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# CHALLENGES AND DILEMMAS WITHIN THE RELATIONS BETWEEN RUSSIA AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

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**Abstract:** *Every EU enlargement signified a step towards Central and Eastern Europe, therefore, the 2004 „big bang enlargement”, followed by the one in 2007, modified the geopolitical context within the „old continent” and also increased the importance of the European Union regionally, as well as globally. Integrating the ex-soviet countries into the EU meant taking them out of the Russian sphere of influence, as well as attempting to super size the EU territory in order to increase the European power on a long term. Despite the weakening of Russia after the Cold War, the federation still represents a challenge regarding „pax europea”, as Russia still has an amazing military capacity, as well as important natural resources. The entrance into the Russian sphere of influence, the European energetic dependency on Russia, the conflicts within the separatist regions situated at the EU eastern borders are just few of the many challenges regarding the relations between the European Union and Russia.*

**Keywords:** European Union, enlargement, Eastern neighbourhood, power, natural resources, dependence

**JEL Classification:** N44, N74, R58, F59

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Following the latest EU enlargements, Russia became the main security “challenge” that stands in front of the European Union. Therefore, in my paper I intend to analyse the main setbacks and dilemmas within the relations between Russia and the European Union (EU) from different dimensions: political, economic and military.

I consider this topic extremely relevant as the Russian Federation is undoubtedly the most important neighbour of the EU from all kinds of perspectives: economic, political, strategic and military. Therefore, the second section of the paper entitled *Challenges and dilemmas in the EU/Russia relations* will further develop the following issues: the importance of the EU enlargement towards East, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the importance of the Buffer Zone between Russia and the EU as well as a brief analysis of a “new” Russia.

The last section of the paper will present the main conclusions as well as possible prospects and solutions that could lead to a better cooperation between the two powers. The basic conclusion is that for a better future, free of conflicts, prosperous, dominated by peace, freedom and tolerance

we should hope for Russia to replace all, or even part of its own imperial system and for the EU to learn how to speak with “one voice”.

Therefore, twenty years after the end of the Soviet totalitarian communism, Russia remains a major challenge for Europe. Russia’s future and evolution is a mystery that raises an endless debate. Will it move eventually towards a Western-style democracy, by continuing to strengthen and develop a middle-class? Or it will remain for a long time a corrupt and authoritarian regime, likely to turn in certain circumstance to aggressive nationalism as announced in August of 2008?

## 2. CHALLENGES AND DILEMMAS WITHIN THE EU-RUSSIA RELATIONS

**Robert Schuman**, one of the EU founding fathers considered that *we have to build Europe not only for the free people in the West, but also for the Eastern peoples who need our support and our moral adhesion* (IS1, 2000). The founding fathers’ purpose was to build a wider European Federation which would ensure unity, peace, security and economic development in the European Continent (Mikulitsch & Busek, 2005, p.13). According to **Bronislaw Geremek**, the ex-Foreign Affairs Minister of Poland, „The EU *enlargement* will bring *history* and *geography* in harmony with each other”.(IS2, 2002) In order to accomplish this major objective of conciliation between the history and geography of Europe, EU encounters major challenges, especially when it comes to the Eastern countries which are situated within the Russian sphere of influence. Despite its decline, Russia still represents the biggest „*existing security threat*” to the peace and stability of Europe (Kahn, 2007, p.160).

The relations between EU, U.S. and Russia are of great importance not only for Europe's future but also for the well functioning of the EU. By establishing bilateral partnerships with more Member States, both U.S. and Russia virtually became „inside” players in the EU, because some EU countries represent the views of these external powers. When it comes to US, these circumstances rely on a common history and a mutual set of democratic values while with Russia is different. The unpredictable evolution of Russian foreign affairs, as well as the geographic proximity are strong and valid arguments for the impetuous necessity of establishing a **common European policy** towards this country.

## 2.1 The EU enlargement towards East

Within the Eastern enlargement decision, the geopolitical aspect had primacy over the economic one. After the 2004 enlargement, the continent's division of East and West was overcome. Walter Hallstein, ex-President of the European Commission, stated: „*Europe can develop again as a whole. All these countries that defeated communism through revolutions worthy of our entire admiration, have successfully entered in a struggle for freedom, democracy and self-determination. Through this, they earned the right to take part in the integration process. They still remained Western oriented countries, which for more than 50 years have been victims of ideologies of force, specifically Nazism and Communism. Therefore, they rightfully expected not to be buffer states destined with an uncertain future in a marginal Europe, but to ever become full members of the European Democracy Family*” (Pottering, 2007, 166).

At the *moral* and *historical* duty of the enlargement process we can definitely add an interest of a more *political* and *strategic* nature. It lies within the EU interests to acquire a deep stabilization of the entire territory between the Baltic and Black Sea. By the fall of the Soviet-dominated regimes emerged a political vacuum, which itself bears the risk of further instability. Stability in this area must be the main priority of any EU action, as anxiety in one part of Europe will have consequences and affect the entire continent (Pottering, 2007, 167). *Geopolitically*, the EU succeeded in including within its borders countries from Central and Eastern Europe, and also managed to eliminate the appreciable expansion risk of the inter-ethnic conflict in former Yugoslavia (Ivan, 2007, p.3). By doing so, it has enhanced its negotiating capacity, becoming a major player in the international security system.

The Eastern Enlargement has also an *economic dimension* apart from the historical and political ones which should not be underestimated, although the beneficial effects will be more visible on a medium/long term (Mikulitsch, Busek, 2005, p.83). To summarize, the enlargement towards East has increased the quality of life in both new and old Member States.

When we speak of EU-27, we can assert that the enlargement process, despite all the challenges that characterized this process, was a real success within several aspects: geopolitics and security matters, economy and culture or common identity.

Whereas for the EU the enlargement process was an accomplishment, for Russia we cannot say the same thing. The Russian leaders, as well as the public opinion perceive their country as a world power. In many ways, Russia is still a post-colonial country which has not "mourned" its empire yet (Kahn, 2007, 161). This perception of power encountered a real obstacle starting May

2004. Until then, Russia has never been contradicted by its partners in the years after the Cold War. Russia was invited to join G7 which became G8. Russia's colonial domination policy, regarding the autonomous republics in the Caucasus has not been criticized by the US or the EU Member States. Its military actions against Chechnya, which left 100,000 dead which represented 10% of the population, is tolerated by the same United States, on behalf of the fight against Islamic terrorism, particularly after September 11th, 2001 (LeVine, 2009, p.73).

It seems like only a limited amount of leaders or elites in Russia gave credit to the scheduled date May 2004 regarding the EU accession of eight former communist countries, including three former republics of the USSR. The Russian leaders reckon that joining NATO is the same with joining EU so the association of these two processes is opposed to the interests of their country and its logic of power (Kahn, 2007, 162).

As to the areas of *political and ideological influence*, Russia lost the Cold War but makes considerable efforts to keep the focus of its geopolitical interests, at least on the remaining parts of its areas of interest. Following the EU and NATO enlargements, the Russian sphere of influence, or that considered as such by this country, was considerably and undoubtedly reduced. Therefore, the NATO enlargement to the East is often seen by Russia as *new intrigues* of the Western World against the Federation. In turn, the West sees in Russia's protest to NATO enlargement, a manifestation of „*new imperialist ambitions*”.

Kosovo's Status and the EU enlargement in the Balkans are themselves subjects of dispute in relation of Europe with its largest neighbour.

## **2.2 The European neighbourhood policy and Russia**

Despite the European major interest of having at their borders countries with dynamic economies and a stable political background, the European Union cannot promise nor guarantee an automatic or unconditional ascension of these bordering states. On the other hand, the new neighbouring countries have also a great interest in establishing and developing close relations with the EU, some having even the perspective on a long term, to become a full part of the European project.

To develop relations with those countries considered to be strategic partners, but with no foreseeable prospects of integration into the European structures, the EU launched its European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), within the European Commission Project in March 2003. (IS3, 2011)

The relations with the "new neighbours" will represent a challenge as the EU expands. Therefore, the aim was to develop an EU neighborhood policy in order to promote prosperity and good governance in the surrounding countries with the objective to create a "circle" of stability and safety. The Policy applies to the countries on the southern bank of the Mediterranean (the countries of the Barcelona process of 1995) and to Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova and the republics of the Caucasus.

Not only that Russian leaders do not appreciate that their country is put on the same footing as the others, but the ENP is seen as a competition or even a threat (Bordeianu, 2007, p. 24). This is why Russia chose not to join the ENP, in order to be „*an equal partner*”. As a result, the EU and Russia agreed to create four "common spaces" of cooperation in various fields such as: *Economic issues and the Environment; Freedom, Security and Justice; External Security; and Research and Education, including cultural aspects* (IS3, 2011).

Despite the ongoing financial crisis and the several conflicts and political instability during the last decade, Russia is the EU's third biggest trade partner which, in turn, is the main partner of Russia. (IS3, 2011) EU is also the main foreign investor in Russia, estimating that 75% of the FDI shares in Russia come from the EU (IS4, 2011). When Russia will join the WTO, the bilateral economic relations between these two powers will develop and become more solid (IS4, 2011).

Without its former socialist republics, the Russian Federation is on its own a great continental power, extremely diverse, militarily strong and weaker economically- at the opposite end of the EU. "Russia still has a long way to go in order to meet the European standards of democracy, governance and market economy" (Tsoukalis, 2005, 221). The Russian Federation has not developed a political culture compatible with the European standards. For this matter, in December 2001, the European Commission has expressed concern regarding the lack of “media pluralism, possible political intolerance and weak civil society concluding that the actual respect of human rights principles in Russia continues to lag behind the country's formal commitments.”(Marsh, 2005, p.200)

### **2.3 The buffer zone – hopes and disappointments**

The recent disagreements and tensions in Europe are a living proof of the collision between two *geopolitical projects* on the „old continent”: the project developed by the European Union collides with the interests and views of the Russian leaders and authorities.

The stability of the countries lying between the enlarged EU and Russia should concern both sides and provide an opportunity for close cooperation, not the fuel of a dangerous race for spheres of influence. The border consists of a number of economically underdeveloped countries most of them being internally divided, with one part of the country „looking” towards East and the other towards West. This is especially true for Ukraine, an important and very unstable neighbour of the enlarged European Union. This situation is also valid for Georgia and Moldova, but less for Belarus, which gradually approached the status of a Russian satellite (Rusu, 2007, 36). The European Union does not have too much to offer at the moment to these neighbouring countries, except for the ENP. At least for now, Europe's borders stop at these countries.

The *geopolitical rivalries* that existed in Soviet times were maintained until today, in a more veiled manner. These circumstances complicate the cooperation and strategic partnerships established between the EU and Russia, the U.S. and Russia. From this point of view, it is believed that **Ukraine** is important for the West only in the position of a buffer state in relations with the unpredictable Russia. When these relations and political context are favorable, Ukraine is forgotten and left aside. (Bordeianu, 2007, 31) Therefore, Kiev is required to refrain from any coalition with Russia, but is not being promised an eventual membership of the EU or NATO in return for missing possible benefits from the Russian scheme (Kahn, 2007, 112).

The EU contribution and initiatives to create a stable and prosperous region at its borders by launching the ENP seem to be silently approved by Russia. Even so, the tensions and disagreements tend to rise when it comes to the *Black Sea Synergy* or the *Eastern Partnership*. Within this context, the Black Sea becomes the heart of animosities between EU and Russia, with all the issues that lie within: the frozen conflicts in the **Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)** regions, the gas pipes and projects which are part of the Kremlin's geopolitical agenda (Kahn, 2007, 174).

After August 2008, when the invasion of **Georgia** took place, the EU-Russia relations have become more tense. Most of the European deputies underlined the necessity to respect Georgia's territorial integrity, saying that Russia's reactions were disproportionate and called for a strengthening of EU's neighborhood policy. It was also underlined the importance of reducing dependence on energy supplies from Russia (IS6, 2009).

The "*Gifts*" received by the young post-Soviet republics after the collapse of the USSR, in particular the separatist areas, represent a strategy and a highly efficient method to manipulate and cause instability within these republics. Therefore, each of the former Soviet states has within their borders an area which is causing political and social instability, armed conflicts, civil wars and even



invasion: Moldova with Transnistria, Ukraine with Crimea, Georgia with Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

For the last decade, Russia has provided the ethnic fighters with money, weapons, support and refuge and helped them to pass the borders. For various reasons, such as political correctness, ignorance or fear, the international community chose to deal with these conflicts in an isolated manner, trying to mediate the conflicts between governments and rebels of the small states, ignoring the critical role which the external actors play within these countries.

In this respect, it is very fair to admit that the failure of such states, like Moldova and Georgia, is not exclusively due to them. For example, Russia has decided to refrain from arming the Russian minorities in the Baltic States, when the West has hinted they would not tolerate such an approach but at the same time, the same West allowed the arming of Moldova and Georgia. Consequently, the Baltic States are currently members of the European Union, when Moldova, Georgia and other states are being threatened with failure.

## **2.4 The “New” Russia – A Gazprom State**

Energy has become a strategic stake for the independence of the European construction members. EU countries are largely dependent on external supplies. The EU currently imports 50% of its energy. The Russian supplies of natural gas imported into the EU are of approx. 40% (representing 25% of the EU needs) and the oil of 15% (IS5, 2008). The Russian government seeks to become indispensable to EU by increasing their dependence, as the beneficial cooperation projects prove, that are organized between the Russian Gazprom and Sonatrach its counterpart from Algeria, which is the second supplier country of the EU (Bahgat, 2006, pp.967-969).

From an *economic* perspective, the relations between the Russian Federation and the EU became more tense when the membership of Russia to the WTO came to question. The EU has an intransigent attitude in negotiating with Russia, especially when it comes to energy. The dialogue between the two regarding energy takes place on the premises that Russia supplies 40% of the European gas demand and 15% of its oil (IS5, 2008). The most recent unpleasant event within the EU-Russia relations was stopping the supply of Russian gas to the European users in January 2009 (IS7, 2009).

Europeans suffer from the bilateral disputes between Russia and Ukraine and should increase their efforts to diversify their energy supply. Following the dispute between Gazprom and Naftogaz,



the European Union faced interruption of gas supply. It is important to mention that some Member States have a dependency of almost 100% on the Russian gas.

The Russian leaders do not refrain from using this energy relationship as means of pressure on the EU. Thus, in January 2006 and January 2009, they stopped for 48 hours each export of gas to Ukraine, arguing that its leaders refused to pay the price almost five times higher, demanded by Gazprom (IS7, 2009). This has caused dissatisfaction and worries among the EU states as several pipelines carrying Russian gas transit through Ukraine.

Russia, which holds one third of world gas reserves, is in turn, dependent on European Union: in 2006, it exported to the EU nearly 90% of its oil and nearly 60% of its gas. Therefore the dialogue between the two powers can be classified as a "bargain"- Europe's investment in turn for Russia's oil and gas (Bahgat, 2006, p.969). With the right attitude and fruitful cooperation, this asymmetric interdependence could advocate for a "win-win" cooperation between Russia and the EU.

Despite Russia's return to power, through economic development, political stability and strategic ambitions, we should not overlook its demographic disaster and lack of technology. These aspects push Russia to form strategic partnerships and to understand the interdependent relation which it develops with the EU (Gomart, 2008, p.8).

Beyond the facade of a new charming and arrogant Russia-which is taking advantage of the soaring energy prices in order to assert itself on the world stage once again-, the social catastrophe that befell this country remains completely impressive. The quasi-absence of a social assistance system provided by the state, as well as the Russian social body diseases (alcoholism, drug abuse, domestic violence, child abandonment etc.) heavily weigh upon the country's demography. The deeply rooted criminality within the State's structures- which lasts since Soviet times- is based upon an „incestuous relation" between the political power and the business sector (LeVine, 2009, p.212).

On top of all these severe challenges that Russia is facing, one can definitely add the Northern Caucasus problem. Far from being a stable region, the Northern Caucasus represents an explosive mixture within the Russian borders. Apart from this specific issue of the Caucasus region, there is a strong nationalistic wave which rises from the depths of Russia, fueled mainly by the recent conflicts in Chechnya and Georgia. The issues of Russian nationalism can be partly explain by a deep nostalgia shared by a large part of the Russian population (Gomart, 2008, p.5).

When it comes to the concept of *power*, Russia's power system is based on a close association between the prestige of the state and that of the army (Gomart, 2008, p.5). Within the World Stage, Russia craves for recognition, to have the status of a potential global player once again (Allison,

2008, p.1171). That is why, Roy Allison considers that the Georgian conflict did not express the desire of territorial enlargement but a desire for respect, image and recognition of power (Allison, 2008, p.1171).

On the other hand, the EU is more of a political prototype as well as a bureaucracy (The Commission) reluctant to submit to democratic control (Gomart, 2008, p.8). Therefore, regarding the concept of power, Russia behaves as a great power while the EU still questions its own identity without managing to become a really *credible security player* (Gomart, 2008, p.8).

The two major *geopolitical challenges* that Russia must face are quite clear. To the East, the growing economic and demographic power of China represents a real threat (Brezinski, 2009, p.72). In the South, Islam is also an important threat to Russia that has over 20 million muslims. Even so, it seems like Russia has no other obsession but to prevent the extension of NATO or any other Western or European influence beyond its borders. Convinced that it is the target of an encirclement policy orchestrated by Washington DC –which is not always necessarily wrong- Russia tends to strike once in a while by its available harmful means: energetic blackmail in Ukraine, recognizing the independence of the Georgian separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia or provoking the Russian speaking population in Crimea and Transnistria.

Within this context, Russia should reflect upon the terror it provokes among its neighbours. Most of them, even the most rusophile among them -which are intimately connected to Russia through family or cultural ties- are dreaming about fleeing towards the West or particularly towards NATO, as what they desire is a partner, not a master.

In the 1990s, EU member states gathered around a strategy of “democratizing” and “westernizing” a weak and indebted Russia, and managed to get the Russians to sign up to all major international standards on democracy and human rights. But since then, soaring oil and gas prices have made the Russian governing elite incredibly powerful, less cooperative and above all, less interested in joining the West.

The regime in Kremlin, led by Vladimir Putin considers that the EU tries to weaken Russia, in order to obtain the transport infrastructure of oil and natural gas. In this context, dominated by mistrust between the two parties, Brussels is trying to solve problems step by step. Some European officials believe that such level of misunderstanding between the European states and Russia has not been seen since the end of the Cold War (Gomart, 2008, p.1). Each suspects the other of double standards. Each thinks that the other uses the energy weapon as a political instrument.

If Russia would get rid of their own past and imperialist mentality, which still has repercussions over the Russian politicians’ way of thinking, it is assumed that “a democratic Russia

who is adapted to market economy principles would be more sympathetic to Europe."(Brezinski, 2009, 64)

## CONCLUSIONS

The potential for a solid cooperation with the Russian Federation is directly proportional to the challenges and difficulties which the European Union must face. As we saw, for the last decade the buffer countries faced protests, conflicts, corruption, violence, human rights violations, and their problems tend to emphasise. The indifference to the political instability of those countries would threaten in time the peace and stability of the entire European Union, as Russia's involvement in the frozen conflicts could have repercussions over all Europeans.

In conclusion, the complexity of EU - Russia relations raises questions such as: To what extent the EU, as a political and economic actor, truly understands Russia? Is the European policy effective in dealing with this country? Is it required a change of attitude?

Given the great differences between these two powers, in all aspects: economical, political, military, ideological, historical as well as the contexts in which they have formed and developed, the mentality, unity or territory, it is not difficult to comprehend that the EU meets difficulties in understanding Russia. The European Union and the Russian Federation are two powers that lie at *two opposite poles: the EU is economically strong, militarily weak and with democratic principles, while Russia is weaker economically and stronger militarily and has imperialist tendencies.*

Currently, there are two "*schools of thought*" within the European Parliament which reflect the ambivalent attitude of the member countries. A first "school" suggested that Russia should be responsible for any alienation from the European democratic principles. The second "school" is more moderate, bringing the "pragmatism" as main argument. In this respect, it should be adopted a position that combines pragmatism with integrity.

Indeed, after analyzing the relations between Russia and the EU, it is not difficult to grasp the importance of a buffer zone between these two powers. The EU should be more involved regarding the unstable situation which is threatening the newly formed democracies of these young former soviet republics that are likely to fall again under the Russian influence. Therefore, we can definitely state that these countries are extremely important for the EU security, peace, stability and beyond. If in the future these countries will have a membership perspective and will be offered the candidate status, this will strongly encourage the liberals in Russia who are the only ones who can bring democracy in the Federation. If the EU wants to turn the new Russia to be a predictable and

viable neighbour, it must build its partnership with Russia on the same foundations that made European integration a success – interdependence based on stable rules, transparency and consensus. But these foundations will not build themselves. The Union must be much more determined about agreeing rules of engagement with Russia, and then defending them.

After analyzing the relations between the two powers from different perspectives we can conclude that the maturing process of the EU-Russia relations seems to be long and painful. Therefore, when the two sides, Russia and the European Union could start discussions on security, trade, energy supply and oil routes, when Russia will join the WTO and the EU will form a true common market for energy; when Russia will bury the past and its imperialist tendencies and the EU will no longer be "*an economic giant, a political dwarf and a military worm*" and will "*unite in diversity*", maybe then Russia will no longer appear in the position of danger, or "*the sick man of Europe*", but in that of a cooperating neighbour and a key trading partner.

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