a9d14bac>. Accessed 13 July 2021.
- Goble, P. (2021). Kaliningrad elites selling out Russia for German money, Shulgin says. *Window on Eurasia*, 21 June. <http://windowoneurasia2.blogspot.com/2021/06/kaliningrad-elites-selling-out-russia.html>. Accessed 13 July 2021.
- Kolesnikov, A. (2021). Похороны Сталина – продолжение. Как память о войне и репрессиях превратилась в два разделяющих дискурса. *Carnegie Moscow*, 28 June. <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/84853>. Accessed 13 July 2021.

- Коммерсантъ*. (2021). Обзор с пристрастием. 16 June. <https://www.kommersant.Ru/doc/4857301>. Accessed 13 July 2021.
- Lavrov, S. (2021). The law, the rights and the rules. *Russia in Global Affairs*, 28 June. <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/the-law-the-rights-and-the-rules/>. Accessed 13 July 2021.
- Lemon, J. (2020). 45 percent of Russians support anti-Putin protests while just 17 percent oppose demonstrations: Poll. *Newsweek*, 28 July. <https://www.newsweek.com/45-percent-russians-support-anti-putin-protests-while-just-17-percent-oppose-demonstrations-poll-1521078>. Accessed 26 August 2021.
- Levada Center*. (2020). Gordost i identichnost. 19 October. <https://www.levada.Ru/2020/10/19/gordost-i-identichnost/>. Accessed 13 July 2021.
- Levada Center*. (2021a). Russia and Europe. Press release, 22 March. <https://www.Levada.ru/en/2021/03/22/russia-and-europe/>. Accessed 13 July 2021.
- Levada Center*. (2021b). Самые выдающиеся личности в истории. 21 June. <https://www.levada.Ru/2021/06/21/samye-vydayushiesya-lichnosti-v-istorii/>. Accessed 13 July 2021.
- Meduza*. (2021). Intolerable competition: What fuels the Russian authorities' perpetual legitimacy crisis. 25 June. <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2021/06/25/intolerable-competition>. Accessed 13 July 2021.
- Official Journal of the European Communities. (1997). *Agreement on partnership and cooperation*. OJ L327 (28 November), 3. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A21997A1128%2801%29>. Accessed 26 August 2021.
- Parfitt, T. (2021). Vladimir Putin bans comparisons between Soviets and Nazi Germany in Second World War. *The Times*, 1 July. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/vladimir-putin-bans-comparisons-between-soviets-and-nazi-germany-in-second-world-war-wtdtw6g9n>. Accessed 13 July 2021.
- Prokofief, D. (2021). Федерация Трех толстяков. Новая газета. *Novaya Gazeta*, 16 June. <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2021/06/16/federatsiia-trekh-tolstiaikov>. Accessed 13 July 2021.
- RTVI Новости*. (2021). Наталья Зубаревич: когда государство пугается, оно начинает немножко доиться // Вы держитесь! YouTube, 29 May. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KbQEzU3XxPg>. Accessed 13 July 2021.
- The Moscow Times*. (2021). 7 in 10 Russians support reviving 'Gulag' prison labor—Poll. 1 June. <https://www.Themoscowtimes.com/2021/06/01/7-in-10-russians-support-reviving-gulag-prison-labor-poll-a74068>. Accessed 13 July 2021.
- Tkachev, I. (2021). The X-files: How the Russian state is creeping underground. *Riddle*, 1 June. <https://www.ridl.io/en/the-x-files-how-the-russian-state-is-creeping-underground/>. Accessed 13 July 2021.

Author biography



Robert Pszczel is a Senior Fellow with the Pulaski Foundation, Warsaw. He is a former diplomat and NATO official; he served as Director of the NATO Information Office in Moscow in the period 2010–15.