



MONDODEM

Russia's Stance in a Changing Neighborhood: What Role for the EU?

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Over the last few months, multiple crises have erupted in the former Soviet space as well as renewed tensions between the EU and Russia following Aleksey Navalny's poisoning. In light of these events, the EU needs to address three key questions:

- 1. What does Russia's response to these crises reveal of its policies in the Eastern neighborhood?*
- 2. How might these crises affect EU-Russia relations in the near future?*
- 3. Does this new situation call for an upgrade in the EU strategy of selective engagement?*

1. What does Russia's response to these crises reveal of Russia's policies in the 'Eastern neighborhood'?

Belarus

Since August, the massive protests against electoral fraud and Lukashenko's presidency have put Russia in an uncomfortable position. Russia is currently, and unsurprisingly, supporting Lukashenko, although, in truth, it has no good options to deal with the crisis. With Lukashenko having lost popular legitimacy for good, Russia is aware that support to Lukashenko means risking 'losing' Belarus: first, a candidate representing the oppositions might soon look at the EU. Second, support to Lukashenko, with his systematic repression of protests, is rapidly alienating an important part - and the youngest - of the Belarussian society.

In case Russia decided to push for Lukashenko's departure, it would probably try to replace him with a figure deemed to be loyal to Moscow in the medium term. Protesters would hardly recognize him/her as a legitimate ad interim president. It is difficult to imagine that Russia would ever be ready to overtly support the protesters' demand for new and fair elections: the move would legitimate protests against the authoritarian regime that has the closest links to Russia and, as such, it could be potentially read by the Russian opposition as a 'green light' for domestic protests.

Against this backdrop, Russia has an interest in keeping Lukashenko in power, hoping, first, that protests will wane; second, to manage to a Kremlin-orchestrated power transition. As of today, and in contrast with Ukraine's Euromaidan, the Kremlin has not put forward the idea that protests resulted from a direct interference and organization of 'foreign powers'. Instead, Lavrov has only aired vague concerns "about the attempts to take

advantage of the domestic difficulties being experienced by Belarus and the Belarusian people” – thus avoiding discrediting the causes of unrest.

Nagorno-Karabakh (NKAO)

In the NKAO conflict, Russia had no obvious side to pick, as both countries have been careful not to cross any of Russia’s geopolitical red lines: questioning its sphere of influence in the post-Soviet world, seeking alternative integration paths with the Euroatlantic community, refusing to pay lip service to a common historical heritage. Some Western analysts suggest that Russia is the ultimate winner of the war: it played a pivotal role in the ceasefire negotiations and, while Turkey demonstrated that Moscow can’t unilaterally govern its southern neighborhood, still remains the “indispensable power” in the area.

Moreover, Russia was authorized to send a peacekeeping mission - something that both Armenia and Azerbaijan had been refusing for years - which increases Armenia’s and NKAO’s dependency on Moscow for defense. Reactions to Turkey’s support for Azerbaijan reveal that the Kremlin does not see Erdogan as trying to destabilize Russia’s control over the Caucasus. It did not even outright reject a Turkish proposal to mediate the conflict. Carnegie’s Sinan Ülgenⁱ suggested that Turkey wanted to create a “security condominium” with Russia, substituting the OSCE Minsk group and excluding EU countries. This outcome would not be especially threatening to Moscow, and indeed, the Russian leadership seems to have accepted Ankara’s junior role in the region.

Still, several Russian experts believe that the agreement substantially damages Moscow’s position in the region. High-level EU

diplomats have pointed out that Moscow was extremely vexed by Turkish overtures in the Southern Caucasus, and that the Kremlin was extremely reluctant to engage in negotiations offending its perceived suzerainty in the region. The final arrangement cemented an uneasy collaboration, but for a leadership so used to think of international politics as a zero-sum-game, this can hardly be hailed as a victory.

The fragile peace has stark implications. Russia has not been able to maintain the status quo ante in which Turkey is kept out, Armenia down and Moscow confidently in charge. This may be a sign of weakness, but also a reassessment of Russian priorities in its neighborhood. The Director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, for example, has argued that Russia no longer feels the special responsibility of an empire in extensively policing the post-Soviet space.ⁱⁱ It is however questionable whether the Kremlin will be able to pursue a more limited agenda, focused on immediate Russian interests, while casting a doubt on its resolve to intervene against any challenge to the status quo.

Poisoning of Alexey Navalny

The popular opposition figure Aleksey Navalny was poisoned while he was campaigning in Tomsk for the annual round of Russian regional elections. It is an oversimplification to explain his poisoning in August with the Kremlin’s ‘fear’ that the Belarussian protests might spark protests in Russia. Instead, domestic dynamics seem to have been played a key role.

Navalny’s ‘smart strategy’ to win seats in the local legislative assemblies proved successful, and it could increasingly threaten United Russia’s monopoly of local politics. Tensions and central control over society will

probably grow as soon as we approach to next year legislative elections in September 2021. The Russian presidential administration aims indeed at obtaining a landslide victory, notwithstanding the awareness that support to United Russia had been steadily decreasing, particularly since the 2018 pension reform. The attack gave Navalny unprecedented popularity, in Russia, too, although it did not lead to protests.

2. How might these crises affect EU-Russia relations?

Belarus

The international community's call for a national dialogue and a negotiated way out of the crisis clashes with the irreconcilable positions held by Lukashenka and the opposition regarding the country's near future. The development of the Ukraine conflict is a threatening precedent. Since the outbreak of protests in Belarus, the EU insisted on the purely 'internal' dynamics of the conflict in order not to 'geopoliticize' the conflict. However, after Moscow took Lukashenko's side, it will be difficult, in practice, to keep Belarus out of a 'geopolitical' struggle between the EU and Russia. Additionally, we need to consider the so-called "sanctions' dilemma": they might be an effective tool to put pressure on the Lukashenko's inner circle, but they risk effectively cutting the EU out of the country should Lukashenko be able to stay in power more than expected, leaving Russia free to influence the government.

Nagorno-Karabakh

In NKAO, peace has not been achieved. The issue at the heart of the conflict is still open. Azeris now will be tempted to wipe the Armenian enclave out once and for all, while

revanchist sentiment in Armenia can only increase. The OSCE has been downgraded from a high-level forum for East-West dialogue to a technical provider of ceasefire observers and election experts. As such, it's the EU that will need to step up its efforts towards peacebuilding - knowing well there's little we can do militarily.

It is fundamental Member States avoid profiting from Azerbaijan's strengthened position by pursuing additional trade partnerships, as the one signed by Italy in January. The Azeri gambit can be partially explained by the willingness of European countries to turn a blind eye to the pre-2020 stalemate, and new trade deals would send the message that EU commitment to the Madrid process was, after all, not as binding as we thought. We need to take a special interest in Armenia, a weakened republic that is now more than ever caught between rock (Turkey) and a hard place (Russia) and therefore runs the risk of descending into political unrest over the lost war. Civil society support, economic and humanitarian aid are crucial to contain the political turbulences, as the risk of putsch and revolts ahead of next year's constitutional referendum rises.

Wider EU-Russia Relations

In the wider context of EU-Russia relations, these developments indicate that Moscow may have moved beyond the aggressive policy of Putin's third term. In fact, Russia seems to be managing the transition from a strategy of assertive neighborhood policing to one of preservation. It seems to have grown more flexible towards changes in the post-Soviet status quo, as long as it does not challenge Russia's primacy. The Kremlin may have accepted that "to ensure that nothing changes, it is necessary for everything to change". Where the EU differs from Russia –

and where we believe it can truly make a difference – is that the collapse of the old autocratic order Moscow had actively supported in Belarus and the Southern Caucasus can indeed lead to sustainable, long-term peace. Even if the EU is limited in what it can do under current circumstances, a window of opportunity may be opening for the region to move towards democratic change.

3. Does this new situation call for an upgrade in the EU strategy of selective engagement?

Russia continues to play a key role in the eastern neighborhood. However, its “governance” of the region is beginning to atrophy. The Kremlin’s role as a mediator in the NKAO conflict shows once more that Moscow tends to obtain diplomatic successes in the short term (see Syria, too) but lacks a long-term strategy of conflict management. Russian red lines are shifting – doubts on where they now lay will likely increase miscalculations on the part of rising actors. In NKAO, Russia has an interest in keeping the conflict ‘frozen’ to continue playing a pivotal role. Contrary to the Caucasus region, Moldova, and Ukraine, in Belarus a ‘frozen conflict’ scenario along ethnic lines has to be excluded. As such, the stake of who will govern Belarus is even greater.

It is doubtful that Europe will be able to develop a constructive partnership with Russia anytime soon. On the other hand, Europe needs to find a way to hibernate ties to Russia for when the domestic situation will become more favorable, well-knowing that even timid liberalization is unlikely to unfold any time soon. This is the key to the five “Mogherini principles” at the core of selective engagement – the time has now come to fully implement them.

Our policy should follow a double track of targeted pressure and resilience-building. As social democrats, these measures should express our values and priority of social justice and freedom, supporting the Russian people when basic human rights are violated.

A policy of targeted pressure requires to:

- *fight tax evasion, corruption and organized crime, which often flows through the European financial infrastructure;*
- *reinforce people-to-people exchange, especially for civil society actors such as trade unions, environmental organizations and historical memory groups;*
- *relax visa requirements for young people under 29 and cater to specific professional categories like IT experts;*
- *foster university exchange programs between EU members states and Russia;*
- *develop a network supporting and protecting opposition politicians exiled in Europe, as well as post-Soviet diaspora communities. They are often easy prey to the long arm of Russian security services;*
- *any discussion on the relationship between NATO and EU Defense needs to include our Eastern European colleagues. The German debate on nuclear sharing did significant damage to our perceived will to take their preoccupations seriously.*

Resilience building, on the other end, means to smartly employ current capabilities of the EU:

- *Deploy the underused EU Battlegroups in the NATO forward enhanced presence (eFP) in the Baltic States. Because NATO troops are already present, it would not significantly tip the balance of power, while also maintaining a tripwire force.*
- *Step up EU efforts in the realm of Security Sector Reform (SSR) and training missions*

in the Neighborhood. The fact that “soft” military support has been mainly provided by NATO has limited the constructive role of the EU.

- *The Green New Deal could finally serve as a developmental model for the struggling economies of the region. Armenia, in particular, would greatly benefit from a partnership putting sustainable industrialization and green energy at the center of its modernization efforts.*

Only with these preconditions will we be able to turn selective engagement in an approach capable of not only de-escalating, but also preventing crises in the shared neighborhood. We need to achieve a level of credibility and attractiveness for the nations of the post-Soviet area.

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ⁱ Gabuev et al., “Tipping Point in the Karabakh Crisis: What Next?”. Carnegie Moscow, 15.10.2020.

ⁱⁱ Trenin, “Moscow’s New Rules”, Carnegie Moscow, 12.11.2020