
A new cold war : We're yet to adjust to the old one ending

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Bad-tempered relations between Russia and the EU cannot be allowed to stymie a new partnership deal: both sides need it police avoided running amok. The result was that stereotypes of Russia as a harsh forbidding place lost another chunk of credibility, and its quest to be treated as a "normal" country on the post-cold war stage advanced a further step.

It has been a bumpy journey since the Soviet Union ended. The western euphoria of the 1990s, when Russia seemed to have no major disagreements with western policy, gave way to disappointment when Vladimir Putin took a less compliant international line - especially in his second term - while also curbing some of his compatriots' new-found democratic freedoms.

Now we are in a time of unprecedented EU uncertainty over Russia, as arguments rage over whether to engage more deeply with an increasingly independent and prosperous neighbour. The EU's 10-year Partnership and Co-operation Agreement with Russia expired last year, and efforts to renew it have run into serious problems.

One reason is that the EU is bigger than it was in 1997. The entry of new members who used to be locked into alliance with the Soviet Union or, in the case of the Baltic states, were Soviet republics, has added a deep vein of historical tension. Last year it was Poland that was blocking the EU's search for consensus on a negotiating mandate with Russia. This year it has been Lithuania.

Another reason is that Russia wants a new partnership agreement to have a very different tone. It felt the last one's language about Russia and the EU sharing "common European values" was used as a stick. As Professor Margot Light of the London School of Economics puts it: "Russian officials believe these values are determined exclusively in the EU and are simply proclaimed by EU officials for Russia to adopt." Now Russia prefers the concept of sharing interests.

On Monday, the EU's foreign ministers will make a new effort to agree a mandate. It will be nowhere near as exciting a struggle as the Luzhniki match, or indeed the one a week earlier, when Russians cheered Zenit St Petersburg in winning the Uefa Cup. But it does matter, since the EU is Russia's biggest trading partner, and Russia is Europe's major energy supplier.

The issues are well aired in a report published yesterday by the House of Lords' European Union committee. They took evidence from an array of former British ambassadors to Moscow as well as EU officials and independent experts.

The voice of political realism rings through the report, a world away from the emotional and ideological tone of the "new" Europeans from central and eastern Europe as well as of the Bush administration towards Russia.

EU-Russia relations are said to be going through a "bad-tempered phase" - a point that could be made even more sharply about Anglo-Russian relations in the wake of the Litvinenko and Lugovoi affairs. But both sides are advised to see things in a long-term perspective. Far from being in a "new cold war", neither the EU nor Russia has yet adjusted to the end of the old one

and the past two decades' turmoil of newly released post-Soviet nationalisms.

In his evidence Sir Roderick Lyne, a former British ambassador, rejected the idea of "neo-containment" as well as efforts to isolate Russia or kick it out of the G8. Pleading for patience, he argued that the 1990s aspiration for "strategic partnership" between the EU and Russia should be put in cold storage: "It's a sensible long-term objective and its time will come again." Gunnar Wiegand, head of the Russia section in the European commission, said that dialogue over human rights should not become a lecture. "We should not forget that the majority of our member states - and this I can say as a German - are countries that have come out of authoritarianism themselves, be it of the left or right, and many are very young democracies," he warned.

The House of Lords' report strongly makes the point that the 1990s were a time of mass impoverishment for Russians, and the imposition of western-style democracy is associated with that in many Russians' minds. Obliquely but unmistakably, it also hints at the double standards in European and US policy. Its conclusion is that the EU should speak out on human rights in Russia "from time to time", but consider every critical statement carefully before issuing it.

Some, particularly in central Europe, will treat the report with disdain.

Memories of Russia are negative and the wounds of history have not yet healed.

The EU's need for unanimity gives any one of its 27 members a right of veto, so the debate over how to treat Russia only highlights the difficulty of achieving consensus within the EU. The Russians are no different from the Americans in wanting a strong European voice, provided it agrees with their own view.

If not, they are happy to work with member states bilaterally. Having an EU president (to be chosen in the autumn) may make it marginally easier to achieve consensus on difficult issues, but I would not bank on it.

On the Russian side, having a new president will also not change much. The new set-up of a powerful prime minister Putin and a novice President Medvedev will take several months to bed down. Kremlinology is back in vogue as analysts pick over the names, titles and status of Putin's cabinet ministers and Medvedev's advisers; but the trend of Russian domestic and foreign policy will not alter. Those who see Medvedev as more "liberal" than Putin will be disappointed.

Could the EU and Russia survive the failure to sign a new partnership agreement? Absolutely. The old one has been extended for a year, and could be renewed again. Or it could lapse, unmourned. The two sides have already agreed on a series of "roadmaps" which outline cooperation in various "common spaces" - on economics, security and justice, and research and education. It is easy to sneer at this as Eurocratic gobbledygook and word games, as though giving a lump of issues a label amounts to actual progress.

But the reality is that interaction between Russia and the EU is bound to develop in all these areas, however they are labelled. The main need is to lower expectations and prevent the inevitable short-term crises and disputes from bringing down the house.

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