

# Neighborliness as a model for Russia-EU relations in 2030

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. 23](#) by Irina Busygina and [EUREN Brief no. 24](#) by Andrey Melville 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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Russia-EU relations have come a full circle since the 1990 Paris Charter for a New Europe, which represented the diplomatic equivalent of the *End of History*. Its underlying ideas — the vision of a common space from Lisbon to Vladivostok promoted most actively by Russia, and the European expectation of Russia modernizing on the current European model and becoming a sort of an associate of the EU — are gone. Instead, there is deep disappointment, mounting alienation, and growing mistrust and disrespect. Old hopes and new nightmares aside, where might Russia and Europe be a decade from now? Current trends are clearly taking them toward real confrontation, and potentially conflict. What can be done to keep things on an even keel, while not yet again falling for wishful thinking?

In my view, the objective of *neighborliness* offers real improvements and is realistic enough. *Neighborliness* means living side by side, separately rather than together; recognizing the validity of the other's political systems and social morals rather than insisting on conformity with one's own; being able to manage political

adversity in order to avoid direct military conflict with potentially fatal consequences; collaborating on issues of common concern, such as protecting the environment and responding to climate change; trading with each other and engaging in joint economic projects; promoting cultural, scientific, and technology exchanges; facilitating people-to-people contacts; and the like. If the state of Russia-EU relations were to match that description by 2030, it would be a huge improvement over the current situation.

Right now, the trends are still mostly in the opposite direction. Many of the traditional pillars of Russo-European relations are giving way, with nothing solid or lasting being put in their place. Security arrangements are unraveling. The Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty is defunct. The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty has been canceled. The Open Skies Treaty (OST) is in danger. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) is marginalized. Conflicts in places like Ukraine, Belarus, the South Caucasus and potentially Moldova/Transnistria are fueling EU-Russia tensions. As the European theater becomes remilitarized, Europe's security architecture again rests essentially on US-Russian and Russia-NATO mutual deterrence.



Political dialogue has withered to a standstill since the 2014 Ukraine crisis. Russia's relations with the European Union are de facto frozen, and its ties to Germany, formerly Moscow's principal partner in Europe, are broken. To Europe's leaders, the Kremlin lives in a different world that they abhor and reject. To the Russians, European governments are mere vassals of the United States. The arrival of Joe Biden in the White House suggests that the United States and Europe will work hard to repair and strengthen their transatlantic ties in order to oppose, to use U.S. President-Elect Biden's words, the challenge posed by China and the threat from Russia.

Geo-economics is following geopolitics. Russo-European economic ties have been severely hit by sanctions, which have been expanding rather than easing. The sad saga of the Nord Stream II gas pipeline suggests that energy shipments, for decades the backbone of the strategic relationship between Moscow and Europe, are losing their former stabilizing role. A whole fifty-year chapter in Moscow's relations with Western Europe is coming to a close.

A visa-free regime was almost ready to less than a decade ago, but was put on hold by the EU and then became virtually unthinkable after Crimea and Donbass. Mutual suspicion and restrictions reign, backed by accusations of Russian election meddling in EU countries, European interference in the former Soviet states, and assassination plots, including by means of chemical weapons. Many ordinary people-to-people contacts still survive, even despite the pandemic, but the adversity of the present political climate makes values and principles — human rights and democracy — a sore point once again.

A decade is an enormously long time in global politics and economics. Scenarios considering possible changes in international relations, like the ones produced by the EU-Russia Expert Network on Foreign Policy in its recent EUREN Report, are certainly useful and can be illuminating.<sup>1</sup> However, rather than building new scenarios of where Russia and the EU could be by 2030, I propose describing a realistic objective — I call it neighborliness — consistent with the interests and basic positions of the two sides and identifying ways leading to that outcome. For this, I will first indicate where I assume Russia and the Union will each be in 2030, before elaborating on the concept of neighborliness and considering what needs to be done to sustain such a new relationship.

## Russia 2030

For Russia, the next ten years will be decision time. It is likely to be the period of political transition to a post-Putin era, whose actual pace and forms will depend on circumstances which are difficult to foresee. More important and intriguing will be the question of what elements of the rich legacy of Vladimir Putin's long reign will be preserved, which will be modified, and which will be rejected. This is not the place, of course, to speculate at length about these issues. What is relevant for Russia-EU relations is that geopolitically Russia will most probably remain an independent player on the world scene — in other words, a great power. Its resources should suffice for that. Continued confrontation with the U.S.-led West is likely to make the job of domestic consolidation easier rather than harder. Russia will not reverse course and surrender to Washington's demands and Brussels' wishes. Moscow's ties to Beijing and other non-Western capitals will grow substantially.

## European Union 2030

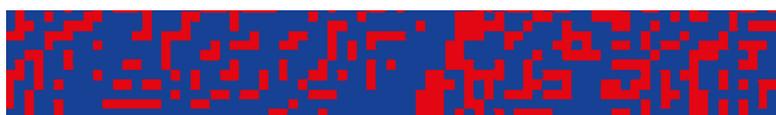
The European Union will have been able to resolve the problems of internal cohesion, both at the intra- and inter-state levels. It is also likely that the EU will acquire a functioning leadership mechanism in which Berlin will be established as the Union's informal leader, Paris as its de facto deputy or junior partner, and other capitals able to win concessions for their support for Germany's lead. In geopolitical terms, the EU as a whole will even more closely follow the United States' lead — in exchange for Washington supporting Berlin's lead within the EU. The West will be restored as a geopolitical concept and re-energized in the context of intensifying confrontation between the United States and China and, to a lesser extent, between the U.S. and Russia.

## Russia-EU “neighborliness” as a new basis for relations?

What, under these circumstances, could form a new lasting basis for Russian-European relations? It can hardly be partnership: the differences run too deep. It should not be hostility. A nuclear war would obliterate Europe. Co-habitation suggests a common roof, which is and will remain missing. Moreover, as life in Soviet-style communal apartments shows, a common roof is no guarantee of friendliness, or even mutual respect. Coexistence is closer to reality, and might well fit, except that the concept is too laden with the memories of the Cold War. The mutual proximity of the parties points

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<sup>1</sup> Sabine Fischer, Ivan Timofeev, Alternative futures of EU-Russia relations in 2030, EUREN Report 2, // <http://www.eu-russia-expertnetwork.eu/en/analytics/2020-11-euren-report>, (November 2020).



to neighborliness as a natural and non-controversial baseline for Russia and the European Union.

A few comments on the principles of neighborliness. The main one is *managing adversity*. Most conflicts in Europe's east will remain unresolved, including those in Ukraine and Georgia. Moldova is another bone of contention, but the future direction of Belarus will be particularly important for the geopolitics of Eastern Europe. With NATO shifting its assets closer to the Russian border, and Russia bolstering its forces in the Western district, remilitarization of the European theater will continue. These, and other issues of conflict, will need to be managed before some sort of a steady state is achieved. Then we could begin talking about a new security architecture in Europe.

In terms of security, though, the European Union will be less relevant. With most EU countries, including Germany, staunchly Atlanticist, European strategic autonomy can only be a supplement to NATO on secondary issues. In relation to Russia, Europe will be wearing the NATO uniform and obeying alliance discipline and U.S. leadership. A stable and durable European security architecture will result from the ongoing Russia-U.S. confrontation, which is likely last for some time, most probably beyond 2030. As of now, the outcome cannot be predicted. The danger to be avoided is Europe again an arena of Cold War-style U.S.-Russian military stand-off. This is likely if the US deploys intermediate-range nuclear missiles — whether nuclear or non-nuclear-armed — in Europe and shifts its significant military deployments closer to the Russian border.

Unlike during the Cold War the main threat is not massive nuclear attack or surprise overland invasion. Military conflagration in Europe could result from escalating incidents, local conflicts that get out of hand, or miscalculations resulting from misperceptions. As already noted, the EU is not the proper authority to tackle these issues with Russia, but NATO is, and will remain so. This, of course, means involvement of the United States as the principal Western party, in communication with Russia. While NATO-Russia relations will stay frankly adversarial, contact and communication between them can be vital for keeping the confrontation in Europe cold.

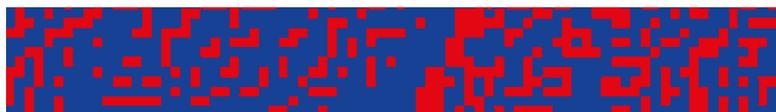
Almost equally important, although much harder, is *accepting diversity*. Russia will not become a European-style democracy in the next decade, nor will Europe bring back the days of bourgeois conservatism, which has suddenly become so dear to latter-day Kremlin ideologues. This major division should not, however, lead to

conflict, or to delegitimization or denigration of neighbors. While lively discussion and heated debate in the public space will continue regardless, EU-Russia and state-to-state relations need to be shielded from that. Russia's participation in the Council of Europe and in the European Court of Human Rights, which are dominated by EU member states, will either foster endless polemics or be called into question amid the new division between Russia and the EU.

Another principle is *dealing with trade and technology as commerce and business*. Economic relations between the EU countries and Russia will no longer revolve around grand projects. The fate of Nord Stream 2 will shape the future. Europe's share of Russia's trade will slowly decline over the next decade, while Russia's trade with China and other non-Western countries will expand. The EU's policies of moving toward carbon neutrality will make it less reliant on hydrocarbons. The diminishing importance of fossil fuels in the global economy will severely challenge Russia, whose foreign trade, even a decade from now, will still heavily depend on oil and gas. The EU-Russia economic relationship will continue, under sanctions, but will be seen essentially as commerce, devoid of any strategic significance.

Russia will still need Europe's advanced technologies, of course, but Europe will continue to restrict its access. These restrictions will probably become more stringent in the next few years, as Europe joins the United States to apply more sanctions on Russia, seeking to pressure it to change its foreign and domestic policies. In response, Russia will probably have to double down on import substitution and digitalization. Further de-dollarization will be as much a result of Russia's yearning for financial sovereignty as the result of US indirect sanctions. With the West not ruling out switching off SWIFT and sanctioning Russia's sovereign debt, development work will have to continue on an autonomous national payments system. There, Russia might cooperate with countries like China and possibly India.

Finally, emphasizing neighborliness would stimulate EU-Russia *collaboration in the shared domains*. Mutual engagement in the geopolitical common neighborhood — from Eastern Europe to the South Caucasus to the Middle East and North Africa — will be challenging or outright impossible for the reasons stated above. Areas like the natural environment and particularly climate would be more propitious for joint efforts. The EU is a champion of international cooperation on those issues, but Russia is also becoming increasingly interested in climate-related issues. No wonder: the pace of climate change in Russia is particularly high. As evidenced by



the COVID-19 pandemic, public health also represents a shared domain. Despite fierce competition in the global pharma business, a degree of cooperation is possible there as well. In a word, the key to neighborliness is minimal mutual respect — however cold it may be and however laden with reservations.

After the grand expectations of a common security space from Vancouver to Vladivostok and economic partnership all the way from the Atlantic to the Pacific, mere neighborliness appears too low a bar — if not an outright mockery. However, from where the

relationship is today, it would be a marked improvement. Moving up to that level, however uninspiring by comparison to the lofty ideas of the recent past, would represent a clear improvement from the current mutual alienation and disengagement. If Russia and the European Union countries can learn to live side by side as neighbors by 2030, the next logical step would be *good* neighborliness.

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