

The new European bipolarity

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Russia and the EU are re-entering a state of bipolarity. How can the EU continue to provide peace and prosperity in the future?



Pro-EU demonstrations in Kiev. Wikimedia commons/Evgeny Feldman. Public domain.

The events which have occurred in Ukraine over the past few months pose several challenges to the European security architecture, to Euro-Atlantic relations, and to the role of the European Union as a regional security actor. More fundamentally, Russia's actions as well as the response from the United States and the EU will determine the future of their bilateral relations and the balance of power - hard and soft - in Europe in the coming decades.

A new [narrative](#) for social and political development, revolving around the return of a Soviet identity and the development of 'Putinism', is openly challenging notions of Europeanization and liberal democracy, which have been the bedrock of European and Euro-Atlantic integration. To be fair, European and North-American leaders are also to blame for the erosion of the normative standing of these values, with double standards and illegitimate action undermining trust and international law, not to mention the hesitant policies towards post-Soviet states' Euro-Atlantic integration.

Nonetheless, the scale of the challenge posed by Russia today is fundamentally different. By challenging post-Soviet states' decision to pursue a liberal democratic path through the use of armed violence, President Putin's Russia has definitively positioned itself outside the European security community. Russia is today not only a direct competitor with this community; it is a threat to its existence.

European security is rooted in the principles established by the [Helsinki Final Act](#) in the 1970s, including the sovereign equality of all states - i.e. their autonomy to define internal and external policies - refraining from the use or threat of use of force, inviolability of borders, territorial integrity, peaceful settlement of disputes, non-intervention in internal affairs, respect for human rights, the self-determination of people, cooperation among states, and the principle of good faith of all international legal obligations (*pacta sunt servanda*). Russia's actions since the escalation of the crisis in Ukraine have violated virtually all these principles, voiding the European security order of a meaningful normative structure.

Such an erosion, however, did not begin in 2014. In fact, Russia has for long claimed that intervention in Kosovo by NATO forces and the recognition of Pristina's unilateral declaration of independence undermined these principles, by interfering in Serbia's domestic affairs and violating its sovereignty and territorial integrity. This interpretation serves Russia's interests in the Balkans, as did the competing narratives from western countries, underlining a duty of intervention in the face of massive human rights violations, but which have been dangerously manipulated and applied with dual standards. The result has been the eroding of an old order, rooted on the safeguarding of national interests and mutual accommodation, and the emergence of competing norms and narratives of peace and stability. The European security order is thus in a state of flux and is being forced to actively reshape itself.

From this perspective, the ongoing crisis in Ukraine is but another violent manifestation of this competition, which had been limited to political and economic dimensions. The enlargement of the Euro-Atlantic institutions illustrates, simultaneously, the consolidation of a security community of peace and prosperity, but also the undermining of Russia's perceived interests in the former-Soviet space. For all the western assurances that promoting democratic and stable nations on Russia's borders would also serve its security interests, Moscow has responded with a narrower view of its interests and an absolute refusal to allow security interdependence to be imposed by Washington or Brussels. This can only be explained by the fundamentally different visions, which are being promoted, in order to fill the vacuum of guiding principles in European security, resulting from these revisionist policies.

Although the argument can be made that the Euro-Atlantic institutions have largely failed to accommodate Russia, the new vision advanced by President Putin is fundamentally irresponsible, as it is based on the erosion of the rule of law, the centralization of economic power in the hands of the political and security elites, the deliberate exacerbation of ethnic fears and incompatibilities, and the use of military power for the advancement of political interests – strategies that have proved disastrous in the European context.

Under Putin, Russia has also sought to rein in important partners through a mix of coercion and positive incentives. Counteracting western-led institutionalization and enlargement of the Euro-Atlantic community, Russia has proposed its own institutional arrangements, such as [the Collective Security Treaty Organization](#), and more recently, the [Eurasian Economic Community](#). This movement towards political, economic and military consolidation has been wrapped by an ethnic nationalist discourse, complemented by the creation of an external enemy, threatening the Orthodox/Slavic identity with liberal western values.

The challenge to the European Union and its peace project

The expansion of Euro-Atlantic institutions has been a fundamental tool in the institutionalization of the post-Cold War order. The EU has been rooted in the [desire to overcome its own history](#) by limiting the power of the nation state through the consolidation of democracies and the establishment of supranational institutions. This system has provided peace and prosperity in Europe for over six decades.

Russia, however, has posed a formidable challenge to the EU project. Russia's role has been ambiguous, and it has gradually advanced its own competing system, undermining the EU's efforts whenever possible.

The EU's hesitant engagement with the eastern partnership countries -- Moldova, Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan -- has left these countries to fare for themselves in the face of competing external pressures. Internal divisions in these countries regarding pro-western and pro-Russian orientations are largely based on misperceptions, oversimplifications, and disinformation by all sides. The west has been portrayed as either a paradise of freedom and prosperity or as disingenuously attempting to undermine Russian (and local) interests and recklessly supporting anti-Moscow 'fascist' regimes. Russia has been showcased as either a protector, an alternative to liberal values alien to these societies, or as a neo-imperialist force, set on countering western interests at all costs. The events in Ukraine prove the latter interpretation to be closer to the truth, requiring a reinforcement of the democratic strength of the remaining European countries.

In the short-term term, the EU's biggest priority is the peaceful management of the Ukrainian crisis and the diffusion of tensions. But in the long-run, the EU will have to think hard about its role as a security provider in

Europe. It is certainly necessary to rethink the future of the Eastern Partnership and the contributions which the process of European integration can create for regional peace and stability. The European market, despite the current crisis, is still one of the most attractive and should be used as leverage. Interdependence with its neighbors makes the EU stronger, not weaker, in trying to shape their behavior in international relations.

Economic strategies, however, need to be complemented with a visible concern for the social impact of the economic crisis and protracted political instability, with which many EU and neighboring countries are confronted – and which Ukraine will further fall into. It is important to remember that the EU's legitimacy has been historically derived mainly from positive outputs of peace and prosperity. That needs to continue as a hallmark of what the EU represents, both at home and abroad.

On the other hand, the consolidation of strong, accountable institutions is fundamental to mitigate street politics, which pose serious challenges to the normal functioning of the democratic process. In order to succeed, the distribution of wealth needs to become more central within the European project, overcoming the inequalities derived from corrupt and undemocratic regimes, which fuel street politics in the first place. In comparison with Russia, the EU is much better positioned to continue to provide security, if these dimensions are reinforced. It is fundamental, however, that its regional project be all inclusive at the margins and reinforced at the core.

The Ukrainian crisis represents a much bigger challenge to peace and stability in Europe than the war in Georgia in 2008. But they are fundamentally the same. Russia is now a full revisionist power of the European security architecture, concerned with the spread of democratic demands to its own territory and to that of its authoritarian allies. In order to achieve its goals, however, Russia has sacrificed the values which have ultimately been the bedrock of its own strength, including issues of non-interference in domestic affairs and sovereignty.

It is important that the EU learns its lessons as well, and reinforces the fundamental aspects which have legitimized its existence and have reinforced its attractiveness: the rule of law, democracy, human rights, and a socio-economic model based on dialogue, social justice, and fair redistribution of wealth. As long as the EU does that, it is set to remain an appealing project and a reliable partner to all its neighbors, including post-Putin Russia.



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