

Defining Factors in EU-Russian Relations

George Voskopoulos, Ph.D.

Abstract: *EU-Russian relations have been a defining parameter of European security during the post-Cold War era. The axis of cooperation has been defined not only by EU-Russian common goals but also the ability of the US to derail this emerging partnership. The recent crisis in Georgia has illustrated Russia's determination to defend its national interests.*

Keywords: *EU-Russian relations, Russian foreign policy, American-Russian relations, European security.*

Russia's policy in the post-Cold War era has become Europe-oriented, showing that co-operation with the EU has become a strategic priority for Moscow. The prerequisites for a stable relationship based on mutual interests can be epitomized as follows [1].

First, inclusion in the emerging world order and acknowledgment of Russian interest in European periphery. Under this spectrum Russia may not be considered a threat to the US and the EU, unless strategic isolation activates Russian militaristic bravado and leads Moscow to the adoption of zero-sum policies. A policy that may lead to Russia's isolation will not be welcome by EU states that have enhanced their relations with Moscow. Russia constitutes not only the main parameter of European security but also a strategic trade and energy partner for the EU, a fact pinpointed ever since the 10th EU-Russian Summit of November 2002.

Second, the ability of the EU to accommodate Russian worries about NATO expansion and American policy at dealing with Moscow as a de facto threat to European security. An American policy that jeopardises EU-Russian relations and causes security dilemmas on the part of Russia might seriously affect European energy security. In the long run Russia may turn into an incompatibility factor between the EU and the US. The recent initiative of the French presidency of the EU concerning the crisis in Georgia has made evident that Europe has lowered its voice and seeks ways to accommodate its strategic relation with Russia.

Third, the inclusion of Russia in the ad hoc alliance against terrorism implies a desired strategy on the part of the US. In the past President Putin put emphasis on the common aim of Washington and Moscow to deal with fundamentalists. The fact that both the US and Russia have been the targets of terrorists has brought the two countries together.

However two factors constitute a threat to EU-Russian relations. The first is American strategy of primacy and its externalization in the form of aggressive realism as described by John Mearsheimer [2]. Any overt or covert effort to overlay Russian interests in the Caucasus will be rejected by Moscow that desires to retain certain privileges in terms of its regional role. This policy is a risky choice in terms of European energy security. According to the former head of the International Energy Agency (IEA), Claude Mandil, *"Europe is playing an ineffectual double game with Russia and must cease if it wants to better diversify its energy sources...On the one hand we are horrified that there will be a shortage of Russian gas and, on the other hand, we are verbally aggressive with Russia...Let's be flexible...Let's stop provoking Russian sovereignty in the belief that we can dictate Russian behaviour on energy."* [3].

The EU is facing a strategic multidimensional dilemma. That is to ensure regular flow of oil and gas to Europe, safeguard its strategic relationship with Moscow and at the same time influence American foreign policy vis-à-vis Russia. This is by no means an easy task. The importance of Russia as an energy supplier to Western European allies cannot be ontologically and strategically questioned. Decisions to be made will influence European energy security as well as Russia's role in world politics and its international behaviour. A cost-gain ratio analysis illustrates that Russia matters to Europeans a lot more than it does

to the Americans. Under this spectrum, European and American strategic choices bear crucial implications for the balance and degree of co-operation amongst the EU, the US and Russia.

Eventually Russia may become a major point of divergence between the US and the EU, particularly after the EU-Russian rapprochement of the last years. The strategic interaction amongst the US, the EU and Russia and the asymmetric importance of Russia vis-à-vis the EU and the US, in terms of energy security, imposes, in the long-term, the adoption of compromising policies. The American stance was articulated in the recent past by Vice President Dick Cheney who suggested that, "Russia was backsliding on democracy and using its energy resources as tools of intimidation or blackmail" [4]. It is clear that Russian energy expansion is considered a threat to the established world order and American effort to prevent the emergence of a multipolar world.

The above evaluative judgment of American leadership has led to a number of cost-ineffective policies. As suggested, "Cheney and other leading U.S. officials genuinely believe that the United States can gain support for its policies by abusing and threatening other major states". If so, this reflects not only a Neanderthal approach to diplomacy, but a failure to grasp the damage to American power from the Iraq debacle, and the increased strength and confidence of Russia, China and other countries" [5].

The Georgian crisis along with American reaction to Moscow's effort to define the margins of NATO's expansion constitutes a battle between those who wish to support a unipolar world and those who aim at providing a systemic balance in world politics. In effect Russian policy bears features of a defensive Realism as defined by Kenneth Waltz, meaning an effort to preserve a zone of vital interests. Conventional wisdom analyses Russian foreign policy through the actual democratic governance deficit of the Russian political system and treats Moscow more or less as a pariah state [6].

In effect, treating Russia as a minor state constitutes an actual threat to European security, a challenge to the EU and its ability to provide a stable environment for development. Moscow has made clear that it is part of the geopolitical equation and clearly rejects any concept of American primacy. In 2005 V. Putin addressed Russians and pointed out emphatically that "the collapse of the Soviet Union was one of the greatest geopolitical catastrophes of the 20th century" [7].

The end of the Cold War was eventually a major upset in the overall balance of power of the bipolar system and allowed the US to gradually exercise a strategy of primacy. Early post-Cold War American policy was cautious and aimed at not isolating Russia. It was introduced in the late 1980s with President Bush's strategic decision not to treat the defeated superpower and its most powerful successor, Russia, as a de facto failed opponent. The Clinton administration adopted a similar constructive policy. President Clinton elevated "Russia's internal transformation to first place in American global agenda". American strategy during the G. Bush and B. Clinton administrations illustrated a degree of continuity for support towards Russia, a fact that undeniably assisted Moscow in finding a new constructive role in world politics.

On their part Europeans supported the policy of integrating Russia into European institutions, although they acknowledged tangible deficiencies in the human rights field and democratic operation of the Russian political system. This was rather an imposed "flexibility" based on the need not to isolate Moscow and turn it into a potential or actual threat to European energy security. It appeared that Russia was going to be invited to be part of the new security architecture in Europe through a number of agreements with the EU.

Yet, American insistence on taking measures considered by Moscow a threat to its security temporarily derailed EU-Russian relations. The biggest issue was that of Ukraine's NATO membership, a policy that assisted the voice of hardliners in Moscow. Actually this very policy supports the choices of those in Russia who would like to Sovietize Russian foreign policy again. The 2006 Russian-Ukraine crisis over gas supplies sent a message to

everyone and defined the red line of Russian diplomacy. Moscow blamed Kiev and suggested that it *"counts on Ukraine to guarantee the stable supply of Russian gas to European countries in accordance with international obligations fixed in the European Energy Charter"* [8].

The settlement of the Kaliningrad issue in 2002 appeared a breakthrough in EU-Russian relations. Moreover, the EU mass enlargement wave in 2004 brought Brussels and Moscow closer. This policy provided new opportunities but needed to be dealt with within the institutional limitations of EU-Russian relations and American policy vis-à-vis Moscow. Russian foreign policy supported by energy expansion in south-eastern Europe brought the country back to the international area, a fact that affected the orientation of the EU's Security and Defence Policy [9], built, inter alia, on the need to establish institutional communications channels with Russia and take advantage of the trade partnership already inaugurated in the 1990s [10].

The great strategic issue in EU-Russian relations centres around how to manage the common space [11]. Although there have not been spectacular results, the energy and trade fields have provided ample space for cooperation. As a result, EU trade with Russia doubled in the 2000-2006 period [12]. From Moscow's perspective the most difficult issue has been that of looking at its relations with the EU under the impact of EU-US relations. The Russian perception of Europe being a junior partner of the US has affected Moscow's policies [13]. This created a rather cautious predisposition despite the fact that leaders in Moscow saw the possibility of the EU distancing itself from American initiatives through NATO. A powerful point of convergence between Brussels and Moscow in the new millennium has been their verbal, at least, determination to support international institutions, namely the EU. This particular choice has been inconsistent with American unilateralism, as expressed in the case of Kosovo and Iraq.

On the part of Russia this has been a turning point, at least in terms of semantics. Russian support for a multilateral world based on UN dictates has not been a noble or altruistic choice but a necessity stemming from the multidimensional power disposed by the US. Russian policy in the case of the 1999 Kosovo crisis has been clear in terms of aims and messages to be conveyed to euro-atlantic partners [14]. It was a reminder that the new world order should be constructed with the aim of establishing a "consensual international system".

Despite American non-facilitating policy, the EU recognised the importance of building a stable strategic relationship with Russia. In 2006 Commissioner for External Relations and Neighbourhood Policy, Benita Ferrero-Waldner stated that *"Russia is a strategic partner for the EU and we share many areas of interest and inter-dependence; it is important that these should be reflected in the new Agreement. There are both opportunities and challenges on which we need to work together to promote prosperity, peace and security on the European continent. Finally it is of great importance that the mutual interest we have in energy cooperation should be expressed in concrete terms in the new Agreement"*. [15]. This has been part of the efforts to streamline an institutional process of setting a strategic partnership with Russia.

The Slovenian presidency took another initiative in furthering EU-Russian relations. The aim was *"to conclude a strategic agreement that will provide a comprehensive framework for EU/Russia relations for the foreseeable future and help to develop the potential of our relationship. It should provide for a strengthened legal basis and legally binding commitments covering all main areas of the relationship, as included in the four EU/Russia common spaces and their road maps agreed at the Moscow Summit in May 2005"* [16]. It was another step towards enhancing the common European economic space and "building blocks for sustained economic growth".

In the September 1st 2008 meeting of the European Council EU leaders expressed their worries about the situation in Caucasus and the future of EU-Russian relations, yet, they did not take measures against Russia. It was a prudent policy reflecting European

priorities, the need not to isolate Russia and the need to find means to support Georgia in a way that does not affect further relations with Moscow [17]. EU leaders evaluated Russia's reaction in Georgia as "disproportionate" thus, following US evaluative judgement.

Yet, at this point the EU's priority should be built on how to construct European security with Russia and not against Russia. Russia's future is a matter of strategic speculation but European strategy could provide carrots to Moscow and turn this speculation into a rational choice for both the EU and Russia. However, the Atlantic factor of EU-Russia relation is of tantamount importance for the evolution of bilateral relations between Brussels and Moscow. At the core of the problem lies the [mis]perception of Russian leadership that NATO enlargement constitutes a challenge to its security and role in Eurasia. This applies to EU enlargement. Yet, Brussels has made efforts to pinpoint that enlargement meant to bring Russia and the EU closer and not create "dividing lines" [18]. This can only materialize if the EU adopts a cautious policy vis-à-vis Moscow and turns it into a positive parameter of the European security equation.

REFERENCES

- [1] Voskopoulos George, *U.S., "Terrorism and International Security"*, *Demokratizatsiya*, Washington D.C., 2003.
- [2] John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, W. W. Norton, New York, 2003.
- [3] "Leave Russia alone, energy expert says", <http://www.earthtimes.org/articles/show/217003.leave-russia-alone-energy-expert-says.html>
- [4] «Putin harnessing Russia's energy», *International Herald Tribune*, 13-7-2006.
- [5] Anatol Lieven, "Putin versus Cheney", *International Herald Tribune*, 11-5-2006.
- [6] Michael McFaul and Kathryn Stoner-Weiss, "The Myth of the Authoritarian Model How Putin's Crackdown Holds Russia Back", *Foreign Affairs*, January / February 2008.
- [7] "Russia's gas weapon", *International Herald Tribune*, 21-12-2005.
- [8] "Moscow cuts flow of gas to Ukraine", *The New York Times*, 2-1-2006
- [9] Dov Lunc (ed.), "EU-Russia Security Dimensions", Institute for Security Studies, Occasional Papers, N. 46, July 2003.
- [10] Dmitriy Danilov and Stephan De Spiegeleire, "From Decoupling to Recoupling, Russia and Western Europe: a new security relationship?", *Chaillot Paper 31*, April 1998.
- [11] "Partnerships for Effective Multiculturalism", *Chaillot Paper 109*, Institute for Security Studies, May 2008.
- [12] Sabine Fischer, "The EU and Russia: A contested partnership", *Chaillot Paper 109*, *ibid*, p. 115.
- [13] "Putin Lashes Out At U.S. and E.U.", *Washington Post*, December 24, 2004.
- [14] Charlotte Wagnsson, "Developing the Moral Arguments: Russian Rhetorical Strategies on Security post-Kosovo", Occasional Papers N. 28, 1998.
- [15] IP/06/910 Brussels, 3 July 2006, European Commission approves terms for negotiating new EU-Russia agreement.
- [16] IX. Joint Statement of the EU-Russia Summit on the Launch of Negotiations for a new EU-Russia Agreement, 27-6-2008.
- [17] Conseil De L'Union Européenne, Bruxelles, 1-9-2008, 12594/08.
- [18] 12th EU-Russia Summit Joint Statement, Rome, 13990/03, 6-11-2003

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Assistant Professor George Voskopoulos, PhD, Department of International and European Studies, University of Macedonia, Thessaloniki, Greece, Phone: +2310 891 445, E-mail: gvoskop@uom.gr

The paper is refereed.