

Cold Confrontation: The New Normal in EU-Russia Relations

Sep 11, 2017 by [Ilana Bet-EI](#)

November 2017 will mark four years to the start of civil unrest and protests on Maidan Square, Kyiv, over the decision of the then Ukrainian government to suspend the signing of an Association Agreement with the European Union. That people-powered uprising sparked a series of events that rapidly led to a stand-off between Russia and the West, and specifically between Russia and the EU – one that shows few signs of being bridged. Cold Confrontation is the new normal in the relations. This paper, based on the debates in the Experts Workshop EU-Russia Relations organised by the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung European Union on [12 July 2017](#) seeks to briefly chart the background to this situation, followed by an examination of the parameters of the relationship within three broad categories: narrative, power and the future.

Background

Ukraine is at the heart of the confrontation between Russia and the EU, a fact that occasionally becomes obfuscated within the ongoing stages of deterioration in the relationship, and the larger confrontation between Russia and the West, especially the US: the physical state that is Ukraine, that lies between the European Union and Russia; the protests over democracy by the people of Ukraine, that ultimately led the collapse of the Yanukovich government and the national pivot to the EU demanded by the protestors; the furious reaction from Russia, that on 18 March 2014 annexed Crimea from Ukraine; the international principles and values disputed by Russia and the West by the annexation of Crimea; the downing of flight MH17 from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur over the Donbass on 17 July 2014, killing all 298 passengers and crew; the sanctions levelled at Russia by the EU over the sequence of events in Ukraine, and the counter sanctions issued by Russia; and the ongoing conflict in the Donbass region of Ukraine perceived to have been instigated and sustained by Russia – all these are both the cause of the Cold Confrontation, and the reasons it persists. Without an agreement over the status of Ukraine, accepted by both Russia and the EU, there will be no significant change in the mode of confrontation between the two. Unfortunately, there is little chance of such an agreement in the near future.

Narrative

As in every confrontation, at stake is an absence of a common narrative – or indeed a willingness to create a new, joint one. If this was probably the case from 2008 – the independence of Kosovo followed by the retaliatory invasion of Georgia by Russia – it has become hardened by the sequence of events commencing in 2013: what was a geopolitical dispute with ideological elements morphed relatively quickly into an ideological confrontation with geopolitical elements. It is this reality that makes the relationship, and its prospects, so toxic.

For while neither side probably disputes the actual chronology of events noted above, both the EU and Russia interpret them in opposing manners, each laying the blame on the other for the deterioration and stagnation – and both claiming the other a violator of international agreements. Indeed, neither narrative is comprehensible without understanding *the core ideological dispute*, centred upon international law: the EU and the West see the rights of the individual equal or indeed above those of the state if these are violated, at least in theory (see Syria, or indeed the disputed territories in Ukraine) which is the underpinning of the 2005 UN declaration on the Responsibility to Protect. Conversely, Russia (and in effect most of the non-Western world) interpret international law to apply solely between states, thus stopping at international borders without any relevance to the individual. When it comes to Ukraine, or indeed Kosovo and Georgia beforehand and Syria subsequently, both sides spin contrasting narratives of culpability and blame.

The **EU narrative** must be understood as the collective stance rather than that of individual Member States (that often interacted differently with Russia). It is also, like the Union itself, relatively a-historical. Indeed, other than another state resulting from the end of the USSR that had to be accommodated, there was no particular Russia focused EU narrative, until the open disagreement

between the two over the unilaterally declared independence of Kosovo in February 2008, that the EU (minus five states) supported and Russia vehemently opposed. The Russian invasion of Georgia in August 2008, and its recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, was for the EU what led to the rapid creation of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) with six states surrounding the EU and Russia, as a means to managing the common neighbourhood by offering more formal ties to the EU, stopping short of membership. Within the EU narrative Russian hostility to the EP was perceived as a given but unthreatening, and in any event the Union holds it has an absolute right to engage with whatever state or peoples it chooses. Due to the eurozone crisis the Russia-EU narrative is not contiguous, until November 2013, and the Vilnius Council in which Association Agreements, including trade, were to be signed with a number of EaP states. The vehemence of the Russian reaction to the EaP and the proposed agreements as anti-Russian, seemed to surprise the EU – despite Russia having created its own Free Trade area in 2011 with a number of former Soviet Republics as an overt move to circumvent the proposed EU FTAs.

There followed the events in Maidan, that shocked the EU into a pro-Ukrainian position, and ultimately the ousting of Yanukovich and the signing of the Association agreement with Ukraine. This was accompanied by an increasingly hostile rhetoric between Russia and the EU, which reached a first climax in the Russian annexation of Crimea, and then the downing of MH17. It was from this point that the collective position of the EU and its Member States hardened, sanctions were imposed, and open rejection of Russia and its positions was expressed. In essence, this attitude has hardly altered, even if the EU and some Member States created the Minsk Process for resolving the conflict in Ukraine. The EU perceives Russia as a violator of international law, agreements and obligations. Until it reverses this stance, there can be no rapprochement other than between peoples, and in the specific interests of the EU.

The **Russian narrative** disputes that of the EU, and also casts it within a broader historical perspective. Most especially, it focuses upon the end of the USSR as a national and global disaster, hastened by the West – which means the US, NATO and then the EU. Indeed, the latter did not rise in significance to Russia until 2008, and it is difficult to overemphasise the significance of the Kosovo conflict (1999) and its aftermath in the creation of the current Russian narrative – from the fact that it was Vitaly Churkin, the then Russian member of the negotiating Troika, who was crucial in persuading Milosevic to concede, but received little credit for his actions (the Nobel Committee awarded the Peace Prize solely to Martti Ahtisaari in 2008), to the ‘treachery’ of the EU in recognising Kosovo, contrary to UNSCR 1244 (1999), that established the post-war status in Kosovo, and was supported by Russia within an explicit understanding that Kosovo remained a *de jure* part of Serbia.

The subsequent invasion of Georgia, as indeed the annexation of Crimea, have always been explained by Russia as no more than a parallel with Kosovo: peoples asserting their right to self-definition, and thus being recognised by other states. Or indeed, one state (Russia) giving aid to repressed people (South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Crimea) much as the West had done in Kosovo. That these activities are, as noted above, based upon a diametrically opposed interpretation of international law is irrelevant – and has led to Russia continuously assert its own interpretation as correct, and that in ignoring it the EU is trampling on Russian interests, from the creation of the Eastern Partnership to the attempt to lure its neighbours into the EU sphere. Within this context, the Russian narrative holds that EU involvement in Ukraine was and remains a violation of the history and sovereignty of Russia and the Russian people. Ultimately, the Russian narrative is one in which it, and it alone, is the honest law abiding party, attacked and ganged up against by the West, and in the case of Ukraine specifically the EU.

Power

While international law and agreements are the core ideological difference between the sides, perceptions and uses of power are the more pragmatic manifestation of the positions of the two.

Russia is all about hard power: it uses military force and, as necessary and possible, its energy resources to project power, supplemented with its permanent veto-wielding seat in the UN Security Council. Moreover, it still sees itself as a global power, purposefully diminished by the West after the

Cold War, and thus in need of both asserting itself wherever possible and diminishing its perceived opponents and enemies. Rather than borders, it sees areas of influence – be it in Europe or Asia.

It is within this self-perception of hard power and influence that Russia came to see the EU as a threat, notably with the creation of the Eastern Partnership in 2008: this is when it felt the Union had moved from being a rich but relatively harmless neighbour to a parallel of NATO – powerful, antagonistic and encroaching upon Russia, its influence and its rights.

The EU is avowedly an instrument of soft power: it has no collective military capability, other than a small crisis management and peacekeeping centre. It believes itself to be values driven, so influencing other parts of the world through a development agenda. If necessary, it escalates power through economic means, thus sanctions or the withdrawing of funding. However, it is above all the largest trading block in the world, with influence in every corner of the globe – while also being entirely internally focused.

It is within this self-perception that it came to see Russia as both denying its values and potentially violating its interests, in 2008 – and to preserve both it created the EaP: as a buffer between itself and Russia, fuelled by money and access to the EU. An ultimate soft power solution.

The problem with both these depictions is that they are no longer entirely true: in economic terms, Russia is probably a regional power, if that. Its military, much enhanced by emptying the national coffers in the past years, is still capable more of disruption and asserting positions than taking them. Its real strength, as lately revealed, has been in the cyber-domain – which is as much the dark arts as military parades. However, it has understood that disruption – of elections and democracy today, electrical grids and gas supplies tomorrow – may be the ultimate expression of power, and it is focused on garnering it. The problem is, the West, including the EU, is gaining upon it fast.

The EU is no less guilty of self-deception. It is now mostly an interest-driven entity backed up by values, sometimes: the migration crisis, relationships with the neighbourhood, global trade – all of these have been interests driven. Moreover, since the escalation in terrorist attacks, now coupled with the perceived anti-EU attitude of the US, the EU has begun to rapidly morph into a body with a hard power dimension due to the Global Strategy and the new mechanisms for joint defence and security research and procurement.

It is the disparity between the capabilities and perceptions of power between the two that not only enhances their conflicting narratives but also makes it extremely difficult to reach an accommodation between the sides.

The future

There are a number of dimensions to examining the future, each offering options for developments.

The first is Ukraine, the core issue in the bad relationship. While both sides are focused upon conceptual and narrative layers of blame, the harsh truth is that the status quo is acceptable to both the EU and Russia at this point.

- The EU is committing relatively few resources to maintaining the state as independent alongside aiding it in fighting corruption and democratisation. In addition, it has aided the Member State initiated Minsk Process, so ensuring a continuing if removed commitment to its principles. And so, as long as all these tangents unfold favourably, and it does not need to escalate to any form of active military/crisis management/peacekeeping mode, it effectively considers the situation contained.
- Russia sees the land of Ukraine being Russian, but rejects the people – not least because it has no resources to recapture the whole of the state or rebuild a regime in its image. Moreover, it needs to direct its resources elsewhere, from Syria and the Middle East to menacing the Baltic states and mounting shows of power to NATO. Thus it has no interest in a settlement in Ukraine, but equally seeks to avoid it being a black hole that consumes all its

capabilities. Like the EU, it too sees no reason to move beyond the current mode of containment.

The second is open aggression between the sides – an option that appears to be at a very low level of probability in the near or even mid-term future, not least because it would affect the status quo in Ukraine.

The third is great disruption which is of a greater probability, largely in cyberspace, but also amongst peoples and lands. In this way there has been a clear escalation both in Russian attempts to influence democratic elections and processes in EU states and assets such as banks, health services and others – but also indications that it is attempting to co-opt regimes in central and east European Member States, and especially the Balkans. For its part, the EU has invested rapidly in acquiring counter cyber capabilities, and while still far behind Russia it will no doubt escalate in that field, while countering Russian meddling with ever greater rounds of diplomacy and in the Balkans, the tentative offer of EU membership, eventually. In Russian eyes, such countering will be deemed a disruption of its interests, so escalation should not be unexpected.

The fourth is sanctions that are both the great instrument of status quo, and potentially the great game changer. For both sides, the existing sanctions have been more about the EU than Russia: for the Union, the very fact of levying them, and rolling them over repeatedly, has been an act of purpose and unity, even if they have not deterred Russia in any way in Ukraine. For Russia, they have become a symbol of EU perfidy, useful for the regime to flag at a population suffering ever greater hardship while largely not affecting those it is targeting. Indeed, it can be said that both Russia and the EU have found ways of circumventing sanctions, so ensuring the status quo in Ukraine while not hurting too much on either side. The potential game changer will be the new US sanctions that have the potential to hurt both sides in their point of vulnerability: energy. Russia needs to supply the EU in order to maintain its reserves, while the EU still imports some 40% of its energy needs from Russia. Sanctioning this sector in any way would thus be a significant escalation – not least because it is the one that could affect the willingness of both sides to maintain the status quo in Ukraine.

The fifth is people to people exchanges which is probably the only potential point of optimism, but with reservations. The chronology and mutual narratives of hostility between the sides have effectively created ‘lost generations’ of populations on both sides. Where there was potential for openness, there is now mutual suspicion amongst people, both uncomprehending how the other can accept and support their regimes. That said, this remains the only sphere in which there is still some openness to co-operation of sorts, so it must be here that an attempt at change must be sought in the near to midterm future: in the absence of dialogue on differences, acceptance of people and culture can fill a certain gap.