

The Ambiguous Partnership: The European Union and Russia in the Northern Dimension

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Introduction

The end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union have obviously presented both the European Union and Russia with a host of acute challenges, which deal intimately with the very identity of the two actors. In the beginning, however, these processes differed qualitatively as the (then) European Community was engaged in the process of building a European Union whereas Russia was engaged in the rapid dismantling of the old Soviet system. Even today it can be argued that EU is engaged in further integration whereas Russia is struggling with the effects of disintegrative tendencies.¹

What was clear from the start, however, was that Russia wanted to join the ‘community of civilized states’ as soon as possible and the West (especially United States and the European Community) were enthusiastic about guiding and supporting the rapid transformation of the Russian economy and society.² These beliefs were especially strong in Russia where the people were willing to embark on a very radical shock therapy believing that in the face of the growing economic and societal hardships the West would step in and ‘save’ Russia.³

Unfortunately, the Russian transformation has been a failure in two respects: the Russians have failed in transforming their economy and society while the European Union’s at times half-hearted efforts at helping the transformation have led to a situation where Russia has not acquired all the assistance that she would have required or at least would have liked to have. Therefore it is only natural that Russia and its population have started looking for political alternatives to Western models of modernization and integration.

These problems in the EU-Russia relations have resulted in a growing awareness that the ‘romantic period’ between the EU and Russia has perhaps come to an end. This is due to the changing perceptions of the other, which have taken place in both actors. If the ‘romantic period’ of Russian foreign policy came to an end in 1993–1994, then the wake-up call for the European Union was the economic and political crisis of August 1998 and the second war in Chechnya, which started in October 1999 and is still going on to a certain extent at the time of the writing.

This leads us to the main argument of this article that the already fluctuating EU-Russia relations are changing. Although there are some elements of continuity (such as the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement PCA and the consent that Russia cannot become an EU member at least in the foreseeable

future) the 'strategic partnership' between the European Union and Russia is a constantly moving target as the both actors are in a process of radical change.

The change takes place at many levels. Russia is still a long way from completing its transformation and the end-state cannot even be guessed as of yet. The President Vladimir Putin has sought a firm grip on the rudder of the turbulent Russia but the consolidation of the Russian state shall be a long process. So far, this has resulted in a more assertive Russia, which has chosen to be directed especially towards the European Union in its foreign relations. However, the measures that are required in the restructuring of the Russian economy and society might in the future go against the major currents of rule of law, democracy and human rights (i.e. the common European values), which in the eyes of the European Union are considered as being central elements in the EU-Russia relations.

In addition, there is another side to the story. So far the awareness about the European Union has been rather low in Russia. This is slowly changing. However, as this awareness is rising, the elements of change within the European Union are picking up speed. The evolution of the European Security and Defence Identity (ESDI) and its most concrete manifestation to date, the Common European Security and Defence Policy (CESDP) is a process that is perhaps going to change the mental image of the European Union for the worse in Russia.

The main argument of this article is that common European values, the very foundation of the 'strategic partnership' between the European Union and Russia, is untenable. In addition, it could be that the EU emphasis on mutual values is not merely counterproductive but it can also in the long run be dangerous. At the moment the common values are used as double standards in criticizing Russia while the existence of those same values precludes Russia from taking full part in the European project. Thus in the end of the paper it is suggested that instead of abstract notions of values the EU-Russia relations should be based on common interests. Thus the role of the Northern Dimension as a catalyst for the injection of the original functional logic of integration into the EU-Russia relation is envisaged as one possible answer to the current lack of mutually appealing future prospects between the EU and Russia.

The article is divided into three parts. The first part examines the factors, which have relevance to the identity building in Russia whereas the second part takes a comparative glance at the European Union's similar challenges. The final part examines the implications of all this change to the future of EU-Russia relations from the viewpoint of the European North. It is suggested that all the recent turbulence in EU-Russia relations stems partly from basic misunderstandings of the notion of 'strategic partnership'. Finally, the role of the Northern Dimension in injecting the original functionalist logic of integration in giving concrete content to the EU-Russia relations is pondered.

Russia: the agony of (eternal?) transition

As was already remarked, in 1993 the initial 'romantic period' in the Russian foreign policy came to an end. It marked the beginning of a growing search for national interests in Russia. Since then, national interests have once again been the guiding force behind Russia's relations with the West.⁴ Thus, the challenge for the European Union in the coming years is to overcome the growing Russian apprehension of the West as an intruder and competitor in its western borderlands, which only recently were an integral part of the first Russian and then the Soviet Empire.⁵ This refers mainly to NATO expansion but it will be argued later on that it is not entirely unconceivable that also EU might be part of the same category in the future.

The academic debate on Russia's identity is usually focused on the question of whether Russia is a European (thus in dire need of learning from the West and with a lot of catching up to do) or Eurasian power with perhaps a special messianic mission to 'save the Western world from itself'.⁶ Usually the answer given is the non-conclusion that Russia is both European and Asian in essence.

Although these lines of thought have a two-century tradition in Russia, in my opinion these academic deliberations are, however, misguided as the basic decision in Russia has already been made: in terms of history, religion, culture, demography, industrial potential and trade Europe is the frame of reference and the main direction of the Russian activities. Moreover, the reign of Boris Yeltsin and the more recent Putin regime have made it clear that Europe is the main partner of Russia and Europe is the reference group in which Russia wants to belong in.⁷ Regardless of this fundamental choice, there are other questions in Russia's identity, which still have to be answered and many problems that have to be solved before we can argue that Russia has found and is settled with its own identity.

The nature of Russia's borders. This factor has internal and external dimensions. Internally the question is about what are Russia's outer borders. Paradoxically, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union Russia is ethnically more homogeneous than it has ever been in the modern era.⁸ Simultaneously the recent events in Chechnya have shown that Russia has tremendous difficulties in letting go of the minuscule fractions of non-ethnic Russians in the Federation. Of course, the question of Chechnya has other factors than just ethnicity, such as the existing oil pipe infrastructure and strategically important location but there seems to be a strong tendency of frantically holding on to all parts of land in Russia. Basically Russia has to make the decision whether it wants to try to continue being an empire or will it settle into being an 'ordinary' nation-state.

Externally the problem is where do the 'legitimate (security) interests' of Russia stop. The existence of some 25 million ethnic Russians in the territory of the Former Soviet Union (FSU) seems to have blurred the line between domestic and foreign policies in Russia.⁹ In fact, in the early 1990s the Russians came up with the concept of 'near abroad', which has been used in describing the area of the FSU where Russia must be entitled to play a leading role in order to protect and enhance its 'vital national interests'. During the 1990s the vehicle for this domination has been the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). However, the CIS has proved to be a very inefficient tool of controlling the countries of the 'near abroad' and thus more recently Russia has been taking a more assertive stance in its bilateral relations with the countries of the 'near abroad'.¹⁰

The nature of the state in Russia. During the first decade of its short existence the Russian Federation has been a federation in name only. In reality, the centuries old centralized tradition of ruling in Russia was carried over from the Soviet Union. However, Boris Yeltsin was forced to turn to regions in its search for allies in the power struggles of 1989-1993 urging the regions to take as much sovereignty as they can muster in exchange for their support. In addition, the gradual failing of the Russian state during the last decade has led to *de facto* regionalization in Russia where the regions have started having their own external economic relations and even foreign policies.¹¹

In Moscow the whole concept of regionalization has a very negative connotation. It means the erosion of central power and the increased regionalization is feared to result in an increased likelihood of secessionist conflicts especially in the outskirts of the Federation.¹² President Vladimir Putin has sought to stop the trend of regionalization in Russia claiming that it could result in the disintegration of the whole state. Thus, Putin has established regional governors, curbed the powers of regions, and taken a strong stance on any secessionist thoughts in Russia. However, in reality Russia has only one basic choice between autocratic and centralized or democratic and regionalized Russia.

The relationship between national and societal prestige in Russia. Basically, the choice is between a military great power Russia or a welfare state Russia. Traditionally Russia has been a power engaged in a constant search for expansion and new landmasses. The emphasis has been laid on strong military with less concern over the individuals and the well being of the Russian society. However, in the age of globalization the notions of (military) power and strong state have relatively little meaning without the welfare of its citizens. Moreover, this welfare is dependent on being able to be competitive in the global networks where capital, goods and services are marketed. Basically, Russia has to make a decision, which is more important: the welfare of its citizens or the ability to project military power beyond its borders and control and subjugate peoples living in the 'near abroad'.

At the level of official documents Russia seems to subscribe to the notions of comprehensive security where security concerns not only the state but increasingly also society and individuals.¹³ In this respect, the functioning market economy, democracy, human rights, rule of law, freedom of media all get into picture as important aspects of the overall security and welfare of Russia. In reality, the Russian actions seem to be very different. For example, the brutal manner in which, the second war of Chechnya has been fought, shows also blatant disregard for the lives and well being of Russia's own citizens.

The nature of Russia's external orientation. As was mentioned before, during the first years of the Russian Federation there was a clear Western orientation in Moscow's foreign relations. Later on this approach has been challenged and an increasingly assertive Russia has emerged. Russia's relationship with the United States seems to be especially complicated: Although its former super power rival has excelled in all the fields of economy and international relations far better than Russia, the existence of nuclear weapons make the Moscow want to have a special and a rather competitive relationship with Washington.¹⁴

The main theme in Russia's foreign policy seems to be the growing multipolarity of the international system. During the recent years Russia has indeed made efforts at creating special ties with the possible counter poles to US hegemony, such as China and India. At times it has seemed as also European Union might have its role to play in Russia's quest for a multipolar world. Basically Russia's assessment of the importance of the EU is correct as it barely has any other realistic partner comparable to the European Union. In reality, however, Russia's policy is based on a flawed logic as it is very hard to think that Russia could be able to forge a 'strategic partnership' with the European Union in order to topple the US hegemony in the international system of the 21st Century.¹⁵

European Union: an international presence in search of an identity¹⁶

Surprisingly, the European Union is in a similar quest for an identity as Russia with many of the basic choices being very similar:

The outer limits of the European Union's borders. The Cold War and its bipolar overlay served the Western Europeans very well as they could take the concept of Europe as their own property without having to bother to think about where the outer limits of the European integration really lay.¹⁷ This was all to change with the end of the Cold War as the European Union was flooded with membership applications from the Central and Eastern European Countries (CEEC).

Now after a decade later the European Union and its member states have still not been able to decide where the ultimate boundaries of the European integration lie. The Helsinki European Council's decisions in December 1999 on expanding the team of negotiating countries to twelve (+ Turkey waiting in line) does not reflect a true strategic choice in the future composition of the European Union. One 'outsider',

Ukraine, is still pressing hard for eventual membership whereas consensus exists within EU that one of the already accepted 'insiders', Turkey, is not likely to become a member in the foreseeable future. These examples seem to verify the argument put forth by William Wallace in 1992 that the European Union does not have any criteria on how to decide which countries can get in and when the enlargement should ultimately stop.¹⁸

Other question to be solved lies in the nature of the external border of the EU. There the situation seems to be equally blurred. While the European Union calls for open borders with no new divisive lines in Europe, paradoxically, the enlargement is creating a strong 'normative divide'¹⁹. The acceptance of *acquis communautaire* brings a vast army of different standards, norms, rules and directives, which have to be followed to the point also by the new member states. This normative divide is further enhanced by the very real and hard Schengen border, which will make the interaction between, for example, Russia and Lithuania much more difficult. This has an internal repercussion on Russia as well, as the Kaliningrad region will be effectively cut off from the mainland Russia.

The institutional structure of the European Union. The European Union is built on compartmentalized thinking. The artificial pillar structure, which was adopted in the Maastricht Treaty in 1991 was invented in order to guarantee that issue-areas with implications on national sovereignty would stay under national control. This has led to a rather schizophrenic situation in which the three pillars are guided under very different supranational and intergovernmental logics with many repercussions for cohesion and cooperation within the European Union.

These problems have been especially clear in the realm of external relations. The European Union's external relations are formed out of the Community element in which low-politic issues, such as trade and development are dealt with and the intergovernmental common foreign and security policy (CFSP), which deals with the area of 'high politics', including defence.

As a consequence it can be argued that the European Union does have an international presence²⁰ but it does not have a clear cut international identity, which would help it to formulate consistent policies and implement them in a coherent manner. In addition, it seems more and more likely that instead of trying to find out what the common European interests could be, the member states are pushing for increased 'flexibility', which is just a euphemism for watering down the common European construction. This process has been given a significant boost by the negative result of the Danish referendum on euro in September 2000.²¹ Thus the intergovernmental conference (IGC) concluded by the Treaty of Nice in December 2000 was dedicated to increasing the possibilities for 'the core', or 'the pioneer group' to go along on further integration without waiting for others to catch up. Thus for the first time, the European Union might be losing sight of the common goal and the sanctity of the *acquis communautaire*, which should bind all the member states.²²

The choice between 'civilian' and 'military' power Europe. The question of the very nature of the European Union in the international arena is of course tightly linked to the wider issue of the institutional setup of the European project. The member states have since the Amsterdam Treaty in 1997 been engaged in the process of developing the crisis-management capabilities of the European Union. At first the question was of incorporating the rather unambitious Petersberg tasks into the Treaty²³ but in the aftermath of the war on Kosovo the process has picked up speed tremendously and the European Union is actively engaged in developing Common European Security and Defence Policy.

Yet it can be argued that the member states have drawn the wrong conclusions from the traumatic experiences of the 1990s. It is less military crisis management and more pre-emptive civilian crisis

prevention that is now required. Most of the new crisis in the 21st Century stem from ethnic, cultural and economic tensions, which can best be alleviated through a multitude of crisis prevention mechanisms. Thus it is the traditional civilian power Europe, which should step forward and not a military one.²⁴

In lieu of conclusion: the Northern Dimension – towards a functional logic of integration in EU-Russia relations?

Russia and the European Union are both in search of their identities. In addition, there is no reliable way of telling what the end-result is going to be in either case. Yet the two actors are engaged in the process of consolidating a ‘strategic partnership’, which is to be based on common European values shared by both.²⁵ Without scrutinizing the rather problematic concept of universal European values any further, as it is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to stress that it is highly unlikely that the Russia and the EU would perceive the content and meaning of those values in the same way. A telling point is the second war of Chechnya in which the Russians perceived itself as the vanguards of western Christians against the Muslim terrorist threat whereas the European Union was appalled with the use of disproportionate use of force in restoring order to the rebel republic.²⁶

So, what is the ‘real’ nature of the EU-Russia relations? It has been argued here that due to the on-going and radical change in the very identities of the two actors the relationship is ambiguous rather than strategic. Moreover, it is worth asking is it mere ‘cooperation’ or has it evolved into something more, a true ‘partnership’? Yuri Borko has offered a useful distinction between the two concepts arguing that ‘cooperation’ refers to a relationship based on mutual pragmatic interests whereas ‘partnership’ is a political relationship based on at least some common values.²⁷ However, as has been argued in this paper, it is exactly the stress put on values that has led to problems in EU-Russia relations. Thus it might be wiser for the European Union to avoid unnecessary rhetoric about ‘universal European values’ and concentrate on fostering cooperation with Russia on the basis of common interests.

It is indeed in the European North that the European Union and Russia seem to share many common interests. The Northern Dimension initiative, which was born out of the Finnish initiative in 1997, lists dozens of acute challenges but also vast possibilities that the European Union and Russia share in the North.²⁸ These different sectors range from energy cooperation to communicative diseases and environmental concerns.

However, one of the biggest mistakes that the European Union made during the first decade of EU-Russia relations was to misjudge its role in the Russian transformation. It is not up to the European Union to make the major structural changes take place in Russia. Yet the successive statements, reports and action plans even to date still suggest that stable market economy, consolidation of democracy, rule of law and respect for human rights in Russia are all elements that EU can wield active influence on. This is not the case as the EU has hardly any levers on Russia, which could be used in conditioning Russia without seriously and perhaps permanently rupturing the EU-Russia relations. Rather, the European Union can realistically only hope to facilitate positive trends in Russia while seeking to damp the negative ones. Thus, the mindset of the European Union should be geared more from achieving the best to avoiding the worst in Russia.²⁹

The Northern Dimension initiative can be seen as an instrument, which the European Union can wield in order to ‘avoid the worst’ (i.e., for example, a return to authoritarianism, disintegration of the Federation, or complete environmental catastrophe) in Russia. Thus the Northern Dimension can be seen as a ‘return’ to the original functionalistic logic of integration, this time applied in the case of EU-Russia relations. Thus, in creating a more stable, open and friendly relations with Russia, the European Union might be

wise in adopting concepts based on functional, and mainly technical 'low-politics' cooperation, which will result in solving at least some of the common problems in the European North while perhaps resulting in a positive 'spill-over' to new and more sensitive areas of cooperation. Moreover, this kind of cooperation requires constant communication and building of mutual trust, which in turn can lead to diminished expectations of war.³⁰ Thus, the Northern Dimension can prove to be extremely valuable in erasing the mental image of Russia as the 'eternal other' of (Western) Europe and so bringing the two distinctively separate identities into closer cooperation in the European North. It is after all that common values can best be built on the foundation of common interests and cooperation. It is in this respect that Northern Dimension can act as a forum through which Russia can have an equal say on what the common European values might actually entail.

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¹ Medvedev 2000.

² Timmermann 1992, 163.

³ Taylor 1996, 255.

⁴ Roper and van Ham 1997, 504-5.

⁵ Garnett 1998, 91.

⁶ Cf. Taylor 1996.

⁷ This conclusion is supported, for example, by Medvedev 2000 and Shemiatenkov 2000.

⁸ 81.6 per cent of the population in Russia is ethnic Russians compared to the 51.4 per cent in the Soviet Union. Taylor 1996, 252-253.

⁹ Russell 1995, 53.

¹⁰ For an overview of the evolution of the Russian policies towards the 'near abroad' and CIS, cf. Pikayev 1996.

¹¹ Cf. Medvedev 2000, 82.

¹² Tairov 1999, 172-173.

¹³ Sergounin 1999, 179.

¹⁴ Piontkovski 2000.

¹⁵ In fact, there is already evidence that Russia might be realizing the futility of using its relations with the EU as an instrument against the United States. For example, Russia's "Medium-term Strategy for Development of Relations between the Russian Federation and the European Union (2000-2010)" document explicitly states that the development of the EU-Russia relations is not aimed against the cohesion of the Trans-Atlantic link between the European Union and the United States. The document is available at http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/russia/russian_medium_term_strategy/index.htm.

¹⁶ This part has been inspired by Jan Zielonka's excellent book, *Explaining Euro-Paralysis* (1998), especially pages 66-85.

¹⁷ Wallace 1992, 34.

¹⁸ Wallace 1992, 40.

¹⁹ To quote the catchphrase cooked up by the Finnish ministry for foreign affairs.

²⁰ On EU's presence on international arena, cf. Allen and Smith 1991; and especially in Northern Europe see Antola 1999.

²¹ Cf. Peter Norman's analysis of the referendum's impact on the future development of EU in *Financial Times* 30.9.2000.

²² Smith J. 2000, 20.

²³ The Petersberg tasks refer to peacekeeping and peacemaking together with small-scale humanitarian and rescue operations.

²⁴ For arguments in favour of preserving the 'Civilian Power Europe', see Smith K. 2000 and Zielonka 1998, esp. pp. 226-229.

²⁵ For example, both PCA and the CSR are built on the presumption that the common European values are the cornerstone of the 'strategic partnership'.

²⁶ Haukkala 2000.

²⁷ Borko 1997, 481.

²⁸ There are already numerous works, both descriptive and more analytical, written about the subject, cf. Haukkala 1999; Hedegaard and Lindström 1999; Joenniemi 1999; Ojanen 1999; Ojanen 2001.

²⁹ This point has been forcefully made in Breslauer 1995.

³⁰ This mechanism of building a 'security community' has of course been analysed in the classic text of Deutsch et al. 1957.