

How should the EU deal with Russia after Navalny's poisoning?

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Steps towards managing the European Union's **relations with Russia** need a long-term perspective and a corresponding political dynamic that requires audacity. The once commonly-held vision of co-operative security in Europe, enshrined in the OSCE's founding documents, may seem unachievable now, but it should not be lost out of sight.

When the Russian oppositionist Alexei Navalny released the video "Putin's palace" in January 2021, upon his return to Russia from Germany after being poisoned with a military-grade substance called Novichok in August 2020, the showdown began. No doubt, Navalny and his political organisation have always been a thorn in the Russian regime's side. Yet the stakes have risen since investigative journalists revealed the details of the poisoning as being carried out by Russian intelligence agents. Since then the "Berlin patient" seems to have been elevated to public enemy number one by the Russian ruling regime.

The subsequent trial and imprisonment of Navalny led to the largest street protests in Russia in a decade. They occurred across the entire country, drawing over a 100,000 people. In the meantime, the regime has been tightening the screws. It has barred Navalny from public life, banned his organisation and adjusted the laws so that virtually anyone can be put behind bars for as little as a social media post. Individuals and organisations are being prosecuted under the guise of fighting extremism, misinterpretation of history or undue foreign influence. The room

for manoeuvre is very limited for oppositional forces, and pretty much anyone can be labelled a “foreign agent”.

Nothing to lose

At the time of writing, the authorities have overwhelmed Navalny, his team and organisations with criminal lawsuits in an unprecedented wave of repression ahead of the autumn Duma election. Several opposition leaders have already emigrated as a result. Against this backdrop, the degree of confrontation in Russia-West relations and the heightened tensions in the neighbourhood constitute a new and worrying phenomenon. The recent Russian military build-up at the Ukrainian border – a “test of the Russian military’s readiness”, as Russian minister of defence Sergey Shoigu put it – alarmed Ukraine and its neighbours. President Alyksandr Lukashenka of Belarus, after being shaken by tenacious peaceful country-wide protests, has cracked down on demonstrations and, being supported by Russia, is unlikely to step down voluntarily.

In its relations with the EU, Russia continues to break diplomatic porcelain and seems to have adopted a policy of “nothing to lose”. It humiliated Josep Borrell, the EU’s High Representative of Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, on his visit to Moscow in February this year. It expelled European diplomats for attending pro-Navalny protests while the press conference between Borrell and Sergey Lavrov was happening. Subsequently, Lavrov claimed Russia did not have relations with the EU as an organisation, and even floated the option of breaking relations with the EU altogether. A biannual renewal of EU sanctions and a wave of mutual expulsions of diplomats became part of the routine.

The inauguration of the Joe Biden administration in the US heralded the revival of what is left of nuclear arms control, through the five-year renewal of the new START treaty. Yet President Biden has made no attempts to reset relations with Russia so far. Instead, he imposed additional sanctions in response to alleged Russian election interference and the hacking of government computers (i.e. the Solar Winds attack). All previous sanctions remain in place, firmly backed by a bipartisan consensus in the US Congress. Biden called his Russian counterpart a “killer”. But, at the same time, he offered Putin a personal meeting. Overall, Biden’s proclaimed fight between democracies and autocracies suggest a tough US line on Russia and narrows the space for defusing tensions. And Russia seems comfortable with the status of the US as primary adversary.

Despite tensions running high, a relaxed attitude seems to prevail among policymakers and experts. This is paradoxical. Both the EU and Russia appear to think

that the status quo is not too bad, and that time is on their side. This “wait and see” approach suggests that it is better to “sit out” the current crisis in the hope that the other side gives in, or that events will ultimately change the situation. This thinking only fuels the current deadlock. Serious problems with Russia should not allow the EU to lie back since the situation may quickly deteriorate.

Those policy makers and experts calling for a “maximum pressure” approach face another paradox: the outcome may be minimal or even contrary to the desired goal. The seven-year history of anti-Russia sanctions indicate that while sanctions may be painful for Russia, they do not fundamentally change Russia's behaviour. Rather they feed into the Russian narrative of a “besieged fortress”, built on the juxtaposition of “the West”. Issues of (wounded) national pride play an important role here. This should not be taken as an argument against sanctions per se, but rather as a critical reflection on the expectation that Russia will change under pressure. Above all, this approach does not provide a way out of the current impasse, but rather entrenches the antagonism. The underlying moral high ground of this policy can be dangerous, especially if applied to a nuclear power that feels threatened.

A third paradox is that in Europe security issues do not seem to be on top of the agenda, which is dominated by climate change, the pandemic and migration. Yet tackling these global challenges requires a concerted effort of all countries, including those who are deeply distrustful of each other or are in conflict. Solving these “classical” security conflicts appears to be a necessary condition for successfully tackling global challenges to security.

Stepping out of the deadlock

There is no clear recipe for getting out of the deadlock with Russia – not least because it requires a great deal of co-operation from Russia, unity among EU member states and coordination with the US. Above all, it requires political will from all sides to tackle the obvious risks emanating from a standoff between nuclear powers. In the short term, it is the EU's responsibility and interest to manage relations with Russia and to prevent further deterioration of the situation – the worst case possible could lead to a war. Concrete steps may include direct talks, reactivation of confidence-building measures and military-to-military contacts. Let us not forget that dialogue is not a reward for good behaviour, but the most common tool in foreign relations. It has nothing to do with appeasement, as some critics have it, let alone forgiveness for the Kremlin's behaviour.

In the medium- and long-term, a political process with bold new ideas to re-establish stability on the European continent is badly needed. The EU is in a good

position to start it. Such political process should include three components: 1) being tough – “resistance”; 2) extending the hand – “co-operation”; and 3) bringing our respective homes in order.

A carefully balanced and well-communicated combination of resistance and co-operation, on the one hand, requires the EU to deter Russian sabre-rattling and cyberattacks, to dismantle tax havens that attract money laundering, and to push back against outright lies. On the other hand, it requires engagement with Russia on issues of mutual interest – as has been pointed out by European policy-makers. Issues range from technical standards for industrial products to the development of vaccines, management of the Arctic, climate change and the Iran nuclear deal. Not for the sake of engagement, but based on the realisation that tackling these issues is in the EU’s interest and it requires co-operation with not like-minded states. There may be more areas that Russia is interested in engaging. The EU should seek a frank dialogue on equal footing with Russia to explore what these could be and to forge concrete joint projects.

Together with the Council of Europe, the EU should continue being vocal about human rights abuses, as in the case of Navalny and other political prisoners. Doing so is important not only to stay true to the EU’s own values, but because publicity can save lives. The EU should also continue expressing concern over breaches of the very same principles that Russia subscribed to as a member of the Council of Europe and the OSCE, such as the right to free speech and freedom of assembly. At the same time, in supporting civil society, the EU should be cautious not to do harm given the current wave of repression.

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The EU should view its policy towards Russia in the broader context of Eastern policy, currently covered by the Eastern Partnership programme. Most urgently, the EU and its member states should do everything they can to contribute to a peaceful resolution of the seven-year-long conflict in Ukraine that has claimed more than 13,000 lives. First and foremost, fighting in Donbas needs to stop. This requires putting diplomatic pressure on Russia but also, to a certain extent, on Ukraine. This latter aspect may be politically unpopular in the EU, yet is necessary and should go along with continued assurance of solidarity with the Ukrainian people and support the efforts of the government to bring peace to the country. Even if Russian soldiers, foreign fighters and their weaponry disappeared from Donbas overnight, re-integration and reconciliation would be a daunting long-term task, requiring the collective effort of the entire Ukrainian society. Demining of the contact line – sadly one of the largest mined areas in the world – will be a part of this effort.

Moreover, it would be advisable if the EU reassessed what it can credibly offer the Eastern Partnership countries in the absence of a membership perspective, and how to encourage domestic reforms. Ideally, the EU should play a mediating role and help these countries to find a well-balanced approach between their neighbours – the EU and Russia. The EU, in this context, should encourage countries not to see themselves as bargaining chips in a geopolitical contest. Detailed proposals have been laid out in the joint RAND-FES policy report titled “Consensus Proposal for a Revised Regional Order in Post-Soviet Europe and Eurasia”.

Resilience at home

These steps should be premised upon facing Russia the way it is, not the way we would like it to be. This means taking Moscow's interests and threat perceptions into consideration. This does not mean not being tough on Russia. Neither does it mean accepting Russia's policies or forgiving its transgressions, let alone betraying EU values or giving up the ideal of a democratic Russia. This approach does not imply a strategic partnership, a quick breakthrough or change through rapprochement. It does, however, reject the passive, defeatist attitude of the “wait and see” approach and eschews the confrontation inherent in the policy of “maximum pressure”.

Most importantly, steps towards managing relations need to be accompanied by a long-term perspective and a corresponding dynamic that requires audacity. The once commonly-held vision of co-operative security in Europe, enshrined in the

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OSCE founding documents, might be unachievable now, but it should not be out of sight. The FES-Globsec “Cooperative Security Initiative” that combines efforts of eminent experts from across the region and a public awareness campaign, offers proposals on reviving co-operative security. A serious, honest strategic conversation (perhaps informal and behind closed doors) about European security and Russia's future place in it needs to be a part of this process. Neutral states (for

instance, Austria, Finland, Sweden), who were instrumental in the CSCE process, could give impulses, fathom the room for compromise and have a mediating role.

EU member states would be aided by the realisation that Russia, in fact, is not the biggest threat – the EU's internal weaknesses are. The EU would be a stronger foreign policy actor with regards to Russia if it bolstered its own capabilities – from education, in order to better demarcate propaganda from facts, to the economy,

now battered by the pandemic, to common defence capabilities. Only if EU member states find durable fixes to domestic problems like populism, nationalism and growing inequality can they better prepare to deal with external challenges. Strong cohesive societies will both exert the power of attraction and act from a position of strength on the international arena.

If EU member states had a more unified approach, they would be sending clearer signals to Russia, and the EU as an institution would be taken as an actor to be reckoned with. Yet views on Russia differ starkly. Some states gravitate to the “maximum pressure” approach, others favour a “wait and see” one; a few governments try promoting dialogue, but often face criticism from their neighbours. In the absence of majority voting in the European Council, member states are having a hard time reconciling their different views and agreeing on a common policy that goes beyond the five “Mogherini principles”. The divisions invite Russia to exploit them – most recently the procurement of Sputnik V vaccines by some European countries before any EU authorisation.

As for the Russian “home”, it may not be close to collapse, as some hawks suggest. In fact, economists attest it a considerable *zapas prochnosti*, or resilience, that rests on sound macroeconomic policy coupled with regime ingenuity to mobilise and placate large parts of the populations while selectively targeting dissent. Yet the relative stability should not lead Russia to lose sight of the problem of economic stagnation, driven primarily by domestic factors, corruption and low oil prices. Economists around Sergey Guriev speak about *zastoy 2.0*, relating to the period of economic stagnation of the late Brezhnev years. Additionally, Russia’s “middle-income trap”, noted by World Bank reports, will be hard to escape from without political and technological modernisation.


The second difficult task, which will be key to the future trajectory of Russia, is to manage the balancing act between the demands of two groups, described by the economist Alexander Auzan. On one side is the 75 per cent of Russians who are predominantly conservative, depend on state-funded jobs and prioritise stability and a strong state. On the other side you have 25 per cent of Russians who are more liberal, agile and entrepreneurial – they prioritise political freedom and the rule of law. Some of them came into the spotlight during the recent protests – young internet-savvy people who grew up during the economic boom and are hard to intimidate. To stay in power, the ruling regime needs to cater to the 75 per cent; but to spur economic development, they need support from the other 25 per cent. This dilemma will shape the future of Putin’s rule and the path that Russia takes.

Notably, this path is not bound to lead to a democratic Russia. EU policy-makers tend to connect their hopes with the “25 per cent”. Yet even those of them who are dissatisfied with the situation in Russia, and Putin in particular, do not necessarily

favour a western-style democracy, as many polls have demonstrated. In this context, Russian authoritarianism should not obscure to western observers the tacit social contract in Russia. Its most recent renewal came in 2020 with the nationwide voting on constitutional amendments, in the middle of the pandemic and when the Crimea rally-round-the-flag effect had worn off. This de facto plebiscite on the (almost) indefinite rule of Putin demonstrated that the Russian regime cares about its legitimacy while large parts of the public are content with the bargain.

Long-term goal

In our relations with Russia, we are facing a deadlocked and potentially dangerous situation. The West will probably remain tough on Russia, as will Russia towards the West. Both sides are militarised and not since the heights of the Cold War has the danger of nuclear exchange been so high, at least according to the Doomsday Clock. Even if a new figure appears at the helm of the Russian government, this alarming situation is unlikely to go away. To manage it we need responsible policy, front and centre. Therefore, all Russian wrongdoings notwithstanding, the EU should reconsider its self-righteous perception that the ball is in Russia's court. If the EU wants to actively shape policy and avoid further escalation and possible conflict, the ball is automatically in its court. This requires critical self-reflection and a readiness to admit mistakes and to adapt. And, above all, it requires boldness to start a political process with an adversary in order to stabilise European security.

It will be a difficult process, most certainly marred with setbacks. But rather than stopping at obstacles or trading blame, the EU should be humbled by crisis and feel urged to try harder next time. After all, diplomacy cannot afford standing still. It is its job to manage even bad relations. Even though a breakthrough with Russia is hardly imaginable in the near future, the EU should not lose sight of the long-term goal of co-operative security in Europe. It is not only a desirable vision but an utmost necessity given the great challenges of human security we are facing, such as migration, pandemics and climate change. 

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