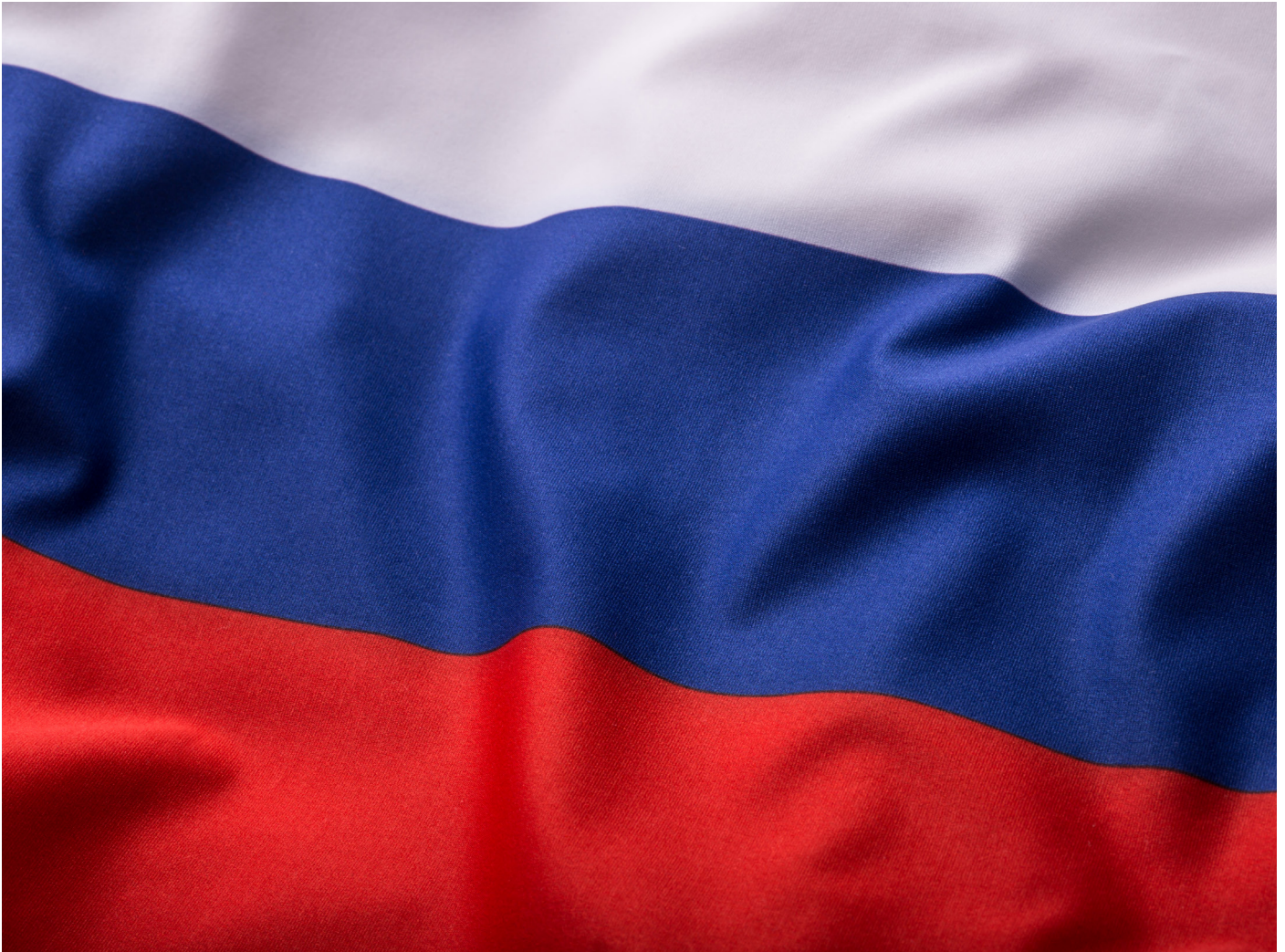


# From a Strategic Partner to a Strategic Challenge?



## Where we stand

Russia is an important international actor at regional as well as international level; it is a permanent member of the United Nations (UN) Security Council, a current member of the Human Rights Council and the EU's biggest neighbour. Due to historical and cultural links, Russia plays one of the major roles in Europe and its neighbourhood. Unfortunately, the behaviour of Russia's current leadership poses one of the main challenges to the EU's strategic and foreign policy agenda and to freedom, peace and security in Europe and beyond. Russia is a country in which the corrupt ruling elite is deliberately undermining democratic principles, disregarding the rule of law and the international order, infringing on the sovereignty and territorial integrity of its neighbours, manipulating the international community, spreading disinformation and killing and poisoning its own citizens.

The European Union is founded on principles that aim to safeguard peace, democracy, prosperity, equality and human rights. Our foreign policy priorities are guided by these principles. Support for democracy and the rule of law, both within the EU and globally, remains a cornerstone of EU policy.

The goals of Putin's regime include the following elements: to be recognised as a great power; to consolidate the regime's influence in post-Soviet countries and beyond; to place the sovereignty of powerful states above the right to sovereignty of other states; to construct the Eurasian Economic Union as a counter to the European Union; to undermine the model of liberal democracy and to portray Russia as morally superior and the West as morally inferior; to use the concept of 'protecting ethnic Russians abroad' as justification for hybrid war and disinformation; to use falsification of history as a tool of influence; to use frozen conflicts areas as a strategic element for influencing the affected country and preventing it from exercising sovereign choices (e.g. by moving closer to the EU and NATO); and to use energy resources as a tool for manipulation and blackmailing.

These elements of Russian foreign policy are contrary to Russia's own obligation to respect fundamental UN, Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and Council of Europe (CoE) norms, principles and commitments; and they are contradictory to EU values and principles and leave little space for cooperation. While the EU supports democracies worldwide, Russia lends its support to authoritarian regimes like Bashar al-Assad's Syria and often becomes a source of destabilisation in its closer and wider neighbourhood.

Russia's military intervention in Syria in 2015 changed the course of Syria's civil war, saving the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, which was accused of using chemical weapon against civilians. Russia and Syria deliberately instrumentalised migration in an attempt to overwhelm the European Union and the Member States and threaten the future of the European project. In the MENA region, notably in Libya with the 'Wagner Group' presence, Russia increased its influence, boosted its regional diplomacy and reinserted itself militarily in the region under the banner of the fight against international terrorism. From 2009 to 2018, Russia was the second-largest arms supplier to the MENA region. Russia's policy in Africa has become more assertive and often pursues opportunistic aims. The resurgent conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh has enlarged Russia's military presence in the contested area. While the democratic world continues a policy of isolation vis-à-vis the illegitimate Venezuelan government, Russia has become a source of economic and military support, hoping in return to expand its influence in Latin America. In the Western Balkan countries, Russia has continuously played, at the very least, the role of 'spoiler': exploiting democratic vulnerabilities with Russian-backed disinformation and military collaboration and supporting anti-EU and anti-NATO rhetoric while endorsing Russia-oriented regional leaders. Furthermore, interference in elections in the region and support for anti-democratic forces in the Western Balkans remains an issue, notably in those countries which are also NATO members. And, as we stated in

our September 2020 EPP [position paper](#) on EU-China relations, ‘Careful analysis shows increasing military, technological and energy coordination on the part of China and Russia, aimed at least in part at bolstering an authoritarian model of governance and at weakening in turn both the alternative, democratic governance model and the rule of law as well as the organisations and alliances of the West.’

Numerous attempts in recent decades for Russia to embrace the values we share have failed. During the 1990s and at the beginning of the 2000s, it was believed that Russia could become a democratic state respecting rule of law, human rights and its international obligations. But President Putin’s speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007 started a new era of confrontation between Russia and the West. The Russian-Georgian war in 2008 sounded the first alarm, which unfortunately did not receive a proper response.

After the illegal annexation of Crimea and the ongoing military aggression in Donbas, which is a serious breach of international law, EU policy towards Russia has undergone a serious transformation. Official EU documents indicated a shift of perception: Russia is no longer regarded as a ‘strategic partner’ but as a ‘key strategic challenge’.

Russia’s aggressive actions in Ukraine resulted in Russia’s expulsion from the G8; the loss of its delegation vote in the Council of Europe for five years; the introduction of sanctions against Russia by the EU and the G7; and the loss of Russian influence in Ukraine and in other Eastern Partnership countries. Putin in fact has done a remarkable job of unifying the West’s response towards Russia.

### **Russia today**

The Putin regime is strongly intertwined with a class of powerful oligarchs that also has informal links to criminal structures. This political structure serves the purpose of strengthening Putin’s hold on power. The oligarchs owe their wealth to President Putin and act as a source of private finance for the Kremlin. An important role in Russia’s internal politics is also played by the militarisation of society, anti-Western patriotism, Soviet nostalgia and religious nationalism.

In 2020, President Putin took actions to further cement his power with controversial constitutional amendments shifting the balance of power and allowing him to stay in power until 2036. Together with harsh legislation against civil activists and ‘foreign agents’, and the adoption of a new law guaranteeing immunity from prosecution for former presidents, this seemed to have created for him a secure safety net. And yet an increased activity on the part of civil society, several protest movements across the country, the weakening of the ruling party during the last local elections and a deteriorating economic situation have resulted in a drop in ratings for the president and his ruling party.

The poisoning of opposition leader Alexei Navalny in August 2020 — the second time, following the 2018 Skripal case, that an illegal, military-grade nerve agent was used against civilians — and Navalny’s imprisonment in January 2021, together with the situation in Belarus and Russia’s support for the dictator Lukashenko, as well as Russia’s continuous hybrid attacks and interference with electoral processes: all this has further strained EU-Russia relations, now at their lowest point. Navalny’s investigations, mounting repressive actions and controls as a response to the unprecedented moral courage and determination to fight against the system have unveiled the real face of the Putin regime, even for those in Europe who still try to continue with ‘business as usual’.

In January 2021, Russia witnessed the largest-ever public protests against Putin’s rule, triggered by the imprisonment of Navalny and his investigations regarding Putin’s wealth. Many young people, free from Soviet nostalgia, took to the streets to support Navalny and condemn an unfair and corrupt regime. These



protests, very similar to the recent protests in Belarus, will hopefully trigger a new period in Russia's domestic development, one that might bring about a societal movement eventually resulting in Russia's democratisation. In the near future, we can expect more protests, further brutality by the regime and an intensification of repression across the country. Upcoming elections in the second half of 2021 are likely to increase tensions and radicalise the situation further.

Recent developments have revealed an official Russian attitude hostile to the West. Unable to compete with liberal democracy, Russia is trying to destroy it, using the means at its disposal: military power, hybrid warfare, cyber-attacks, interference in Western elections, propaganda and disinformation, and access to energy resources. Russia wants to appear as a strong power but is weakened by having lost influence on the global stage and in its immediate neighbourhood: by its weak economic performance, by sanctions, by massive 'institutionalised' corruption and other predatory practices against private business, by a lack of reforms and by the discredited face of the political elite, who no longer enjoy strong popular support as in the past.

### **Our response**

**We believe it is high time to critically reassess our relations with the Russian Federation and adapt EU-Russia policy accordingly.** The EU needs a long-term, fact-based, strategy — harbouring no illusions regarding the Putin regime. We have to move from a reactive to a pro-active approach; the price of inaction may be very high. Until now, we have lacked a comprehensive, unsparing analysis allowing the EU to understand Kremlin policy and to define a proper response. Attempts to relaunch a 'modernisation partnership' have yielded little result: the 'Normandy format' concerning the occupied Donbas is stuck because Russia has no interest in easing tensions with Ukraine; even after the lifting of sanctions in the Council of Europe, Russia's opposition leader was poisoned with chemical weapon; the offices of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and European Medicines Agency (EMA) were hacked by Russia; the Kremlin extended a hand to the dictator Lukashenko, who has stolen elections and perpetrated unprecedented brutality against his country's citizens; Russia continues its hybrid war against Ukraine and other neighbouring countries and against EU and NATO Member States; and Russia's human rights record continues to deteriorate. With the poisoning by a military-grade nerve agent, arrest and imprisonment of Navalny and brutal police actions against protesters, Putin's regime is showing that they are ready to wage a real aggressive 'war' against the Russian people, who are starting to demand change in the country.

We therefore believe the European People's Party, being a long-term friend of Russian civil society and a strong supporter of the Russian people's aspirations for freedom and democracy, should initiate a discussion on a coherent EU-Russia strategy. This strategy should be based on our unity and resilience and on a policy of pushback, where Russia steps over its international obligations; containment, where a preventive policy is required; and engagement, where issues of common interest and concern are to be addressed. The strategy should strongly support democracy and democratic opposition, civil society and the pursuit of the rule of law, wherever possible in close coordination with our transatlantic allies.

### **Strengthening our unity**

Putin's strategy is to divide Western unity in two dimensions: to create division among EU Member States and to undermine transatlantic unity. In recent decades, Europe has become more dependent on Russian energy and financial resources. Some countries within the European Union, with weaker democratic institutions, appear to be more vulnerable to Russia's corrupt form of oligarchic capitalism; they have experienced an erosion of transparency, rule of law and good governance and have implemented policies contrary to core Western values. Russian funding, targeted propaganda and support have contributed to the

rise of nationalistic and anti-European political forces across the EU and have undermined a Euro-Atlantic orientation and fostered greater support for Russian policies. Through bribery, disinformation, propaganda and friendly media outlets; through the funding of populist and Russia-friendly political parties; with the help of a widely integrated network of intelligence services; and by playing on controversies between certain Member States, Russia is trying to influence decision-making in Europe.

Our response to this challenge must go in two directions: 1) **We have to unite around the model of liberal democracy**, which has no alternative in promoting prosperity, economic growth and social welfare and in ensuring security and the rule of law. This model of liberal democracy has attracted more and more of our neighbours, where citizens, despite confronting harsh propaganda, are continuing their fight for democracy. All actors striving for democracy and freedom in these countries are our allies. 2) **We have to prepare a global response and coordinate our policy vis-à-vis Russia together with all our partners: the US, the UK, Canada and other allies of democracy as well as NATO.**

Finally, this strategy should contribute to bringing war criminals to justice, including those involved in the downing of flight MH17.

## Preparing a global response on sanctions

The European Union has more instruments at its disposal to counter Russian aggression than it is currently using. The EU underestimates its ability to influence Russian behaviour: the Russian economy relies primarily on the European market to sell its hydrocarbons and — to a lesser extent — to sell Russian goods and services, and Putin's regime uses European open economies for the corrupt assets of Kremlin-connected individuals.

Despite sharp rhetoric directed towards Russia, the international consequences for Russia's poisoning of Navalny have not been severe. Sanctions are most effective when allies act together; therefore, the EU must discuss with its transatlantic partners how to better coordinate our response regarding the latest political events in Russia.

The current sanctions regimes have been effective in isolating Russia and creating certain economic difficulties for Putin, as well as in preventing Putin from going even further in Ukraine. In light of recent developments, including continuous aggression against Ukraine, however, these sanctions regimes may no longer be sufficient, and further and stronger steps may be needed.

## ***We propose further actions to be considered:***

- To strengthen the EU's capacity on sanctions, including enhanced transatlantic cooperation and coordination, especially with the UK, the US and Canada. Automatic initiation of personal restrictive measures should be considered against all those involved in gross human rights violations in Russia: police officers, judges, prosecutors, etc.;
- To strengthen the strategic transatlantic partnership to tackle global challenges, such as hybrid warfare, cyber-attacks and disinformation;
- To work together with the US on shaping the rules and norms that govern technology, in the struggle between techno-democracies and techno-autocracies, including by strengthening our resilience against Russian cyber-attacks;
- To target, on the basis of a legal framework, internationally exposed individuals from Putin's inner circle — including propagandists, oligarchs and partners in Russia's system of repressive kleptocracy —

with the following measures: asset freezes, restricting access to the EU (and other Western) banks and restrictions for international travel, including by restricting and revoking visas. Likewise, we should step-up origins-of-wealth investigations consequently in all EU Member States regarding such individuals and intensify investigations into money laundering schemes, inter alia by including these individuals in international lists of politically exposed persons. Such measures should also be extended to immediate family members. The intelligence services of the EU, UK and US, in the context of the broader transatlantic partnership, should cooperate and coordinate their actions in identifying and regularly updating the lists of those individuals on whom the Kremlin relies to carry out campaigns of aggression, disinformation, propaganda, human rights abuse and assassination. We have already seen the impact of such targeted individual sanctions after the US and UK introduced some of them;

- To impose additional targeted restrictive measures, under the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime (EU Magnitsky Act), against all individuals involved in or bearing responsibility for the attacks against Alexei Navalny and other politically repressed citizens;
- To closely monitor the cases of repression against members of the opposition, intimidation and torture of political prisoners and repression of civil society organisations, media, and human rights defenders, as well as independent media outlets. The most severe cases should be recommended for international investigation;
- To use the G7 format to encourage unity of action among the world's largest economies;
- To cut off Russia's channels of illicit offshore finance: there is a clear need for stronger political will to end the flow of dirty money into the EU.

The Russian economy is deeply connected to the Western financial system; if we unite our response, we can challenge Russia's increasing aggression both internationally and domestically. At the same time, we have to be ready to revise those sanctions imposed in response to Russia's domestic violations of democracy and human rights should Russia take meaningful steps forward, such as by allowing free and fair elections to the State Duma under proper international monitoring. The sanctions regime introduced as a reaction to Russia's aggression against Ukraine must continue until Russia fully implements the Minsk agreements and returns illegally annexed Crimea to Ukraine.

### **Boosting our deterrence**

The only factor stopping Russia from military aggression is the preparedness of its neighbours to resist. Credible deterrence, therefore, is the decisive factor. Securing the military presence of NATO member countries in Europe and further strengthening this presence remains a core of deterrence strategy.

#### ***The following initiatives can strengthen our deterrence:***

- To continue to strengthen NATO's forward presence along the Eastern flank and to increase NATO's readiness to respond quickly and reinforce its forward-deployed assets in case of Russian aggression;
- To build and strengthen, in coordination with NATO, joint anti-hybrid defence capabilities;
- To prevent Russian economic involvement in strategic projects;
- To follow with greater attention the security situation in the Arctic and the High North, the Baltic States, the Black Sea region and in Eastern Partnership countries;
- To better consolidate the security resilience of Eastern Partnership countries through developing security dialogue and cooperation;
- To discuss the 2008 NATO offer that Ukraine and Georgia could become members of the alliance in future;
- To identify and actively support EU Member States at higher risk of Russian influence;
- To boost the EU Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) in general and to promote a more active approach;

- the EU Member States' defence budgets, in general, and the EU Defence Fund and EU military mobility budget, in particular, must be ambitious, with sufficient dedicated resources;
- once the situation permits, and as part of the full implementation of the Minsk agreements, an EU-led CSDP mission should be offered for deployment to the parties to the conflict in Donbas;
- the EU should consider the appointment of an EU Special Envoy for Crimea and the Donbas region.

### Tackling disinformation and cyber-attacks

The real dimension, impact and consequences of Russian disinformation are often underestimated by EU governments. The EU must prepare for Russia's use of disinformation as a long-term tool for contesting the political order of Europe and undermining the EU's democratic legitimacy, including by interfering in elections. Disinformation poses a major threat for the EU because it is Russia's most structured, consequential and well-resourced tool. The goal is to weaken the EU by polarising society within individual Member States. These threats cannot be addressed solely by national authorities: a legal framework for tackling hybrid threats, including cyber-attacks and disinformation, should be developed both at EU and international level.

In this regard, we praise the fruitful cooperation between authorities in the Eastern Partnership, such as the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine and the European Defence Agency, and we encourage its further development. The EU and our Eastern Partners should boost cooperation in security and defence, in the sphere of cyber security and in the fight against disinformation. The Eastern Partners possess unique experience and knowledge of Russian cyber strategy which can be particularly valuable to the EU's global security strategy.

Russian disinformation campaigns use both traditional and online media, including social media platforms. According to a report by EU-LISTCO, two main media outlets of Russian propaganda, Sputnik and Russia Today, operate in 100 countries and broadcast in 30 languages; RT's annual budget allows it to compete with *BBC World*, *Deutsche Welle*, *Voice of America* and *France 24*. The Internet Research Agency, a so-called troll factory owned by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a close associate of Putin, has a monthly budget of around €1 million and operates fake social media accounts. The EPP, in its resolution on Russian disinformation at the 2017 Malta Congress, warned of state-owned Russian TV channels enlarging their audiences in Europe. Nothing was done since then at EU level to solve this problem. Propaganda instruments like *Russia Today* and *Sputnik* cannot be considered as media and must be subject to strict regulation.

While the whole world struggles to overcome the current pandemic, the deliberate spread of false narratives through massive disinformation campaigns on the part of pro-Kremlin actors undermines trust in approved vaccines and spreads vaccine hesitancy in the EU and in neighbouring countries. We appreciate actions already undertaken by the European Commission, European Parliament and other relevant EU bodies to tackle disinformation, address vaccine hesitancy and raise awareness concerning the benefits of newly available vaccines. We applaud the special initiative in this regard undertaken by our member association YEPP, the Youth of the EPP. At the same time, joint efforts are needed to ensure that reliable, truthful, fact-based information reaches the public: to guarantee an effective vaccination process and a way out of this pandemic.

In such challenging times, it is more important than ever to have a coordinated European response towards disinformation. EU governments should build up trust by communicating better rather than allowing social media to set the agenda. The EU should limit the flow of Russian online disinformation campaigns by sanctioning those responsible for spreading Russian disinformation; the EU should also limit domestic disinformation media financed through various channels by Russia. National capitals need to commit additional capacity for effective coordination under the specially established Rapid Alert System

against disinformation. We have to raise awareness across Europe: to improve media literacy, support quality journalism, engage with social media companies and tackle hate speech and fake news. After years of lukewarm progress, it is evident that self-regulation by social media companies does not provide sufficient results in tackling disinformation and malign influence operations online. The EPP remains committed to these issues and will be actively involved in the design and future implementation of the European Democracy Action Plan and the European Digital Services Act.

The latest large-scale cyber-attack targeting US companies and federal agencies — the so-called ‘Solar Winds’ attack — is a stark reminder of Russia’s capacity to lead complex cyber espionage operations. In 2020, the EU invoked for the first time its cyber diplomacy tools and imposed sanctions against Russian and Chinese individuals for conducting malicious cyber-attacks. The EU must stand ready to counter such malicious behaviour in cyberspace and have the necessary mechanisms to prevent, deter and respond to external threats in the digital domain. The EPP calls for closer transatlantic cooperation against these challenges and for extending NATO’s capabilities in defending allies in cyberspace.

### **Reducing energy dependence**

Energy is the most important resource for Russia’s budget, military and social programmes. Gazprom is government-owned and is used as an important tool in advancing the Kremlin’s economic and geopolitical interests abroad. Decisions, therefore, on major energy projects, such as Nord Stream 2, should also be taken with the long-term energy security of the whole EU in mind. We have to avoid that such projects make countries like Ukraine and Belarus strategically less important and more vulnerable. Current developments on Nord Stream 2 have undermined European and transatlantic unity, endangered the EU’s strategic goals in Eastern Europe and the European Energy Security Strategy. Nord Stream 2 and Gazprom have to fully comply with existing European energy legislation.

Moving away from a dependence on fossil energy must be our overall goal, not only for security reasons. Given that all EU Member States are still net importers of energy, our energy security must rely on a long-term strategy pursuing a safe, reliable and diverse energy supply.

### **Strengthening the Eastern Neighbourhood**

A successful, prosperous and democratic Eastern Neighbourhood is considered by the Kremlin as a threat to the stability of the Putin regime, because it may provide ‘soft power’ inspiration to ordinary people in Russia. The democratisation of our Eastern Neighbourhood, therefore, has crucial importance for the future democratisation of Russia. Russia’s true aim regarding the conflicts in this region is not to back particular sides or personalities but rather to delegitimise democratic change as a means of transferring power; to prevent the successful development of these states; to discredit liberal democracy; and to export Russia’s own system of power. Yet the revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia, the electoral victory of President Maia Sandu in Moldova and the recent uprising of the Belarusian people have all demonstrated that people in the region prefer democratic values and are willing to fight for democracy and the rule of law. The Kremlin simply has no answer to the more appealing prospect of European-style democracy.

The circle of democratic countries surrounding Russia has great significance for the democratisation of the Russian people. It is crucial for the Kremlin to prevent such a transformation in Belarus, as it views such a popular uprising as a direct threat to its own authoritarian model. Moscow’s ability to try to play the role of a leading and credible security player in the post-Soviet part of Europe would take a significant hit were Russia to lose its last remaining regional ally. The events in Belarus are being closely followed by the Russian people — the most recent protests in Russia, in a way, were inspired by democracy fighters in Belarus.



The people of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova have chosen a pro-European path; some have paid a very high price for this, including even temporary loss of territory and loss of human lives. Assisting Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova in their transformation and ambitious reform agenda is crucially important for the EU. More sustainable Western engagement to support these countries is needed on their path ever closer to the European Union. The successful implementation of reforms is a clear pre-condition for such a development. These countries must therefore strengthen their efforts in implementing reforms in the areas defined by the Association Agreement, especially in fighting corruption and in strengthening democracy, institutions, the rule of law and media freedom.

We have to push for a more ambitious political agenda for Eastern Partnership countries, especially for the associated trio states: Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova. Considering a true European perspective could be the first important step in this direction; the successful implementation of reforms is a clear pre-condition for such a development.

Special attention must also be given to Armenia, where the image of the EU and the Western world has deteriorated as a consequence of our inaction in the recent Nagorno-Karabakh war. Both on bilateral and OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs level, efforts must be renewed for a negotiated, comprehensive and sustainable settlement of the conflict, including on the status of Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenia is a pro-European society based in Christian values. Closer attention must be given to EU investment in neighbouring Azerbaijan, which cannot mean sacrificing relations with Armenia.

New and special attention should be given to Russia's relations with NATO member Turkey. There is strong cooperation between Russia and Turkey, most recently seen in the South Caucasus. Both President Putin and President Erdogan want to avoid any democratic change arising in the streets. These interests and these common actions on the part of Russia and Turkey, and their impact on the security of the Eastern neighbourhood, must be studied.

Russia's imperial ambitions cannot be realised if Russia loses control over some of its neighbouring countries.

Further east, the goal should be to have a strong EU presence in Central Asia, a region affected by the geopolitical aspirations of both Moscow and Beijing.

### ***Supporting a pro-European Russia***

Since Russia's current regime has made clear its unwillingness to engage constructively with the EU and what it represents, our main partners in Russia should be civil society, the democratic opposition and the Russian people. Together with them, we need to develop a long-term plan to meet their wish for Russia to be a democratic state fully committed to its international obligations, to respect for fundamental rights and to the wellbeing of its citizens. The EU should send a very clear message to the people of Russia as to what kind of benefits from closer cooperation the EU will be able to propose for Russian society should Russia in future choose a democratic path of development.

With an increasingly restrictive legislation in Russia, such as the Foreign Agents Law, unfortunately, cooperation with Russian civil society and the academic world and people-to-people contacts were also affected. The European institutions should establish further channels of communication with the democratic, pro-European part of Russian society. The EU must put in place new, effective and accessible tools to support the democratic opposition and civil society across the country:

- To support Russian activists and politicians fighting for democracy and human rights — including political, religious, and LGBT rights — and to grant them and their families political asylum in case of persecution, according to Member States' national legislation;
- To monitor, together with the leading civil and human rights NGOs and independent media outlets, the situation of political prisoners in Russia; to campaign in support of them and their families; to demand their release; and to publish their names in various EU reports and declarations; to establish a European Justice Hub to assist international investigations of human rights crimes, committed by authoritarian regimes such as in Russia and Belarus, which would provide legal assistance to victims, including through coordinated application of universal jurisdiction by EU Member States' national courts;
- To give people greater opportunity to travel and acquire first-hand knowledge of the EU;
- To work more with the young generation, which is more progressive and better informed; to include young Russians in programmes for youth and education; and to give young people more opportunities to travel, study and work in the EU, in particular via the Erasmus+ programme;
- To increase investments — currently very low — in EU programmes for Russian civil society organisations, in order to provide them with experience, knowhow and capabilities for democracy-building, for fighting corruption and for implementing the rule of law in their home countries;
- To create, together with our transatlantic partners and EPP-affiliated foundations, a donors forum to support Russian civil society and the opposition;
- To support Russian experts with the European knowledge to prepare a blueprint for reforms for Russia, post-Putin, which can be presented to the Russian people as a viable alternative to the current regime;
- To elaborate and promote an EU strategy for relations with a democratic, post-Putin Russia; this strategy should include all the important instruments of possible relationship: free trade, visa-free regime, partnerships for modernisation, etc.;
- To create forums and exchange groups between Russia and Eastern Partnership countries, with participation from relevant European experts to share their successful experience of democratisation and reform agendas.

### **Maintaining a dialogue on topics of common interest**

It is important to find ways to de-escalate current tensions and to keep channels of cooperation open with Russia in areas of common interest, and to prevent any worsening of the situation. Such areas could include, but are not limited to, foreign policy issues, such as European security, arms control, emerging weapons technologies, nuclear non-proliferation, Iran and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and counterterrorism; efforts to prevent and combat pandemics; trade and investment, including support for European companies operating in the Russian market; and the fight against climate change, including by encouraging the Russian government to implement more ambitious environmental policies. We should strive to identify further areas for selective engagement with Russia. However, at present we should focus on topics where the EU has clearly defined interests and strong leverage, and where the seriousness of the challenge urgently requires international cooperation. The EU should develop a structured, concrete and detailed strategy for how to engage Russia in areas, and at a time, of our own choosing.

A change in Russia's aggressive policy, as well as democratic developments inside the country, could lead to better cooperation and the implementation of important joint projects.

### **Promoting a positive image of the EU**

At a time when the Kremlin is spreading toxic disinformation and discrediting the EU's image and objectives inside Russia and within Russian-speaking communities in Europe, the EU has to invest more in pro-

moting a positive image of the EU and must communicate better its policies and achievements. We have to ensure that EU support, engagement and policies are well promoted and explained to the citizens of the Western Balkans, of Eastern Partnership countries and of Russia.

### **Conclusion**

The European Union has to come up with a new, realistic, long-term strategy towards Russia. We have to build an official EU strategy towards Russia that is based on resilience and deterrence while also maintaining our readiness for dialogue in areas of mutual interest. The main focus of our work should be countering Russia's aggressive behaviour combined with strong support for democracy, the rule of law, civil society, people-to-people contacts and the development of closer ties with the Russian opposition. The key to success vis-à-vis Russia will be our unity within the EU as well as a common transatlantic approach.

Russia is not our enemy, and we do not want it to be. Russian culture is a fundamental part of European culture. However, the EU cannot remain indifferent to Russian attacks and to the hybrid war undertaken by the Kremlin against our unity, which has been taking place now for years.

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