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Russia and Europe: An Imbalanced Relationship

by ROGER E. KANET

For the past decade and a half the relationship between Russia and the European Union has been one between two quite different types of political entities. On the one hand, Russia was a new political actor—though a traditional state and one that had inherited a complex set of historical relationships and commitments—in the middle stages of economic and political freefall. Although Moscow still commanded massive nuclear military capabilities, its economic and financial situation throughout the 1990s was dire. However, since former President Boris Yeltsin's selection of Vladimir Putin as his successor, Russia's fortunes have improved dramatically. In part, this resulted from good fortune and the escalating demand for and price of petroleum and natural gas on the world market; in part, it stems from President Putin's successful reimposition of central control over the political and economic structures across the vast area of the Russian Federation, regardless of the cost in terms of human rights and democracy. Russia's resurgence as a major power during the past decade has brought with it a reaffirmation of assertiveness in its relations with other states—both those within its stated sphere of influence and those further from Russian territory. The revival of Russia's economy has made such resurgence possible. Russia remains very much a traditional power whose leadership views the world from a power political perspective, much as does US leadership in Washington.

The European Union differs from the Russian Federation on virtually all counts. First, and possibly most important, is the fact that the EU is not a state and does not, therefore, have the integrated decision-making organs and processes of a state. Despite commitments to develop a common foreign

and defense policy, in no way does the European Union pursue a common policy on issues of central importance to individual member states, such as the nature of relations with the Russian Federation or, for that matter, with the United States. The hesitant and halting response to the August 2008 Russian military intervention in Georgia is but the most recent example of the difficulty for the members of the EU to agree on a policy when major issues are concerned. Is Russia, first and foremost, a looming threat to European security, as most of the new members and some of the older ones argue, or rather, is Russia to be viewed primarily as the solution to Europe's future energy problems, as other member states maintain? Moreover, while Russian leaders control a top-down decision-making process and view the world largely through the *realpolitik* lens of nineteenth century European political elites, many of the members of the European Union take a post-modern perspective that emphasizes cooperation, negotiation and the peaceful resolution of differences, rather than the resort to traditional power political approaches to dealing with differences.

We will focus here on those factors that have influenced the evolving relationship between the Russian Federation and the European Union. It is important at the outset to note that this relationship is complicated by the fact that Russia has attempted to ignore the existence of the EU and has dealt as much as possible with individual EU states—as in negotiations with Germany, Bulgaria and Italy for the construction of gas pipelines under the Baltic and Black Seas. In fact, even before the August 2008 Russian invasion of Georgia, the nature of relations with the Russian Federation was a divisive issue within the European Union, as new members such as Poland and Estonia criticized their EU partners for downplaying the importance of a coercive Russian policy toward its neighbors in Eastern Europe. Russia's invasion of Georgia in August 2008 and ensuing diplomatic recognition of the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia reinforced the fears of the new EU members. So, in examining Russian-EU relations it is important to recall that in foreign and security policy the European Union remains a collection of sovereign states each of which, especially the larger ones, pursues its own relations with Russia.

Added to the complexity that arises from the divisions within the EU on the issue of relations with Russia, relations between the Russia and the United States, a formal ally through NATO of most EU members, have soured since 2002. On some issues, such as the US decision to invade Iraq, Russia joined with key US NATO allies to oppose American policy. The new, postcommunist, members of the European Union have generally been much more supportive of US policy and critical of Russia than other EU/

NATO members have been. In other words, the relationships between Russia and the European Union have been influenced and further complicated by Russian-US and EU-US relations. The current analysis deals with five distinct, but overlapping, issues: first, the reemergence of a self-confident and assertive Russia under former President Vladimir Putin, a Russia committed to resuming its role as a major world actor; then, the status of the Western alliance system and the prospects for the reestablishment of an effective and meaningful transatlantic alliance system; third, the prospects for a common approach to foreign and security policy in the EU, as well as the absorption problems that the EU has faced since the expansions of 2004 and 2007 into Central Europe; fourth, Russian relations with the European Union and its members; and, finally, the deterioration of relations between the Russian Federation and the United States since the short-lived “honeymoon” following 9/11, the relevance of which cuts across all four of the other issues.

Before proceeding it is important to note the context in which Russian-EU relations have evolved for the past decade or so. When President Yeltsin appointed Putin as his successor the position of the Russian Federation—both domestically and internationally—was extremely weak. Russia was on the verge of becoming a failed state, one whose government was unable to control or administer its territory, whose views and interests were ignored by other major actors. The Russian economy had witnessed serious decline since before the collapse of the USSR; the once vaunted Russian military proved incapable of winning a conflict with a band of secessionists in Chechnya; Moscow was unable to collect taxes across much of its huge territory and, thus, unable to provide stable incomes to the tens of millions of people still on the state payroll; political and economic corruption and organized criminal activity was widespread. Although the West included Russia in some of its important “clubs” (e.g., the G-7), they generally ignored Russian objections to their policy initiatives—such as NATO expansion, NATO military operations against Serbia, etc. This was the context in which Vladimir Putin assumed the presidency of Russia and laid out a policy aimed at recreating Russia’s position as a major international power.

The Reemergence of Russia as a Great Power

After assuming the presidency Putin announced his commitment to reestablishing Russia’s position as the preeminent regional power and as an important international actor. To fulfill these objectives he had to produce internal political stability and economic viability in Russia. Putin moved forcefully, and in most cases effectively, in reasserting central

governmental control in Russia. The economy, while still not flourishing, showed strong signs of turning around with growth rates of 4.5, 10.0, and 5.0 percent in the years 1999-2001. The signs of growth continued, and even expanded in the following years—not merely in the oil and gas sector, but across much of the economy. These political and economic gains occurred with growing disregard for the civil liberties and democratic processes to which Putin’s government was nominally committed. His anti-corruption campaign soon became a catch-all that targeted those who in any way challenged his position or were concerned about the authoritarian turn in Russian politics—such as the independent national media, which were largely silenced by the end of Putin’s first term as President.

In the foreign policy arena Putin sought allies who shared Russia’s commitment to preventing the global dominance of the United States that Moscow viewed as a threat to international security and to Russia’s goal of serving as a major center of influence in a multipolar world. Most of the issues on which Russia and the United States disagreed in the mid-1990s continued to plague that relationship. Until the terrorist attacks on the United States in September 2001 there was little evidence that the seemingly enduring disagreements dividing Russia and the United States would disappear soon. In fact, after a brief hiatus immediately after 9/11, those issues reemerged and continue to plague Russian-US relations.

However, Putin’s success in dealing with the major problems challenging the Russian state at the beginning of the century meant that Russia now could deal with Europe and the United States from a position of increased strength. That position was enhanced by growing European dependence on Russia for energy. Besides rebuilding the foundations of the Russian state, Putin and his associates benefited from the exponential rise in global demand for energy and the ensuing revival of the Russian economy. This, in turn, contributed to Russia’s ability to pursue a much more active and assertive foreign policy. The voices calling for Russia to resume its role as a great power in the 1990s were strident, but not realistic. However, similar voices—led by Vladimir Putin—have assumed the dominant position in Russia and are based upon expectations of achieving many of their goals. In a statement to the Russian parliament and people Putin noted, “The collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century.” Early in 2006 he delivered a broad attack on virtually all aspects of US policy at a security conference in Munich that made clear Russia’s new assertive approach to foreign policy, beginning with its relations with the United States. The rhetoric emanating from Moscow at the time of the recent military incursion into Georgia confirmed the image

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of a revisionist state intent upon reestablishing its dominant role, at least along its periphery.

By spring 2008, when Putin turned over the presidency to his successor Dmitry Medvedev, Russia had reemerged as a major player in European economic and political affairs and as the dominant actor in most of post-Soviet space. The foundation of this new role is Russia's semi-monopoly over the extraction and distribution of natural gas and oil across much of Eurasia, and the growing direct influence that this semi-monopoly provides over the economies of neighboring states.

The Weakening of the Transatlantic Relationship

Since the turn of the century Russia has successfully rebuilt much of its status as a major power and has strengthened its overall position in its relationships with its near neighbors, a number of emerging states in Asia, and much of Europe. For its part, however, and despite its overwhelming global military superiority, the political position of the United States in Europe—and throughout the world—is significantly weaker than it had been a decade ago. An important part of its weakened position in world affairs relates to the split that has occurred in transatlantic relations since the end of the cold war—greatly exacerbated since 2001 during the administration of George W. Bush by what many Europeans view as a hegemonic and unilateralist approach to policy making, most clearly visible in the run-up to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. The current divisions in the transatlantic relationship are far more consequential than disagreements in the past and will not likely be resolved to the point where they can be completely healed. Serious disagreements will characterize future relations in which institutional linkages will be loosened. Although the tone of relations between the major European states and Washington improved during the second Bush Administration, important policy differences—from those concerning the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to how to deal with global warming—continue to plague the relationship. The question of how to respond to Russia and to Russia's often confrontational policy initiatives has been added to the list of other important differences on issues ranging from growing European dependence on Russian energy exports to Russia's bullying tactics and pressure against Estonia, Ukraine and Georgia—even after the August 2008 Russian invasion of Georgia.

The EU in Search of a Policy

After more than a decade of deepening and broadening integration in Europe, recently the European Union has seemingly lost some of its *raison d'être*. The defeat of the proposed constitution in 2005 by voters in France and the Netherlands and the

rejection of the Lisbon Treaty by Irish voters in spring 2008 created a constitutional crisis in the EU. The political mechanisms established half a century ago for decision making by a community of half a dozen members no longer work effectively for a union of twenty-seven members. Yet, coming up with a solution to the problem has, to date, been beyond the capability of the leadership of the EU. Added to this is the fact that national governments across Europe simply have not been able to replace their conceptions of individual national interest with supranational, or EU, interests. The common foreign and security policy to which the EU committed itself a decade and a half ago appears no closer to realization on major issues in 2008 than it was a decade ago. The differential responses of the countries of Europe to the US decision to overthrow Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq provide an excellent illustration of the lack of a common sense of EU interest and the absence of anything approximating a common policy. The nature of relations with Russia has become another source of division among the member countries of the European Union. While "older" members seem more interested in normalizing relations with the Russian Federation and in ensuring their long-term energy supplies, the new members are more troubled about the suppression of dissent in post-Soviet states and about Russian domination over neighboring states, in part by using the "energy weapon" to blackmail those countries dependent on Russian supplies of gas and oil. For political elites in Central Europe and the Baltics, Russia's military intervention in Georgia in August 2008 and its ensuing recognition of breakaway regions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia provide evidence of its continuing threat to national security throughout the region. For purposes of the present analysis the most important issue concerning the EU and its general foreign and security policy is the fact that no common EU foreign policy exists, rhetoric about a common foreign and security policy notwithstanding. All of this means that Russia—and the United States, for that matter—does not deal with a large and integrated Europe, but rather is able to pursue policies targeted at individual European states.

Russia and the European Union

Throughout the history of the European Community and European Union, the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation have, in effect, attempted to ignore the emergence of the multinational institution as a collective decision-making organization in favor of dealing individually and bilaterally with member states. Given the absence of a full commitment on the part of the EU's members to collective decision making in the areas of foreign and security policy—and, at times, even in trade and economic

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policy—the approach has generally been rather successful for the Russians. Yet, over the past decade the EU has also pursued a broad range of agreements and relations with the Russian Federation. At times, the EU and other West European political institutions have been extremely critical of Russian domestic and foreign policy behavior on issues as wide-ranging as Russia's brutal treatment of Chechen separatists, the suppression of domestic dissent, support for secessionist movements in neighboring states, the use of gas and oil deliveries as a blackmail tool, and related matters. Prior to the June 2008 EU-Russian summit two clear camps had emerged within the European Union on the issue of relations with Russia—the military incursion into Georgia in August reinforced those positions. On the one side were, especially, the new member states—led by Poland and Estonia. Allied with them at times and on some issues were Sweden and the United Kingdom. For the Central European states recent Russian treatment of Georgia and Estonia, even before the August 2008 invasion of the former, as well as continuing support for secessionist groups in post-Soviet countries, was reminiscent of almost half a century of Soviet domination throughout the region. Sweden reacted especially to Russia's treatment of Georgia even prior to the military incursion, while the UK has raised all these issues, besides Russia's reported involvement in the 2006 murder of an ex-Russian security officer in London. On the other hand, important EU members are committed to normalizing relations with Russia, in particular concerning the import of energy.

Russian Energy and EU Political Divisions • The divisions in Europe's responses to Russian policy have emerged and widened since 2000—at the very time that European states have sought long-term solutions to dependence on imports of energy. Just as important, however, as the turn to Russia by some of the EU states for energy supplies has been the expansion of EU membership since 2004, with nine of the 12 new members having experienced almost half a century of Soviet domination after the Second World War. Perhaps the most important disagreement concerns the growing dependence of Europe on energy supplied by the Russian Federation. Moreover, the United States has been an active player in attempts to contain Russia's growing control over the development and distribution of oil and gas from Eurasia destined for Central and Western Europe. Washington has led efforts to develop pipelines for the distribution to Europe of gas and oil from Central Asia that will avoid Russian territory and, perhaps, Russian influence or control. This policy has been driven by the justified concern in Washington that Russia's influence in Europe would be enhanced were Moscow to control the distribution of Central Asian gas and oil, as well as its own. The Russians,

understandably, have viewed this US approach—especially in conjunction with the eastward expansion of NATO—as a continuation of the cold war policy of containment. US efforts to restrict Russian influence over the delivery of energy to Europe have failed to accomplish their objectives; Russia has effectively outmaneuvered the United States in its relations with the oil and gas producing countries of Central Asia, even though several pipelines have been completed that skirt Russian territory. In recent years Moscow has reestablished solid political and economic relations with the authoritarian regimes of Central Asia. It has signed new agreements with these energy producers that will expand the supplies of gas and oil destined for European consumers through the existing and planned pipeline network across Russian territory, as part of an apparent Russian effort to increase control over the oil and gas that flow from Eurasia to Europe.

Especially important for the current argument is Russia's agreement with important Western partners for the future distribution of oil and gas to Europe, which will eliminate the possible interference of current transit states such as Ukraine, Belarus and Poland, by avoiding their territory altogether. The planned Nord Stream and South Stream pipelines under the Baltic Sea and Black Sea directly to Germany and Bulgaria will expand Russia's domination over the gas markets of Europe, while reducing possible disruption of those flows. Overall, Russia has positioned itself effectively to control the production and distribution of energy across almost all former Soviet space as part of former President Putin's commitment to establish Russia as a major global actor. The dependence on external sources for virtually all gas and oil needs of some countries in the European Union and their willingness to cut bilateral deals with Russia outside the context of a common EU policy (notably Germany, Bulgaria and Italy), has aided Russia in its attempt to employ energy as a foreign policy tool. Poland has been especially critical of the Russian-German pipeline agreement as part of its overall criticism of Russian policy, as has Washington. The Poles were especially angered by what they viewed as Germany's willingness to capitulate to Russia, while the latter exerted unacceptably hostile pressures on EU member states. The accession to the EU of the postcommunist states of Central Europe and the Baltics has added a new dimension to Russian-EU relations, a dimension that was hardly considered in the run-up to their admission in 2004 and 2007.

War in Georgia, "Frozen Conflicts," the "Color Revolutions" and Human Rights • EU members also disagree among themselves on the importance of a series of issues regarding Russia's relations with its new neighbors, as well as human rights abuses in

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Russia itself. The “frozen conflicts” about which new EU members have been most agitated relate to the Transnistria region of Moldova, Nagorno-Karabakh, and especially the two breakaway regions of Georgia—South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The issue of Russian support for secessionist forces in several post-communist states, not to speak of the direct military intervention in Georgia in support of such forces, resonates strongly among new EU members, as does Russian economic pressure against neighboring states on numerous occasions since the collapse of the former USSR, but especially during the presidency of Vladimir Putin. Moscow has shown its willingness to impose severe economic pressures—especially by shutting off the supply of natural gas and oil—to strengthen its bargaining position in economic and political disputes with countries such as Ukraine, Georgia, Belarus, and Estonia. It has been this willingness to coerce and bully small neighbors that has revived serious fears among new EU members—most former dependents of the Soviet Union—about the prospects for their longer-term security in the face of an increasingly assertive Russia. Poland and Lithuania used their “veto” power to prevent the negotiation of a new partnership agreement between the EU and Russia for more than a year and a half. At a joint meeting between the EU and Russia in May 2007, these and other issues split the two sides and precluded any meaningful agreement even on other less controversial issues deemed important by either side. Meanwhile, the unwillingness of the major states of Western Europe to support their new EU partners fully and effectively continues to provide an opening for the United States, whose views of Russia and Russian policy are much closer to those of countries such as Poland and the Baltic states.

Related to the issue of “frozen conflicts” is that of the so-called color revolutions (the 2003 Orange Revolution in Georgia and the 2004 Rose Revolution in Ukraine) that brought to power Western-oriented and proto-democratic political regimes. In both of these cases, as also in Kyrgyzstan’s Tulip Revolution (2005), Moscow opposed the change in political forces that reduced its ability to reestablish its political dominance in a “Greater Russia.” In both Georgia and Ukraine the relationship with Russia has been conflictual ever since the shift in domestic political power. As already noted, one result was Russia’s attempt to use its economic leverage, especially its control over energy, to influence the policies of both countries. For the new members of the European Union, these and related matters are of great security concern, while for the countries of Western Europe they are of secondary importance to the immediate and longer-term needs to normalize relations with the Russian Federation and to ensure energy supplies for the future.

NATO Expansion, US Missile Defense, and Ex-Yugoslavia • Besides the issues of energy dependence, “frozen conflicts,” and Russia’s assertive role towards neighboring states, other important matters cloud Russian relations with the West and divide EU member states concerning the appropriate response to be taken in any given situation. Since the mid-1990s NATO expansion eastward has elicited strong opposition from Russia, which views it as a breach of agreements reached between the USSR and the West at the time of German reunification and as a direct challenge to Russian security in what Moscow perceives as its legitimate sphere of influence. Although the United States was the driving force for expansion in 1997 and 2004 and remains the primary advocate for the admission of Ukraine and Georgia into NATO, long-term European members have been lukewarm or even opposed to further expansion eastward. Yet, on this issue as well, the position of the new members of the European Union and NATO differs from that of their western EU partners. Virtually all of them joined NATO as a means not only to be accepted into one of the core Western “clubs,” but also in the expectation of enhancing their security. They view the inclusion of countries such as Ukraine and Georgia into NATO as a strengthening of their own long-term security situation vis-à-vis Russia. Russia, for its part, continues to make clear that further movement of NATO eastward would elicit a very negative response. In his new role as Russian prime minister, Vladimir Putin has threatened to terminate Russia’s “military and other contracts with Ukrainian weapons and space facilities that depend on Moscow, if Ukraine joins the Western defense alliance.” Yet, as has become clear on a broad range of issues, the divisions within NATO and the EU permit Moscow to exploit divisions within the Western community in order to accomplish its own objectives.

If anything, the US decision to place elements of its planned missile defense system in the Czech Republic and Poland has generated even more fierce opposition in Moscow than have plans for further expansion of NATO membership. At every stage in the emerging agreements between Washington and its Polish and Czech allies the Russians have threatened to respond—most recently with “military resources.” President Medvedev has emphasized that the Russian position on this issue has not shifted with the change in presidents by stating to a group of high-level Russian diplomats: “The deployment of elements of the US global missile defense system in Eastern Europe is only aggravating the situation. We will have to respond appropriately and our American and European partners have already been warned.” Western policy toward ex-Yugoslavia, in particular the widespread support for and recognition of the

new state of Kosovo, has also elicited serious Russian opposition and has, in effect, provided Russia with the justification for recognition of the independence of the secessionist regions that they have supported throughout the post-Soviet period—i.e., especially Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria. On the issue of Kosovo's independence the members of the EU and NATO have been far less divided than they have been on growing European energy dependence on Russia, NATO expansion, or US missile defense. Yet, even here important countries such as Spain, which faces domestic demands for independence, have taken a separate approach.

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Prospects for Future Relations

As should be clear at this point in the argument presented here, the European Union lacks a coherent policy in its relations with Russia. Moreover, because US policy toward the Russian Federation since the end of the cold war has been based, in part at least, on containing Moscow's influence, US policy impacts directly on the divisions within the European Union between those who recommend patience and caution in dealing with Russia, such as Germany, and those who focus on what they view as aggressive behavior toward neighboring states.

The EU-Russian summit held near Samara, Russia, in May 2007 proved to be a total failure, as both sides exchanged charges against one another. From then to mid-2008, however, the EU as an organization seemed to back off from its rather stronger approach to Russia. The mood of key European leaders at the June 2008 summit was much more upbeat, as they seemed willing to give new Russian President Medvedev the benefit of the doubt. Yet, the “charm offensive” of President Medvedev hardly resolved the outstanding issues between Russia and members of the EU—in particular the new members who view the Russian Federation through the lens of almost half a century of Soviet domination. Moreover, Russia and the EU have quite different conceptions of the nature of a new agreement to frame their relations. The European Union prefers an Agreement on Partnership and Cooperation that spells out in detail the terms of agreement across economic, energy, and political matters, while Russia proposes a much narrower framework agreement that relegates specifics to later follow-on agreements. Although the meeting in late June 2008 was much more cordial than those a year earlier, the central issues that divide the two persisted, such as the demands placed on Russia by the EU as a precondition for visa-free travel between Russia and the EU. When one adds these differences plus the continuing concerns of new EU member states, often supported by the United States, to the fact that any new agreement between the EU

and Russia requires the approval of all twenty-seven members, one can come to the conclusion that the road to a new Partnership and Cooperation Agreement will not be smooth and will depend on shifts in perception about longer-term Russian intentions among the new members of the European Union. Furthermore, the development of the Russian-EU relationship was interrupted by Moscow's invasion of Georgia. As a group, the EU members' reaction was moderate and measured, although the United States and the newer members of the organization pushed for more forceful retaliatory action. The EU called upon Russia to withdraw from Georgian territory and President Nicolas Sarkozy of France, in his role as current head of the EU's rotating presidency, played a key role in negotiating that withdrawal and the agreements to replace Russian “peacekeepers” in Georgia proper with EU observers. The only “sanctions” imposed on Russia were an indefinite delay in discussing the nature of any future formal Russian-EU relationship. However, after months of domestic debate both Poland and the Czech Republic finalized agreements with the United States for the construction of radar and missile installations as part of the US anti-missile program and were among those calling for a forceful EU response to Russian actions.

The prospects for a rapid improvement in EU-Russian relations are not positive, given Russia's occupation of parts of Georgian territory, President Medvedev's claim that former Soviet space is an area of “privileged interest,” and, on the other side, the renewed insistence of the EU's newer members, supported by the United States, that Russia represents more a security threat than a solution to Europe's problems. Even in Europe the “new world order” touted in the early 1990s appears to have had a brief existence.

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