

Reaching Out to Russia

The European Union must establish a strategic partnership with Russia, in cooperation with the United States if possible



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Alexander Rahr | **The European Union must finally adopt a consistent policy toward Russia. In addition to signing a new Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, Brussels should work with Russia to reform international organizations and expand joint projects such as free trade zones.**

The East-West conflict ended nearly twenty years ago, and there is hardly a politician in office today—whether in the United States, the European Union, or Russia—who held a position of power during the Cold War. Nevertheless, after a brief rapprochement that could have led to Russia's integration into the West, Americans and Europeans are once again at odds with the Kremlin. There is even talk of a new cold war. The West faces a choice: It can continue to treat Russia as the disturber of international peace and attempt to contain it with policy tools from the Cold War era, or it can accept the incompatibility of Russian and Western value systems and attempt to establish a strategic partnership that will incorporate Russia into a joint alliance.

During the last years of the Bush administration, the United States pursued a policy of containment toward Russia, influenced in part by an increasingly authoritarian Russian domestic policy. It initiated the stationing of missile defense systems in Central Europe, sought to expand NATO to include Ukraine and Georgia, and attempted to break the Russian pipeline monopoly on oil and gas transports to the West. President Barack Obama, who apparently sees no good reason to begin a new cold war with an old adversary, is likely to make concrete proposals on cooperation. But if the United States continues to shun Russia as a potential international partner, the European Union will have no choice but to pursue its own independent policy of rapprochement. After all, while Russia may not be indispensable for world order, it is essential for European peace.

Russia will doubtless remain an extremely complicated partner for the European Union. The Russian elite have never recovered from the collapse of the

Soviet empire. Today they openly criticize the West for shamelessly exploiting Russian weakness in the early 1990s in a bid to make the country economically dependent on the West and to rob it of its traditional spheres of influence. Russia regards itself as a leading power in Europe and is eager to help build the continent's future economic and security architecture. It refuses to allow the European Union to shunt it aside in favor of Asia. In response to Western objections that the Russian economy is too weak to be taken seriously, Moscow reminds Europeans of their dependence on Russian energy. The annexation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia during the Georgia conflict in August 2008 fueled Western fears of a neo-imperialist Russia.

The European Union might take the position that due to different Russian values, its fragile legal system, and its underdeveloped democracy and market economy, Russia is not a reliable partner for building a shared European civilization. In this case, the European Union would have to radically diversify energy imports from Russia and develop and implement alternative projects for gas and oil pipelines as well as liquid gas transports. Otherwise it would risk a dangerous dependency on the country and make itself vulnerable to energy blackmail.

Meeting in September 2008 with international experts from the Valdai Club, an annual meeting of political analysts at the Kremlin, Russian President Dmitri Medvedev stated that Russia should have been admitted to NATO in the 1990s. If it had, the current conflicts in the post-Soviet region could have been avoided. Not only did this not happen, but the Europeans continued to expand their security and economic architecture through NATO and the European Union. A fundamental decision has also been made to include Georgia and Ukraine in the Western alliance. While a united Europe has gradually emerged on the sole basis of NATO and the European Union, Russia remains isolated in the new European institutional order.

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Hard Line or Soft Integration?

Moscow's desire to change this state of affairs and to assert its own claims within Europe underlie the current conflicts between Russia and the European Union. The European Union is deeply divided over its relationship to the Kremlin. Several EU states do not support a joint European framework for peace. This intra-European dispute revolves around issues such as NATO expansion, missile defense, a possible energy alliance with Moscow, and assessments of the August 2008 conflict in Georgia. Backed by Great Britain and Sweden, many Central European states are currently calling for the European Union to take a hard line against a "neo-imperialist" Russia.

Other EU countries, such as France, Italy, and Germany, do not want to pursue a European policy that goes against Russian interests or does not integrate the country into Europe. Furthermore, these EU states refuse to blame Russia alone for the Georgia war. If this continues, the dispute over Russia is likely to split the Europeans into "old" and "new" camps.

During its EU Council presidency in 2008, France made intensive diplomatic efforts to reconcile these different positions, and it did indeed succeed in offering Russia a new Partnership and Cooperation Agreement. It promised Moscow close economic, academic, and cultural cooperation with the European Union, provided it did not further distance itself from European values. Moscow was asked to abandon, once and for all, its plan to create a sphere of influence and to support a common European neighborhood policy. With the endorsement of his six-point plan, French President Nicolas Sarkozy could even brag to have prevented an escalation of the Russia-Georgia conflict. If another EU member state such as Poland had held the presidency, it is highly probable that punitive sanctions would have been imposed on Russia. After all, during the German Council presidency in 2006, Chancellor Angela Merkel was unable to overcome stubborn Polish resistance to opening negotiations on a new Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with Russia, and the issue remained on the back burner for nearly three years. The most important task facing the European Union at present is therefore to define a consistent political line toward Russia.

Participating in a Security Dialogue

In the 1990s Russia accepted the terms laid down by the West in the initial Partnership and Cooperation Agreement. Struggling economically, it regarded the European Union as a source of stability. Today Moscow has other priorities. Instead of settling for a junior partnership with the West, it demands equality in its relations with the European Union. President Medvedev has called for a new security dialogue with all of Europe, one that aims to create an “umbrella organization” encompassing all existing European institutions. Russia is eager to make “eternal peace” with NATO and the European Union, but it wants to incorporate the two organizations into an expanded alliance in which Russia and the West act in concert to stabilize the European continent.

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Whereas the United States, the states of Central Europe, and a number of Western European states reject such a security dialogue, the French president signaled to Medvedev that he was willing to talk. Nevertheless, the Czech Republic, which has just assumed the Council presidency, appears to be distancing itself from Sarkozy. As the new Council president, Prague intends to improve relations between the West and the former Soviet republics of Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. It also wants to make these states an ambitious offer of affiliation with the European Union. Given the way the new eastern partnerships are structured, they can be interpreted as an attempt by the European Union to squeeze Russia out of its old turf in the west and south. If Commonwealth of Independent States members accept the broadened offer of partnership with the European Union, they can count on generous support from the West for the democratic transformation and integration processes. The eastern partnerships also contain a new EU energy security package for all neighboring states that are dependent on Russian energy. This amounts to an

open show of solidarity with the countries that feel threatened by an “imperialist” Russia. In contrast to the French, the Czechs might once again lean toward a policy of containment vis-à-vis Moscow. This would “punish” Russia for its annexation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Following the Czechs, the rotating presidency will fall to the Swedes in 2009 and to the Poles in 2011. Stockholm has signaled its support of the Central European position on Russia. The *Ostpolitik* of the Central Europeans, which differs from the traditional Russia-centered policy of the French and Germans, could place new obstacles in the way of good relations with the Kremlin.

Ten Concrete Points for Cooperation

In response to Medvedev’s desire for dialogue, the European Union should move beyond a revamped Partnership and Cooperation Agreement and seek new forms of cooperation with Russia in the following fields—whereby cooperation with the United States is possible in some cases:

- Conceptual development of a joint missile defense system to provide equal protection for America, Europe, and Russia against potential attacks by rogue states. Also: joint space research to prevent an arms buildup in space;
- Renewal of the Western energy alliance with Russia with the dual goal of ensuring long-term security for Russian energy deliveries to the West and providing Russia with Western technologies for the long overdue modernization of its energy complex; there should be an establishment of gas consortia between Western and Russian energy groups to prevent pipeline wars in Eurasia;
- Close cooperation between the European Union and Russia on reforming international organizations such as the United Nations, the G-8, and the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe; possibly also new global “partnerships for peace” such as the NATO-Shanghai Organization for Cooperation;
- Development of an EU-Russian plan for modernizing Siberia as a practical tool for achieving the objectives of the energy alliance. This plan will not only promote economic cooperation, but also codify the strategic value of Russian resources for Europe’s future prosperity;
- Rebuilding trust among the states participating in the nonproliferation regime for weapons of mass destruction. The formulation of a joint global “security doctrine” could bring Russia, the United States, and the European Union into a long-term alliance against international terrorism;
- Creation of a functioning new mechanism between the European Union and Russia that is not dependent on the consensus of all 27 member states. The old German-French-Russia troika causes too much ill ease among the states of Central Europe. Based on the proposal by Eckart von Klaeden of Germany’s Christian Democrats, the European Union should form a core group of European states and give them responsibility for EU-Russia policy;
- Joint measures in climate and environmental protection. Russia, the European Union, and the United States should consider the possibility of an “ecological alliance” that would allow the European Union and Russia to meet joint

Russia demands equality in its relations with the European Union.

challenges and develop shared options for action within the framework of the Kyoto process;

- Further expansion of joint projects between the European Union and Russia, including free trade zones, the dismantling of visa barriers, academic exchanges, and European-Russian peacekeeping missions in the post-Soviet region, Africa, etc.;
- The US-EU-UN-Russian quartet, which emerged in negotiations in the Middle East, could be used in other conflict regions such as Iran and Afghanistan. Over the past few years, Russia has gained new political clout from its efforts to intensify economic ties with countries in the Arab region, and it could use its new power to help promote Western interests;
- Joint programs to fight poverty in developing countries. The international energy, food, and financial crises will not only change the global economic order but are also likely to result in mass migration and resource wars. Russia can provide aid for emergency programs and thus underscore its growing responsibility for the international economy.

Russia has been hit particularly hard by the global financial crisis and, as a consequence, seems to be reorienting its foreign policy toward the West. The Kremlin has officially backed away from its initial plan to install an anti-missile defense system in the Kaliningrad region. At the World Economic Forum in Davos, Putin pled for greater cooperation between Russia and the other leading industrial nations in addressing the economic crisis. It could well be that Russia will now lack the resources for ambitious military and industrial projects. Thus for Moscow, a strategic partnership between the United States and the European Union is not only pragmatic, it is in Russia's national interests.

The European Union should seek new forms of cooperation with Russia.