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The EU's Russia policy: Are crisis management and 'small steps' adequate?¹

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Summary:

The EU's response to the Ukraine crisis has involved a combination of 'small steps' and crisis management. The latter is evident in unanimity on sanctions and a freeze in many aspects of relations. On the other hand, the "Five Guiding Principles" for EU-Russia relations, articulated by Federica Mogherini and supported by the EU Foreign Ministers in March 2016, suggest incremental steps to govern EU actions in regard to Russia. This combination of methods has involved an avoidance of strategic thinking about the future of EU-Russian relations which might move beyond the current crisis. This policy memo considers whether such a 'small steps' approach is adequate or whether the EU should consider moving beyond the 'five principles' to engage a process aimed at finding a strategy that addresses longer-term policy objectives. While small steps may appear to bring progress in particular sectoral arenas, the memo argues that, without a strategic vision, a long-term adversarial relationship between the EU and Russia could be the result.

Context and the Challenge

Since the crisis in EU-Russia relations erupted in 2014 following Russia's annexation of Crimea and interference in eastern Ukraine, relations have remained largely frozen. EU sanctions, along with Russian counter-sanctions, have now been in place for seven years. At the same time, an escalating security dilemma has developed in Europe.

In 2016 the EU Council agreed on five principles to govern its relations with Russia (Mogherini 2016): these were most recently affirmed in October 2020 by the Foreign Affairs Council (Council 2020). In addition to continued development of relations with Eastern Partnership countries (which does not directly speak to the EU's Russia policy), these principles call for full implementation of the Minsk II accords, strengthening resilience of the EU to threats from Russia, selective engagement with Russia on some foreign policy issues when it is in EU interests,

and support for Russian civil society along with people-to-people contacts. While setting out some specific approaches, the five principles do not provide any clear strategic direction for the EU in its relations with Russia and only vague operational guidance.

EU leaders have repeatedly indicated that the lifting of sanctions and presumably also the ‘unfreezing’ of the relations depends on Russia’s fulfilment of its obligations under the Minsk II agreement. However, progress on achieving this has been limited. Therefore, no end to the crisis in relations is in sight. Meanwhile, the EU’s response can best be described as *sustained crisis response*. Sustained crisis response involves an institutionalization of the immediate response to the crisis, with a “focus on short-term reactions such as sanctions, rhetorical interventions or a freeze in relations” (DeBardeleben 2020b, 568). While normally one would expect such an approach to be relatively short-lived, if it is maintained over a longer period of time it can potentially replace a conscious choice of long-term strategy. The further risk is of a paradigmatic shift to a long-term adversarial relationship with Russia (DeBardeleben, 2018).

In fact, the EU’s response to Russia’s actions has lacked a strategic direction. Other than a hope that Russia will change its behavior, no longer-term perspective on how the relationship could or should develop has been articulated. Reasons for this are clear. First, subsequent actions by Russia (e.g., the Skripal poisonings, the Kerch Strait actions, the treatment of Alexei Navalny, and most recently Russian troop movements near the Ukrainian border) have reinforced tensions. Second, member states’ positions differ so it is difficult to gain agreement on a unified strategic direction. Some member state leaders, such as Emmanuel Macron of France, are pushing for a more assertive effort to re-engage Russia, while, on the other end, the Baltic states and Poland see Russian actions within a ‘threat’ frame. Third, it is intrinsically difficult to chart a strategic path due to a root dilemma: on the one hand, if the EU reengages with Russia, this may appear to legitimize Russian actions that are a breach of the EU’s fundamental values and interests; on the other hand, keeping sanctions in place and relations frozen may lead to an increasingly adversarial stance, which is also not in the EU’s interests; this outcome would undermine the

very raison d'être of European integration, i.e., achieving long-term peace and security in Europe.

Key considerations

The EU has clearly been following the five principles in many regards. Efforts have also been made to move implementation of the Minsk II agreements along, through the Normandy Format in particular. The EU has continued to place priority on relations with the Eastern Partnership countries, and especially those with which it has signed Association Agreements and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements. Efforts to reinforce EU resilience include the EastStratcom Task Force² and the website EUvsDisinfo³. Programs promoting people-to-people contacts, such as cross-border cooperation, research support (e.g., Erasmus+) and student mobility have been continued. However, relating to the fourth principle, regarding selective engagement with Russia, the direction is unclear. Alongside implementation of the Minsk II agreement, this principle is arguably the most important in terms of mitigating the growing security dilemma with Russia and creating a groundwork for a longer-term strategy. The key question relates to the development of a clear concept of what constitute EU interests in this regard, and the strategic implications of this definition of interests.

Several key parameters are clear in terms of EU interest. First, the EU's Russia policy must not put in question the Union's commitment to Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia (hereafter EaP3). In line with this principle, any engagement with Russia must not be 'over the heads' of these countries; rather, where relevant to their interests, these countries should be included in negotiations and discussions. For example, any process that would involve direct negotiations

² See "Questions and Answers about the EastStratCom Task Force," European External Action Service website, Dec. 5, 2018, <https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/2116/questions-and-answers-about-the-east->

³ See the website at: <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/>

between the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union would have to protect interest of the EaP3, since they would not be represented at the table (DeBardeleben 2020a). Strict adherence to this principle is essential to avoid what might appear to be, or actually represent, a ‘great power bargain’ that would sacrifice the interests of EaP members. Second, a long-term adversarial relationship is not in the interests of the EU. This is true due to geographical proximity and the threat that an adversarial relationship poses to the security of the EU, and not only those countries bordering Russia. Furthermore, the EU and Russia are energy interdependent, and the resolution of key regional issues will benefit from a cooperative stance. A long- term adversarial relationship with the EU offers no benefit to the Union. Third, it should be assumed that EU actions will not be able to impact Russian domestic political developments in a significant or predictable manner. While actions such as sanctions may produce an economic effect, they have so far not produced a verifiable change in Russia’s behavior. While people-to-people contact and support for civil society may produce micro-impacts, their effect on the overall political direction in Russia is likely to be minimal and unpredictable. Any idea of helping to ‘engineer’ political change from the outside is ill-advised and risky. On the other hand, this does not mean that the EU should discontinue the existing sanctions regime or fail to call out breaches of human rights. This is connected to the fourth parameter for defining EU interest. The legitimacy of EU foreign policy, both domestically and internationally, rests in part on the Union’s support for and adherence to basic normative principles involving human rights, rule of law, and democratic governance. While the EU cannot compel other states to abide by these principles, significant violations of them should be clearly condemned by the EU. This is in line with the EU’s position of principled pragmatism.

Defining a strategic definition of EU interest in relation to its Russia policy should respect these basic parameters. In addition, the EU needs to consider that, whatever the intentions behind its decisions, the EU’s actions may have a geopolitical significance for other international actors. In the period leading up to the Ukraine crisis, the EU fell into a position of being an ‘accidental geopolitical actor’, meaning that the EU’s actions have had unintended geopolitical consequences; because these were not consciously considered, they have often produced

suboptimal and unforeseen outcomes (DeBardeleben, 2019, pp. 360-361). Development of an explicit strategy, taking account of geopolitical implications, is necessary to avoid unintended consequences that may push the EU outside of the parameters of its key objectives and goals.

Since the inception of the Ukraine crisis, the main tool for influencing Russian behavior has been the use of sanctions, which have been largely ineffective in achieving the goal. Ad hoc measures to ‘punish’ or ‘sanction’ undesirable Russian behaviour have apparently not provided an incentive for change. The fundamental reason is that the cost of change has likely been considered by the Russian leadership to be higher than the benefit. This may be linked to the manner in which Russia’s foreign policy actions have been mobilized to achieve domestic political legitimacy and support.

Policy recommendations

Despite, or perhaps because of, the continuing irresolution of the conflict in eastern Ukraine, it is important that the EU engage in an exercise to more clearly define its strategic goals in relation to Russia. To achieve this, concerted attention within EU decision-making circles will be required.

- a) A strategic review of the EU’s policy toward Russia should be undertaken with the purpose of clarifying long-term objectives for the relationship and identifying steps that may be undertaken to make this outcome more likely. This review should take place within defined parameters, as indicated above. It should be clear that the aim of the review is to expand the time frame of consideration beyond the immediate crisis context.
- b) A focus should be placed on efforts to define concrete interests of the EU as they relate to the bilateral relationship with Russia. Examples could be: (i) Reaching an understanding with Russia regarding cybersecurity; (ii) Expanding the scope of cross-border cooperation and restoring/maintaining small border traffic regimes that facilitate solution of common cross-border problems or facilitate person-to-person contact in specified geographic regions; (iii) Achieving increased use of renewable energy resources and reduction in greenhouse gas emissions; (iv) Reducing trade barriers in sectors of the

economy not affected by current sanctions regimes, and promoting business-to-business contacts; (v) Moving toward compatibility of regulatory standards as they may affect important trade relations; (vi) Optimizing synergies in over-coming the pandemic and moving toward post-pandemic recovery stages, including a common global approach to vaccine availability; (vii) An early warning system for future health threats; (viii) Confidence-building measures that can address issues such cross-border military buildups; (ix) A strategy for reconstruction in eastern Ukraine.

- c) The strategic review should outline a vision for future EU-Russian relations, even if this vision might seem unrealistic in the current context and might only be possible in the longer term. The basis of this vision could, for example, involve a rethink of the meaning of ‘a common economic space from Lisbon to Vladivostok’, or mechanisms to facilitate a collective security system for wider Europe. The vision would provide the basis for a roadmap to move in that direction.
- d) In addition to outlining a positive vision for future EU-Russia relations, the EU should consider positive incentives for cooperation that could be offered to Russia to encourage movement toward that vision. In other words, carrots as well as sticks could be applied, based on a principle of linkage. Carrots could include measures such as a visa-waiver regime, increased investment in Russia, and direct trade negotiations with the Eurasian Economic Union. These ‘carrots’, as well as linkage requirements, should, however, correspond to defined EU interests, as per point (b), and clearly respect the key parameter of supporting EU commitments to EaP countries, including, of course, Ukraine.

Realization of this set of recommendations will require a broad process of consultation, involving member states as well as Eastern partners. However, so long as the parameters laid down in this memo, or similar ones that protect vital EU values and commitments, are maintained, the risk of acting boldly is far less than the risk of timid small steps that reflect only ad hoc responses to the current crisis.

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