

PUSH BACK, CONTAIN, AND ENGAGE: HOW THE EU SHOULD APPROACH RELATIONS WITH RUSSIA

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SUMMARY

- In recent years, the EU has based its Russia policy on modest sanctions, periodic offers of engagement, and a careful accommodation of Russian strategic sensitivities.
- But the Russian approach to the EU has been much less calibrated, involving deliberate attempts to disrupt the bloc's influence in large swathes of its neighbourhood.
- The EU should push back against, contain, and engage with Russia, bracing itself for rocky diplomatic interactions with the country.
- The bloc should reframe how it speaks of human rights and democracy, while developing closer security and military links with select neighbours in the Balkans, its eastern neighbourhood, and the Middle East and Africa.
- The EU should continue to selectively engage with Russia's government and society through multilateral institutions, simplified visa procedures, and dialogue with a wide spectrum of organisations.

Introduction

Since the start of the war in Ukraine in 2014, the European Union's policy on Russia has sought to balance sanctions with selective engagement. But the EU should now move beyond this bichromatic approach. In light of his recent trip to Moscow, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell has argued for a new policy triad when it comes to dealing with Russia: push back, contain, and engage. But how can the EU turn yet another round of Brussels slogans into concrete policies? This paper outlines several ways in which the bloc can try to adapt its Russia policy to these new imperatives and develop the concepts into concrete policies.

The EU's strategic accommodation of Russia

In recent years, media headlines on EU-Russia relations have been dominated by news of sanctions, cyber attacks, the use of chemical weapons, and exchanges of jibes at the highest levels. What rarely made it into the news was a rather profound accommodation by the EU, and partly by the United States, of Russian strategic interests and sensitivities. NATO has de facto suspended the accession processes of Ukraine and Georgia. Meanwhile, humanitarian intervention has fallen out of favour among Western governments. While this did not happen because of Russia, it has removed a major irritant in the EU's relationship with the country for a decade now. Russians continue to be the biggest recipients of Schengen visas in the world: almost one-third of such documents are issued in Russia. The country receives some of the most lenient treatment of any state whose citizens still need visas to enter the EU: 82 per cent of visas issued to Russians are multiple-entry, and most are multiannual. Most Western sanctions on Russian entities target individuals rather than the Russian economy, and have been deliberately designed to send signals of disapproval to Russia rather than to significantly weaken it. The Nord Stream 1 pipeline was built in 2010-2011, while Nord Stream 2 is nearing completion. In 2019 the Russian delegation was accepted back into the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. And the US and the EU tiptoed respectfully around Russian sensitivities about large-scale popular protests in Belarus and the war over Nagorno-Karabakh. Despite the EU's accommodation of Russia's sensitivities on numerous foreign policy issues, relations between the two have deteriorated.

Judging by Russian policies on Ukraine, Libya, Central African Republic, and Serbia, one cannot say that similar self-restraint has informed the Kremlin's foreign policy calculations. Russia's military and

security partnership with Serbia surpasses that of any EU member state, even though Serbia is an EU accession candidate. Recently, Russia started calling on the EU to stop interfering in the domestic affairs not just of post-Soviet states (as it long has) but even Western Balkans countries, which happened to ask for such ‘interference’ in the form of EU accession.

The EU has supplemented this strategic accommodation with periodic diplomatic overtures. However, all these efforts failed – in large part because Moscow does not want to reset its own foreign policy or domestic political system. Rather than investing in resets with the EU or the US, Russia has looked for ways to weaken and circumvent European and American influence in key areas of the world – from the Balkans to the Middle East, to sub-Saharan Africa.

In many areas, Russia is satisfied with its current level of practical cooperation with Europe. Russian gas sales to the EU have hit record highs. Somewhat paradoxically, the worse the political relationship became, the more Russian gas the EU bought.

On the diplomatic front, confrontation has not disrupted EU-Russia dialogue. On some issues, this dialogue has even intensified. Kyiv, Moscow, Berlin, and Paris hold regular summits at the level of heads of government in the Normandy format, while country representatives permanently liaise with each other – on issues related to the war in Donbas – within several working groups in the Minsk process. In the framework of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), there are working groups on security and confidence-building measures (such as the modernisation of the Vienna document), frozen conflicts, human rights, and so on. The EU itself has been mostly excluded from these discussions by its member states – a trend that is increasingly apparent.

Since Borrell’s ill-fated trip to Moscow in February 2021, two countervailing trends seem to be affecting EU member states’ thinking. Some trust Brussels even less when it comes to EU institutions’ ability to handle Russia. Others are worried that Brussels will become even more marginalised in the EU-Russia relationship, leaving medium and small-sized member states with even fewer channels through which to affect the relationship. It remains to be seen whether there will be a slowdown in the procession of visits to Russia by delegations from EU member states. But, from Moscow’s standpoint, systematic engagement with member states and the relative marginalisation of EU institutions suits Russia well.

The EU's past attempts at pushback

The EU's strategic accommodation of Russia's sensitivities, and its continued engagement with the country, has been balanced by periodic pushback from the bloc on various fronts. The EU adopted in 2009 its third energy liberalisation package, drastically reducing Russia's power to use Gazprom as a foreign policy tool against much of the bloc. And there is an increasing desire in the EU to attribute cyber attacks by Russia. In an unprecedented development, Germany sought last year to indict Russian cyber operatives. Countries such as France and the Netherlands have adopted a more aggressive cyber posture (and raised the prospect of so-called 'hack-backs') in response to Russian cyber operations. Following the poisoning in August 2020 of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, the EU became more forceful in signalling concern about Russia's domestic political dynamics than it had been at any time in the preceding decade.

The EU's use of sanctions to push back against Russia has been reasonably successful. These low-intensity sanctions might not have reversed Russian policies in Ukraine, but they have significantly constrained them. The measures have probably limited the scale of Russian military involvement in Ukraine and thereby reduced the size of the warzone in the east of the country. Sanctions on the defence sector have contributed to significant delays and cost increases in many of Russia's next-generation weapons platforms, decreasing the need for Europe to rapidly develop and purchase systems to provide deterrence along NATO's eastern flank. Sanctions slow down Russia's military modernisation, and thereby make it less urgent for the EU to accelerate the growth of its defence spending. Another side-effect of the sanctions has been to limit the financial resources that Russia can use to project power abroad. Russia still has significant financial reserves, but it has been saving them for domestic projects and even rainier geopolitical days.

In recent years, Russia's military spending has stagnated and its financial aid to foreign partners has either begun to dry up (as in the cases of Belarus and Armenia) or not materialised in significant amounts (as in that of Syria). Such growing mercantilism in Russian foreign policy is not an immediate and direct result of EU sanctions, but rather a response to Russia's lacklustre economic performance in the last decade. But, of course, sanctions are among the factors that affect Russia's economic outlook and its capacity to mobilise financial resources for foreign policy.

The EU's balancing of pushback, engagement, and respect for Russia's sensitivities has been quite geopolitically minded but not very systematic. The bloc still finds it quite uncomfortable to behave geopolitically vis-à-vis Russia, even if Moscow has seemingly done its best to nudge the EU into the adoption of harder-nosed policies. A recent non-paper circulated by an EU member state called on the EU to structure its Russia policy along the following lines: support the implementation of Minsk II and stronger reactions against the violation of the sovereignty of the EU's neighbours; increase cooperation on resilience building with the bloc's eastern neighbours, not least in combating hybrid and cyber threats; increase the EU's own resilience, including by boosting green policies and fighting disinformation; continue to engage selectively with Russia on Middle Eastern and environmental issues, as well as through dialogue with the Eurasian Economic Union; and support civil society in Russia. These approaches resonate with Borrell's three suggested actions: push back, contain, and engage.

The way forward

In international relations, confrontation and cooperation are not antonyms but two sides of the same coin. Accordingly, the EU should seek to reclaim regional influence in its neighbourhood and to constrain the capacity of other powers – be it Russia, China, or even Turkey – to act against its interests. To achieve this, the bloc needs to fill Borrell's 'push back, contain, and engage' framework with assertive policies on more partners than just Russia.

Push back

The EU's most influential partners – from Moscow to Ankara, to Beijing – perceive any sort of dialogue through the prism of power hierarchies, vulnerabilities, and dependencies. All policies that enable the EU to stand its ground improve the bloc's standing with third powers, regardless of the substance of its dialogue with them. Such policies include those that provide the EU with energy independence, increase its military and intelligence capabilities, or create counter-intelligence capacities it can use to retaliate for hostile covert operations or cyber attacks. Unity and solidarity within the EU also greatly aid this endeavour, as does strong transatlantic coordination. Any strategy of interaction and engagement with other powers, including Russia, will be more successful if the EU itself is strong. The bloc has to learn to live with other powers being irritated by its bolder actions – be

it Russia, Turkey, Iran, or China.

Speaking up for human rights and democratic values is also a way to project a strong and self-confident Europe internationally. However, it is useful for the EU to learn to defend its values in a somewhat different manner than it has often done until now. The bloc's language on human rights reminds its foreign partners of lectures about democracy in the 1990s and 2000s. The bloc needs to promote values in a way that makes clear its intention not to meddle in the domestic politics of countries such as Russia. This approach would stress that human rights infringements and anti-democratic policies contradict domestic constitutional provisions or international commitments acquired through membership of the Council of Europe, the OSCE, or international law against the proliferation and use of chemical weapons. Instead of expressing concern, which often sounds patronising, it is better to speak up for values by calling on states to respect their own legislation. That is how the defence of democracy was framed during parts of the cold war – and the practice might need resuscitation. Such a reframing of the defence of human rights will continue to irk the EU's foreign partners, but it will be harder for them to push back against rhetorically.

Constrain

Good relations with Russia are important, but they are not an end in themselves. The EU has a strong interest in developing a capacity to shape strategic developments in its neighbourhood (vis-à-vis Russia and other powers). Many Russian policies are deliberately designed to disrupt EU influence in large swathes of the bloc's neighbourhood, including the Balkans, the Middle East and North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, and the South Caucasus. And the EU has an interest in disrupting those efforts at disruption. On this front, the EU should strive to:

- Improve its coordination with the US on Russia policy. So far, individual member states' unilateral outreach to Moscow has undermined the EU in both Moscow and Washington.
- Launch a series of security compacts – frameworks for increased security, military, intelligence, and cyber cooperation – with select friendly countries in the EU's neighbourhood. These compacts should involve states in the Balkans, eastern Europe, and the Middle East and North Africa, as detailed in [a previous ECFR publication](#).
- Start investing in military and [security partnerships](#) with countries such as Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. Europe needs strong security partners in its neighbourhood, and should not see

security coordination with these countries through the prism of the divisive issue of EU or NATO enlargement.

- Strengthen the democratic and security resilience of countries in the Western Balkans – including by backing EU membership for all states in the region – and support NATO membership for Bosnia-Herzegovina, as well as Kosovo. The EU should better leverage its political, economic, and financial assistance to Serbia with a rapprochement on foreign, security, and defence policies.
- Engage Turkey in a dialogue on Russia and Black Sea security issues. The EU should support Turkey's recent offer to normalise relations with Armenia and open the Turkish-Armenian border to help stabilise the South Caucasus.

Actions of this kind might often seem brutally geopolitical and uncomfortable for most EU institutions and member states. But they remain within the bounds of the strategic prudence much of the bloc has already adopted vis-à-vis Russia. The policies outlined above fall short of calls for NATO enlargement to Ukraine or Georgia, new humanitarian interventions in the Middle East, and major initiatives over Nagorno-Karabakh. In this sense, such policies would give the EU somewhat sharper ways to assert itself in its neighbourhood – but would do so within the confines of the reigning foreign policy consensus in the bloc.

Engage

None of this means that the EU should avoid dialogue with Russia. Multiple areas of EU-Russia engagement – on trade, energy, travel, and scientific cooperation – have been resilient enough in recent years.

Some forms of dialogue with Russia are easier in multilateral settings such as the OSCE, the Council of Europe, and the Arctic Council. Because so many member states still want to create a new framework for dialogue with Russia, the effort could even involve engagement with the Eurasian Economic Union – if this helps persuade some EU countries to be more ambitious not just on selective engagement but also on policies that constrain hostile Russian actions. Attempts to address climate change and other environmental issues could take place in such multilateral settings. Counter-terrorism cooperation between Europe and Russia already happens and should continue (even though it is mostly bilateral, between the country and EU member states).

The EU has an interest in preserving all forms of dialogue with Russian society at large. This certainly implies support for independent NGOs and civil society groups, but might often involve government-affiliated and -supported organisations. Due to the nature of Russia's political system, there are too many such organisations to ignore if one is to retain maximum outreach into Russian society.

The EU should maintain its relatively liberal policies on visas for Russian citizens, and could even make them friendlier by abolishing or subsidising fees for these documents (a move the bloc should clearly communicate to each recipient in Russia through leaflets in each newly returned passport). That would be a good way to reach out to the four million Russians who receive EU visas annually (according to pre-pandemic data) in a way that EU public diplomacy and press conferences cannot match. Europe should sustain and, where possible, intensify its support for Russian civil society and its decentralised scientific, cultural, and educational dialogues with Russia. Vaccine distribution is also a valuable cooperative endeavour: as covid-19 has no nationality, nor should measures to prevent its spread. But such scientific and cultural cooperation has been happening without too much political or diplomatic fanfare – which is a good thing.

A muscular approach to Russia is not part of the EU's strategic culture, and would take the bloc out of its diplomatic comfort zone. Yet exile to the margins of international affairs is a far more discomfiting prospect for the EU than trying to learn the language of power and to become an assertive geopolitical actor. In other words, a better dialogue with Russia will come about once the EU begins behaving in a more decisive way, both domestically and internationally. In time, the sides will restart their dialogue. But the EU should come to that dialogue with more cards to play than it currently has.

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