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# How has European geostrategic thinking towards Russia shifted since 2014?

EURO-ATLANTIC SECURITY  
POLICY BRIEF

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## About the Author

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# How has European geostrategic thinking towards Russia shifted since 2014?

## Introduction

Europe's relationship with Russia is marked by competition and cooperation. In many ways, Russia has served as a natural "other" against which European societies define themselves. However, Russia is and has always been a part of Europe; and it is therefore seen, if not as a natural, then at least an unavoidable partner to its European neighbours. In a recent policy brief for the European Leadership Network, Sergey Utkin pointed out that in Moscow, "Russian officials still insist that Russia remains part of Europe, but not only Europe."<sup>1</sup> In Brussels, officials admit that Russia remains part of Europe, but only partly.

There is difficulty defining a unified "European" position towards Russia as each European state has a different relationship with Russia due to its history, geography, cultural and economic ties. Additionally, institutional memberships in the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) shape policy debates and can constrain or enhance member states' national policies.<sup>2</sup> For analytical purposes, "Europe" can be considered in two ways. The geographical and cultural Europe of which Russia is a part. And the political and "strategic" Europe, defined by the EU and NATO from which Russia remains excluded.

This paper assesses how geostrategic thinking towards Russia has changed since 2014 within the latter category. This matters. Russia's assault on Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea delivered a shock that may have shaped Europe's future for decades. These actions compelled governments across the continent to fundamentally reconsider their relationship with Russia and assumptions about the nature of the Russian state and its ambitions abroad. The repercussions of 2014 have also led to questions over the resilience of the international liberal order and the West's ability to defend the rules and norms that underpin it. To many European states, apparent fragility has compelled a re-evaluation of the European security architecture.

This is not only about Ukraine. Subsequent developments such as the downing of MH-17, the Kremlin's meddling in democratic processes abroad, and Russia's growing role in the Middle East have also shaped Europe-Russia relations. Meanwhile, political developments and elections across Europe over the past five years have formed a new political landscape on the continent. This has added fuel to longstanding debates over disunity in European policy.

Still, this report argues that despite national differences, the EU and NATO have maintained remarkable cohesion and exercised patience and restraint. While European leaders should continue to press for the full implementation of the Minsk agreements as the basis for any substantial change in the relationship with Russia, they should also make better use of existing channels to pursue dialogue with Russia and think more creatively on areas of selective engagement. The new European Commission offers a timely opportunity for the EU to evaluate its "five principles" that set the basis for its Russia policy. Similarly, the 70th anniversary of NATO could be an opportunity to evaluate the alliance's realistic objectives with regards to Russia.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Sergey Utkin, "Together and Apart: A Russian Perspective on Europe," European Leadership Network, June 2019, <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/05062019-Together-and-apart-Russian-debate-on-Europe-Sergey-Utkin.pdf>, 1.

2 For a discussion on "Europeanization" in foreign policy, see Reuben Wong and Christopher Hill, "Introduction," in Reuben Wong and Christopher Hill (eds.), *National and European Foreign Policy: Towards Europeanization* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 1-18.

3 Lukasz Kulesa and Anna Wieslander, "A new strategic concept for NATO's 70th birthday?" European Leadership Network, April 1, 2019, <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/a-new-strategic-concept-for-na>

This report is based in part on study visits to European capitals and interviews with European diplomats, politicians and strategic advisers across Europe - many of whom are members of the European Leadership Network (ELN). It is also informed by the discussions of the "Contact Group on Russia-West Relations," an ELN-led track 1.5 initiative which brings together practitioners and experts from Russia and the rest of Europe to discuss the future of the relationship. These impressions do not represent the full spectrum of strategic thinking in Europe with regard to Russia. Neither do the countries highlighted in this report represent the diversity of policy within NATO and the EU. As a result, important nuances will inevitably be lost. Nonetheless, this report does illustrate how the European view towards Russia has evolved during a critical juncture for the continent's relationship to Russia.

## HISTORY MATTERS

The end of the Cold War necessitated a strategic rethink of Russia-West relations. Europeans struggled to define their relationship with the new Russia, perceived neither as an adversary nor as a natural partner. Western leaders maintained that Europe and Russia could bridge Cold War divisions but this would not be on Moscow's terms. Modern Russia-West relations have witnessed recurring "resets" to turn the page on a faltering relationship. And yet, old Cold War paradigms have come full circle from Kennan's containment, de Gaulle's "Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals", Brandt's Ostpolitik, to NATO's Harmel report, which, by noting that "military security and a policy of détente are not contradictory", is as relevant to European policy-makers today as it was in 1967.<sup>4</sup>

In Europe, Russian military action in Ukraine validated a suspicion that Moscow never intended to play by the rules or accept the constraints of the liberal international order. Putin's exposé of Russian grievances at the 2007 Munich Security Conference was a stark warning of Russia's dissatisfaction with

the post-Cold War regime and the Russo-Georgian war the following year demonstrated Russia's willingness to use military force in Europe to secure its interests.

Russia's assault on Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea in 2014 sent shockwaves through Europe. The official European response was quickly coordinated with the US. The Obama administration was aware that most of its European allies were opposed to a military response and that if Washington pursued a policy that was seen as too escalatory (such as supplying Ukraine with "lethal defensive weapons") this might jeopardise transatlantic cohesion.<sup>5</sup> This was affirmed by German Chancellor Angela Merkel in a speech to the German Bundestag in March 2014, where she asserted that military options were off the table.<sup>6</sup>

The EU began, in close cooperation with the US, to roll out diplomatic and economic sanctions against Russia and made the implementation of the Minsk agreement – the protocol developed by Germany, France, Russia and Ukraine to alleviate the military conflict in eastern Ukraine – the basis for any substantial change in its relationship with Russia. In 2016, NATO leaders decided to strengthen the alliance's deterrence and defense posture. The most tangible result at that time was the so-called Enhanced Forward Presence through which multinational battalions were deployed to the Baltic States and Poland.

Important differences exist between European states on the most effective way to respond to Russia. These range from economic and political engagement to condemnation to increased military defense and deterrence measures. Most countries have adopted more than one of these. The countries that have adopted the starkest approaches can be categorised into different camps:

- "Confront and Contain";
- "Accommodate and Engage"; and
- "Pressure and Engage."

tos-70th-birthday/.

4 NATO, "Harmel Report," [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_67927.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_67927.htm). Retrieved on July 2, 2019.

5 Fred Kaplan, "Obama's Way: The President in practice," *Foreign Affairs* 95(1) (2016), 61.

6 David Rising, "Merkel: Russia risks huge consequences in Ukraine," *The Seattle Times*, March 13, 2014, <https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/merkel-russia-risks-huge-consequences-in-ukraine/>.

While the political landscape has changed over the past five years, there has been little change between these camps, which co-exist within the EU and NATO. And so far, there has been no dramatic reversal in policy towards Russia.

### Confront and Contain (The Baltic States, Poland, UK and the Nordic countries)

Since 2014, the Baltic States, Poland, the United Kingdom and the Nordic countries have consistently adopted economically and militarily hardline stances against Russia, nationally as well as within the EU and NATO. Compared to other countries in Europe they have consistently advocated for more robust defence and deterrence measures within NATO, the continued application of sanctions through the EU as well as undertaken national measures to secure themselves from Russian interference.

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For these states, Russia's aggression is not just a challenge to principles governing the rules based order but a clear sign of Russia's wider malign ambitions and their vulnerability. For them, the Western response from 2014 onwards is not only a defence of the rules-based order but the means to deter further Russian violations to sovereignty and territorial integrity.

As one of the largest European states in Russia's vicinity, Poland has balanced a troublesome historical relationship to Moscow with a need to pursue limited cooperation. Russian actions in Ukraine had a profound impact on the Polish government's attitude towards its relationship with Russia. As Witold Waszczykowski, then the foreign minister, noted

ahead of NATO's 2016 summit in Warsaw, "We have to reject any type of wishful thinking with regard to pragmatic cooperation with Russia as long as it keeps on invading its neighbours."<sup>7</sup> In the wake of Russia's annexation of Crimea, Polish leaders lobbied hard for a commitment from NATO to reinforce its Eastern flank.<sup>8</sup> NATO's 2016 decision to deploy four battalions to Poland, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia was strongly welcomed in Warsaw. When welcoming the arrival of the NATO battalion to Poland on April 13 2017, president Andrzej Duda noted that "freedom has arrived after years of waiting for it, and this freedom is strong."<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, the Baltic states interpreted Russia's assault on Ukraine as an existential threat. Lithuania's ambassador to the US testified before US senators in 2017, "The illegal annexation of Crimea and the war in Eastern Ukraine are being perceived by Lithuania as having substantial implications to its own national security."<sup>10</sup> "Russia," the ambassador continued, "has never stopped treating the Baltic States as part of its exclusive sphere of influence and used its political, economic, energy resources, propaganda, cyber, information and other coercive, open and undercover tools to make the democratic countries more vulnerable to the present-day challenges."<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Baltic leaders emphasise that they are on the "front line" against Russia. Whether in the form of cyberattacks,

7 Robin Emmott and Sabine Siebold, "NATO agrees to reinforce Eastern Poland, Baltic states against Russia," Reuters, July 8, 2016, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-nato-summit/nato-agrees-to-reinforce-eastern-poland-baltic-states-against-russia-idUKKCN0ZN2NN>.

8 Monika Sus, "Poland, Leading critic or marginalized hawk?" in Marco Siddi (ed.), "EU Member States and Russia: National and European Debates in an evolving international environment," Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 84.

9 "President Andrzej Duda welcomes NATO troops," President of the Republic of Poland, April 13, 2017, <https://www.president.pl/en/news/art,401,president-andrzej-duda-welcomes-nato-troops.html>.

10 U.S. Senate, "The testimony of the Ambassador of the Republic of Lithuania, Rolandas Kriščiūnas before the Committee on Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations and related programs," March 7, 2017, <https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/030717-Krisciunas-Lithuania-Testimony1.pdf>.

11 Ibid., 2.

energy coercion, or meddling in elections, if it is happening elsewhere in Europe, it has most likely already happened in the Baltics.<sup>12</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the Baltic states pushed for a tougher position towards Russia through the EU and NATO. In the EU, this has primarily taken the form of supporting more stringent economic and financial sanctions as well as opposition towards Nord Stream 2, the pipeline which they consider as increasing European dependency on gas imports from Russia. Within NATO, the Baltic states supported more forceful defence and deterrence measures. As the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Saeima notes, "Latvia needs to advocate the necessity to further strengthen the collective defence functions of NATO, in line with a policy of deterrence."<sup>13</sup>

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Absent such changes, further engagement or dialogue is seen as counterproductive since it would signal an acceptance of the current status quo, and dialogue is interpreted by this camp as a reward for better behaviour.<sup>14</sup>

The United Kingdom has also been a driver of a tougher EU policy towards Moscow. As a vocal proponent for extended sanctions, it is commonly portrayed as a hawk in the sanctions debate. This position has hardened in recent years. While the United Kingdom has sought to strike a balance between a firm stance and engagement on issues such as

nuclear non-proliferation, the Salisbury attacks of 2018 triggered the adoption of an even more critical position. Following the assassinations or unexplained deaths of several high profile Russians in the UK, including former Russian spy Alexander Litvinenko in London, the Salisbury attacks have had significant effects on policy, evident in the push for a UK Magnitsky Act.<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, the Nordic countries' newfound focus on security and defence is heavily influenced by Russian behaviour. In Sweden, where national defence has long been overlooked in the political debate, Ukraine was a wakeup call of a new fragile security landscape. The final report of the bipartisan Swedish Defence Commission from May 2019 makes clear that this new security landscape is a direct result of Russian aggression, and notes that an armed attack on Sweden cannot be ruled out.<sup>16</sup> The Swedish debate over increased spending on national defence, re-introduction of conscription, and even a domestic dialogue over NATO membership, all largely result from concerns over Russia.

The perceived new threat level is also influenced by numerous military incidents in the Baltic sea.<sup>17</sup>

### Accommodate and Engage (Italy)

Elsewhere in Europe, a group of countries have kept in line with EU and NATO measures but have national governments that are more favourable towards Russia. Compared to others, they are more willing to engage with Russia, even if only bilaterally. Italy is one of these countries.

<sup>15</sup> European Leadership Network, "Note from the 6th meeting of the Contact Group on Russia-West Relations," 11-12 October 2018, <https://www.european-leadershipnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Contact-Group-Rome-6th-meeting-notes.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> Regeringskansliet, "Försvarsberedningen överlämnar rapport om inriktningen för säkerhetspolitiken och utformningen av det militära försvaret," May 14, 2019, <https://www.regeringen.se/regeringens-politik/forsvarsberedningen/forsvarsberedningen-overlamnar-rapport-om-inriktningen-for-sakerhetspolitiken-och-utformningen-av-det-militara-forsvaret/>.

<sup>17</sup> See the "Russian Activity Tracker" by Stockholm Free World Forum and the McCain Institute at Arizona State University, <https://frivarld.se/russian-activity-tracker-nordic-baltic-region/>.

<sup>12</sup> ELN interview, Riga, May 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Rihards Kols, "Foreign Policy – the Guarantor of Latvian Independence," in *Latvian Foreign and Security Policy*, Latvian Institute of International Affairs, <http://www.liia.lv/en/publications/latvian-foreign-and-security-policy-yearbook-2019-770>, 14.

<sup>14</sup> ELN interview, Paris, May 2019.

Rome and Moscow have a long history of amicable relations thanks to close trade ties and a belief in Italy, as in Germany and France, that incorporating Russia into European security system is important for continental security. But although in the immediate aftermath of the Ukraine crisis, Italy supported the EU sanctions and NATO's deployment of troops to the Baltics, the Italian political debate has been defined by a more lenient position towards Russia, scepticism towards "punitive" measures such as sanctions, and a preference for a relationship based on engagement. Italy's then Prime Minister, Matteo Renzi was the first major European leader to visit Moscow after the Ukraine crisis. There is also historical acceptance of Russia's "sphere of interest."<sup>18</sup>

Italy's view is strongly influenced by economic and financial factors. Russia has long been one of Italy's most important trade partners and the two countries are connected by numerous commercial projects including but not limited to Italian investments in Russian oil, gas and drilling.<sup>19</sup> But Italian diplomats also concede that their country's position is also swayed by its not being in Russia's neighbourhood.<sup>20</sup> As noted in a European Council on Foreign Relations commentary, "what happens in Russia and the eastern neighbourhood is of secondary or even tertiary concern for Rome."<sup>21</sup>

The unfolding crisis over Ukraine has put Italy in an uncomfortable position. Italy has been a defender of improving relations between the EU and Russia, and has repeatedly threatened to act as a spoiler in EU debates over sanctions renewal.

18 European Leadership Network, "Note from the 6th meeting of the Contact Group on Russia-West Relations," 11-12 October 2018, <https://www.european-leadershipnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Contact-Group-Rome-6th-meeting-notes.pdf>.

19 Henry Foy, Rachel Sanderson, and James Politi, "The ties that bind Italy and Russia," *Financial Times*, October 29, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/ff-be03c0-b976-11e7-8c12-5661783e5589>.

20 ELN interview, Rome, October 2018.

21 Angelantonio Rosato, "A marriage of convenience? The future of Italy-Russia relations," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, July 15, 2016, [https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_a\\_marriage\\_of\\_convenience\\_the\\_future\\_of\\_italyrussia\\_relations](https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_a_marriage_of_convenience_the_future_of_italyrussia_relations).

Nonetheless, while leaders in Rome are uneasy with what they see as an unnecessarily confrontational and unconstructive European posture towards Russia, they do not deem the issue to be important enough to risk relationships in NATO or the EU.<sup>22</sup>

As a result, in important ways Italy is aligned with Austria and other EU member states in Central and Eastern Europe such as Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic, which have all expressed concerns over sanctions and expressed greater affinity for Russia due to an array of factors such as common history, shared culture and values and economic ties.

### Pressure and Engage (Germany and France)

A group of European states led by Germany and France have promoted a policy of applying pressure while simultaneously engaging Moscow in dialogue.

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Leaders in Berlin and Paris care deeply about EU and NATO cohesion, are central in shaping the agenda within these institutions, but also understand that Russia cannot be completely isolated from Europe and the continent's security architecture.

The most important country advancing this position is Germany, who advocated continued sanctions against Russia despite economic interdependence and domestic criticism from business. In Berlin, Russian's actions in Ukraine ran counter to the core beliefs that have underpinned German foreign policy since the end of World War II and to a large extent have come to define the identity of the modern German state: firm belief

22 European Leadership Network, "Note from the 6th meeting of the Contact Group on Russia-West Relations," 11-12 October 2018, <https://www.european-leadershipnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Contact-Group-Rome-6th-meeting-notes.pdf>.

in multilateral diplomacy, an emphasis on dialogue to resolve disputes and an overall repudiation of armed conflicts or the threat thereof as a tool of foreign policy.<sup>23</sup> This required a tougher stance towards Moscow. Yet the enduring legacy of Ostpolitik, seen by many practitioners and analysts across German politics as a driving factor in both the peaceful end of the Cold War and the peaceful reunification of Germany, stipulated a diplomatic course.<sup>24</sup>

The tension between defence and engagement was exemplified with the remarks by the then foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier following NATO exercises in Poland in June 2016, "What we shouldn't do now is to inflame the situation by loud saber-rattling and shrill war cries."<sup>25</sup> Yet overall the German position has been more measured. In a speech to the German Bundestag just weeks after Steinmeier's remarks, Chancellor Angela Merkel expressed support for strengthening NATO's eastern flank and noted that "deterrence and dialogue" must be the core pillars of Russia policy.<sup>26</sup> Combined with a sense of responsibility for European policy and security, this has led Germany to be the natural mediator in Europe's response to Russia.

Germany has shared this role with France which, with one of Europe's largest economies and most significant military forces, wields considerable influence on the continent. As a founding EU member with a permanent seat on the UN security council and considerable influence over the European institutions, France plays an instrumental role in setting the European agenda. It has a historically "special relationship" with Russia which dates back through history, most notably with Peter the Great's visit to the French royal

court at Versailles in 1717.<sup>27</sup> As French President Emmanuel Macron remarked at a joint press conference with Vladimir Putin at Versailles three hundred years after the Russian tsar's visit, "This history transcends us and has cemented Franco-Russian friendship."<sup>28</sup> Yet tensions were at full display at the meeting, particularly over the issue of alleged Russian interference in the French election.<sup>29</sup>

France's 2017 Defence and National Security Strategic Review, described by a senior French diplomat as "the bible" for threat assessments, highlights the threat from Russian actions and states, "This assertion of Russian power must be met with a firm response combined with dialogue."<sup>30 31</sup>

For both Germany and France, there is an economic dimension to their positions. Germany has a long history of close economic exchange with Russia and has pursued deepening cooperation in energy trade in recent years. Germany's economic ties have come under scrutiny in the political debate over the Nord Stream 2 pipeline system, a Germany-backed project which has persisted in spite of widespread criticism and persistent threats of US sanctions.<sup>32</sup> In France, exports to Russia rose to their highest levels ever in 2014.<sup>33</sup> However there has not been as close an economic relationship as is the case with Germany. But the clearest synergies be-

23 Marco Siddi, "Germany: The leader of the EU's Russia policy," in Marco Siddi (ed.), "EU Member States and Russia: National and European Debates in an evolving international environment," Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 29.

24 Ibid., pp. 25-26.

25 Micheal Nienaber, "German minister warns NATO of 'saber-rattling' against Russia, Reuters, June 18, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato-russia-germany-idUSKCN0Z40LE>.

26 "Merkel backs NATO buildup in Eastern Europe," DW, July 7, 2016, <https://www.dw.com/en/merkel-backs-nato-buildup-in-eastern-europe/a-19385342>.

27 This is seen in France as an important moment that ushered in cultural exchange which helped drive the modernisation and "Europeanisation" of Russia, and the Franco-Russian Alliance in the late 19th century.

28 "Joint news conference with President of France Emmanuel Macron," President of Russia, May 29, 2017, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/54618>.

29 Nicholas Vincur, "Macron and Putin's awkward first date," Politico, 29 May 2017, <https://www.politico.eu/article/emmanuel-macron-vladimir-putin-awkward-first-date-versailles/>.

30 ELN interview Paris, May 2019.

31 Strategic Review of Defence and National Security 2017, <https://cd-geneve.delegfrance.org/Strategic-review-of-Defence-and-national-security-2017>, 42.

32 Rochelle Toplensky, Michael Peel, and Henry Foy, "EU tightens regulations on Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline," Financial Times, February 8, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/f22bddf2-2ba5-11e9-a5ab-ff8ef2b976c7>.

33 "France Exports to Russia," Trading Economics, <https://tradingeconomics.com/france/exports-to-russia>. Retrieved July 5, 2019.

tween Berlin and Paris lie in a shared sense of responsibility for European security and a strong conviction that enduring stability can only be attained through a security architecture which Russia is bound to and engages with. As Chancellor Merkel told German lawmakers, “security in Europe can only be accomplished with Russia and not against it.”<sup>34</sup> Similarly, president Macron has emphasised, “None of the major challenges these days can be tackled without a dialogue with Russia.”<sup>35</sup>

## The European Union

The individual countries’ positions towards Russia illustrate the diversity of thinking across Europe as well as the key influencing factors that shape it. Yet a broader view of the European approach towards Russia requires an assessment of the policies of NATO and the EU.

The EU has maintained a surprising degree of unity and resilience since 2014 despite the differences among its members. It has pursued a comprehensive sanctions policy linked to Russia’s annexation of Crimea, the incomplete implementation of the Minsk agreements and other malign acts such as the downing of flight MH17. Unity on sanctions policy has been sustained despite constant concern and speculation that future agreement on extending sanctions will not be possible to attain.

Brussels perceives Russia’s state visits and offers of energy and trade deals to EU member states as an attempt to divide the Union’s members.<sup>36</sup> Russia’s actions have contributed to NATO solidarity, hardening the EU position and strengthening unity within the bloc. For instance, it was only after the downing of MH17 that the EU followed the US in imposing sanctions that targeted Russia’s financial

sectors.<sup>37</sup>

Arguably however, the EU and NATO have been more restrained than might have been anticipated. The EU has maintained and updated, but not escalated, the sanctions regime. In the spring of 2016, Mogherini announced five guiding principles for the EU’s Russia policy. These remain the foundation for its relationship to Russia:

*In 2016, Mogherini announced five guiding principles for the EU’s Russia policy. These remain the foundation for its relationship to Russia:*

- Insisting on the full implementation of the Minsk agreements as a prerequisite for any substantial change in the relationship.
- Pursuing closer relations with the EU’s Eastern Partners and the former Soviet republics in Central Asia.
- Building better resilience against Russian threats, including in the energy, hybrid, and disinformation domains.
- Seeking “selective engagement” with Russia on a range of issues, mainly in foreign policy, where the EU has a clear interest.
- Supporting Russian civil society, including through people-to-people contact and exchange.<sup>38</sup>

These five principles are a combination of defensive measures and selective engagement. They represented a new balance in Europe’s position and a compromise between the member states. Yet their implementation has been uneven.

34 “Merkel backs NATO buildup in Eastern Europe,” DW, July 7, 2016, <https://www.dw.com/en/merkel-backs-nato-buildup-in-eastern-europe/a-19385342>.

35 “Joint news conference with President of France Emmanuel Macron,” President of Russia, May 29, 2017, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/54618>.

36 Andrew Osborn, “Putin steps up drive to kill sanctions amid signs of EU disunity,” Reuters, July 29, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-sanctions-putin/putin-steps-up-drive-to-kill-sanctions-amid-signs-of-eu-disunity-idUSKCN1091NT>.

37 Peter Harrell, “Lessons from Russia for the future of sanction,” Center for a New American Security, September 2015, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/lessons-from-russia-and-the-future-of-sanctions>, 4.

38 “Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini at the press conference following the Foreign Affairs Council,” press release, Brussels, 14 March, 2016, [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/5490/remarks-by-high-representativevice-president-federica-mogherini-at-the-press-conference-following-the-foreign-affairs-council\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/5490/remarks-by-high-representativevice-president-federica-mogherini-at-the-press-conference-following-the-foreign-affairs-council_en).

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The Minsk agreements, captured by the first principle, have not been fully implemented. The OSCE Special Monitoring Mission repeatedly reports violations of the ceasefire, and Russia has not abided by its commitments. Continuation of EU sanctions therefore remains warranted; the room for "substantial change in the relationship" is non-existent.

On the second principle, in terms of forging relationships in the former Soviet Union, the EU has pursued closer cooperation with its Eastern Partners through a range of trade and association agreements. A comprehensive agenda has been developed to strengthen cooperation further ahead of 2020.<sup>39</sup> Meanwhile, Central Asia remains a region where the EU's influence is limited. The increasing importance of this region, thanks to economic growth, important reforms and its strategic location, makes it an economic and geopolitical focal point to which Europeans should devote more political capital. The EU's new Central Asia strategy, expected by the middle of this year, offers the chance for it to take a more proactive stance and offer a balance to Russian influence.

On steps taken to improve resilience, these have been noteworthy. On energy resilience, Lithuania has diversified its gas imports and reduced its dependency on Russian pipelines; Latvia has improved its gas storage capacities; and the development of pipeline infrastructure has enabled some states in Central and Eastern Europe to pool their gas supplies.<sup>40</sup> Through its new strategy on

an "Energy Union," the EU is also seeking to strengthen coordination between member states to better manage potential supply disruptions.<sup>41</sup> There still remain severe disagreements on the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which is likely to remain a divisive issue within the bloc.

On addressing hybrid threats, resilience and disinformation, the EU has developed a Task Force that actively monitors and responds to Russian disinformation campaigns.

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On military resilience, European initiatives remain ambitious though progress is uneven. The establishment of the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and European Defence Fund (EDF) illustrate a newfound willingness to address Europe's shortfall in military capabilities. This is also reflected in budgetary shifts. While still not enough, an absolute majority of EU member states increased their defence spending in 2016, while Europe's combined defence spending also rose in 2017.<sup>42</sup> As a recent joint report by the European Leadership Network and the Institute for Strategic and International Studies concluded, "the [EU] has made steady progress in the areas of security and defence."<sup>43</sup>

Service, February 2018, [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/614698/EPRS\\_BRI\(2018\)614698\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/614698/EPRS_BRI(2018)614698_EN.pdf).

41 European Commission, "New rules to secure gas supplies in Europe bring more solidarity," press release, September 12, 2017, [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_IP-17-3203\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-17-3203_en.htm).

42 Alina Poyakova and Benjamin Haddad, "Europe Alone: What comes after the transatlantic alliance," Foreign Affairs, July/August 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/europe/2019-06-11/europe-alone>.

43 Alice Billon-Galland and Yvonne-Stefania Efsthioi, "Are PESCO projects fit for purpose?" European Leadership Network / Institute for International and Strategic Studies, February 2019, <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Final-PESCO-policy-brief-ELN-IISS-20-Feb-2019-ilovepdf-compressed.pdf>, 2.

39 See the 20 deliverables in the 2017 communique <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/31758/final-statement-st14821en17.pdf>.

40 Martin Russell, "The EU's Russia policy: Five guiding principles," European Parliamentary Research

Regarding the principle of “selective engagement,” there has been plenty of room for limited cooperation, given the range of issues in which Russia and the EU both have a stake. However, the areas in which engagement has been meaningful have been few. While Russia and the EU both remain parties to the Iran nuclear deal and still see its maintenance as an important objective despite the US withdrawal, other developments in the Middle East have harmed the relationship. This includes Russia’s continued support for the Assad regime in Syria and its bombing campaigns. Additionally, while arms control remains a common interest, the deterioration of a number of arms agreements complicates constructive dialogue.

Finally, in people-to-people contacts and societal cooperation, the EU has continued to support programmes, particularly in education and research. As the European Parliament notes, “2016 was a record year for educational cooperation, with nearly 4000 Erasmus+ exchanges – most of them Russian students and academics coming to study and teach at EU universities.”<sup>44</sup> This does not, however, seem to directly translate into more favourable public opinion towards Russia.

## NATO

Since 2014, NATO-Russia relations have deteriorated to their lowest point since the Cold War. NATO emphasises that this not only a result of Russian aggression in Ukraine but due to an array of “Russia’s destabilising actions and policies” including “provocative military activities near NATO’s borders” and “irresponsible and aggressive nuclear rhetoric.”

Whereas the five principles have guided EU policy towards Russia, and the sanctions regime is the key instrument of that policy, NATO has opted for the Enhanced Forward Presence,<sup>45</sup> which is intended to be an assur-

44 Martin Russell, “The EU’s Russia policy: Five guiding principles,” European Parliamentary Research Service, February 2018, [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/614698/EPRS\\_BRI\(2018\)614698\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/614698/EPRS_BRI(2018)614698_EN.pdf).

45 At four battalions, the Enhanced Forward Presence is arguably a militarily light posture. Yet a remarkable aspect of those four battalions, led by the United Kingdom, Canada, Germany and the United States, is

ance and defensive measure for allies and minimally confrontational towards Russia.

NATO has not only focused on deterrence. Since 2014, NATO communiqués have included an emphasis on dialogue and the importance of open channels of communication with Russia, next to defensive measures and a deterrent posture. The 2016 Warsaw declaration, for instance, notes the alliance’s willingness to engage in “periodic, focused and meaningful dialogue” as a means towards “avoiding misunderstanding, miscalculation, and unintended escalation, and to increase transparency and predictability.”<sup>46</sup> But while some channels of communication between NATO and Russia remain operational, communication between the two sides has deteriorated since Russia’s assault on Ukraine and NATO’s subsequent decision to suspend all practical military and civilian cooperation with Russia. As a result, while NATO officially has demonstrated a willingness to remain open to dialogue, dialogue is hindered by the political climate.

***As a result, while NATO officially has demonstrated a willingness to remain open to dialogue, dialogue is hindered by the political climate.***

As noted in a joint report by the European Leadership Network and the Russian International Affairs Council, “the existing communication channels are inadequate and insufficient to clarify concerns or deal with uncertainties, especially during periods of increased tension.”<sup>47</sup>

their multinational character: the four battle groups are made up of troops drawn from across the alliance. As a result, they ensure active buy-in from all contributing nations. The posture in this sense fills a key deterrent function as a “tripwire to a Russian attack. As noted in NATO’s 2016 Warsaw communiqué, the idea behind the initiative is “to unambiguously demonstrate, as part of our overall posture, Allies’ solidarity, determination, and ability to act by triggering an immediate Allied response to any aggression.”

46 NATO, “Warsaw summit communiqué,” press release, July 9, 2016, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_133169.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm).

47 Katarzyna Kubiak (ed.), “Towards a more sta-

## EUROPEAN POLICY: CONTINUITY DESPITE DISUNITY

The EU and NATO have maintained a great degree of cohesion, despite internal disagreements over the preferred approach towards Russia. This may be because, for many European countries, Russia is not at the top of the foreign policy agenda. While the Russia-West relationship has deteriorated, the European political agenda has become increasingly preoccupied by other issues, such as immigration, terrorism, Brexit and economic uncertainty. Additionally, mutual sanctions have had a marginal effect on the European economy overall. Russia is a secondary, not a primary factor in most European countries' politics. Some European governments may take issue with the policies pursued by the EU or NATO, but the integrity and cohesion of those institutions and the means to use those institutions to pursue issues more important to them is more important.<sup>48</sup> For instance France has clear concerns over Russia's assertiveness but the country's Minister for the Armed Forces Florence Parly notes, "Jihadist terrorism remains the most direct threat."<sup>49</sup>

Although several European countries consider Russia a destabilising influence rather than a direct military threat, it presents a broader set of challenges to European stability and cohesion. These threats include hybrid and cyber threats, disinformation, interference in elections, and support of populist political movements. For many European policymakers, there is a link between the challenge from Russia and the rise of populist parties. Particularly since Russia is seen as actively supporting "illiberal democracies", promoting

ble NATO-Russia relationship," European Leadership Network / Russian International Affairs Council, February 2019, <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/31012019-Towards-a-more-stable-Russia-NATO-relationship.pdf>, 6.

48 Angelantonio Rosato, "A marriage of convenience? The future of Italy-Russia relations," European Council on Foreign Relations, July 15, 2016, [https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_a\\_marriage\\_of\\_convenience\\_the\\_future\\_of\\_italyrussia\\_relations](https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_a_marriage_of_convenience_the_future_of_italyrussia_relations).

49 Florence Parly, "Foreword by the Minister for the Armed Forces," in Strategic Review of Defence and National Security 2017, <https://cd-geneve.delegfrance.org/Strategic-review-of-Defence-and-national-security-2017>, 9.

populist movements and the European far right. As a recent Gallup report found, "those who look favourably on right-wing populist parties are more likely to trust Putin to do the right thing in world affairs."<sup>50</sup>

## WHAT IS BREWING IN 2019?

The evolution of European strategic thinking towards Russia since 2014 highlights a number of issues.

The Russia-West relationship has reached a stalemate. The full implementation of the Minsk agreements remains the basis for any substantial change in relations. Yet Minsk implementation is unlikely to happen any time soon as Russia has shown no signs of significantly altering its behaviour in Ukraine. The Europe-Russia relationship has steadily deteriorated; prospects for any substantial improvement are low. European policies are centred on deterrence and economic sanctions and there are no signs from either side of a willingness to compromise. Mutual disappointment is likely to remain the key hallmark of the relationship in the near to medium term.

There is overall stability in European strategic thinking towards Russia. The disparities within Europe have evolved into discernible camps, which have proven relatively resilient. The extreme views of each camp has been moderated by maintaining consensus within NATO and the EU.

Europe has been relatively united on Russia. Europeans agree on the main problems that Russia presents, even if they disagree about how important they are, the reasons for them, and what to fundamentally do about them. While there have been plenty, often very public, disagreements over Europe's approach towards Russia, the EU position has been remarkably consistent, and produced coherent policies – most notably, EU sanctions and NATO's strengthened deterrence and defence posture. Internal divisions remain, but these

50 Clark Letterman, "Image of Putin, Russia Suffers Internationally," Pew Research Center, December 6, 2018, [https://www.pewresearch.org/global/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2018/12/Pew-Research-Center-Views-of-Russia-Report\\_2018-12-6.pdf](https://www.pewresearch.org/global/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2018/12/Pew-Research-Center-Views-of-Russia-Report_2018-12-6.pdf), 9.

are likely to cancel out each other and make the middle road the pragmatic and workable compromise. Moreover, as European politics are overshadowed by other topics such as populism, rifts in the transatlantic alliance, economic uncertainty, and the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the EU, this makes it less likely that there will be a push in either direction towards a radically different Russia policy.

Divisions in Europe on Russia are not merely found between EU states. There is a broader division across Europe that plays out within European states. Between mainstream and populist parties in European politics, talk of "pro-Russian" or "anti-Russian" camps within the EU is too simplistic.<sup>51</sup>

*Between mainstream and populist parties in European politics, talk of "pro-Russian" or "anti-Russian" camps within the EU is too simplistic.*

With limited prospects for any change in Russian behaviour or full implementation of the Minsk agreements, there is little room for any substantial change in Russia's relationship with Europe. The confrontation is increasingly institutionalised and entrenched. If so, what organising concepts and resulting policies offer a way forward?

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Focus on managing rather than resetting relations. Understanding that Russia's interests differ – sometimes vastly – from its European neighbours will help provide the basis for a more stable future relations. In the short to medium term, this leaves little room for any grand initiatives to substantially improve the relationship. It is in all parties' interest to reduce, in particular military risks. In the immediate future, the political priorities should be to find practical and realistic steps towards

that end.

- Keep communication channels open. There is an assumption by some EU and NATO member states that talking to Russia is rewarding bad behaviour. Dialogue should not be seen as a reward but as a fundamental requirement for effective diplomacy. The new European Commission offers an opportunity to reaffirm this principle. The new EU High Representative should signal a renewed willingness to maintain dialogue with Russia, including through early meetings with the Russian Foreign Minister. Reaffirming that willingness to maintain communication channels does not change the EU's position that full implementation of Minsk is an absolute requirement for any substantial change in the relationship.
- Old tools can be useful for new initiatives. The guiding principles of key documents such as the NATO-Russia Founding Act are still valid and could provide the basis for managing the relationship. It is difficult to pursue sustained strategic dialogue between NATO and Russia given the challenges in the current political environment, including NATO's decision to suspend practical cooperation with Russia. Yet even in these circumstances, dialogue could be expanded. One realistic and important step in this direction would be regular meetings of the NATO-Russia Council. As noted in an earlier report by the European Leadership Network, "Setting a firm timetable with a specified number of regular meetings...would provide more consistency, avoid divisive deliberations on the timing, make the channel less vulnerable to political storms and allow more continuity of work."<sup>52</sup>
- Review the implementation of Mogherini's five principles. Implementation of the five principles remains uneven. Further use of the selective engagement principle could be imagined. Central Asia, which is cen-

51 Ernest Wyciszkiwicz, "Pro-Russian? Anti-Russian? On the futility of labels," European Leadership Network, January 7, 2019, <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/pro-russian-anti-russian-on-the-futility-of-labels/>.

52 Katarzyna Kubiak (ed.), "Towards a more stable NATO-Russia relationship," European Leadership Network / Russian International Affairs Council, February 2019, <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/31012019-Towards-a-more-stable-Russia-NATO-relationship.pdf>, 6.

tral to Russia and the Eurasian Economic Union, and an emerging area of interest for the EU, offers one venue for this. Given Central Asia's significance for China's One Belt One Road strategy, the region should offer an opportunity for Europe and Russia to engage in a multilateral framework to promote stability and development.<sup>53</sup>

- Lead by example. Beyond risk reduction, the best way for Europeans to influence Russian politics may be to lead by example. Strengthening European democracy and institutions can display the potency of liberal norms in practice.

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53 Sabine Fischer and Ivan Timofeev, "Selective engagement between the EU and Russia," EUREN, October 2018, [https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/eu-russia\\_network\\_interim\\_report\\_eng.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/eu-russia_network_interim_report_eng.pdf), 1.



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# **If the JCPOA Collapses: Implications for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and International Security**

**GLOBAL SECURITY  
POLICY BRIEF**

Maximilian Hoell  
December 2018