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# Policy Brief

**The EU and Russia with Different Agendas**

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## **Policy Brief (3)**

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### **THE EU AND RUSSIA WITH DIFFERENT AGENDAS**

On paper the EU considers Russia a strategic partner. The reality is quite different. The last EU-Russia summit in December demonstrated clearly what has been apparent for some time. The EU and Russia are pursuing very different agendas that make any meaningful partnership increasingly unlikely. Although, unlike the case with other strategic partners, the EU meets the Russian leadership twice a year, this has not led to a narrowing of differences between the two sides.

When did it start to go wrong? Looking back, it is clear that the EU had ill-founded illusions about President Medvedev being able to bring about change. He talked constantly about the need for modernisation, fighting corruption and implementing the rule of law. He even had nice things to say about the importance of human rights and civil society. Most Russians recognised that he was little more than a puppet, keeping the seat warm until Putin returned to the Kremlin. But EU leaders including Merkel and Barroso, both of whom had poor relations with Putin, were over-optimistic that Medvedev might continue as President.

The poor chemistry between EU leaders and Putin was shared by Obama who made little secret of his disdain for the former KGB agent. The famous 're-set' in US-Russia relations never really got off the ground. This American view of Russia was important for the EU-Russia relationship as Brussels did not wish to get out of step with US concerns about developments in Russia. The Magnitsky law, for example, brought calls for similar legislation from the European Parliament. The EU also watched with concern as Russia took further punitive measures against American NGOs and stopped Americans from adopting Russian orphans.

Perhaps the final nail in the coffin as far as the EU was concerned was Putin's crackdown on civil society after the rigged Duma elections and his return to the Kremlin. The arrest of human rights activists, the sentencing of Pussy Riot, the campaign against gays were all sharply criticised by the EU.

In addition, Putin showed little interest in supporting the EU in pressing Assad in Syria to stop the violence against his own citizens. The responsibility to protect principle was ignored and he withdrew Russia from the Nunn-Lugar threat reduction programme. Major differences remain over the common neighbourhood, especially with regard to Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia.

Against this background the official exchanges have been struggling to make progress. At the December summit there was a complete lack of agreement on all major issues – energy, Syria and Iran, human rights, visa liberalisation. The once vaunted Partnership for Modernisation was not even discussed. There was, however, a third progress report on P4M signed by senior officials in December which attempted to paper over the cracks in the relationship. There were even some welcome words for the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum and hopes that the work of the Forum could be enhanced.

Putin was especially furious at the European Commission's investigations into the alleged monopoly behaviour of Gazprom. The EU, in turn, criticised Russia for not living up to its WTO commitments by banning the import of livestock from Europe and maintaining state subsidies over large swathes of industry.

Shortly before the summit there had been a routine meeting on human rights. As usual the Russians stone-walled on EU concerns but on this occasion launched a blistering attack on alleged EU discrimination against minorities, especially the Russians in the Baltic States.

Delegations from the European Parliament also met with their counterparts in December (in Moscow) and January (in Brussels). On both occasions the two sides talked past each other and according to one veteran MEP the disagreements had never been so large.

Putin does not seem to care that the relationship with the EU is stagnating. He seems to believe that the economic crisis has fatally wounded the EU and prefers to promote the Eurasia Union as power centre to rival the EU. Moscow's "European choice" proclaimed by Putin himself in the German parliament in 2001 has been replaced with a focus on Russia's near neighbourhood. He does not wish to re-create the Soviet Union but he does wish to establish Russia as the dominant power in the Eurasian landmass surrounded by friendly vassal states. In the longer term there could be an agreement between the Russia-dominated Eurasia Union and the EU.

In the eyes of Dmitri Trenin, the change on the Kremlin side runs deeper than geopolitics or geoeconomics. He argues that 'not only is the EU no longer accepted as a mentor—or even a model—but Moscow has also accepted the values gap argument that the Europeans were using for a long time, simply turning it against its critics. The decline of Europe, one hears in elite Russian circles, is due to the Europeans becoming too "soft" and giving up their former strengths that once made Europe the world's leader in favor of multiculturalism, mindless tolerance, and dilution of national or religious identities'.

Putin's default political ideology is nationalism, always a potent force in Russian history. But his brand of nationalism is tinged with authoritarianism and according to some MEPs he is leading Russia towards a semi-fascist state. The security forces are omnipotent. There is no rule of law. No one can challenge the ruling elite without facing repercussions. You can travel, make money, watch the internet – but you cannot challenge the status quo.

This makes the prospects for EU-Russia relations rather bleak. There is less and less interest in Russia among think tanks, academia, the media and the general public. Russia was hardly mentioned at Davos or the Munich security conference. The official contacts will of course continue. Gas and oil will also continue to flow. But a real improvement in the relationship is highly unlikely as long as Putin remains in the Kremlin.

How should the EU respond? The EU cannot ignore or even try and contain Russia as some advocate. Russia is too important in many fields, from energy to foreign policy, to ignore. But the EU must also stick to its principles of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. Getting the right balance between business and principles is never easy. A more confident and united EU, however, has many levers in dealing with Russia. To take just one example, Gazprom gets 70% of its profits from sales to Europe. Russia thus needs the European market for its own future prosperity. The EU will not suffer, therefore, if it pursues a principled policy towards Russia.

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