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**Research Report**

## A more robust Russia policy for the EU: How member-state coalitions can contribute

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# SWP Comment

NO. 65 DECEMBER 2020

## A More Robust Russia Policy for the EU

How Member-State Coalitions Can Contribute

*Susan Stewart*

Since the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of the war in Eastern Ukraine in spring 2014, the EU has largely been in crisis-management mode vis-à-vis Russia. During the past six years, it has become clear that Russia's actions towards Ukraine are not a stand-alone crisis, but rather the expression of a policy that violates the sovereignty and territorial integrity of other states and does not seek compromise with western actors in the neighbourhood. It is associated with an approach that aims to weaken the EU and many of its member states. Finally, the case of Alexei Navalny, inter alia, has indicated that the Russian leadership is prepared to use brutality to prevent a viable political opposition from emerging. Considering all this, the EU needs a Russia policy that is capable of dealing with Russia more effectively.

A major success of the EU's Russia policy is that all member states agreed to impose sanctions on Russia in spring 2014, and that these remain in effect. It was unrealistic to expect sanctions alone to force the Russian leadership to rethink their actions in Ukraine. Nevertheless, the restrictive measures were and continue to be an important and rare signal of EU unity vis-à-vis Russia; they greatly surprised Moscow. Attempts by the Russian regime to have the sanctions lifted show that the latter have impacted on the country's leaders in various ways. This was evident, for example, in the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic, when Vladimir Putin proposed with reference to the United Nations that all existing sanctions be revoked as a sign of solidarity during the health crisis.

### Problems with the EU Approach

In March 2016 the sanctions were supplemented by five Principles, which now define how the EU deals with Russia: 1. complete implementation of the Minsk agreements; 2. expanded relations with Eastern Partnership (EaP) and Central Asian countries; 3. reinforced resilience within the EU against threats from Russia; 4. selective engagement with Russia on e.g. the Middle East, the fight against terrorism and climate change; 5. expansion of people-to-people contacts and support for Russia's civil society. These five principles, proposed by the then-High Representative Federica Mogherini and approved by all EU foreign ministers, de facto replaced the pre-2014 Russia policy. All previous instruments – negotiations on a new agreement and liberalising visas; the “four



Common Spaces” of cooperation; the Partnership for Modernisation; and regular EU/Russia summits – were put on hold and have so far not resumed. A return to the status quo ante is currently inconceivable.

The five principles reveal weaknesses in the EU’s foreign policy. Especially where Russia is concerned, member states’ interests have diverged significantly for many years. The principles are the lowest common denominator for the whole of the EU; going above and beyond them seems neither possible nor sought after. Moreover, prioritising one principle over another could trigger a renewed Russia debate within the EU and thus threaten the fragile consensus. The principles do not form a coherent whole, and it would be difficult to claim that they have been consistently and effectively applied in the past few years.

In part, this is understandable. The complete implementation of the Minsk Agreements is unrealistic since Russia’s and Ukraine’s objectives regarding the Donbas are incompatible. The expansion of EU relations with the other post-Soviet states is happening as part of the Eastern Partnership and the Central Asia strategy. These initiatives are important and must be continued. However, as a weak foreign and security policy actor, the EU is frequently unable to respond to these states’ main concerns, particularly concerning hard security. As regards selective engagement, it is difficult to find potential areas in which cooperation with Russia beyond already existing levels would be meaningful. This is mainly due to the fact that the Russian leadership does not take the institutions in Brussels very seriously and attempts to weaken them as well as some EU member states. Given these circumstances, intensifying cooperation makes little sense.

### **Resilience and Societal Contacts as Focus Points**

In other words, only principles 3 and 5 remain for the EU to focus on in its direct relations with Russia: increasing the resili-

ence of the EU and its member states, and expanding contacts between (civil) societies. The drive towards more resilience as part of the five principles primarily targets Russia’s calculated attempts to damage the EU and its members. However, EU efforts can have a positive impact which goes far beyond dealing with Russia, since other actors also employ similar strategies against the EU. The expansion of contacts between (civil) societies has caused concern amongst the Russian leadership, which fears they might strengthen the opposition or even lead to an externally supported regime change. Both Russia’s legislation on civil-society organisations and its handling of the Petersburg Dialogue show that the leadership wants to exert far-reaching control over developments in this area. This principle is therefore less about working together with official Russian authorities and more about societal forms of cooperation. These can be promoted through EU and member-state institutions, such as the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum. In Germany, the basis of such support is, inter alia, the Coordinator for Intersocietal Cooperation with Russia, Central Asia and the Eastern Partnership Countries.

### **Coalitions as a Workable Approach**

An effective approach could be pursued via coalitions of member states that share similar objectives in one or several areas of the existing Russia policy. These coalitions could re-energise principles 3 and 5 by countering specific actions by Russia, such as disinformation, money laundering or cyber attacks. Coalitions could also be active in supporting particular groups within Russia, for instance with regard to visa issues and civil-society cooperation. This would be easier than readjusting all principles at the EU level, since some member states have strong preferences for individual principles.

The joint declaration by France, Latvia and Lithuania in September 2020 can serve as an example of how to initiate such co-

operation. It calls for measures that strengthen the security of elections and target disinformation. Even though the declaration does not explicitly refer to Russia, many of the measures mentioned are especially relevant in the Russian case. The three countries argue that the EU could be more proactive in this area under the European Democracy Action Plan, presented on 3 December. This appeal by France, Latvia and Lithuania to the EU level is important. However, the purpose of the cooperation suggested in this analysis is for interested member states to act on their own initiative, without waiting for the approach to become an EU-wide policy. In the context of the above-mentioned declaration, the three countries could therefore jointly take stock of the resources that they currently employ and the measures that they already undertake to ensure election security and to counter disinformation. In a second step, they would henceforth coordinate their actions in these areas and exploit potential synergies. Thus they could tie into existing EU measures, for instance the Joint Action Plan against Disinformation, and strengthen them through action on the national level.

As regards civil-society cooperation, activists in countries such as Germany, Poland, Sweden, Finland and the Czech Republic have extensive contacts with suitable Russian actors and could mutually benefit from systematic exchange. This would facilitate finding creative ways of handling the numerous administrative and legal hurdles that confront civil-society cooperation in Russia. Official support in the relevant member states, both tangible and intangible, could contribute to this.

The approach suggested here is potentially risky, since foreign policy would initially be relocated onto the nation-state level to some extent. It is nevertheless ultimately based on the idea of transcending the individual nation-state. The project's strength is that a number of interested member states could come together in this domain and act with combined force. Similar coalitions of affected EU member states could tackle other projects: to contain Russian

money laundering, Germany, Estonia, Latvia, Denmark, Sweden and Poland, for instance, could join forces. To counter cyber attacks, Germany, Estonia, Finland, Sweden and the Netherlands, inter alia, could form a coalition. Here existing counter-strategies could complement one another. Even where cooperation already exists, it would be sensible to pool it as a combined initiative and thereby expand it. Links between member states could thus be strengthened, aspects of a common Russia policy could be made more visible, and EU citizens could be made more aware of the gravity of the situation.

If competing groups of member states were to draft two contradictory policies, it could become a problem. Astute interventions by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, could prevent this or facilitate a compromise.

## Development of the EU's Foreign Policy

An approach as outlined above could also build on other pre-existing initiatives and contribute to intensifying Franco-German cooperation, as set out in the Aachen Treaty. Both Germany and France have recently made efforts to pursue enhanced communication with eastern EU members concerning policy vis-à-vis Russia and the Eastern Partnership countries. Trips by French President Macron to Warsaw in February 2020 and Latvia and Lithuania in September 2020 testify to such intentions on the part of France. They are part of Macron's broader international initiative aiming, inter alia, to establish a strategic dialogue with Russia. Similar high-ranking endeavours have taken place in Germany, for instance vis-à-vis Poland and Lithuania. There are also a number of expert dialogues.

Germany and France could join together and systematically seek out commonalities with partners in the eastern EU. This would be less about agreeing on a united front towards Russia as a whole and more about

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discovering where overlapping agendas with several eastern EU members exist and agreeing on joint or coordinated action in these sectors.

However, the efforts should go beyond the current approach. The latter seems to consist of communicating the French or German perspective and better understanding the other side's opinion, but without striving for a convergence of the two positions. Both countries appear willing to represent the interests of the eastern member states in their dialogue with Russia as well. However, this proposal is unconvincing unless and until substantially greater trust is established. More promising would be an attempt to engage representatives from these countries in a dialogue with or about Russia. This would also ensure that more attention is paid to relations with EaP states, since actors in Poland and Lithuania, for instance, have particularly close contacts with Belarus and Ukraine.

France and Germany should also consider working together with regard to cooperation with Russian civil society. Precisely because Germany's Petersburg Dialogue and France's Trianon Dialogue use different approaches, it would be worthwhile to organize an exchange on their successes (and failures) to date and, where appropriate, formulate joint messages to the Russian leadership regarding its treatment of civil society.

When establishing coalitions, it is important for the participating member states to declare their willingness to embed their policy within an EU approach. Close cooperation between the member states concerned and Brussels will be essential if these partial approaches are to strengthen the EU's Russia policy, rather than weaken it. Such an attempt would represent an opportunity to provide some parts of the existing policy with more meaningful and effective content and make the EU more resilient in areas where it has been confronted with destructive acts in the past few years, by Russia in particular. Partial

approaches could thus contribute to developing a more robust EU foreign policy, initiated by shifting member-state coalitions.

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