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The EU in Russia's House of Mirrors

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Introduction

2018 offered little hope to those still waiting for the potential of the EU–Russia relationship to be realized. If anything, relations continued on their downward descent, aided by Russia, some of the EU member states themselves and their ‘ally’ across the water, the USA. The stagnating relationship was punctuated by moments of high drama, even farce. However, both sides continued to polish their established positions, as signified by the remarks of the EU’s High Representative for Foreign Affairs Federica Mogherini (2018), following a session of the Foreign Affairs Council and by the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov (2018a) at the Russian-German Forum. For the EU, it boiled down to the five guiding principles on Russia (Mogherini, 2016), whereas Russia insisted that it had not been integrated properly and on equal terms into the post-Cold War architecture, while remaining open to deep, primarily economic, relations with the EU.

For the most part, the year contributed to a feeling that the key actors were waiting, but it is not precisely clear for what. Russia’s hosting of the World Cup helped to legitimate Putin’s regime in the manner that such a spectacle is designed to achieve (Koch, 2017), going some way, at least in the public mind, to offset the negative publicity garnered as a result of a number of its activities. Yet Russians themselves grew increasingly unhappy about their declining standards of living, which affected their support for the government’s course (Levada, 2019) but not their support of Putin. Meanwhile, the EU looked like an organization under pressure from a number of internal problems, notably growing populism and nativism in member states and narratives of disintegration fuelled by Brexit, which help to crystallize the ambitions of Putin’s Russia.

As in other years, in 2018 Russia functioned as a house of mirrors for the EU and its member states, often distorting their image, sometimes reflecting them accurately, at other times making them look better than they were in reality. In this respect, five points deserve particular attention: the EU’s unity and solidarity; its values and identity; its long-term goals and selective engagement; the EU’s and Russia’s damage limitation by encouraging multilevel relationships; and the EU–US–Russia triangle.

I. EU Unity and Solidarity

To begin with the relatively positive features, the continued solidarity shown in relation to Russian actions in Ukraine should not go unremarked. Here, the institutional backbone of the EU has to be credited. Few commentators were unsurprised by the early agreement to impose sanctions on Russia and few have been unsurprised about their rollover in the

years since then, given member states' exposure to the Russian market and therefore the price paid in relation to EU sanctions and the Russian tit-for-tat sanctions imposed on European agriculture and other products. In 2018, the EU extended sanctions six times and added new names to various black lists on three occasions (the presidential elections in Crimea, the construction of the Kerch bridge and the so-called elections in the breakaway regions of Ukraine). Amid pressure to maintain coherence and in the absence of a consensus to lift the sanctions, the choice has been to maintain them, a choice aided, admittedly, by the fact that the sanctions are linked to the Minsk agreement, for which there is a lack of political support in Kyiv.

Any surprise at the solidarity on sanctions stems from a wider and justifiable view that the member states are divided on Russia. Nevertheless, 2018 offered evidence that differences in the EU should not be overstated and that there is much that glues the member states together. Greece, often seen as the weak point here, serves as a good example. In June, the controversy between Greece and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia over the latter's name was resolved, with both parties agreeing to a renaming, resulting in the emergence of the Republic of Northern Macedonia in February 2019. Russia's objection to the deal struck between Athens and Skopje was well known. In October 2018, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) reacted publicly to the Republic's referendum, understandably referring to the low turnout that invalidated the vote, as well as to how 'leading politicians from NATO and EU member states participated in this large-scale propaganda campaign directly, freely interfering in the internal affairs of this Balkan state' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2018). This did not stop Greece playing its part in removing an obstacle to North Macedonia's membership of NATO. Moreover, the support that the Greek Orthodox Church provided to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church autocephaly led to a further deterioration of relations between Moscow and Athens.

The Skripal poisonings that occurred in England in March 2018 (alleged to have been committed by Russian military intelligence officers) were for many a sign that Russia was no longer playing by any rulebook that the West could accept. Although Russia argued that the accusations were unfounded, the event prompted a strong show of solidarity from the EU and led to a mass expulsion of Russian diplomats from most EU member states (and others, including the USA). The June European Council called for measures to prevent further similar incidents and in October, the Council adopted a new mechanism allowing the introduction of restrictive measures to prevent proliferation and chemical weapons usage. The feeling that an EU member state was under attack contributed to the speed and intensity of the EU's reaction.

Nevertheless, member states pursued their own agenda in certain areas, probably the most prominent example being the Nord Stream II gas pipeline, intended to enlarge the direct link between Russia and Germany. Various national politicians advocated the improvement of relations with Russia and argued that sanctions were not fulfilling their function. Italian and Hungarian leaders were particularly noticeable in this regard. Moreover, Austrian, French and Greek leaders visited Russia to explore ways to engage with it but also to use their bilateral dialogues to negotiate leverage in the EU.

In sum, the Russian house of mirrors reflected an overly flattering image of EU solidarity and unity in the context of an uncooperative and assertive Russia. In that sense, Russia continued to function as the 'Other' against which the EU's unity and solidarity was reaffirmed. Significantly and unfortunately, no member state managed to turn its more

positive relationship with Russia towards improving the EU-Russian relationship; nor did that unity deliver any constructive, long-term solution of how to deal with Russia.

II. Values, Identity and Soft Power

Recent events have therefore seen Russia functioning for many member states and Brussels itself as the 'Other', against which not only its unity but also its very identity is asserted. The April 2018 Council on Russia highlighted the idea that the 2016 'five guiding principles [...] provide a flexible framework for EU relations with Russia, allowing firmness on EU values and selective engagement where there is a clear EU interest' (Council of the European Union, 2018). Hence, for the EU, values continued to figure prominently, despite its efforts to instil more pragmatism in its external relations, as illustrated by the 2016 Global Strategy (EU, 2016). The EU continued to criticize Russia both for the attack on the rules-based international order, notably in Ukraine, and for the 'decrease of respect for human rights and the rule of law' in Russian internal politics (Mogherini, 2018). Hence, EU soft power logics with their promotion of liberal values were preserved.

Russia was continually reproached for interfering in the EU's political life, including through its contacts with and support of populist, Eurosceptic and frequently extreme right political forces. Those political activists visited Russia, advocated the lifting of sanctions and the recognition of Russia's 'repatriation' of the Crimea. Moscow widely publicized their visits, especially domestically, to demonstrate that its position on Ukraine had some support in the EU and the West. At the same time, far-right political activists' attention to Putin as a charismatic leader and their praise for Russia's embrace of conservative values form, for some, elements of Russia's nascent soft power (Keating and Kaczmarek, 2019). This serves various purposes for Putin, assisting in Russia's identity-building project, connecting to like-minded actors elsewhere in Europe, and undermining the EU's attempts to consolidate its values-based identity (Stepanova, 2015).

Russian perception of the EU's soft power remained ambiguous. Russian officials tend to emphasize that the EU is Russia's key economic partner, omitting mention of most of the EU's political and any (possible) normative influence (see Lavrov, 2018a, for example). Yet, the publicity given to the visits by any EU politician to Russia is easily interpreted as a search for the EU's approval and hence the EU's legitimation of Russian policies (Morozov, 2015).

The EU's promotion of values is universal but becomes stronger when Brussels talks to European countries. Russia's claims to be a European country have therefore always reinforced the legitimacy of EU's demands. Elsewhere, analysis may have pivoted to neo-Eurasianism in Russia and the seeming rejection of its European identity, yet, as Shekhovtsov (2008) persuasively argues, even the most conservative of Russian neo-Eurasianist authors, Alexander Dugin, draws on a body of European intellectuals to develop his concepts. The Kremlin has also continued to support the charge against perceived attempts to conflate Europeanness with EU membership; challenging the EU's right to speak on behalf of Europe and to monopolize the idea of Europe. At the same time, Russia itself sometimes reinforces the notions that it rejects. An analysis of official MFA statements reveals that Russian officials themselves increasingly use the adjective 'European' to refer to the EU; moreover, in 2018 Russia again participated in Asia-Europe (EU) Meetings (ASEM) as an Asian state. On top of this, the EU's Partnership Instrument

classified Russia as a part of Wider Asia. Hence, both sides give the impression they have drifted away from the straightforward recognition of Russia as a European country (without necessarily implying the EU's authority to set the norms).

Developments in 2018 in EU member states continued to challenge the EU's normative authority and soft power, such that attributing all negative developments there to Russia would be a distortion of the reality. One of the ongoing challenges for the EU, a challenge fast approaching crisis point, is how to increase the salience of 'Europe' for its citizens and defend 'European' values against the assertion of nativism. In December 2017, the EU instituted Article 7 proceedings against Poland for breaching the rule of law; a fundamental value of the EU, following up in 2018 with the decision to take a similar route with Hungary. Orbán's appeal to traditional, Christian values (Orbán, 2018) are consistent with Putin's now familiar invocation of religion, tradition and conservatism in political life.

Perhaps most worryingly, profound questions have been asked of the European Parliament's centre-right grouping, the European People's Party, for its failure to expel Hungary's Fidesz party from its bloc. Both sets of Article 7 proceedings look unlikely to be resolved any time soon (de la Baume and Bayer, 2018) and the 2019 European Parliament elections show that the consequences for the European People's Party have, like chickens, come home to roost. Those consequences will be felt far more widely than the single grouping or the European Parliament itself, given the latter's central role in much EU decision-making today. Long the (only) voice of conscience for the EU on its relations with Russia, the European Parliament's failure to defend European values robustly is significant and undermines its extensive and intensive litany of complaints against Russia (see especially European Parliament, 2019). If power in the European Parliament swings more towards the political groupings whose grievances are directed at the EU and not Russia, this will both play into Kremlin narratives and potentially be the catalyst that breaks EU solidarity on sanctions against Russia and hinder more recent decisions to prepare a Magnitsky Act for the EU (European Parliament, 2019).

Russian funding of extreme right and left parties and the amplification of their messages through Russian media such as Sputnik and RT has been the subject of much attention (Klapisis, 2015; Laruelle and Rivera, 2019; Shekhovtsov, 2008, 2017). The extent of Russian influence continues to be disputed, although Klapisis speaks of the 'astonishingly similar stance towards Putin's Russia' in these political parties in Austria, Bulgaria, France, Greece, Hungary, Italy and the UK (2015, p. 13). However, as with other issues, we should be cautious in attributing too much agency to the Kremlin; states today are exposed to the same structures, policies and consequences as each other, that they give rise to similar political groups and politics is unsurprising. This is particularly the case in the context in which Russia does not have the same significance for all member states, as highlighted by the varying extents to which EU member states consider Russia a threat or a friend (see Liik, 2018). For Mediterranean states, the bigger perception of threat comes from the south in the form of refugees from conflict zones and migrants, for some of those further to the east, it is Russia's activities in Ukraine. Thus, geography, history and events determine whether arguments for pragmatic dialogue and engagement preside over arguments for punishment as deterrence.

Even while the EU is open to criticism for its failure to mount a swift and robust defence of its values, the dilemma it has faced has not been its alone, as debates about Russian membership in the Council of Europe show (see, for example, House of Commons,

2018). Liberal democracies and their organizations, of course, are required to balance competing demands from competing levels of politics and society. Yet those debates challenge the EU's normative authority and, if anything, Russia's house of mirrors magnifies the contradictions in this normative authority.

III. The Long-Term Agenda versus Selective Engagement

Both Russia and the EU continued to believe in 2018 that time was on their side. Any, even emergent, proposal for a long-term solution was entirely absent. Rather, the reiteration of the five guiding principles emphasized that any rebooting of EU–Russian relations would require the full implementation of the Minsk agreement (Mogherini, 2016, 2018). Further signs of entrenchment came with the continued reliance on the existing international institutions, most importantly with twin controversial - for Moscow - facts still unacknowledged: NATO remaining as the key for the continent's security; and the (crucial for Moscow) asymmetry of today's international (security) arrangements, highly Western and Euro-centric in form as they are. Lavrov gave a clue to Russian thinking, when speaking of living in 'a post-Western world' one 'still [...] in the process of formation' (Lavrov, 2018b). Hence, Moscow concluded it has only to wait until the collective West (including the EU) collapses and a new world order that is fair to Russia will be established. Nevertheless, Russia voiced no substantial alternative, remaining loyal, at least rhetorically, to the principles of market economy and democracy.

In the absence of any long-term concept of cooperation, the EU had to cling to another of Mogherini's guiding principles, that of selective engagement. The High Representative cited a fairly long list of issues that were 'strategically important for Europeans' (Mogherini, 2018): the nuclear deal with Iran, the Middle East peace process, Afghanistan and North Korea, as well as the environment, migration and the fight against terrorism. 'Selective engagement' on 'strategically important' issues in itself seems a contradiction in terms, betraying the EU's perception of it as engagement out of necessity. Russia for its part believed that it was a step towards more pragmatic, interest-based cooperation.

Both the long-term agenda and the choice of areas for selective engagement are dependent on threat perceptions. The EU continued to view Russia as a source of various threats, against which it had to be resilient. Before 2018, these threats were related to energy supply, hybrid threats in the cyberspace and strategic communication. In 2018, the EU added to the list the disproportionate activity of Russia's security services as well as potential chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear-related risks, following incidents in Salisbury and The Hague. The EU had proclaimed in its 2016 Global Strategy that in a connected world the 'Union cannot pull up a drawbridge to ward off external threats' and promised to 'manage interdependence' (EU, 2016). Yet, as energy relations and the information war demonstrated, this was easier said than done.

In energy, the European Commission ended an anti-monopoly investigation against Gazprom, and Germany defended Nord Stream, using loopholes in the third liberalization package, in line with the kind of market logics and interdependence traditionally promoted by the EU. Nevertheless, Nord Stream attracted severe criticism from many other member states. Moreover, the EU continued to look for ways to diversify its energy supply or to rely more on domestic sources and therefore to disengage with Russia. The transit of gas

through Ukraine, especially after 2019, remained a contentious issue, leading to numerous bilateral (EU–Russia) and trilateral (also involving Ukraine) consultations. Hence, geopolitics continued to compete with market logics, dividing rather than uniting EU member states.

Similarly, in the information space, a liberal approach granting the free circulation of information and the freedom of speech, competed with geopolitics. The first presupposed a free flow of information but also increased the responsibility of information agencies and the mass media as well as advocating better education of citizens. The second is a more paternalistic strategy, of identifying what is ‘fake’ (which can lead to the stigmatization of some media), or even limiting access to such information. Both approaches found their way into the 2018 EU Action Plan against Disinformation (EU, 2018). The European Commission favoured the liberal approach while the European External Action Service (EEAS) with StratCom, charged with fighting Russian disinformation, tends to incorporate the more paternalistic approach. A greater variety of positions exists among member states, divided between those that favour complete freedom and those that believe that blocking some media is justified (Kremlin Watch Team, 2018).

Russian disinformation was not specifically named in the Action Plan, a sign perhaps of a realization that any Russian activities in this regard can find traction only in a polity and society that has been left vulnerable to such tactics. In this sense, Russia might be said to function, entirely unintentionally, as a critical friend that shines a light on the susceptibilities within the EU member states, as well as the institutions of the EU; Russia therefore is an aggregator of discontent. In the coming years, we might reasonably hope also that the EU will show signs of realizing that such dangers emerge from within and implement measures to combat them. Such a realization will be vital for the improvement of EU–Russia relations.

Treatments of historical events are a further case in point. In an editorial in October 2018, amid preparations across Europe to commemorate key anniversaries of the Second World War, the Russian Ambassador to the EU Vladimir Chizhov chose to sow division rather than accord, referring to the anniversary of the partition of Czechoslovakia. Questioning the motivations of France, Italy and the UK, Chizhov cast the partition as an attempt to make the USSR the target for ‘Nazi aggression’, comparing it with the exclusionary nature of the European security system today (Chizhov, 2018). Such rhetoric is apiece with other attempts by the Russian leadership to harness history for contemporary political purposes. It can also be seen as a preemptive attack against EU discussions of the 1939 Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact.

In sum, Russia's house of mirrors revealed the EU's self-centrism and inability to begin the search for a long-term solution. EU–Russian relations also demonstrated the vital necessity of selective engagement, although this is conceptualized in different ways by Moscow and Brussels, as well as the difficulty the EU faces when preserving an open and liberal approach in the context of numerous real or perceived Russian threats in the energy and information spaces.

In the face of this rather depressing state of EU–Russia relations, this account now argues for the necessity of drilling down beyond the political relationships, which, no matter how important in political terms can also be superficial and twist perceptions. It is the case that the relationship has continued to function at multiple levels, something rarely reflected in wider accounts and narratives; for this, both actors should be credited. The

next section addresses this plurality, even while acknowledging that problems continue to beset the relationship. Nor is it optimistic about the prospects for overcoming these problems and achieving more fruitful engagement and cooperation. Nevertheless, the fact of the multiple levels should not be disregarded.

IV. Damage Limitation: Multilevel Relationships

Most intergovernmental relations between the EU and Russia have remained frozen since 2014, but in 2018 the top leaders met on the margins of various international events (like the UN, the G20 or ASEM). Meetings between top figures of the EEAS and the Russian MFA were also regular. Trans-governmental relations continued to stall. No EU–Russian dialogues (including on energy) were resumed and just a few meetings of EU and Russian officials (on energy, veterinary, migration, science and technology and the prevention of drug trafficking) were arranged on an ad hoc basis. The EU provided sparse information on those meetings while the Russian Mission to the EU carefully documented all the meetings to demonstrate that various contacts with the EU are preserved. Small EU projects on counterfeiting, piracy and technical barriers to trade were continued. The EEAS engaged with Russian partners more actively than the Commission (normally reputed to be more technical and less political), perhaps best understood as being the result of the areas chosen for selective engagement. Contacts among Russian MPs and their peers in the European Parliament were not restored in 2018, which did not prevent the European Parliament being the EU institution most critical of Russia.

Russia's calls to establish relations between the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) continued to fall on deaf ears, although the EU's Delegation in Russia maintained unofficial contacts with EAEU officials, mostly relating to the approximation of standards and technical regulations. The nature of that engagement confirmed both the remaining importance of the EU as Russia's key economic partner and the EU's wider market power.

The EU continued to demonstrate its interest in the Arctic region (governed by the Arctic states, none of which is an EU member, although EU member states are susceptible, particularly low-lying states like the Netherlands, to the effects of climate change there) on the basis of the 2016 communication that stresses the EU's expertise in the environment to justify its involvement in the governance of the Arctic. The allocation of the EU's Partnership Instrument to Russia was even renamed as Russia/Arctic to signify the EU's interest and involvement. The Arctic remains one of the few issue areas where Russia has something to offer to the EU to relaunch the relationship. Yet, neither Russia nor other Arctic states are ready at the moment to incorporate a new player into the governance of that region.

The EU and Russia preserved cross-border cooperation (that is, involving sub-state actors in different bordering states in the EU and Russia and covering a range of sectors, including, cultural, scientific, educational and commercial) and their funding of related projects has continued. Five projects continued to function at the Russian border with Finland, Estonia and Latvia. The Russian MFA paid much closer attention to those remaining islands of cooperation. Yarovoy (forthcoming) rightly conceptualizes them as playing 'an important stabilising role ensuring the continuation of regional cooperation'. Moreover, the Northern Dimension cooperation that brings together the north-west of Russia and the Nordic and Baltic states as well as parts of Poland and Germany bordering the Baltic Sea, was also preserved. Here, as elsewhere, of course, the existence of

subnational networks alone are no guarantee of success. One of the things we know is that funding matters and, as Yarovoy points out, to a large extent, future cross-border cooperation (CBC) will depend on the allocation of money from the top downwards.

Business to business transnational relations have suffered far more than other transnational relations as a result of the declining relations between the EU and Russia, largely because of sanctions (Romanova, 2016) but also due to non-tariff barriers to trade that have survived Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization. Russia put its policy of import substitution firmly in place in 2018, which will ultimately make the deepening of economic relations more difficult. Finally, US secondary sanctions make EU businesses extremely cautious when engaging with Russian partners.

In looking for reasons for optimism, transnational civil society's and educational contacts provide some traction. In education, for instance, the story is one of continued EU funding of higher education projects through the Erasmus+ programme. The number of Jean Monnet projects in Russia passed the 100 mark in the period 2015–18, compared with 22 in 2007–14 (Deriglazova and Makinen, forthcoming). The extent to which academic cooperation contributed to the emergence of a transnational academic community remains contested (Romanova, 2019). The EU also carried out a project on public diplomacy, which involved experts' dialogue on EU–Russian relations as well as support for various academic exchanges and study visits to Brussels. Although the exposure of the project to Russian civil society gradually grew, its role in increasing the visibility of the EU and its image in Russia remains to be explored.

Finally, the EU continued to support, both administratively and financially, the EU–Russian civil society forum, on which Russia has been lukewarm since its launch in 2011. Moscow at the same time promoted cooperation between the more institutionalized civil society structures: the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation and the EU's Economic and Social Committee. Their regular meeting took place in September 2018 and was publicized by the Russian MFA. Hence, Moscow attempted to assert supervision over the civil society dialogue (including by way of selecting participants) by suggesting an alternative to the forum. The EU for its part supported both lines of civil society engagement. The EU also remained sensitive to Russian societal demands, responding, in particular, to the growing criticism of gender inequality in Russia by preparing a less politicized project, the National Action Strategy for Women.

Less positive contact continues in the form of relations between parties of the extreme right and left in EU member states and Russia, supported by the latter (including by funding). These parties provoked all sorts of suspicions in the EU. It remains to be seen whether anything comes from the establishment of groups such as that in April 2018 of the People's Council of Russian Germans (Volksrat der Russlanddeutschen), headed by an MP from Alternative für Deutschland, a German nationalist party (Klapsis, 2015). United more by their opposition to the EU, the global financial system and other manifestations of the liberal world order than anything else, these groups may be willing to draw on the anti-European and anti-Western sentiments of some in Russia (Polyakova, 2014) but the longevity and effectiveness of any contacts are very questionable.

Public opinion polls underline the message that pluralism does not automatically result in an improvement in perceptions or relations. In December 2018, the Pew Research Centre's poll of 25 countries, including 10 EU member states, was revealing of a negative

view of Russia. Of the EU states, only Greece expressed a favourable view (52 per cent favourable, 48 per cent unfavourable) (Letterman, 2018). Polls in Russia reveal that the proportion of those who have a positive opinion of the EU decreased from 76 per cent in 2004 to 19 per cent in 2014 but bounced back to 36 per cent in 2018 (Levada, 2018). Although the dynamics seem to be relatively positive on the Russian side, their attitude to the EU remains very critical, aided by both sanctions and Russian official narratives that characterize the EU as subordinate to the USA. Such polls are, of course, snapshots in time. They matter, however, because they speak of how attitudes are being framed within each of the areas and therefore are indicators of the challenge that will be faced by policymakers of the future seeking to return relations to a more positive footing.

In sum, the Russian house of mirrors reflected the downslide of traditional EU-fostered transgovernmental and business links, although the EU tried to compensate for this by fostering civil society contacts, educational exchanges and cross-border cooperation. Russia responded positively to most of these initiatives, yet with efforts to put them all (including civil society dialogues) on a more institutionalized and better supervised basis and to imitate the EU's activities in its own territory, promoting Moscow's version of soft power.

V. The EU–Russia–US Triangle

2018 contained remarkable moments in the dynamics between the EU, Russia and USA, especially with President Trump's tour of Europe that was tornado-like in its effects. It is difficult to remember a greater boon to critics of the rational decision-making model than President Trump placing the EU at the top of the US's list of 'foes', ahead of both Russia and China. Helsinki was then the scene for a far from ordinary press conference, starring the presidents of Russia and the USA, Trump's performance so startling that the former Central Intelligence Agency director John O'Brennan was moved to call it 'treasonous'. Extraordinary in the particularities, the year was nonetheless ordinary in its consistency with the more long-term triangle of relations in which the EU and the USA have not always seen eye to eye over how to deal with Russia and in which the USA has often been critical of Europe's lack of self-sufficiency.

President Trump's relationship with Russia continued, of course, to be the subject of multiple investigations in the USA, most notably Mueller's, even while for many in Washington it was Russia that was the object of suspicion, for some a pariah. Trump continued to criticize European NATO members for not fulfilling their budgetary obligations, leading to much speculation about the USA's commitment to Europe. Meanwhile, the EU moved ahead with developing 34 projects under Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), including in relation to training, maritime, cyber joint enabling and space. Developments here will be closely watched from Moscow but ultimately it should be remembered that Trump is not the first US president to level such criticisms at the Europeans or to try and pivot away from Europe. Nor is PESCO the first manifestation of an EU intention to develop its own security architecture and, by its very nature, it is as much a signifier of the reluctance of some in the EU to move ahead here as it is of the enthusiasm of others to do so.

Despite the unpredictability of the present incumbent of the White House, cooperation between the EU and the USA on Russia remained strong and coherent, which is mostly

the result of the institutionalized politics on both sides and the power of bureaucracy. Russia's favourite idea of playing the nineteenth-century game of triangles (in this case, EU–US–Russia) and balancing one against the other, predictably failed one more time. It is for this reason that Russia continued to argue that the EU is not ready for any independence from US decision-making and readily incurred economic losses as a result of US-inspired sanctions (Lavrov, 2018b). Yet, the picture remained more nuanced than Russia portrayed when palpable interests were on the table. For example, the EU (under German pressure) managed to negotiate exceptions from US secondary sanctions for the companies that construct Nord Stream II and remained determined to complete that very project despite the ever-intensifying pressure from Washington to decrease dependence on Russian oil and gas.

That being said, the development of US sanctions legislation, when the same and additional sanctions are supported by new pieces of legislation and – more importantly – by additional motivation (Russian interference in elections, weapons proliferation, human rights' violations, illicit trade with North Korea and support to Syria), meant that US sanctions were cast in stone, and made it impossible to lift them in the near future. That contrasted vividly with the EU's present strategy of linking sectoral sanctions against Russia with the Minsk agreement as well as with the political rationale of using sanctions as an instrument to change policy. The US sanctions strategy (coupled with its secondary sanctions that threaten any company wishing to operate in the US market and violating US sanctions) effectively deprives the EU of its most powerful foreign policy instrument, sanctions. It also means that, in Russia's eyes, the attractiveness of the EU as an economic partner and independent player has plummeted as a result of the rush of sanctions in Washington.

At the same time, the Trump Administration's decision to abandon the deal on Iran enhanced the importance of Brussels' selective engagement with Russia on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. Moreover, the EU's decision (realized in February 2019) to set up a financial mechanism to bypass US sanctions is watched with great interest in Moscow – although at present it does not lead to any illusion that EU-Russian relations will greatly improve.

In sum, despite some reasons to be nervous about the extent to which today's USA can be relied upon and reasons also to be frustrated by some unhelpful developments, the EU–US relationship offered few opportunities for Russia to exploit divisions. Nor have Russian activities given cause for the USA to make good on its threats to leave the security of Europe to the Europeans, quite the contrary.

Concluding Remarks

The EU–Russia relationship matters for a number of significant reasons. It is the EU's largest neighbour, the state with which it has the longest ground border and is, as such, a key security actor. But it is also *the* test case for the EU, a test from which the EU once again has not emerged well. Russia evades any attempts to fit it into the EU's existing pattern of relations and the EU has still not managed to develop – or even imagine – a new one.

The future of the EU–Russia relationship is naturally dependent on a range of factors. However, it is perhaps most dependent on each actor acting in a manner consistent with

its own self-interest. First and foremost, each needs to acknowledge certain problems as homegrown. The divisions increasingly evident in the EU are the product of internal (to the EU as well as the member states individually) differences. Russia may seek to exploit them, to sow further division and dissent but it has not created the original problem. Equally, Russia's problems are not the result of EU interference, they reflect certain growing authoritarian tendencies, disappointment with the international engagements of the 1990s and the slow development of civil society. In blaming the other, each actor is indirectly pointing to its own vulnerabilities. That vulnerability would exist even in the absence of the other actor. Yet, at the moment, Russia acts as a powerful house of mirrors for the EU, amplifying its drawbacks and current problems, doing little justice to its achievements or contributing to them along negative lines alone.

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