

# On A Collision Course

## The EU and Russia Revisit Europe's Recent Past

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 20

*Viatcheslav Morozov*

*St. Petersburg State University*

*August 2008*

Recent studies have pointed to a fundamental transformation of the way in which the European Union imagines itself and establishes legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens and external audience. Since its inception in the aftermath of the Second World War, the cornerstone of the European integration project was the idea of redemption (i.e., that we integrate because we do not want our past to repeat itself). Now, the EU's identity is increasingly based on a feeling of moral superiority and the resulting desire to expand its own normative order past its current boundaries (i.e., we are better than our neighbors and we want them to be, for security reasons, like us). After summarizing recent findings on EU identity, I focus on the consequences of this transformation for EU-Russia relations. I argue that the new assertiveness of the EU puts it on a collision course with Russia. In particular, Russia has recently come to reappropriate its Soviet history in a way that jars with Europeans' now settled views of their own past. Far from being just about "images," this conflict has already had an effect on many aspects of international relations in wider Europe. The U.S. foreign policy community should at least be aware of the reality of this controversy. The United States could also try to engage in a dialogue with Europeans by, inter alia, bringing in its own historical experience, even though this could prove to be painful for Americans themselves.

### **The New EU as a *Finalité Politique***

Throughout the early decades of its existence, the European Community was a

unique political entity because of the centrality of temporal, rather than spatial, aspects to its identity and legitimacy. Even though the USSR posed an external threat to the existence of the West, the EC was created first and foremost to deal with Europe's own past. Integration was the West European response to the enormous moral challenge posed by the fact that the two World Wars, concentration camps, and totalitarian dictatorships had their origins in European civilization. While economic considerations played a role, the benefits of a single market were less important in themselves than as a means to make certain that Europeans would never again butcher each other for the sake of "nation" or "race."

As pointed out by a number of scholars, most notably Thomas Diez, this identity of "Never Again" has been replaced in the post-Cold War era by a new and much more self-confident "European Self." The new European identity is based on the premise that Europeans have managed to leave their totalitarian past behind, and that their main security challenges are now located on the other side of the Union's borders. Thus, as Pertti Joenniemi of the Danish Institute for International Studies has pointed out, only external threats were dealt with in the 2003 European Security Strategy, while the once central theme of a possible clash between member states was not mentioned. According to Thomas Christiansen of the European Institute for Public Administration, the new European image of political reality includes the EU as a *finalité politique* – a completed project, a utopia made reality.

One consequence of this is that the temporal and spatial dimensions of European identity have exchanged places. The past, which used to be within the EU and set the system of coordinates for European political thinking, is now relevant outside of it. EU member states perceive that they (with the partial and temporary exception of a few less disciplined ones) have already reached the end of history, while the Union's neighbors are still far from the democratic ideal. The EU's mission and identity are no longer rooted in critical self-reflection but amount to criticizing others (their neighbors in particular) and to trying to bring them closer to the idealized image of the EU "self." This is the key rationale behind the European Neighborhood Policy, which addresses external security concerns by putting the democratization imperative on the agenda of EU relations with neighboring states. Much like the classical model of the modern nation-state, the new European identity implies a community of values that has to be defended against external threats. Unfortunately, this identity is also much less inclined than the old "Never Again" model to tolerate difference.

## **History and Security in EU-Russia Relations**

The debate about the recent deterioration of EU-Russian relations has highlighted the fact that the new EU includes a number of states that, due to their historical experience, are much more critical of Russia than the states of

“old” Europe. This argument, however, does not take into account the shift in approach within “old” Europe itself. Whereas the previous rounds of enlargement were negotiated as deals between more or less equal partners, the eastern enlargement was premised on the Union’s right to set conditions of membership and, thus, of “Europeanness.” In addition, enlargement was conceptualized as a security endeavor, an approach later extended even to those neighboring states not seen as prospective members. In this way, the EU project was joined to the American project of democracy promotion.

Russia is not alone in its unhappiness with what it sees as a Western democratic crusade. A number of studies, focused on different regions from the Middle East to Africa, have argued that a formal approach to democracy promotion, a propensity to opt for simple institutional solutions, and a lack of respect for local political processes have caused general discontent and often put pro-Western local political activists in awkward positions. However, Russia has been among the most vocal critics of the Western project, mostly because it considers itself a great power. This self-description, by definition, necessitates an insistence on one’s sovereign right to political autonomy in both domestic affairs and the setting of foreign policy priorities.

Yet what really singles Russia out from a wide circle of disgruntled non-Westerners and puts it on a direct collision course with the EU are interpretations of twentieth-century history. Victory over Nazi Germany occupied a key place in Soviet ideology, which interpreted it, broadly speaking, as proof of the superiority of socialism over capitalism. In achieving his declared aim of restoring the Russian state from the ruins of Soviet collapse, Vladimir Putin elevated the Second World War to the rank of a foundational event in the history of the new Russia. The official story, reproduced in official statements and school textbooks, holds that Russia has always been a European power that has contributed a great deal to the development of European civilization. The defeat of Nazism – an evil originating in the very heart of Europe – was one of the most decisive contributions establishing Russia as a proud member of the European family of sovereign nations.

This story, of course, is completely unacceptable to most “new” Europeans, in particular the Baltic states and Poland, who insist on their own image of Russia as an aggressive barbarian power and the exact opposite of Europe. However, the official Russian interpretation of the Second World War is also hardly at home with the majority of Europeans, for whom these events continue to provide a basis for critical reflection about the nature of their own civilization. The Russian black-and-white interpretation looks flawed to them, if only because it was a war *within* Europe and thus the dividing lines often run through their own families and national histories. Most Russians, on the other hand, are firmly opposed to attempts at drawing parallels between Nazism and Stalinism. Not without reason, they see these as attempts to exclude today’s Russia from Europe by making it responsible for the crimes of the Soviet

dictatorship.

Competing interpretations of the end of the Cold War and collapse of the USSR almost exactly mirror those of the Second World War. The EU claim to moral superiority is anchored in the story of the end of the Cold War as a triumph of the Western model and the moment when Europe became whole and free again. Putin, on the other hand, has repeatedly insisted that the USSR, its leaders, and its citizens played a crucial role in ending the division of Europe. At the same time, Soviet collapse and the painful reforms of the following decade remain for Russians a theme of constant critical introspection about past illusions and mistakes. According to this account, the end of the Cold War was not a capitulation, but it was not a triumph of democracy either. Too many hopes were ruined in the process of “democratic transition,” and too many promises broken, to make it possible for Russians to see this period as marking their country’s unproblematic return to European civilization.

Identity politics, rooted in conflicting interpretations of history, are at the core of the political disagreement which currently defines EU-Russia relations. While both sides recognize their “objective” interdependence, the benefits of that interdependence can only be reaped if the other’s actions are predictable. Predictability, in turn, depends on the availability of shared stories we can refer to and project into the future. When the stories about the past are radically different, interdependence is a problem rather than a solution. In the current setting, the benefits and potential benefits of EU-Russia cooperation carry less weight than mutually exclusive security concerns.

## **Any Role for the United States?**

As a confrontational pattern between the EU and Russia has taken shape, the United States has not been a neutral observer. On the contrary, U.S. security policy, based on the idea of democracy promotion, has contributed to the construction of the new European divide, and that between Russia and the Euro-Atlantic community more broadly. However, the post-Cold War experience of the United States has been very different from that not only of Russia but of the EU. Even the shock from the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, has not led to such a deep structural transformation of identity as has happened in the EU. The first lesson the U.S. foreign policy community could draw from the analysis of current EU-Russian relations is that it is necessary to understand how each side’s perspective on contemporary affairs is colored by the stories they tell about their recent past.

Second, one is tempted to speculate about a possible third story the United States might tell at this particular moment in its history. On the one hand, the image of the “city upon a hill,” of an exceptional country whose mission is to spread democracy throughout the world, is likely to remain the foundation of U.S. foreign policy. On the other hand, the mixed results of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have been interpreted by parts of the American public as

an indication that the United States' role in global affairs needs to be reconsidered. This could lead to a return to isolationism or, on the contrary, to a search for new terms of engagement with the outside world.

What will probably be crucial for the success of this quest is a willingness to treat different interpretations of past and present as rooted in the unique historical experience of each political community, rather than as caused by "distortions," "misperceptions," or "manipulation." One does not have to endorse, or even to tolerate, certain political positions one finds unacceptable. However, as the story of Russia's relations with the West demonstrates, being self-righteous is not the best way to persuade someone whose experience is very much unlike one's own to accept a new set of values. Far from being a sign of weakness, recognizing its own mistakes could give the United States an edge over the EU in dealing with Russia, as well a new sense of moral leadership. It may be a radical suggestion to say that the world's only superpower must admit to its own imperfections, but this is in the end what the West expects from Russia. Judging by Barack Obama's July 2008 speech in Berlin, it seems that at least one candidate in this year's presidential race is ready to try and take this risky path.

PONARS Eurasia publications are funded through the International Program of Carnegie Corporation of New York. The views expressed in these publications are those of the author alone; publication does not imply endorsement by PONARS Eurasia, Georgetown University, or the Carnegie Corporation.

© PONARS Eurasia 2008