# A House Divided: How the Russian Question Polarizes EU-rope

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While once serving as a cohesion factor across EU member states and in transatlantic relations, the "Russian question" has turned into a litmus test of EU unity and transatlantic solidarity. Since Crimea, Russia-related affairs in Europe have reflected and amplified existing fault lines across EU member states and within European political arenas and societies. Diverging European perspectives on Russia, coupled with transatlantic tensions on the "Russian question" under Trump, have sown confusion in Brussels's Russian policy, serving the "divide and conquer" strategy pursued by Russia.

The March 2014 annexation of Crimea triggered a significant crisis in EU-Russia relations. Within days, the European Union redefined its Russian neighbor as its greatest challenge, threatening the continent's rule of law, security, and unity. Meanwhile, Western Europe defense doctrines re-ranked Russia as their top security threat, dislodging other pressing agendas such as Islamist terror, illegal migration, arms control, and Iran. For the first time since the end of the Cold War, Russia was framed as a pan-European "question," rather than an Eastern Europe (primarily Polish and Baltic) issue.

The Crimean crisis was the last development in a series of clashes that fed tensions between the EU and Russia in the twenty-first century, particularly since the end of Medvedev's presidency in 2012, and triggered the adoption

of a collective EU response against Moscow. In July 2014, the EU deployed a "linkage" strategy, applying political and economic sanctions targeting Moscow and linking them to Russia's "good behavior." As an integral vector of the EU's Russian policy, NATO embarked on an "enhancement and readiness" strategy, staging new demonstrations of force on its eastern flank. Under the second Obama administration, Brussels's political and economic coercive policy with regard to Russia was coordinated tightly with the US, contributing to a relatively united transatlantic front against Moscow – up until Trump's presidency.

Thus after serving as a cohesion factor across EU member states and in transatlantic relations, the "Russian question" amplified already existing fault lines and tensions between EU member states, turning into a litmus test of EU unity and transatlantic solidarity. The states have differed in their assessment of the threats posed by Russia and in their policy orientations. Russia has also become a "question" within European political and intellectual arenas and societies at large (whether with Russia's agency or not). Overall, Russia and its ideological and political model have exerted a palpable attraction on a spectrum of intellectual, political, and societal trends in Europe, a phenomenon that was facilitated by Russia's soft power activities across the continent.

## From Potential Allies to Open Antagonists (1991-2017)

The Ukrainian crisis is often presented as a turning point in EU-Russia relations, yet it marks a culmination of tension-filled events that date back from the late 1990s and early 2000s. Captured by Mikhail Gorbachev's motto, a "United Europe from Vladivostok to Gibraltar," the immediate post-Cold War mood took shape with the partial institutionalization of EU-Russia and NATO-Russia relations in the early and mid-1990s. However, hopes of a rapprochement on both sides were built on an original misunderstanding: Russia aimed for its acceptance into the Western bloc, contemplating its integration into the EU and even NATO; the EU, for its part, sought to expand its values and leverage across the continent without relating to Russia as an equal partner.

This "lost in translation" dynamic unleashed an era of disenchantment. With Russia's authoritarian turn in domestic and foreign policy under Putin's first mandate, the EU became a vocal critic of Moscow. Similarly, NATO's waves of expansion in Eastern Europe (and at a lesser level the

EU's expansion eastwards), the initiation of the US Ballistic Missile Defense Program in Russia's European borderlands, and the US-EU support for the color revolutions in the post-Soviet space ruined Russia's prospect of a rapprochement with the EU. At this juncture, Russia embarked on a "divide and conquer" strategy in Europe liable to provide Moscow with maximum political and economic dividends, with a minor hiatus during the relatively liberal presidency of Dmitry Medvedev (2008-2012).

As since the early 2000s NATO was cast in Russia as a paradigmatic enemy, particularly problematic for Moscow was the accession to the Alliance of former Soviet Union members that demonstrated more antipathy to Russia than West European states. With the Russo-Georgian war (2008) and Russia's new orientation toward the building of the Eurasian Union (2011), tensions mounted anew between the EU and Russia. After 2011, Eastern Europe's traditional show of EU-Russia tension was duplicated in the Middle East and North Africa. Despite cooperation on the negotiations over the Iranian nuclear agreement, Russia and the EU adopted opposite positions on NATO's intervention in Libya (2011) and the status of the Assad regime in Syria following the eruption of the civil war (2011).

Thus since the early and mid-2010s, Russia has represented a multilayered threat for the EU. Of European concern was the potential for "local wars" in the "contested neighborhoods" of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus; the "hybrid" nature of Russia's power projection in Europe (exemplified by the cyberattacks in Estonia in April 2007); Russia's new security architecture in Europe, and in particular the anti-access/area-denial bubble (A2/AD) of Kaliningrad; Russia's upgraded naval capabilities in the North Atlantic, the High North, and the Eastern Mediterranean; and Russia's "weaponization" of its oil and gas (as illustrated by the winter 2009 dispute between Ukraine and Russia that paralyzed Bulgaria, Greece, Macedonia, and Croatia).

Originating in Ukraine's last-minute refusal to sign the Association Agreement with the EU in September 2013, the Ukrainian crisis – and its culmination in Crimea's annexation and the war in Donbass – unleashed a decisive rupture. By violating the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, Russia was accused of shattering Europe's law-based order inherited from the end of the Cold War, opening a Pandora's Box of European secessionist and irredentist movements. Since then, Russia has turned into a litmus test of EU cohesion, as it has exposed and at times helped widen existing fault lines across and inside the member states.

## A Litmus Test for EU Cohesion

The EU remained much stronger and firmer on the Ukrainian question than expected. At the same time, beneath the EU's collective sanctions policy vis-à-vis Russia since the summer of 2014, EU member states and non-members have displayed differences on their assessments of the Russian "threats" as well as in their policy orientations. Such divergences derive from geopolitical, historical, public opinion, and economic factors. The main fault lines include: contrasted assessments of the "threats" posed by Russia; the status of NATO as the main answer to the Ukrainian crisis and as the bedrock of European security; peace negotiations over Ukraine; the validity of the sanctions regime as an instrument of EU foreign policy; and the acceptable degree of reliance on Russian energy.

On the "threat assessment" question, the Ukrainian crisis marked a strong yet provisional moment of unity as the EU and NATO integrated the Polish and Baltic states' anti-Russian narrative into their own security doctrines. Yet sharp contrasts persist between West European states and EU members bordering Russia (primarily Poland and the Baltics) regarding the scope and immediacy of the "Russian threat." Seen from Brussels, there is a positive asymmetry between European members of NATO and Russia in terms of numbers of troops (3.5 million NATO soldiers versus the nearly 330,000 Russian soldiers stationed on Moscow's western border); defense budget (NATO's military budget in 2016 was $846 billion, compared to Russia's $46 billion); and NATO's powerful power projection on its eastern flank (most critically via the operational US ballistic missile defense system). Seen from Warsaw, Tallinn, Vilnius, or Riga, however, such asymmetry is reversed in favor of Russia. With its hyper-weaponized Kaliningrad exclave, modernized military capabilities, nuclear rhetoric, vast snapshot military exercises, and ongoing – albeit conflict-laden – cooperation with Belarus, Russia appears as a visceral threat. This sense of vulnerability is intertwined with vivid historical (and often politicized) memories of Soviet occupation and ongoing controversies over the memorials to the Red Army. With the notable exceptions of the "anti-Russian" UK and "pro-Russian" Hungary, West European countries tend to adopt a rather accommodationist stance vis-a-vis Russia, while East European states insist on maintaining a confrontational approach.

At the defense level as well, different approaches prevail on the enhancement of NATO in Eastern Europe as the central answer to the Russia-Ukraine

conflict. The UK, Poland, and the Baltics elevated NATO and transatlantic partnership as the core response to the Russian threat. As a result of Brexit, the UK strengthened its ties with NATO and took the lead in some of its central Russia-containment initiatives.[1] By contrast, Germany and France displayed less enthusiasm toward NATO's enhancement policy in its eastern flank. Those contrasts build upon an ongoing EU debate between proponents of NATO as the bedrock of European security and advocates for the development of distinctively European defense capabilities. The UK, Poland, and the Baltics elevate NATO as the sole valid framework for collective defense. Poland and the Baltic states would support Europe's "politics of common defense and security," provided that it does not duplicate or harm NATO's efforts. By contrast, Germany and to a lesser degree France signaled greater interest in developing a European army that they see as "complementary" to NATO's force, thereby challenging the Polish and Baltic argument for NATO's predominance.

Third, the EU countries have struggled to agree on a common approach to the crisis in Ukraine. Member states such as France and Germany, two main stakeholders in the Normandy format that also includes Russia and Ukraine, put the emphasis on a political response to the crisis, while other European nations – the UK, Poland, and the Baltics – advance a military containment approach. Similarly, the European Commission, along with France, Germany, the UK, and Finland has advocated a humanitarian assistance approach.[2] By contrast, Lithuania and Estonia have supported Ukraine's request for military assistance; in turn, Poland upheld an intermediate position by aligning itself with the US and remaining cautious on the military support option. Resisting Polish and Baltic pressures, the EU has also remained cautious on the prospect of Ukraine's integration into the EU. Despite the ratification of the Ukraine-EU Association Agreement on September 1, 2017, the EU made clear, in the words of the European Commission's President Jean-Claude Juncker, that Ukraine "is not Europe in the sense of the European Union."[3]

On the issue of sanctions, the "Russian question" has brought back to center stage the controversial use of sanctions and coercive diplomacy as the central instrument of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. Here the main bone of contention has not been Russia per se but the sanctions' effectiveness, a question that has marked the EU's numerous adoptions of sanctions' regimes (currently the EU has 40 sanctions regimes). Indeed, several member states, such as Italy in 2015, have expressed their criticism

of the extension of the sanctions regime against Russia; still other countries, such as Slovakia in 2016, even called for their removal. On this issue, European governments have been pressured by a range of professional lobbies, particularly in Italy and Spain, advocating for the removal of sanctions.

The fifth fault line relates to Europe's energy dependency on Russia and its weaponization. In 2016, Russian gas imports comprised 23 percent of total UK gas demand, 25 percent in France, 40 percent in Italy, 55 percent in Denmark, 58 percent in the Czech Republic, 62 percent Germany and Hungary, 64 percent in Poland, 70 percent in Austria, and 84 percent in Slovakia.[4] Admittedly, the Ukrainian crisis encouraged the East European states to diversify their energy sources through Norway, the Middle East, and the United States;[5] Finland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia were 100 percent dependent on Russian gas in 2007, and by 2016 reduced their gas imports from Russia by 60-70 percent.[6] On the other hand, the Nord Stream 2 (NS 2) pipeline project (designed to strengthen Russian natural gas supply to Europe by avoiding the Ukrainian and Baltic transits), is strongly connected with German, Austrian, Dutch, British, and French companies that invest in and/or benefit from its building. While Nord Stream 2, which would transport natural gas to Germany, is vehemently defended by Germany, it is equally vehemently rejected by Poland, the Baltic states, Romania, and Hungary, which are transit states liable to lose their dividends or suffer the increase of the energy costs after the NS 2 launch.[7] In the context of US-Russia energy competition for the European market, NS 2 has also been at the heart of a transatlantic dispute since June 2017, when the US Senate voted in favor of a bill allowing sanctions against those who facilitate the building or even maintenance of Russian energy export pipelines.

## Divisions inside European Societies: The Case of Germany

As much as Russia is a question for the EU, it has been an even more controversial issue inside European societies. Russia's apparent ideological cohesion, united geopolitical worldview, and political stability have contrasted with and sharpened the image of a cacophonic, absurdly technocratic, and politically and morally inconsistent Europe. Russia has served as a magnet for a wide spectrum of ideological currents, ranging from the far right to the far left, advocating an alternative model of national development. Russia has also skillfully capitalized upon deeply entrenched Euro-skeptic and anti-American trends by deploying a range of soft power instruments,

including information warfare, diaspora politics, cultivation of client "networks" of "influencers" in the political, academic, and business realms, and ideological and financial support of extremist (and anti-EU) political parties (epitomized by the election of former German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder as a chairman of Rosneft in September 2017). Through those pinpointed means, Russia has been able to intervene in Europe's electoral politics and boost anti-EU trends.

Among other relevant examples such as France and the Baltics, Germany is a case in point. First, Moscow has reflected and deepened Germany's historical ambivalence vis-à-vis Russia that builds upon the historical legacy of a Germany divided between the pro-American FRG and the pro-Soviet GDR. According to a Pew research poll in 2015, 40 percent of East Germans had confidence in Vladimir Putin – twice as many as their Western counterparts. East Germans were half as supportive of sanctions against Russia than West Germans (26 percent, vs. 42 percent), and almost twice less likely to defend NATO allies against Russia (28 percent vs. 40 percent).[8] Germany is also a potential hub for Russia's diaspora politics. In 2017, some 3-5 million Russian speakers from the FSU lived in Germany, with a significant number not fully naturalized.

Second, Germany has been a privileged target for Russian information warfare, as illustrated in the 2015 "Lisa case" in Germany (the fake story of a Russian-German girl kidnapped and raped by Arab migrants) which was interpreted in Germany as an attempt to manipulate German public opinion and turn it against Chancellor Merkel. Russia was also accused of involvement in the September 2017 parliamentary election campaign. It has supported and promoted the circulation of pro-AfD materials[9] and has relied on the high proportion of Russian-speakers within the AfD ranks (according to Bloomberg, one third of AfD supporters were Russian-speaking Germans).[10] There were also reports of numerous hacker attacks from Russian servers.[11]

As much as Germans remain ambivalent on Russia, they are also divided regarding the enhancement of NATO. In 2015, at the peak of the Ukraine crisis, Germany's public opinion expressed disappointment, with only 55 percent having a favorable view of the Alliance, and over 70 percent favoring economic aid to Ukraine rather than military assistance.[12] As Russia's second trading partner within the EU, Germany is also particularly exposed to Russia's potential economic and energy coercion, with over 60 percent dependency upon Russia's natural gas supplies. German companies such

as Wintershall or Uniper have been among the most vocal on the European market to condemn the sanctions against Russia leveled by the US in June 2017, rejecting US unilateralism and defending Russia's energy partnership as a key German national interest.

The German case is not unique in Europe, as other information warfare tactics and incidents attributed to Russia occurred in Scandinavia (Sweden in particular), the Baltic states, Central Europe (Slovakia and the Czech Republic), and France. Indeed, Russia has demonstrated its ability and success in identifying and leveraging the soft spots and fault lines within European societies to promote its own interests. Apart from utilizing Russian-speaking minorities' abroad and exploiting deeply entrenched historical, linguistic, and diaspora ties, Russia has also reached out to European hearts and minds through the promotion of the Russian Orthodox Church on the continent. More broadly, Russian media policy is designed to influence the general climate in Europe by voicing the Kremlin's mindset on the most controversial issues (the rise of the far right, the refugee crisis, the Islamic State and terror warfare, EU-US relations, and the Middle East). For now, Russia's information warfare has had some impact in Europe and potentially represents the greatest threat to Europe's unity. At the same time, Russia has unintentionally triggered the development of a common European policy and response in cyber defense, which may boost the EU's unity in the long run.

### Conclusion

The EU-ropean "Russian question" is a reflection of deeper European concerns about the resilience of the European Union, the transatlantic alliance, and the democratic fabric of European states. Across member states, those divisions were thus far mitigated by the systematic extension of sanctions against Russia and may abruptly disappear in times of crisis. Inside European societies, however, Russia's imprint is liable to be deeper and durably affect the post-Cold War accepted rules of law, political culture, and national integrity, as exemplified by the Catalan crisis.

Under the first six months of the Trump administration, the issues of economic sanctions, Ukraine, and US-Russia competition over the energy market in Europe have also driven a wedge (perhaps temporary) between the US and Europe. As the US seems increasingly less predictable, the EU may be tempted to adopt a softer stance vis-à-vis Russia.

Ultimately, diverging European perspectives on Russia, coupled with transatlantic tensions on the "Russian question" under Trump, have sown confusion in Brussels's Russian policy, serving the "divide and conquer" strategy pursued by Russia**.**

## Notes

1   In the year 2017 alone, the UK led NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence in Estonia with 800 British troops; worked with the United States-led Enhanced Forward Presence in Poland; headed the Alliance's "Very High Readiness Joint Taskforce;" and sent Typhoons to Romania for NATO"s Southern Air Policing ,ission to police Black Sea skies. Meanwhile the UK continues to build its new nuclear Dreadnought submarines to maintain their nuclear deterrent, against Russia in particular.

2   The European Commission has been one the largest providers of humanitarian assistance to Ukraine: as of the fall of 2017, the European Commission provided over €88.1 million of emergency assistance to Ukraine.

3   "Juncker: Ukraine not 'European' in the sense of European Union," UNIAN Information Agency, August 29, 2017, https://www.unian.info/politics/2105024-juncker-ukraine-not-european-in-the-sense-of-european-union.html.

4   Gabriel Collins, "Russia's Use of the 'Energy Weapon' in Europe," Baker Institute, July 18, 2017, https://www.bakerinstitute.org/media/files/files/ac785a2b/BI-Brief-071817-CES_Russia1.pdf.

5   Simon Hoellerbauer, "Baltic Energy Sources: Diversifying Away from Russia, Baltic Bulletin, FPRI, June 14, 2017, https://www.fpri.org/article/2017/06/baltic-energy-sources-diversifying-away-russia/.

6   "Lithuania, Estonia Trimmer Gas Imports from Russia," *Energy Market Prices*, May 23, 2016, http://www.energymarketprice.com/energy-news/lithuania--estonia-trimmed-gas-imports-from-russia.

7   The EU and Poland also fight over the level of accessibility allowed to Gazprom on European markets: in August 2017, for example, Poland denied an EU order to allow Russian gas giants more access to the vital European pipeline OPAL (in early August 2017, EU regulators had given a green light to Gazprom to send gas via OPAL – a pipeline that previously was out of reach of the Russian energy companies).

8   Katie Simmons, Bruce Stokes, and Jacob Poushter, "NATO Publics Blame Russia for Ukrainian Crisis, but Reluctant to Provide Military Aid," Pew Research Center, June 10, 2015, http://pewrsr.ch/1Tar5Ms.

9   Targeting Russian-influenced German audience, Russian journal *Novaya Gazeta* reports that AfD "supports the anti-Western course of the Kremlin." See Aleksander Chursin, "Alternative for Germany: Germans Don't Need Islam," *Novaya Gazeta*, May 3, 2016, http://bit.ly/2u8NpmA.

10  Henry Meyer, "Putin Has a Really Big Trojan Horse in Germany," *Bloomberg*, May 2, 2017, https://bloom.bg/2FPrSVu.

11  According to research at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, a strong connection can be found between the AfD campaign and Kremlin propaganda since June 2017. See "Allies: The Kremlin, the AfD, the Alt-Right and the German Elections," London School of Economics, http://bit.ly/2prNQmm.

12  Simmons, Stokes, and Poushter, "NATO Publics Blame Russia for Ukrainian Crisis, but Reluctant to Provide Military Aid."