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The European Security Treaty: 'The Moor has done his duty, let him go'?

LSE Ideas

By Dmitry Danilov

The idea of a legally binding European Security Treaty (EST), voiced by Dmitry Medvedev in June 2008 in Berlin during his first European visit as the President of Russia, stirred up a keen interest. He left the West wondering whether he was signalling a change of Putin's foreign policy course. Naturally, there was certain continuity as the new Russian President also emphasised Moscow's well known security concerns and complaints about the West: for example, when he stood for the indivisibility of European security as opposed to a bloc approach. Nevertheless, Medvedev has visibly shifted the accents, showing Moscow's desire and readiness to scale down the degree of contention between Russia and the West, and to look for a cooperative perspective. Moreover, the Kremlin – maybe for the first time over the last years – has outlined a proactive approach and proposed a positive agenda to the West, instead of the previous futile, sharp criticism and of keeping itself in strong opposition to any initiatives.



The war that broke out in the Caucasus in August 2008 aggravated the Russian-Western disaccord to the utmost extent. The conflict paradoxically strengthened the Kremlin's support for a new EST, the [text](#) of which was drafted and published in November 2009. As Russian policy-makers continue to argue, the war clearly proved the European security architecture to be inadequate, and also that it would have never occurred should the EST have existed. Western scepticism towards the Russian proposals, on the contrary, has just increased in the changed geopolitical situation. So, notwithstanding that it was in the interest of both parties to overcome the acute conflict by reaching a legally binding agreement, their views upon the usefulness of a EST have obviously been opposing. Having fully recognized that, Moscow has preferred to refrain from soft-peddling on the issue, which would be an additional irritant. Consequently, the current Russian approach emerged from this understanding that there would not be a constructive Western reaction to their proposals regarding the EST. However, the prospects of a further NATO enlargement to the post-Soviet space are now negligible; so Moscow has no pressing need to use the EST initiative to stand up against that.

Rhetorically keeping the EST as a priority initiative and a profitable opportunity for his country, President Medvedev has declared his belief that it will eventually succeed: 'its time will come sooner or later'. The Kremlin is still arguing that the EST is not a departure from previous Russian policies, but rather an invitation for open and broad discussions on European security problems and how to react to them. The project is not desired to become a stumbling block in relations between Russia and the West, but rather a diplomatic catalyst to improve their climate of cooperation. Moscow has realised that it can succeed in achieving its goals with a positive attitude, without positioning itself as an opponent of the West. Russia considers that the EST's usefulness should be measured by the ongoing positive developments in the European security system, and in particular in the Russian-Western relationship: in Moscow's discourse, these achievements are automatically seen as outcome of the EST initiative. Even if this does not reflect the reality, it serves to provide a useful ideological justification for the efficiency of Russia's policies. The absence of concrete results in promoting the treaty itself does not yet give grounds for any serious domestic criticism towards its political parents; an important outcome, especially in the run-up to the Russian parliamentary and presidential elections in 2011 and 2012. However, tensions could still erupt on the eve of the elections as one argument in a dispute between conservatives and liberals; the recent [Putin-Medvedev](#) collision over the Odyssey Dawn operation in Libya is a clear example of how this might happen.

Indeed, there has been no progress in advancing the EST project after its publication as Medvedev himself has confessed, although with some regret. The energetic politico-diplomatic and expert activity in late 2009 – early 2010 on updating the initiative and making it relevant has gradually faded out. Today this is limited to keeping the project as one of the issues in the European security dialogue.

Other highly significant tasks with more practical implications have come to the forefront, which also seem to be potentially more profitable for Russian-Western relations. Broadly speaking, the first of them is achieving concrete results in resetting the relations with the main Western partners, both states and multilateral institutions like NATO and the EU. It must be noted that during the [Russia-NATO summit](#) in Lisbon there was barely a word spoken about the EST, even by Medvedev at the closing press conference, with the project of a common European missile defence becoming the key issue instead. This and not the

EST is seen by Russian politicians as having real prospects for a breakthrough in the European security arrangements: Dmitry Rogozin, Russia's representative to NATO, defined it as a litmus test in Russia-West relations.

Of course, compromises could also be reached on other essential issues of common interest, in particular on arms control or the fight against terrorism and drug trafficking. Russia does not limit itself to talking about the EST, not only in its dialogue with NATO – where it has considered the project to lie beyond the agenda of the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) –, but also with the European Union. Russia has been pressing the EU to change the Seville formula for common modalities of crisis management, and has emphasised the Merkel-Medvedev '[Meseberg initiative](#)' to establish a EU-Russia Committee on Security and Foreign Affairs. Major international crises such as the instability in North Africa and the Middle East have also contributed to put the EST on the back burner of Russia's politico-diplomatic concerns.

In other words, now the EST is no longer a heated or a topical subject. But does it mean that "The Moor has done his duty – let him go"? There is no definite answer to this question, and Moscow's actual position provides it with a certain degree of flexibility.

In the [presidential address to the Federal Assembly](#) last November, Medvedev said that the results of the Lisbon summit allow for some 'cautious optimism' over the EST. This reflects an understanding of the fact that a new treaty would only be possible in the context of clear progress in the Russian-Western relationship on the overall security policy agenda, both institutional and functional. But the EST initiative is not in itself a sufficient basis for such positive developments. Therefore, Russia might – or not – undertake a new 'cautious' attempt to breathe new life into the project, if it sees a new window of opportunity for dialogue or even negotiations on this subject. Conceptually, the future of the EST is considered to be closely connected to other European security issues, notably the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) and OSCE reform.

Progress on these directions would prevent the Georgian factor from hindering Russian-Western agreements. On the other hand, what if the declared current 'reset' does not bring about tangible results? What if it becomes clear, perhaps at the Defence Ministers' NRC in June, that the common missile defence will not succeed? Then, as Medvedev explained in the same address, 'we will see another escalation of the arms race' and Russia 'will have to make a decision to deploy new attack forces'. Following this logic, the failure of the EST could become a reason to accuse the West of unconstructive and non-cooperative behaviour. So under the worst scenario, should a dispute in Russian-Western relations happen, the EST would become a useful card in Moscow's political game, evolving from a philosophy of cooperation into a destructive *idée fixe*.

To put it in a nutshell, the EST issue cannot be reduced to the question 'to be or not to be?'; this is secondary. The key issues are twofold: what results the 'new rapprochement' between Russia and the West will bring about, and which purposes the EST initiative could serve in that context. The success of the proposed treaty will not, therefore, depend on the prospects of being approved; but rather on the progress of the Russia-EU and Russia-NATO partnerships, the advances in the Corfu process and the Vienna talks, OSCE reform, CFE and missile defence *dénouements*, as well as other arms control and disarmament agreements. The stakes are really high: for Russia, a comprehensive democratic modernisation; for the West, engaging Russia as a strategic partner and even an ally; for the Euro-Atlantic space, eliminating the legacy of the Cold War and consolidating the European security system.

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