



EU-Russia  
relations

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# EU-Russia relations in the light of Russia's engagement in the Middle East and North Africa

By Agnieszka Bryc

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## EU-Russia relations in the light of Russia's engagement in the Middle East and North Africa

By Agnieszka Bryc\*

### Introduction

Western leaders often tend to see Russia through their own eyes, and find it hard to accept that any successful policy requires an understanding of the key drivers of Russia's international strategy, as well as of the assets and limitations of this strategy. Even more essential is to recognise that any strategy on Russia requires a strong Europe, otherwise Moscow will continue undermining the EU by favouring bilateral relations with the EU's individual member states. This weakens the whole EU bloc. Furthermore, it stokes the populism and far-right sentiment among European societies that has already been fuelled by Russia, and the result is a widespread image of "Europe in decay" (Podberezkin 2015).

In Moscow's view, it is only by challenging the West that Russia is able to improve its international standing (Sakwa 2020). A "business as usual" (Russell 2020) attitude or an unconditional "dialogue with Russia as it is" (Maślanka 2020) is therefore no longer appropriate. In the eyes of the Kremlin, kindness means weakness, as was recently highlighted by Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov during the visit of EU High Representative Josep Borrell to Moscow after the arrest of Russia's opposition leader Alexei Navalny.

Although Russia clearly understands that its potential is in no way comparable to that of the EU27, whose share in global GDP is five times bigger than that of Russia, Moscow nevertheless believes that in order to neutralise the EU politically it is enough to "play on Europeans' weaknesses" (Talseth 2017, p. 256). In Moscow's view, these weaknesses are the lack of EU readiness to establish a common foreign agenda, the lengthy EU decision-making procedures, and the EU's belief that 'Russia might be a reliable partner, not a challenger'.

It is the same belief that drives Russia's policy in the Middle East. However, in this region there are several factors, primarily in terms of strategic culture, that play in Russia's favour (Kuznetsov et al 2018, p. 17). Firstly, the autocratic nature of the Middle Eastern regimes makes Russia a more natural partner for them than the EU, as does their similar strategic culture, which is reflected in an admiration for strength, dictators and kleptocratic governments. Secondly, both Russia and the Middle Eastern regimes place primacy on security issues, with a special role for their armies, not only in politics but also in society. Thirdly, Russia and the Middle Eastern regimes also share anti-Western rhetoric, which is generally formed in the Middle East as the result of a post-colonial syndrome that is then amplified by more recent Western military interventions (for example in Iraq in 2003). This allows Russia to create a picture of itself in the Arab peninsula as a country that is not burdened by an imperial past and that is therefore trustworthy in contrast to Western states. In addition, Russia's cultural conservatism means that the country can be attractive to people

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in the Middle East, for whom European liberalism and democracy is not as familiar as well-known traditional values.

Russia has recently been brought closer to the Middle East because of the country's abandonment of the West in the mid-2000s (Trenin 2006). Since this time, Russia has been challenging the West and has focused on creating an alternative to the Western-led democratic and liberal world order. One of the first signs of this shift came in 2005 when Russia joined the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) as an observer, with Russia's President Vladimir Putin declaring "the Russian and Islamic approaches are the same regarding many international issues" (Baklanov 2020). Russia then departed further from the West in 2008 when the country entered into war with Georgia, and in 2014 when the Russian Federation annexed Crimea (at that time part of Ukraine). Overall, Russia's policy towards the Middle East fits into larger processes in which the Kremlin is engaged, including its challenging of the West, its identification with Eurasia, and its search for balance between the West and a rising China.

### **The key to understanding Russia's engagement in the Middle East**

Its military intervention in Syria in 2015 made Russia an active player in the Middle East and its role there can no longer be ignored. While of significant importance, however, its military intervention in Syria is not Russia's priority (Vasiliev 2018, p. 312). Instead, the Kremlin's policy is primarily driven domestically, and this has been the case since at least 2003 when Putin began centralising his power. The fundamental aim of Russia's ruling elite is to secure the stability of the regime and to avoid challenges and threats from abroad, such as a repetition in Russia of the colour revolutions (Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia) or the Arab spring (2010). Russia's primary interests are in its so-called near neighbourhood (the post-Soviet republics), where the country is determined to apply all measures (including the use of force) in order to defend this area as an exclusive sphere of influence. As long as security threats rooted in the Middle East continue to affect Russia, or its close neighbourhood, Moscow will therefore continue to intensify its activity in the Middle East.

With Russia's point of reference in its international strategy being America, Russia's Middle East policy is actually part of a wider bargaining strategy that includes Washington. It is for this reason that Russia keeps trying to play a role in any international talks concerning the Iranian nuclear programme, non-proliferation, and the fight against terrorism, and it is also for this reason that it undertook military intervention in Syria. Indeed, Moscow considers all of these issues on a par with those in the post-Soviet space – the war in eastern Ukraine (Donbas), protests in Belarus, the security of the Black Sea region, and Western sanctions on Russia.

The Middle East region is therefore important and attractive for Russia for several reasons – the first of which is its geographical proximity. Moscow deems it essential to be present in the Middle East because the key countries from this region, such as Iran, Turkey and recently also Israel, have a substantial impact on the post-Soviet republics. The role of both Turkey and Israel was striking, for example, in the recent Nagorno-Karabakh war in 2020. The Middle East is also an area in which certain threats to Russia's security originate, which have been spreading to the South Caucasus, Central Asia and Russia itself since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Another reason why Russia sees the Middle East as important is security (Lund 2019, p. 12). Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, one seventh of Russia's population is now made up of Muslims. The Kremlin is therefore concerned about the religious and political influence reaching this group of Russia's population from neighbouring Turkey and Iran, and from the Arab peninsula. Indeed, Russia was forced to face the 'Wahabisation' of the Chechen movement for years during the movement's struggle for independence. With much financial and logistic support being transferred to Chechens from the Ciscaucasian diaspora which has lived in Jordan since the Tsarist era, Russia has become determined to increase its activity in the Middle East (Wilhelmsen 2017, p. 58, 63).

Russia's current military presence in the Middle East (in Syria, in Libya with the Private Military Company - Wagner Group, and on the Mediterranean coast with the Russian military base in Tartus) provides Russia with ideal strategic access to the Middle East while limiting the West's ability to manoeuvre. The West, for its part, is clearly not interested in increasing the risk of a military clash with Russian forces in the region or of any escalation in the Middle East. A similar logic to that of the West also motivated Israel when it started the 'deconfliction mechanism' with Russia in 2015, involving regular consultation (several times per year since 2015) between Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Putin with regard to their military action (Bryc 2019, p. 10).

In addition to security interests, Russia has significant economic interests in the Middle East. With buyers of the former Soviet Union's arms still present in the region, Moscow wants to keep as many of these buyers as possible and to invest in obtaining new clients. It therefore saw the war in Syria as a chance to 'showcase' Russian arms, and indeed Russia is the second largest supplier of arms to the region (19%) after the US. The third place is taken by France which supplies 11% (CRS, p. 7).

As well as arms sales, Russia has significant economic and business interests in the energy sector in the Middle East – ranging from nuclear energy to oil and natural gas (Mammadov 2018). The Russian energy companies Rosneft and Gazprom have important projects in countries such as Iran, Iraq and Turkey, and even in Iraqi Kurdistan, as well as in the eastern Mediterranean and North African states. Gaining in its influence over directing Libyan oil and Egyptian gas supplies to Europe, Russia continually tries to undermine Western-backed diversification projects that are designed to bring Caspian oil and gas supplies to European markets. In short, Moscow's activity in North Africa will make the future Trans-Caspian oil pipeline project less economically feasible (Marszewski 2018). Similarly, by becoming a formidable player in a future Egyptian gas hub, Russia will also undermine an expansion of the Southern Gas Corridor (Misiągiewicz 2019, pp. 79-99).

Rosatom, the third Russian state-owned company operating in the Middle East, works in the nuclear energy market. The company has signed deals with Turkey, Iran, Egypt and Jordan for the construction of nuclear power plants in the region, and has also signed a memorandum of understanding on nuclear cooperation with Tunisia. In addition, Rosatom has offered atomic energy cooperation to Saudi Arabia.

Another factor in Russia's engagement with the Middle East is Moscow's desire to keep the West from interfering in Russia's domestic affairs. Putin is convinced that Russia might ultimately become a target of the Western-led uprisings, such as those of the Arab spring in the 2010s, which have resulted in some tectonic changes in the political landscape of the Middle East. In his last annual address to the Russian Federal Assembly, Putin indeed accused

some “hostile foreign actors” of “engaging in domestic issues of a sovereign state”. He continued that “Russia is against foreign provocations” and that “Moscow would respond in a harsh and swift way”. Putin added that Moscow strove to have good relations with other countries, but he warned that no foreign state should cross Russia’s “red lines”. He did not, however, elaborate on the detail of these red lines. “Anyone who stages any provocations that threaten our safety will regret it in a way they’ve never regretted anything before”, he said (Putin 2021).

Its military intervention in Syria in 2015 therefore met Russia’s need not only to perform its first prestigious “military operation abroad (beyond the post-Soviet sphere) since the collapse of the Soviet Union” (Lavrov 2020, p. 106), but also to convince Washington and Brussels that a policy of isolating Russia, marginalising it in world affairs and forcing it to retreat under the weight of US-EU sanctions is doomed to failure.

Nevertheless, despite an image of a successful return to the Middle East, Moscow is fully aware of its fundamental limitations. It does not therefore have an ambition to replace America in the region, nor does it have the capability to play the role of a leading power there. As a consequence, it acts reactively in the manner of an opportunist state.

Furthermore, it is possible that Russia’s activity in the Middle East might be significantly reduced by the growing activity of the American administration under President Joe Biden, who has recently restarted the Vienna talks with Iran. Although Russia seemed to play the role of kingmaker in Syria while the military operation there was taking place, the situation has now changed, with the post-conflict future of Syria becoming the priority. Moreover, a deadlock in the political peace process under Moscow’s umbrella might waste Russia’s military success story, which is another reason why the country is now reducing its activity in the Middle East. Additionally, a growing role of other players in the Middle East (Iran, Turkey, Israel, China or EU member states) is further likely to downgrade Russia, which is now suffering financial problems and an economic recession. The threat of political destabilisation (due to the upcoming Duma elections in September 2021, the protests in support of Navalny, consolidation of the opposition, and protests against electoral fraud as was the case in 2011) will also keep Putin’s focus away from the Middle East and instead on Russian domestic problems and the need to secure the stability of his regime.

Overall, Russia’s success in the Middle East is more the result of clever tactics and its seizure of a few opportunities than of a comprehensive strategy. Its success should thus be seen through the prism of an approach of “filling a strategic vacuum”. This approach typically involves America leaving a region and another country filling the gap (Rumer 2019). The Kremlin’s recipe is simple. It first takes the opportunity of supporting a nation state/government (Syria). It then finds a local partner to reduce costs of involvement, and afterwards provides what is needed – weapons, armaments, diplomatic and economic support – without attaching any ideological preconditions (Makahleh 2018, pp. 78-79).

Russia’s non-ideological position means that in principle Moscow supports ruling authoritarians over revolutionary chaos, and over the rejection of regime change and Islamist radicals, particularly those induced from abroad. It is indeed this picture that has been promoted by Russian Arabic-speaking media outlets in the Middle East like RT and Sputnik. The Middle Eastern media landscape furthermore provides Russia with some unique opportunities, in that state-controlled media, weak independent outlets and growing social

media, combined with a historical suspicion of America and Western narratives, create some useful openings that allow Russia to advance its agenda.

The most recent of Moscow's clever PR campaigns among Middle Eastern countries seemingly involves Covid-19 vaccine diplomacy (Trenin 2020). In August 2020 the Russian vaccine, Sputnik V, was approved in Russia even before large-scale clinical trials had taken place. Although "the first anti-Covid vaccine" (TASS, 2021) campaign was launched to stress that Sputnik is the most affordable vaccine in the world, it nevertheless had the effect of countries such as Iran, Palestine, UAE, Lebanon, Algeria and Tunisia quickly approving it. Russia has thus managed to present itself as a friendly and reliable partner in need.

Although Moscow has managed to build or restore important ties in the Middle East, with its key partners now being Iran, Turkey and Israel, in reality Russia's allies are at the same time its challengers. Indeed, they can downgrade Russia's position, not only in the Middle East, but also in the post-Soviet space. This means that although they are partners, they are definitely only tactical ones, as the following analysis shows more clearly.

First, there is neither a strategic alliance nor mutual trust in Russia-Iran relations. The Kremlin's choice of Iran as a partner is based on Russia's recognition of Iran's growing importance as a regional power which, alongside Iranian-American and Iranian-Israeli tensions, gives Russia many tactical possibilities vis-à-vis America, Israel and the Arab countries (Moore 2014, pp. 47-65). In fact, Russian leaders have no illusions about the nature of the Iranian policy, so its backing of Iran is thus neither unconditional nor unambiguous. In order to maintain a balance, Russia has supported a few UN Security Council resolutions on Iran (three of which imposed light sanctions on that country) and it also formed part of the P5+1 group (together with the other four permanent members of the United Nations Security Council and Germany) that negotiated the nuclear deal with the Iran (Trenin 2006 p. 14). Russia-Iran cooperation in Syria has therefore never been driven by anything except pragmatic calculation. As long as the military operation lasted, Russian and Iranian interests were more or less convergent. Furthermore, Moscow benefited considerably because the Iranians bore the burden of the land operation in Syria (Borshchevskaya 2016, p. 30) and Tehran thus helped expand Russia's regional influence. The change in their interests being largely convergent came once Syria's post-conflict future became the priority issue on the table. While Iran considered it important for Syria's President Bashar al-Assad to survive, Russia did not, and while Tehran insisted on a centralised Syria, Russia was open to a federal option.

Second, Russia-Turkey rapprochement is also more fragile than it appears. In Russia's international strategy, Ankara is something between a friend and a foe (Yildiz 2021). At first glance, both countries have in common their complicated relations with the EU, with both being the targets of criticism for their autocratic regimes, violation of human rights, and corruption. Furthermore, due to its close ties to Russia (shown by the purchase of a Russian-made antimissile system S-400) Turkey's credibility in NATO has been questioned, and this lack of cohesion is seemingly very desirable from Moscow's perspective. Although publicly NATO officials try not to deepen this crisis, the rapprochement of Russia and Turkey has undoubtedly raised momentous challenges for the North Atlantic alliance, and has given Russia a boost in challenging NATO (Pierini 2020, p. 7). At the same time, Ankara has become increasingly assertive, even towards Russia. While during the 2008 Georgia-Russia war Ankara preferred to stay neutral, in 2014 Turkey's President Recep Ayyip Erdogan criticised the Russian Federation's annexation of Crimea and last year supported Azerbaijan in the war over



Nagorno-Karabakh. Although the Kremlin was marginalised at an early stage in this war and could merely watch the situation unfold, Russia eventually managed to seize the diplomatic initiative and forced the conflicting parties in the Nagorno-Karabakh war into a ceasefire. Officially, bringing Armenia and Azerbaijan to the negotiable table was a great success for Russia. However, in reality, Moscow has become worried that Turkey could significantly influence the situation in the South Caucasus, a region which Russia also perceives as its near neighbourhood (De Waal 2021). Russia and Turkey are not free of clashes between themselves either, partly due to both presidents' "macho-style" (Eksil and Wood 2019). Erdogan is known for his overreactions and theatrical gestures, which could be seen by the international public in 2015 when a Russian bomber was accidentally downed by a Turkish fighter jet (BBC 2015). Nevertheless, when Erdogan faced a failed coup d'état in 2016 his first foreign visit was to Saint Petersburg.

Third, with regard to Russia's relationship with Israel, this too is tactical. When Israelis realised in 2015 that "once Russia enters Syria, it will remain there for a long time" (Katz 2018, p. 103) they decided to search for a pragmatic relationship with Russia, given its potential impact on the situation in Israel's direct neighbourhood. Israel primarily wanted to avoid any military clashes with Russian forces while Israel was carrying out air operations against Iranian (or Hezbollah) targets in Syria. Israel and Russia therefore agreed on the 'deconfliction mechanism' in September 2015 in order to help them avoid friendly fire (Krasna 2018, p. 5).

Despite Russia's partners in the Middle East being purely tactical, Russia's importance in the region has been twofold – first, its assurance of the survival of al-Assad's regime; and second, its cooperation with the Iranian proxy, Hezbollah, along the Syria-Israel border. Indeed, Israeli strategists have now for several years been preparing scenarios for a likely war with Hezbollah because they fear that with Russian officers working side-by-side with Hezbollah, a newly offensive-minded Hezbollah capable of more complex operations could deal heavier blows to the Israeli army in a clash along the southern Lebanese border. Furthermore, Israel fears that this newly Russian-influenced Hezbollah may even attempt to enter Israeli territory, as Hamas did in the 2014 Israel-Gaza conflict (Allouche 2016).

Another factor in the tactical Russia-Israel relationship is the 1.5 million Russian-speaking Jews living in Israel (50% coming from Russia and Ukraine) whom Putin usually portrays as "compatriots" and whose votes were needed by Netanyahu during the March 2020 Israeli elections. Netanyahu therefore invited Putin to Jerusalem in January last year, but his invitation did not produce the election vote he had hoped for as the Russian group of Israeli citizens voted (as they had done in previous elections) for various political parties, and not for one 'Russian party'. In fact, by far the most influential role in Israeli politics and business is played by Russian oligarchs who have found a safe haven in Israel (Magen and Naumkin 2013, p. 58). While some have been drawn there by tax breaks for new immigrants, others have sought the advantages of an Israeli passport as a protection against the threat of extradition, or as a means of visa-free entry into the European Union. Among those who have taken these opportunities are Russian oligarchs Roman Abramovich (an owner of Chelsea Football Club), Arkady Gaydamak (a Russian billionaire and owner of the popular Israeli football club Beitar Jerusalem), Valery Kogan (an alleged friend of Putin and co-owner of Moscow's Domodedovo Airport) and Viktor Vekselberg (who was detained for questioning when his plane landed in New York in March 2018, as part of an investigation into possible Russian interference in the 2016 American presidential elections). In short, when analysing the channels of Russia's influence over Israel, it is important to note that the role of Russian-speaking immigrants in

Israel is commonly overestimated, in contrast to the oligarchs who have real access to the highest ranks of Israeli politicians.

With regard to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, Russia has been trying to become a broker in this for years. However, the Kremlin's influence on the peace process remains limited despite Lavrov repeatedly paying lip service to the Palestinians, hosting representatives of Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas (Fatah) and his opponents from Hamas, and Netanyahu's regular visits to Russia every three months. Although Russia is the only member of the Middle Eastern Quartet (the UN, the US, the EU and Russia) that recognises Hamas and Hezbollah in Syria on the one hand, and coordinates its military actions along the Israel-Syria border with Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) on the other, neither Israelis nor Palestinians trust Russia. In their assessments, the Kremlin's policy represents a double standard, whereby Moscow wants to gain further leverage in the Middle East and significant recognition from America.

With regard to North Africa, Russia's entry into this region is far from a strategic success (Ghanem-Yazbeck, Kuznetsov 2018, p. 73). Although Russia has gained access to North Africa through energy cooperation, arms sales and political backing (for example, its backing of General Khalifa Haftar in Libya), its potential remains limited. In essence it lacks room for manoeuvre because the Western actors (France, Italy, NATO, the EU), Turkey and the Arab states are more significantly involved there. Furthermore, greater involvement in North Africa would seem risky for Russia as a geopolitical overstretching could limit its financial capabilities. Indeed, given the West's sanctions on Russia since 2014 (a result of the country's annexation of Crimea) and given Russia's costly involvement in Syria, Russia has engaged selectively where the political, economic and military situation allows – in other words, where it can achieve benefits without excessive costs.

In North Africa, like elsewhere in the Middle East, Moscow has been using its standard tool kit of flexibility and opportunity-seeking. It is therefore simultaneously mediating Libya's civil war and playing the role of supporter of one of the parties there. Officially, however, there are "no Russian troops in the Haftar camp" because, under Russian law, private military companies (PMC) are illegal entities (Reuters 2020). Indeed, Sergei Lavrov therefore stated that "the Kremlin was not responsible for Wagner group there" (Belenkaya 2020). In Morocco, Russia is trying to play a part in the diplomatic skirmishing going on around the war in the Western Sahara. In order to keep balance, Russia has therefore sold weapons to Algeria that could help it confront Morocco. In general, Moscow regards Russia's presence in North Africa more as a question of business opportunities and a chance to secure military positions beyond the Black Sea than as an opportunity to expand to such an extent as to marginalise other players.

When analysing Russia's engagement in the Middle East, it is clear that Moscow faces at least three limitations in the region. The first is China's growing involvement in the Middle East; the second is the 'America is back' scenario which comes with the new Democrat administration; and the third is a domestic crisis in Russia which is caused by its poor economic situation and the political tensions that could continue until the Duma elections in September 2021.

In the medium-term, the rise of China in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region will undermine Russia's capabilities there. Even Israel (one of the most solid American allies) has not avoided Chinese investments, and indeed this issue has become a flashpoint in Israel-

America bilateral relations (Harel 2021). The American administration has repeatedly expressed reservations about an expansion of Chinese influence in Israel, and has warned its Israeli counterparts that this trend endangers America's strategic interests in the Middle East.

Nevertheless, Chinese companies have become increasingly active in Israel's economy. This is mostly through construction projects, including the digging of the Carmel tunnels in Haifa, construction of a light rail system in Tel Aviv, the expansion of Ashdod port, and – most alarming for America – the extension of Haifa port (as it is situated next to Israel's main naval base). America fears that this location grants China access to a variety of information – from that concerning industrial control systems, to the level of activity at the Israeli naval base, which may include naval manoeuvres by America and other Israeli allies (Greenert and Bird 2021).

Chinese activity in the Middle East is nothing new, however. Beijing's strategy is based on a '1+2+3 cooperation pattern' ('1' energy as a core interest; '2' infrastructure construction, trade and investment; '3' nuclear energy, satellites, and new energy sources). China's communication to the region is as follows: (1) we can get you where you want to go economically; (2) we are a force for regional stability; (3) we are not the United States. Overall, China's approach appears to compete with Russian plans for greater influence in the region (Lons et al. 2019). Given that Moscow is not capable of challenging the Chinese investments in the region, Russia is instead therefore likely to fuel the fears of the Middle Eastern countries regarding China's growing influence, and to count on the hope that the Middle East will continue to play a relatively peripheral role in China's global strategy.

### **Russia's view of EU involvement in the Middle East**

Undoubtedly Moscow does not perceive the EU as its Middle East challenger, and indeed has been using 'cherry picking' tactics with regard to the EU by focusing on the big European member states instead of the EU27 as a bloc. In contrast to autocratic states (Russia, China) and America, which is a superpower, Russia believes that the European 'soft-power' is clearly likely to be less effective there.

Despite this, Russia has been successfully exploiting all aspects of the EU's weakness – starting with the EU's lack of a consistent, credible and attractive message to the region. Downgrading the West – and the EU as part of it – comes easily to Russia, which plays on the fact that it is difficult for the EU to build its credibility when, on the one hand, the EU27 bloc highlights democratisation and human rights, but when on the other hand individual EU member states seek good relations with certain Middle Eastern leaders who violate these values on a daily basis (Mohammad bin Salman, Saudi Arabia) (Chambers 2019), and when some EU member states (like France and Germany) supply weapons to Arab countries (SIPRI 2020).

In addition, Russia usually plays on Europe's historical burden to undermine the EU's relations with the Middle East. Russia thus typically emphasises its own lack of colonial past in the Middle East, and thereby contrasts itself with the European states and their history of colonisation. Fuelling anti-Western sentiment has been a very useful tool for Russia, and combined with conspiracy theories, it enables Russia to stoke mistrust of the West (America and the EU) in the Middle East. Furthermore, the lack of a single EU voice on Middle East issues enables Moscow to highlight European frictions on a variety of issues – ranging from a failure to find consensus on hosting refugees, to the open rivalry between France and Italy over Libya.

## **Implications for the EU**

Despite these weaknesses, the EU has some substantial 'ready to use' tools to meet the needs of MENA countries (for example, financial and social aid, R&D) (ECFR MENA 2019). As far as the EU's engagement with Russia is concerned, application of the five principles guiding the EU's relationship with Russia (outlined by former High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini in March 2016) must be a fundamental precondition for any EU engagement..

This paper puts forward that Brussels needs to realise that one of the most effective measures for the EU to influence Russia in general, including Moscow's actions in the Middle East, is to intensify EU activity in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood (for example by reviving the Eastern Partnership programme; providing real support to civil society in Belarus; focusing not only on the war in Donbas but also on the illegal annexation of Crimea), because it is the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood that is the most important area for Russia.

The EU's revitalisation of the Eastern Partnership would indeed be understood in Moscow as a very clear message that the EU has adopted a realistic assessment of Russia's foreign strategy, is not naïve (as Russians traditionally perceive Brussels) and knows well where to push. Given that Russia looks at world affairs through 19<sup>th</sup> century Realpolitik eyes, Brussels needs to communicate with the authorities in Moscow in a very clear and straightforward way.

The Russia-EU relationship does not in fact need to be strategic. Brussels can easily play the card of downgrading or improving Russia's special status in mutual relations. The EU could thus touch one of Russia's most sensitive points, namely its desire to gain/keep/upgrade international prestige.

It is important for Europe not to buy into Russia's image of itself as a major power, including in the Middle East. This European stance should be taken regardless of Russia's improved position in the Middle East, which it did not achieve because of its own power or a comprehensive strategy but thanks to others' weaknesses. Overall, it is crucial for the EU to understand Russia's limitations in its foreign engagements.

For Russia, conflict resolution is a weak point in its Middle East policy, which is not the case for the EU. Although Russia is able to take part in a military operation, it is nevertheless too weak to solve the Syrian conflict, let alone initiate post-conflict rebuilding. The Russian approach is thus more appealing to the ruling elites, as it promotes a form of stability without any ideological conditionality being attached. The EU, however, has strong capacities to support the democratic aspirations of societies on the ground. This is particularly true in North Africa, where the EU can help strengthen an agenda of security, social justice, and human rights.

Moreover, the recent arrival of the Joe Biden administration in America constitutes a real opportunity not only for Europe but for the European Social Democratic agenda. Indeed, in his first foreign policy speech Biden declared: "America is back. Diplomacy is back at the center of our foreign policy" (Dipnote 2021). The EU should therefore participate in America's pro-democratic campaign, for example by promoting ideas of reviving multilateral forums in the Middle East (including the Middle East Quartet or P5+1).

This upcoming opportunity for European diplomacy can also be seen in the announcement by the Biden administration of America's desire to return to talks with Iran regarding the Iranian

nuclear programme. However, this will also be an opportunity for Russia, which has been in close contact with Tehran and continues to be an active player in the Iranian nuclear issue. Russia would therefore have to be engaged by Washington should America want to resume its diplomatic efforts on Iran. This means that if a diplomatic bargain is struck in the Middle East, Moscow will very likely test the EU, with Russia checking first the ability of the EU27 to overcome its internal differences and, second, the condition of transatlantic relations under the Biden administration.

The EU's cooperation with Russia is certainly not impossible and might be beneficial for the EU – but only when the bloc defines some very clear preconditions, otherwise Moscow would take such an initiative as a sign of weakness of a 'soft-power empire' vis-à-vis Russian hard power. There is clearly at least one area where Russia and the EU are able to cooperate based on a win-win logic – the fight against terrorism. Undoubtedly, both Russia and the EU share an interest in preventing and countering Jihadist movements, globally and in the Middle East.

While the fight against climate change does not feature on Russia's Middle East agenda, the EU by contrast is capable of addressing ecological needs in the MENA region – for example by copying German-Israeli cooperation experiences in R&D. Indeed, the EU could give a strong impulse on climate change to the Middle East, not only via the Horizon programme, but also by offering more scientific scholarships to leading European universities, and by promoting student exchanges and peer to peer contacts.

### **Conclusions**

This paper puts forward that the EU and its member states should move from an attitude to a policy towards Russia, including in the Middle East.

Russia's policy in the Middle East, for its part, is not lacking in weak points or limitations. Essentially the Middle East is of secondary importance to Russia, given that Moscow's priorities are its interests in the post-Soviet space and those with regard to America.

An effective EU policy towards Russia requires the EU's strong and predictable international presence. This would come about by the EU eliminating the weak points of its policy towards the Russian Federation in general, and by eliminating the weak points of its policy towards Russia in the Middle East, specifically.

The EU's cooperation with Russia is not something impossible. However, to be successful, it should primarily result from a clear concept and a solid strategy. Brussels needs a carrot-and-stick policy, as an overly positive attitude to Russia is seen by the Kremlin as EU weakness. The Kremlin meanwhile needs to learn that it is worth keeping partner relations with the EU rather than escalating diplomatic crises. For its part, the EU needs to decide what is the most important for its future. Should it allow some actors to destroy its internal cohesion and weaken its values by fuelling populism so that the EU finally disintegrates, or should it focus on revitalising European integration, even if this is at the cost of reducing relations with countries that pose a danger to the European value system?

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