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## NO RESET IN SIGHT: The EU-Russia conflict in the Trump era

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**T**he rift between the European Union and Russia runs deep. Deeper in fact than those in the EU advocating a swift normalisation of relations with Moscow out of ideological conviction or economic interest guess. And although normalisation is unlikely to happen in 2017, it is worth bearing in mind what it involves from the political and strategic points of view. What is at stake is not – or at least not only – the bilateral relationship but the futures of the EU and Russia themselves.

Moscow hopes that the lack of backing from Washington coupled with a new distribution of powers within the EU will result in the end of Brussels's strong stance on Ukraine and fragile consensus on the sanctions. Getting the sanctions lifted is Russia's main immediate goal. But the EU and its member states should above all be concerned about potential objectives of greater strategic importance, such as the survival of the European project and the strength of the transatlantic link and NATO, its most tangible expression. Because recent history shows that if Moscow knows how to exploit anything it is Eu-

ro-Atlantic vulnerabilities and contradictions. And the period of crisis and confusion in which Europe and the United States find themselves, coupled with a worsening domestic context in Russia, seems particularly propitious for adventurous and ambitious moves by the Kremlin.

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**The EU notes that Moscow encourages and in some cases actively backs all European forces with an anti-EU agenda.**

**The Kremlin presents itself as a potential alternative political model that, in different ways, is seducing the EU's xenophobic right wing, above all, but also its populist left.**

**Whatever the view of Russia, there is an implicit consensus between the member states that a stable and prosperous Russia is in their strategic interests.**

### **Where are we? Trump the unknown quantity and the dilemmas for Moscow**

The first one hundred days of the Trump government have left many questions unanswered. Uncertainty persists about the main lines that will guide the new administration's foreign policy. There are no precedents for a presidency like his. Those comparing him to Reagan either fail to recall his character well enough or do not have a clear perception of the disruption the White House's new occupant may embody. Trump questions some of what have, until now, been considered pillars of US global hegemony such as the liberal world order, free trade and the attraction of talent from all corners of the planet.

When it comes to the EU, the White House emits **contradictory messages**. Some of his team favour maintaining a strong transatlantic connection and strategic backing for Brussels. But Trump himself has praised Brexit and shown signs of clear hostility towards the European project, German leadership and has branded NATO “obsolete”.<sup>1</sup> As a result, his arrival in the Oval Office leaves the EU in a highly uncomfortable situation. Like it or not, Brussels remains considerably dependent, both strategically and militarily, on Washington. Time will tell if Trump turns out to be a wake-up call for this stagnant EU, or, on the other hand, hastens its decline. The options are open, but the lack of leadership within the EU does not prompt optimism.

At least, what seems to have receded in these first weeks of the mandate is the possibility of a swift rapprochement between Washington and Moscow at Brussels’s expense. Trump’s victory in November 2016 generated a wave of euphoria on the main Russian television stations that dissipated almost as quickly as it appeared. On February 13th, just 23 days after being named national security adviser, Michael Flynn was forced to resign as a result of his conversations with the Russian ambassador to the United States and **payments originating in Russia** that he received. Flynn’s fall was a turning point. Since then, the same government-loyal Russian media has, in conspiratorial tones, again taken up the narrative of the strength of the US “deep state” in the hands of an purported «globalist and Russophobic» elite.

## What is at stake is not – or at least not only – the bilateral relationship but the futures of the EU and Russia themselves.

As well as Flynn, links with other members of the campaign team and Trump himself are under scrutiny. The true extent of Russian interference and influence in the US presidential elections in November 2016 still needs to be determined. At the time of writing, the Senate and House intelligence committees are investigating the issue. To date, it consists of a combination of a degree of interference – active measures in the form of cyber-attacks on Democratic Party servers – and efforts to exert maximum influence: leaking compromising emails involving Hillary Clinton through the Wikileaks portal, intensive disinformation campaigns and the use of trolls and bots on social networks. Of course, the **Kremlin flatly rejects** having played any role. But there is an unusual degree of consensus within the **US intelligence community** and among experts about the Russian activity in these elections.

There are, nevertheless, different points of view on the extent and objectives of these activities. In my opinion, the Kremlin

worked – like the rest of the world – from the hypothesis of a Hillary Clinton victory and sought, fundamentally, to erode the credibility of the US electoral system. A Clinton victory, Russian television stations ceaselessly repeated, had been decided upon by the establishment and the will of the people was simply irrelevant. So when all the surveys – including internal ones by each of the two great American parties – were certain of a Democrat victory, the Russian media were preparing the ground by establishing a narrative that questioned its legitimacy. And in this endeavour they were joined by none other than the Republican candidate himself, who warned during the campaign that **a fraud** was being prepared. It is easy to suppose that if Clinton had won by a tight margin Trump himself would have taken the lead in delegitimising the electoral system and put the US political landscape under strain.

Despite the praise he and Putin devoted to each other during the campaign, more than enthusiasm for Trump, what became clear was the Kremlin’s deep antipathy towards Clinton. Her phase as secretary of state is linked with two events that are fundamental to understanding the evolution of the Putin regime and the current bilateral context: the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime and the wave of protests in Moscow, both of which took place in 2011. About Libya – which, in turn, explains the Russian focus on the issue of Syria – the Kremlin insists (not without justification on this point) that France and the United Kingdom abused the Security Council’s mandate (**Resolution 1973**)

and went far beyond establishing a no-fly zone in accordance with the principle of the “responsibility to protect” and ended up contributing decisively to the overthrow of Gaddafi by acting as the air force for one of the sides in the conflict. With regard to the 2011 protests, which play a central role in the ideological and

institutional reconfiguration of the Putin regime, Moscow was profoundly irritated by the explicit backing the then US secretary of state gave to them. In the Kremlin’s view, it was all part of a grand plan orchestrated by Washington that pursued nothing less than a “Maidan in Red Square” and to “**demolish ... Russian power**”, as Putin himself put it. This, in turn, also explains Moscow’s reaction to the events in Kiev since the end of 2013. As the Russian analyst Fyodor Lukyanov points out, from the Kremlin’s perspective Putin is giving the United States **a taste of its own medicine**.

For the Russian media, a Democrat victory was as inevitable as the war Hillary Clinton would unleash on Russia when she reached the White House. Presumably, then, some of the Russian domestic audience let out a sigh of relief when Trump won. Nevertheless, both the Kremlin and the community of Russian analysts and experts have been prudent and, in some cases, sceptical about a possible swift rapprochement. Because everyone finds Trump unpredictable. Not to mention the problems his aggressive rhetoric about China and Iran could pose for Russia. Moscow is forging a strategic association with Beijing that is plagued by contradictions and, on the Russian side, fears, but is

1. What line the White House ultimately takes remains to be seen, but it is worth mentioning that certain Atlanticist European voices take Trump’s words to be a redefinition of the organisation’s mission and the distribution of its financial burden, rather than calling into question the transatlantic pillar. See, for example Bardaji, Rafael and Kemp, Richard: “Nato needs to reform into a global alliance against Islamic terrorism – or become obsolete”, *The Telegraph*, 13 February, 2017.

rooted in a shared rejection of US hegemony.<sup>2</sup> And as far as Iran is concerned, despite certain disagreements, Russia is fighting shoulder to shoulder with the country in Syria. Hence, all the tension between Iran and the US may have an impact on Russia and its Syrian deployment. And here it is definitely worth mentioning the concern shown by an Israel that has influence over Trump about what it considers to be a **de facto alliance between Russia and Hezbollah** and the supply to the latter of advanced Russian weaponry.

Nevertheless, beyond these dilemmas, Trump also offers potential opportunities that Moscow would undoubtedly like to explore: the end of the promotion of a values-based foreign policy agenda; the acceptance of an exclusive area of Russian influence in eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia; and the undermining of the transatlantic link and, with it, an attempt to take advantage of Europe's confusion to redefine the continental security architecture in the terms Moscow wants.

### **The search for a new paradigm in EU-Russia relations**

If they were ever strategic partners in anything but rhetoric Brussels and Moscow no longer consider each other as such and that will not change in the foreseeable future. The distrust and clash of perceptions will scuttle any initiative in a context in which the foundations and principles meant to guide European geopolitics are in dispute. Nevertheless, they will continue to be of mutual strategic importance. The evolution of each will have a direct and meaningful effect on the other. What is more, the Kremlin shows growing determination to rival Brussels strategically in two sensitive areas: the "shared neighbourhood" (even the expression displeases Moscow), and the ideological dimension.

The clash of perceptions and symbolism plays a central role in the geopolitical dispute between Brussels and Moscow and is an essential factor to keep in mind. From the European perspective, the dilemma is how to contain Russian aggressiveness and to be sure, at the same time, what its objectives are and how far the Kremlin is willing to go. In other words, Brussels is considering how to react to the uncertainties produced by a threatening Russia. For its part, Moscow conceives of its movements – in Ukraine as well as in Syria – as defensive and in the interests of "restoring" a balance previously violated by the West.<sup>3</sup> The origin of these mis-

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2. Although in Beijing the haste and enthusiasm shown by certain Russian sectors about a possible rapprochement with Washington, even at a cost to the relationship with China, is unlikely to have gone unnoticed.

3. And, continuing with the idea of giving the US «a taste of its own medicine» (acting the way the West does), the idea of restoring balance – or what comes to the same thing, forcing Western advances to retreat – recalls the approach of the "Roll-back" of the Reagan administration. So, obvious differences notwithstanding, Ukraine is the new Nicaragua (remember the beachhead in the back yard) and the Russian insurgency in Donbas is a new Contra.

understandings can be traced to the aftermath of the Soviet Union and Russia's frustrated expectations about its place in the post-Cold War order.

Noting this Russian frustration should not lead, as happens on no small number of other occasions, to uncritical acceptance of Moscow's narrative of victimhood about these past twenty-five years, which may be summarised in the idea that the West is to blame for taking advantage of Russia's weakness in the nineties without any generosity or foresight.<sup>4</sup> In the same way, it is also worth avoiding some of the rhetorical formulas used by the Kremlin that contribute, above all, to poisoning the debate and entrenching the conflict. Among these some worth mentioning are "the indivisibility of European security"; "legitimate Russian interests in the post-Soviet space"; "Russia's rightful place", etc. These are formulations that, supposedly out of geopolitical realism, conceal the Gordian knot of the matter, which is none other than the relationship of Russia with the other former Soviet republics. This is the central issue and while Moscow has neither the desire nor the capacity to redefine the relationship with its neighbours on the basis of real – and not only formal – recognition of their full sovereignty and independence, the tensions and conflicts will continue.

The central place that must be given to narratives and perceptions does not mean they cannot be confronted with facts. The Kremlin's insistence, for example, on the idea of a supposed attempt to surround and isolate Russia stands

## **Recent history shows that if Moscow knows how to exploit anything it is Euro-Atlantic vulnerabilities and contradictions.**

up poorly to **factual analysis and certain geographical realities**. Similarly, since the start of the Ukrainian crisis, Moscow has insisted on the need to defend itself from the threat supposedly posed by NATO. It is therefore interesting to compare the dozens of aggressive manoeuvres and violations of European airspace by Russian military planes with the absence of similar actions by NATO or any member state. This asymmetry reflects the Kremlin's desire to raise the tension, test the limits of the European reaction and place the crisis in the military field – where Moscow feels comfortable and has operational and political advantages over the European states. Beyond the discourses it seeks to inoculate in its public opinion, Russia knows that European countries have for some time disregarded defence issues and placed their trust in the umbrella provided by the United States.

On the other hand, it is incongruous that in the debates in the EU – even more so since Trump's victory – it is assumed that the Europeans must make credible efforts on defence, but when Russia is debated its status as a victim facing a

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4. A good recent example of this trend can be found in Sakwa, Richard: "Russia's 1989 plea for a new world order was rejected, and so Putinism was born", *The Guardian*, 31 March 2017.

military threat that does not exist is accepted. NATO, by the way, is a collective defence community whose strength is rooted in **Article 5** of its founding treaty on the mutual response to an armed attack. Likewise, Moscow knows that in no case do European leaders or their respective public opinions contemplate military escalation. In other words, in this dispute on the European continent, the Kremlin always knows the EU's intentions and how far it is prepared to go. While, by contrast, enormous uncertainty prevails about the objectives and limits contemplated by Moscow. Underestimating the military danger posed by Russia by focussing on the size of Russian GDP or the comparison with the United States' defence budget is a serious error. On the one hand this ignores the fact that at European level, according to **SI-PRI figures**, Russia boasts higher defence spending (\$66bn) than the United Kingdom (\$55bn), France (\$50bn) and Germany (\$40bn). While on the other hand, and what is more relevant, we lose sight of the fact that the political will to use the military wing counts for at least as much as the size of the budget.

Cognitive biases no doubt play a central role in this issue, leading Moscow to believe its own narrative of the *fortress under siege* from a supposedly wicked West that seeks nothing more than to "demolish and usurp Russian power". But here it is worth pointing out that the Kremlin's perception of risk relates to the sustainability of the Putin regime rather

## The Gordian knot of the issue is none other than Russia's relationship with the other former Soviet republics.

than, as the official narrative insists, the military dimension. There is no greater guarantee of the preservation of peace in the European continent than the EU. Not to mention that, whatever the view of Russia, there is **implicit consensus** among member states that a stable and prosperous Russia is in their strategic interests. This is the logic underlined by the policies meant to further Russia's structural modernisation implemented by the EU over the past two decades. So, although the Putin regime toys with confusing its destiny with that of the country, insinuating that "**without Putin there is no Russia**", their interests do not **necessarily overlap**.

Ukraine tops Brussels and Moscow's bilateral agenda. Contrary to what is normally believed, it is more a consequence than a cause of the rift between the two. But, in the current context, it is an issue that cannot be set aside in favour of making progress on others, because the fundamentals of the European security order itself are in question. Slightly unexpectedly, Brussels has taken a strong stance with Moscow on Ukraine. The strength of this position cannot be explained without the German chancellor, Angela Merkel. Nonetheless, the EU clings to the Minsk agreements as a way to resolve the conflict. And, as I indicated in **February 2015**, "only an excess of optimism, lack of knowledge or the desire to turn the page in the Ukrainian conflict allow Minsk II to be considered the beginning of the end or the basis for a lasting peace between Russia and Ukraine".

It is not just that the number of victims has multiplied since the two protocols were signed, but that Kiev and Moscow's interpretations of what full compliance means differ so completely. And, in the current context, the Kremlin seems to believe that a combination of military pressure and disputes within the Ukrainian oligarchy will produce enough instability to provoke the derailing of the reformist agenda in Kiev and make the EU more receptive to its vision of Ukraine as "a failed state" – another of the mantras of Russian propaganda and disinformation.

To the Ukrainian crisis may be added others in **Belarus** and certain Baltic countries. In the latter case, the scenario that prompts most concern is not a large-scale Russian invasion, but something similar to what happened in eastern Ukraine. That is to say, an intervention that Moscow denies, but which is serious enough to destabilise a country and test the credibility of the above-mentioned Article 5. The possibility of a scenario of this type arising, which could potentially seriously erode NATO's solidity – hence the recent deployment as a deterrent of **four multinational battalions** in the Baltic republics and Poland – leads certain voices to advocate a quick agreement with Moscow. But it remains unclear what Russia could offer, beyond what it is presumed already exists (at least on paper): respect for the integrity and existence of countries such as Ukraine and the Baltic republics.<sup>5</sup>

In the short and medium term, the lack of mutual trust will remain the main obstacle in the relationship between Brussels and Moscow. The Putin regime perceives the EU and its values to be a potential existential threat. Meanwhile, the EU notes to its surprise that Moscow is encouraging and in some cases actively backing all European forces with an anti-EU agenda. As such, we are no longer just talking about incompatibility of geopolitical approaches: the area of influence (for which read: control) Moscow claims against the progressive European integration driving the EU's foreign action. To this can now be added the Kremlin's desire to present itself as a potential alternative political model that, in different ways, is seducing the EU's xenophobic right wing, above all, but also its populist left. All of this means that the paradigm of Russian modernisation and its progressive integration into a shared European space which has guided EU-Russia relations for the past twenty-five years is obsolete. Another must therefore be built on new foundations.

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5. See, for example, this article by Riordan, Shaun: "Rapprochement with Russia: In the Absence of Western Resolve", *Atlantic Sentinel*, January 7, 2017, in which the author says that "The Crimea will remain Russian, but the rest of Ukraine must be stabilized and guaranteed. NATO and the EU can agree to no further expansion into Russia's near abroad (given the internal problems of both institutions, this is hardly a concession) in exchange for security guarantees for the Baltic republics and Poland and an end to aggressive Russian military overflights". That means Ukraine having limited sovereignty and Moscow's tutelage in exchange for the security of the Baltic republics and Poland.