

Russia-EU relationship: can scenarios contribute to their improvement?

In November 2020 we asked prominent Russian researchers to share with us their views about EUREN's Report 2 on ["Alternative futures of EU-Russia relations in 2030"](#). See also [EUREN Brief no. 24](#) by Andrey Melville and [EUREN Brief no. 25](#) by Dmitri Trenin, as well as [the recording of the EUREN Expert Panel](#) about "The EU and Russia ten years from now" on 26 November 2020.

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Researchers are sometimes skeptical about scenario-building in the social sciences (and in international relations, in particular). They argue that it is not academic, as it is very subjective and ultimately pointless. It is true that the scenario-building process is not strictly academic; nobody claims it is. But I strongly disagree with the opinion that it is futile.

I believe that scenario-building is a meaningful exercise fulfilling several objectives. When conducted by an international team of experts, the scenario process facilitates the development of a common intellectual space even in the most difficult periods for bilateral relations. Scenarios also supply valuable information to policymakers, help them to avoid the irreparable, identify unexpected dangers and threats, and discover the new opportunities that may emerge under certain circumstances. So scenario-building is far from being an easy and entertaining genre.

It is worth noting that it is particularly difficult to work on scenarios concerning *relations between countries*.

While one can paint the prospects of a single country as a rosy and internally coherent "picture from the future," including more than one country greatly increases the number of variables. The process of selecting the necessary pieces and assembling them in a logical and coherent manner, while weighing the importance of each variable, requires great precision.

In my opinion, too little attention is paid to the EU-Russia relationship as a subsystem in the general system of international relations. This is rather strange, given the importance of this subsystem for the countries of the "common neighborhood" and for other areas of the Eurasian continent. Moreover, the EU is clearly more inclined than the United States to communicate with Russia, while Russian demography, trade flows, and oil and gas pipelines are oriented more toward Western Europe than eastern Eurasia (and will remain so in the longer term).

That is why I welcome the publication of the EUREN report, which presents four scenarios for the EU-Russia relationship in 2030. I consider all the scenarios to be well-founded and competently explicated, but I would like to emphasize the "Descent into Anarchy" scenario, which is in my opinion the most probable. I believe that

the long-term negative consequences of the coronavirus pandemic will strengthen the trends towards fragmentation of political spaces and loss of governability at national and supranational levels that were emerging even before the pandemic.

So the report provides readers (and hopefully policy-makers both in the EU and in Russia) with a very clear vision of the future that prompts serious reflection. Here are my thoughts:

First, I think it would be useful to place the scenarios in the context of the current EU and Russian strategies, keeping in mind a long-term approach to international relations in general and to mutual relations in particular. The authors of the report cite Oppenheimer's observation that scenarios are useful because they allow to identify and correct weaknesses in foreign policy strategies.¹

We can interpret the scenarios as "keys" to analyze the Russian strategy – but what exactly is this strategy? It seems unlikely that Russia will relinquish its great power status by 2030 (or potentially beyond), which will determine its tactical moves in the international arena. Neither a change of political leadership nor the impact of any reforms will alter this choice (which would require a deep and comprehensive modernization of the state). Thus, it is highly likely that this positioning will determine the Russian approach to the EU.

As for the European Union, its strategy towards Russia is expressed in the five principles that the EU member states approved unanimously in March 2016. The first of these is that a significant change in the EU-Russia relations is possible only if the Minsk Agreements are implemented. There is no reason to expect that this strategy will change before 2030, that is, in just nine years from now. It has already existed unchanged for four years.

Secondly, the scenarios reflect the significance of power politics in international relations. As certain researchers have noted, the realists have triumphed and continue to expand their supremacy. Not coincidentally, the authors of the report consider that the most important external actors for EU-Russia relations are powerful states (the United States and China) rather than multilateral international institutions.

The rise of power politics is particularly visible in the post-Soviet space. For instance, the recent agreement on Nagorno-Karabakh was "made" not by the OSCE Minsk Group, but by powerful states (Russia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey). Russia actively implements so-called "coercive mediation" practices in conflict resolution processes, where strong regional or global powers are considered the only reliable guarantors of ceasefire agreements and subsequent de-escalation and stabilization. In other words, the great powers are regarded as better mediators than international institutions. It is within this approach that Russia initiates alternative negotiations in critical situations and organizes its own platforms and formats. This approach is fully consistent with Russia's great power status, but it puts the EU in a disadvantageous position because it is essentially a kind of institutional regime, which is fundamentally unable to carry out such mediation.

Thirdly, shrinking resources place constraints on both Russia and the European Union. This is an important framework condition that will determine the choice of priorities, directions, and partners. Such choices are unavoidable, since Russia can be expected to continue to experience relatively low rates of economic growth (the only question is how low they will be). In addition, it is unlikely to be able to overcome its technological inferiority in many areas by 2030, which means that it will lag behind the United States, China, and the European Union in terms of economic and technological competitiveness. This can only be prevented by large-scale reforms, which are not presently foreseeable. It is worth noting that the European Union has been and will remain the only external actor interested in Russian modernization (primarily for security reasons).

Limited resources will force Russia to focus on the most important areas, so its foreign policy will become more targeted. At the same time, the global recession during and after the pandemic will also limit the EU's resources, similar leading it to focus on the most significant foreign policy concerns. In conclusion, I would like to thank the authors of the report and the EUREN group as a whole, who have provided us with a great tool for thinking about the future.

The content of this paper is the sole responsibility of the author and does not represent the position of individual EUREN members or EUREN as a group.

¹ Michael F. Oppenheimer, *Pivotal Countries, Alternative Futures: Using Scenarios to Manage American Strategy* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

