

There are few political incentives for Russia and the EU to normalise their relations

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Russia held parliamentary elections on 18 September. To coincide with the elections, we are running a number of articles on Russian politics and society. In this contribution, [Irina Busygina](#) writes on relations between Russia and the European Union. Following the Ukraine crisis, Russia and the EU are now further away from establishing stable relations with one another than at any time since the end of the Soviet Union. Given the general lack of political incentives on the Russian side to improve relations, this picture is unlikely to change in the coming years.



When covering Russia's parliamentary election on 18 September, most experts noted the somewhat subdued nature of the election campaign in comparison with the previous election in 2011. However, there was another feature of the campaign which is worth noting: the largely domestic focus of parties and candidates, with issues like salaries, pensions and corruption taking centre stage.

This is curious when one considers that the Russian media tends to devote most of its time to covering foreign policy issues, in particular the West's alleged agenda against Russia, the undesirable actions of Ukraine's government, and the outcome of the US presidential election. There is therefore a noticeable gap between issues that are intended to entertain a Russian audience (albeit in a primitive fashion) and those issues that relate to people's 'real' domestic lives.

An obvious example is that the question of establishing stable relations with the EU appears to belong to the category of 'entertainment'. This may be one reason why the Russian government has failed to exert itself in this area in recent history. Indeed, in the 25 years since the end of the Soviet Union, Russia has never had genuinely stable relations with the EU. And this is despite their geographical proximity and high levels of economic interdependence which 'doom' both sides to cooperation.



Vladimir Putin meeting German Chancellor Angela Merkel, May 2015. Credits:kremlin.ru.

During the 1990s, the EU repeatedly attempted to extend its sphere of influence into Russia by promoting democratisation in the country as well as the values of human rights and the rule of law. These efforts have clearly

gone unrewarded: the EU has failed to facilitate an improvement in governance within Russia, while those few projects that enjoyed some success have largely been invisible when one considers the scale of the country and the size of its territory.

The instruments available were simply too weak to have the desired effect on Russia and European leaders did not envisage the need for more forceful methods of coercion during this period. The EU was reluctant to punish Boris Yeltsin's government when it overstepped the mark and EU leaders considered that the mere avoidance of a reconstitution of the Soviet Union would be sufficient to guarantee Russia's transition toward democracy. This was a mistake.

Worse, the distinctly 'practical' approach pursued by the national governments of some EU member states toward Russia has encouraged the Russian leadership to prioritise bilateral relations with individual states over those with the EU as a single entity. This has undermined even those limited successes that the EU initially enjoyed in dealing with the country. For Yeltsin, establishing good relations with the EU quickly ceased to be part of his survival strategy after Russia's pro-western Minister of Foreign Affairs, Andrei Kozyrev, left office in 1996.

The last significant breakthrough in developing mutual relations came in 2003 when Russia and the EU agreed on a Strategic Partnership, and thus set a new format for their relations. Both sides have put their signatures to a number of important commitments which have nevertheless largely remained on paper in practice. And they have never reached a level of cooperation which could be defined as a real *strategic* partnership.

In Russia, President Putin busied himself with the construction of his 'great state', while the EU focused on managing its enlargements. Both in Russia and the EU, politicians have relied on continuing external tensions as a mechanism for generating internal consensus while implementing transformations in their respective political systems. At the same time, trade between Russia and the EU experienced a period of growth, to the satisfaction of both sides.

This new model of relations was founded on a separation between politics and economics, and this gap has only grown over the years. Under the Presidency of Dmitry Medvedev, there was an attempt to bring economic and political strategies closer together through an initiative named the '[Partnership for Modernisation](#)' in 2010. In principle this could have significantly enhanced the authority of the EU, if Russia had genuinely desired modernisation. But this was not the case and the attempt produced undeniably miserable results.

Following the Ukraine crisis, there is now little doubt that Russia and the EU have fundamental differences when it comes to their views on the prevailing international order, not least in Europe itself. Moscow sees the world as multipolar, with a selection of powerful actors (and only these actors) playing important roles in the international system, with unconditional freedom of action in their respective spheres of influence.

It is from this perspective that Moscow has tried to build relations with Georgia, Ukraine and the other post-Soviet states. In this respect the EU is by default a challenge to Russia's approach, undermining the country's capacity to act freely within its domain – a principle that remains of vital importance for the Kremlin. The format of relations that existed between the EU and Russia from 2000 until 2014 proved to be fragile and was ultimately destroyed by the Ukraine crisis, with both sides turning toward more coercive strategies such as economic sanctions.

Earlier this year, Russia's Valdai Club published a [report](#) on Russian-EU relations, the main conclusion being that the country should resist any kind of integration with the EU. Instead, the report advocated a turn toward the East, chiefly China, while cooperating with the EU only where concrete problems exist. Meanwhile the report demanded that the EU should cease its sanctions over Crimea. In essence, the report reads more as a list of preconditions that the EU should fulfil as a prerequisite to establishing stable relations. And as it stands, Russia and the EU are presently further away from achieving sustainable relations than they have been at any point since the end of the Soviet Union.

What we are experiencing is not, however, a ‘new Cold War’, as commentators occasionally refer to it. This is true not only in a strictly technical sense, given the term ‘Cold War’ entailed specific historic factors that are no longer applicable today, but also in the sense that relations between the Soviet Union and the West were actually more sustainable than in the present period, while the behaviour of actors was infinitely more predictable.

There is little reason to expect rapid and drastic changes to this picture in the coming years. The prospects of Russia and the EU coming to an agreement on how both sides can benefit from enhanced relations are extremely slim. One of the factors working against improved relations is the EU’s common ‘neighbourhood’ area and Russia’s present ambitions within it. But another factor is simply the lack of strong incentives on the Russian side. The endless rhetoric about western actions against Russia does not simply serve to entertain the country’s domestic audience, but is an important source of legitimation for Russia’s political regime. Indeed, it is one the Russian political class can ill afford to lose – and it need not be unduly concerned at losing the trust of the West because this trust is already lost.

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