EU – Russia: Making up for Security Cooperation Shortfall

Dmitry DANILOV

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The former axiomatic EU – Russia formula “we are doomed to cooperation”, which was based on a solid array of trade and economic cooperation, significant mutual interests and proximity of positions on many international security and crisis management issues, did not stand the test of the Ukrainian crisis in 2014. The “common spaces” concept “from Lisbon to Vladivostok” failed, as well as the “almost completed” new basic EU - Russia agreement. The EU faced serious obstacles to its “soft” expansion, which hit the Russian space of “special interests”. For the European Union Russia has turned from a strategic partner into a strategic challenge and a threat to European security order. The systematic political dialogue and sectoral cooperation have been dismantled and replaced by relationship of sanctions.

Revised F&S Concepts: lack of strategic vision

Since the EU – Russia wind-up summit in January 2014, which was held in a reduced format, relations between the parties still remain uncertain. There is no strategic vision of relationship; pragmatic cooperation is repressed by geopolitical paradigm of mutual deterrence and sanctions. Adaptive responses to the changed political realities and international dynamics prevail over strategic thinking and perspective.

The EU’s Global Strategy (EUGS) reflects perception of Russia as a “revisionist power”, but does not represent a strategy towards Russia. Mogherini’s “five guiding principles”¹ are rather an attempt to find an internal balance within the Euro-

pean Union, than a conceptual framework for relations with Russia. Brussels reduces opportunities of rethinking relations with Russia to the Minsk agreements eventuality, which implementation is seen as Russia's primarily responsibility in the settlement of the Ukrainian conflict. Yet, Moscow does not consider itself a party to the conflict and therefore cannot agree with either the European approach to its settlement or the EU's conditionality towards Russia.

The Russia’s Foreign Policy Concept approved by President Vladimir Putin on 30 November 2016, considers the “systemic problems in the Euro-Atlantic region” and a serious crisis in Russian-Western relations through a prism of geopolitical expansion pursued by NATO and EU, and “their refusal to begin implementation of political statements regarding the creation of a common European security and cooperation framework”. But Moscow, despite the radical revision of the EU’s line towards Russia, answers it asymmetrically, keeps calling the EU “an important trade and economic and foreign policy partner”\(^1\). However, in Russia there is no clear vision of how to build relations with the “important partner” – the European Union, whose members have united around a common platform of deterring Russia to counter its “aggressive actions” and “a growingly assertive military posture”\(^2\).

The European response to Russia's attempts to gradually stabilise relations was recognition that without Moscow it is impossible to solve the most important international problems, among them crisis management, and thus channels for dialogue (diplomacy) are needed, even if to just discuss disagreements. Yet, in this case, Moscow is no longer treated as a difficult partner, but rather as an inevitable neighbour (from whom it is impossible to escape to another planet), and this clearly reduces the profile of “meaningful dialogue” and cooperation potential. But at

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least it doesn't close the perspective and, on the contrary, leaves windows of opportunities re-opened. As the EUGS postulates, “the EU and Russia are interdependent. We will therefore engage Russia to discuss disagreements and cooperate if and when our interests overlap”\(^1\).

Such windows of opportunities, along with the objective interest of the EU and the most of its Member States to normalise and stabilise mutual cooperation, allow to consider a positive perspective of relations, in spite of tough disputes. In fact, the strategic choice comes down to two optional scenarios – escalation of confrontation or restoration of comprehensive cooperation. And this is a matter not of the “attribution” of responsible for the current crisis, but rather of ensuring that national and collective strategies are focused on the preservation and enhancing a Common Europe as an indispensable and fundamental joint goal. There has happened a significant distortion towards mutual deterrence in Europe, and the conflicting parties keep on investing significant political and material resources in “anger management”. However maintaining stability and risk reduction should be not only included in the current confrontational agenda, but serve to restore common European partnership. In other words, even if Russia and the EU have no longer an opportunity to return to “the common spaces”, it is necessary to declare and follow the strategic vision of a common Europe as a constant unifying objective. In practical terms, this should contribute to the restoration of a systemic political and security dialogue at all international fora, platforms and levels, notably EU – Russia, NATO – Russia Council (NRC), OSCE, crisis management multilateral negotiations formats.

**Towards F&S political dialogue: Russia’s standpoint**

Restoring of a systemic dialogue between Russia and the West should become a matter of high priority. Both sides agree that in modern conditions the return to “business as usual” is impossible. However, even mutual deterrence and challenges require special attention to arrange strategic communications. The fragmented political dialogue may turn into multiplication of mutual risks and threats, military and political ones *inter alia*, and thus strengthen confrontational trends. The European Union has frozen the structured political dialogue with Russia under the

Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA). NATO–Russia Council’s activities have been decreased to a minimized level of political contacts; the OSCE degrades as a cooperative all-European security platform (as well as the Council of Europe) and becomes a hostage of Russian-Western contradictions and disagreements, turning into arena of political struggle.

At the same time, despite the declared Euro-Atlantic solidarity, there is rather no conceptual political unity with regard to future relations with Russia. Having proposed a “principled” selective engagement, the European Council blocked the structured political dialogue with Moscow. However, the same Member States, on the contrary, support within NATO a double-track approach to Russia, i.e. deterrence + political dialogue, but refuse any practical cooperation through NRC. This, in turn, reinforces strategic imbalances in national foreign policies’, especially in security dimension. Also incoherent national security and defence policies hamper the EU/NATO Member States to develop bi-lateral relations with Russia. The increased challenges in ensuring transatlantic balances, manifested differences between the US administration and European allies, as well as within both the EU and NATO complicate a search of common lines in relations with Russia. In this regard, Moscow, on the one hand, and the Euro-Atlantic community, on the other, face the Russia-West deficit of strategic communications and security dialogue.

From the Russian viewpoint, it seems vital to correct the institutional Euro-Atlantic asymmetry: to unblock practical cooperation in the NRC and thereby give a real content to NATO-Russia political dialogue; on the EU–Russia level to agree on prospective agenda of cooperation (even in the selective engagement format) by restoring systematic political dialogue. However, until now, this concept of a balanced Euro-Atlantic policy towards Russia is not perceived in the West as the core line of practical approach. The EU and NATO have been jointly searching consolidated answers to a “Russian challenge” and forging enhanced partnership mechanisms, where in fact the Russian agenda is considered within the paradigm of deterrence.

Nevertheless, for Moscow in its relations with the EU it is important not to miss a common European perspective and to focus the dialogue in this direction, notwithstanding current political obstacles. At a time when mutual deterrence trajectory limits possibilities of bilateral relations, Russia appeals to “harmonising and
aligning interests of European and Eurasian integration processes, which is expected to prevent the emergence of dividing lines on the European continent. This creates both prospects and challenges.

The positive prospects rest in shaping strategic vision of the Common Eurasian space, where practical cooperation should be enhanced. The EU and Russia could harmonise their multi-faced interests in Asia to strengthen their relations with the regional powers, and, most importantly, with China, within the EU – Russia cooperation conceptual framework. The EU Strategy for Central Asia, which is under development, seems to increases its motivations to reconcile activities with Russia, and Brussels inserted Central Asia in its “five guiding principles” of relations and selective engagement with Russia.

The difficulties relate to the complexity of reconciling the interests of Russia and the EU on the post-Soviet space, and especially in Central Asia, where the EU's position is uncertain and relatively weak. Moscow is hardly inclined to view Central Asia as a space of agreements with the European Union in the context of “selective” relations. On the other hand, the EAEU is in the process of taking shape, and this limits its potential interaction with the EU. In addition, the eventual cooperation of the two unions in any case would be overshadowed by the Russian-European differences at the contesting neighbourhood. Also the lack of S&D dimension in the EAEU, by definition, does not allow Russia and the EU to channel their security relations into this institutional framework.

Of course, the clashes of interests and strategic competition will continue to press over Russia-EU relations in the post-Soviet space. However, the parties should emphasize both the common Europe goals they are committed to, and the opportunities of potential cooperation between two integration organisations – the EU and the EAEU. Anyway, the Russia – EU dialogue on cooperation in the post-Soviet space and in the Central Asia cannot be held as “selective”, it can take place only in the general context of Russian-European relations.

Similarly, both parties will inevitably consider the EU – Russia dialogue and interplay in the CIS, including on so-called frozen conflicts, through the paradigm of mutual deterrence and conflict of interests in the post-Soviet space. This, in turn, complicates progress in the settlement of conflicts within the joint negotiation formats, where Russia and the EU participate (5+2, the OSCE Minsk group, the Normandy format, etc.).

**The changing EU's face and CFDP ambitions**

Not only Russia is seen differently in the EU after 2014, but also the EU in Russia. Moscow ceased to perceive the European Union as a dominant of its “European choice”, declared by Putin at the turn of the 2000s. Even before the Ukrainian crisis, Moscow, when negotiating with the EU, emphasized that Russia is an integral part of Europe, and the European Union should not monopolize European perspective, in particular, when it appeals to common democratic values. The normative expansion of the European Union faced Russian wall – Moscow insisted on the mutual legal and administrative harmonisation in the framework of the common spaces. The Eastern partnership policy was interpreted as the EU’s intrusion into the post-Soviet space, without taking into consideration the interests of Russia and common European perspective.

In 2014, the European Union's refusal to continue systematic cooperation with Moscow provoked a significant drought of bilateral dialogue on the global agenda and European security. The parties are not inclined to dramatize the situation and emphasize that their dialogue continues. Along with the meetings on the sidelines of international events, Federica Mogherini visited Moscow in April 2017. But still this did not become a “first step” to restore bilateral political communications. The lack of systemic political dialogue significantly reduces opportunities for cooperation in the security sphere. On the part of Moscow, this is perceived as a substantial obstacle to bilateral relations, but also as a problem of the European Union's partnership capacity. Objectively, the EU cannot pretend to be a global player without establishing a framework of strategic relations with the key centers of power, in particular with Russia. In other words, Brussels should find opportunities to normalize communication and political dialogue with Moscow, if the EU is really committed to increase its influence and contribute to coping with global and European security challenges and threats.
The EU’s Global Strategy regards the US as a “core partner” on a broad security agenda, “the EU will deepen cooperation with the US and Canada on crisis management, counter-terrorism, cyber, migration, energy and climate action”. The EU – NATO Partnership Declarations, which were signed in 2016 and 2018 at Warsaw and Brussels NATO summits, make the CSDP focused on conceptual set, objectives and decisions taken by NATO. The EU activity tends to firmly line up with NATO strategic guidelines and operational activities, which are aimed at containment of Russia and comprehensive response to Russian-made threats and challenges, including hybrid war and cyber threats, by possible resorting inter alia to the Article 5 of the Washington Treaty on collective defence. The EU’s Plan of Military Mobility (in the North Sea – Baltic corridor), approved in March 2018, is an evidence of consolidation of the EU’s operational activities and capabilities within the Atlantic strategy of Russia’s containment.

For Russia, this signals a change in the EU’s security posture, when the Union’s strategic ambitions and advancing European defence, including PESCO, could consolidate a long-term line in the EU on deterrence of Russia and, therefore, further complicate security cooperation and political reconciliation. On the other hand, such an Atlantic drift of the EU does not strengthen prospects of European political autonomy but, on the contrary, binds it with the US’s strategy and security doctrine, not to mention a destructive impact of Trump’s political maneuvering and his “America first” message to the allies. Moreover, the Russian card continues to be played out in the transatlantic game (collective deterrence and burden sharing, sanctions, Nord Stream-2, Helsinki Trump-Putin summit...). Therefore, the EU’s claims to strategic autonomy in fact are coupled with weakening of the CSDP independent capacity, a change in its profile towards the consolidated Western deterrence of Russia and, consequently, an even greater dependence on the US strategic guidelines and F&SP decision-making.

“Windows of opportunities” for the EU-Russia cooperation, not only in the field of international security, cannot be open without normalization of Russian-American relations, and its prospects are rather faint. Even where the EU’s position is objectively close to Russia, but does not coincide with an American stand,

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as, for example, on the Iranian dossier (JCPOA), Europeans are limited both in stabilizing influence on US administration and in combining efforts with Moscow. European influence on the key pillars of the Russia-West strategic balance has critically decreased in the context of Trump's anti-multilateralism, whereas the next Washington’s unilateral actions, for example, a possible rejection of the INF Treaty, would be a new blow to European security, European defence and political autonomy, as well as for the Russian-European relations. With this in mind, Russia and the EU need making efforts to step up cooperation on international and European security agenda of mutual importance, including Ukraine, Syria and Iran, on countering common strategic challenges and threats, especially international terrorism and illegal migration, arms control and non-proliferation. There are serious hurdles on the way of gradually restoration of institutional platforms for dialogue and cooperation, in particular, Russia – EU systematic political dialogue as well as the result-oriented work of the NATO – Russia Council.