

How the evolving international environment affects EU member states' positions toward Russia



EU states have reacted in varying ways to the nerve agent attack against Sergei and Yulia Skripal, with some states expelling Russian diplomats, and others adopting a more cautious response. Drawing on a recent report, [Marco Siddi](#) assesses some of the reasons that underpin the differing approaches of EU states in their relations with Russia.



Credit: kremlin.ru

In the aftermath of the [Skripal case](#), some analysts noted that the stance and response of European member states had been different. While some countries decided to expel a [relatively high](#) number of Russian diplomats, others took a more cautious stance and ten member states did not take any corresponding measures. The reasons for the different reactions are complex, ranging from the size of existing diplomatic representations, each country's bilateral relations with Russia and the UK, and the nature of the Skripal case itself.

All too often, however, debates on EU policy towards Russia end up in the trope of European disunity, or in the tautological assertion that a minimum common denominator should be found by EU member states on Russia. The deeper reasons why EU members sometimes have a different stance vis-à-vis Moscow – besides the mantra of energy dependence and trade ties – tend to be overlooked.

In a [report](#) recently published at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs, I explore together with three other authors the policies and debates concerning Russia in five large EU member states: Germany, France, Italy, Poland and the United Kingdom. We analyse both the long-term factors that permeate national stances towards Russia and key developments from 2014 to 2017. Within this timeframe, numerous events had a significant impact on relations with Russia: the Ukraine crisis, Russia's intervention in the Syrian civil war, accusations of Russian interference in Western elections and Moscow's growing military and economic presence in new theatres, such as the Middle East and North Africa. Other crises involving EU members – such as the refugee crisis, Brexit and terror attacks – had an indirect effect on relations with Russia too, despite the fact that Moscow's policies played a marginal or no role in them.

Our main thesis is that these events and crises affected EU member states differently. Together with deep-rooted diplomatic traditions, this often led to distinct stances towards Moscow. The annexation of Crimea, the destabilisation of the Donbass and the downing of the MH17 flight induced EU members to converge on the policy of sanctions, as they all agreed that Russia had violated essential legal and security principles. Conversely, assessments differed concerning Moscow's role in Syria and, in October 2016, no consensus was found on the imposition of new sanctions related to the Syrian crisis.

Moreover, while the official EU line towards Russia tends to emphasise both sanctions and dialogue, member states have diverging views regarding the scope of dialogue and cooperation. German, French and Italian officials are more inclined to think that relations with Russia can be "compartmentalised", and cooperation can take place in areas such as energy security, trade, international negotiations and cultural exchanges. On the other hand, most of their Polish colleagues would like to keep dialogue to a minimum, as they mostly conceptualise Russia as a threat (in 2017, former Polish foreign minister Witold Waszczykowski defined Russia as "more dangerous than ISIS").

Our findings highlight how member states have diverging assessments of Russia as a strategic actor depending on where their primary security interests and priorities lie. For Eastern members such as Poland, the Ukraine crisis provides the main, if not the only prism through which Russian actorhood is assessed. On the other hand, for countries such as France and Italy, the Mediterranean and the Middle East are also very important contexts. Italian leaders have to reckon with Russia's increasing diplomatic, economic and military presence in the Mediterranean, the area where Italy's main foreign policy interests are at stake. Russia's growing activeness in this region, together with the partial Western disengagement, shaped their thinking that extending sanctions and confrontation to the Mediterranean theatre was not in Rome's interests.

Furthermore, issues such as Russian attempts to interfere in Western elections or political debates should be analysed on a case-to-case basis, rather than through sweeping generalisations. For instance, while Russian officials and state media took a fairly clear stance in the 2017 French presidential elections and in the 'Lisa case' in Germany, based on available evidence the same cannot be said about Italy's 2016 constitutional referendum and 2018 parliamentary elections.

The election of Donald Trump and US policy towards Russia since 2017 have also added a further element of uncertainty to EU positions towards Moscow. On the one hand, some of Trump's statements caused anxiety in some Eastern EU members that have constructed a good part of their foreign and security policy around US defence guarantees. On the other hand, the US's post-2016 Russia policy has caused headaches in Berlin, Paris and other Western EU capitals due to the imposition of unilateral sanctions with an extraterritorial dimension, which may have consequences for European companies.

There are two major prospects and questions for the future. The first one concerns the observation that (real or alleged) Russian hopes of achieving a reset of relations with the West through a change of leadership in the US and Europe were frustrated in the immediate aftermath of Trump's election. Trump's victory did not lead to an improvement in US relations with Moscow, and in Germany and France, the more pro-Russian candidates did not rise to power. This begs the question of whether the Kremlin will seek a *modus vivendi* with leaders such as Merkel and Macron, who have made some overtures to Moscow, or whether relations will keep drifting towards confrontation.

The second, strictly related question pertains to the resolution of the crises that haunt EU-Russia relations, starting with Ukraine. As some analysts [have argued](#), the preconditions might be emerging for constructive negotiations concerning the Donbass conflict. The challenges are daunting and will require extensive and patient diplomacy, but any effort that could help resolve Europe's worst security crisis since the Cold War is worth trying.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.

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