

WAITING FOR THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION CAN WE EXPECT A CHANGE IN EU-RUSSIA RELATIONS?

VIŞNE KORKMAZ

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CONTENTS

SUMMARY	7
STRAINED EU-RUSSIA RELATIONS –BUT WE ARE STILL IN “BUSINESS AS USUAL” MODEL	8
ENERGY PARTNERSHIP: NEITHER A HONEYMOON NOR A DIVORCE	10
WHY IS KEEPING THE DIALOGUE OPEN BETWEEN MOSCOW AND BRUSSELS DIFFICULT?	12
FACTORS REDUCING THE ESCALATION POTENTIAL IN EU-RUSSIA RELATIONS	13
WILL BIDEN’S PRESIDENCY BRING ANYTHING NEW TO THE TABLE?	14
WHAT DOES A “TRANS-ATLANTIC RESET” MEAN FOR RELATIONS WITH MOSCOW?	16
KEY PROBLEMS IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD: INSUFFICIENT EUROPEAN NEIGHBORHOOD POLICY (ENP) AND TURBULENT RELATIONS WITH TURKEY	17
CONCLUSION	20

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SUMMARY

The analysis elaborates, among others, on the Biden Administration's European expectations and offers an outlook on potential future political and geostrategic relations and developments between the EU, Russia, the United States, and Turkey.

This analysis explores the relations between Russia and the EU in terms of energy partnership and geopolitical cooperation and confrontation. It explores how the EU's lack of diverse capabilities in the areas of defense and energy affects the union's ability to develop an alternative dialogue framework with Moscow. The analysis elaborates, among others, on the Biden Administration's European expectations and offers an outlook on potential future political and geostrategic relations and developments between the EU, Russia, the United States, and Turkey. The competitive relations between the EU and Russia seem likely to continue during Biden's tenure as president of the USA.

STRAINED EU-RUSSIA RELATIONS – BUT WE ARE STILL IN “BUSINESS AS USUAL” MODEL

Brussels and Moscow have been witnessing a cooling of their relations to the point, one could argue, of reaching the freezing point. This is not surprising as Russia challenged the EU's stability, security, and norm diffusion capacity both in the 2008 Georgian war, and in the 2013-2014 crisis in Ukraine. Since then, Brussels and Moscow seemed to be dragged into a vicious cycle of sanctions and countersanctions, and endless confrontations in different fronts like the Navalny protests, Belarus, Moldova, Syria, and Libya. By January 2021, although EU members did not agree to take additional restrictive measures against Russia on the imprisonment of Russian opposition figurehead Alexei Navalny, it seems unlikely that Brussels will lift the European sanctions on Russia following Russian assertiveness in Ukraine.

There are also various problematic issues in the EU-Russia relations. European leaders, for example, accused Moscow of cyberattacks on certain European parliaments, of meddling in internal affairs of European states by giving support to far-right or separatist parties in European politics like the FPÖ in Austria, the AfD in Germany, the Northern League in Italy, and the Brexit Party in the UK. On occasion, the Kremlin has been accused of engaging in propaganda operations in Europe via social media. That is why, for some Europeans, the poisoning of Navalny, or that of the former GRU official Skripal, is not just another attempt by the Kremlin to silence critics of Russia, but a part of the Russian campaign to destabilize the EU and intervene in European politics.

Today, Brussels continues to follow the guideline drawn by the five principles that were declared in 2016 by Mogherini, a former High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, in order to manage its relations with Russia.¹ However, it is also clear that during the last five years, Brussels has failed to achieve the political objectives embedded in these principles: *full implementation of the Minsk agreements on Donbass, closer ties with Russia's former Soviet neighbors, strengthening EU resilience to Russian threats, keeping Russia selectively engaged with the EU, and support for people-to-people contacts*. In October 2020, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov warned that Russia might end all dialogue and contact with the EU² and

1 “Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini at the Press Conference Following the Foreign Affairs Council”, 14.03.2016, https://ec.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/5490/remarks-by-high-representativevice-president-federica-mogherini-at-the-press-conference-following-the-foreign-affairs-council_en, (Accessed on 11 December 2020).

2 Fyador Lukyanov, “Is Russia's Dialogue with the EU Coming to an End?” *The Moscow Times*, 15.10.2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/10/15/is-russias-dialogue-with-the-eu-coming-to-an-end-a71766>, (Accessed on 11 December 2020).

after that on different occasions he kept voicing the same warning.³ The EU Foreign Affairs Chief Joseph Borell's February 2021 visit to Russia was symbolic in this regard. The visit was shadowed by Kremlin's decision to expel 3 European diplomats for attending pro-Navalny rally and led critics against Borell's diplomatic stand at the face of Russia.⁴ Besides, no common space and no roadmap exist between the EU and Russia, and no one expects any positive development in this regard. Despite this fact, no one expects a radical shift toward fully confrontational relations either. It is true that western strategists have sought new instruments to constrain or contain Russian influence for a while, but the European market is still important for Russia and Russian energy resources are important for Europeans despite the changing conditions of the European energy market. In other words, the parties know that they need to maintain contact with each other.

This necessity is known as the "business as usual" model.⁵ This model indicates that Russia and the EU, as mutually dependent actors in commercial relations, foremost in the East-West energy trade, prefer to avoid using force and cutting their economic relations, and try hard to keep mutual political dialogue open in order to be able to capitalize on geo-economic opportunities. That is why Mogherini's five guiding principles were praised as being flexible enough to keep a "selective engagement with

Russia" - one of the objectives of the union's future Russian strategy.

Adopting an alternative strategy towards Russia needs certain military and diplomatic capabilities which Europeans currently lack. The shortages are not limited to money and military capacity; above all, the EU 27 has no common security and foreign policy vision. Furthermore, the EU is divided by economic and social divergencies, which is why EU member states prefer to adopt national strategies for damage control vis-à-vis Russia. However, even these national initiatives and strategies, like Macron's Russian policy, have limitations when they aim to create a change in Moscow's assertive behavior. By recognizing EU's limitations after the 2020 U.S. presidential elections, Europeans expect to receive support by the Biden Administration to strengthen the European area of influence vis-à-vis Russia in the European neighborhood.

Europeans must face the necessity of revising their expectations on the future support of the U.S. in EU mediation and regionalization policy efforts in Georgia, Ukraine, Karabakh, Moldova, and the Western Balkans.

Regarding the future relations between the U.S., Europe, and Russia, however, it might be difficult for Biden's foreign policy team to match the Europeans' expectations since the contours of U.S.-Russia relations and EU-Russia relations will hardly change under the new administration. Regarding the U.S.-Russia relations, the Biden Administration has to find appropriate instruments to deal with the Russian Anti Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) challenge, while Europeans seem to have critical shortcomings

3 Michael Daventry, "Russia 'Ready' to Break in Relations with the EU, Says Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov", *Euronews*, 12.02.2021, <https://www.euronews.com/2021/02/12/russia-ready-for-a-break-in-relations-with-the-eu-says-foreign-minister-sergey-lavrov>, (Accessed on 20 March 2021).

4 "A Predictable Mistake, MEPs Slam over Borell's Moscow Trip", *Euronews*, 09.02.2021, <https://www.euronews.com/2021/02/09/a-predictable-mistake-meps-slam-borrell-over-moscow-trip> (Accessed on 18 March 2021)

5 Tom Casier, "Not on Speaking Terms, But Business as Usual: The Ambiguous Coexistence of Conflict and Cooperation in EU-Russia Relations", *East European Politics*, Vol: 36, No:4, (2020), pp. 529-543.

in terms of political determination and consistency to spend more on developing strategic autonomy. Europeans also need time and money to provide the EU with an energy security resilience against Russia.

Europeans must face the necessity of revising their expectations on the future support of the U.S. in EU mediation and regionalization policy efforts in Georgia, Ukraine, Karabakh, Moldova, and the Western Balkans. Throughout this revision, apart from power projection and a capacity problem, Brussels should solve two basic problems which are affecting the bargaining power of the Europeans vis-à-vis Russia: Firstly, the internal difficulties of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP). Secondly, the EU's turbulent relations with Turkey.

ENERGY PARTNERSHIP: NEITHER A HONEYMOON NOR A DIVORCE

In the last half decade, even in terms of energy relations, Russia-EU relations were far from smooth. Moscow, for example, cancelled the South Stream pipeline project and instead invested in TurkStream as a reaction to legislative obstacles put by the Third Energy Package (TEP) of the EU and European sanctions targeting Russia. The future of Nord Stream II – one of the symbols of the Russian-European energy partnership – continues to be uncertain despite the fact that 95% of its infrastructure has been completed. At the end of 2020, in accordance with the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), the annual U.S. defense bill brought tough sanctions on the Nord Stream II pipeline project. These sanctions are designed to “target any companies and individuals providing help to the project including upgrading

of a ship needed to lay the pipeline, verification of equipment used to lay the pipeline, and insurance.”⁶ The NDAA was a bipartisan act, so investors of the Nord Stream II continue to be worried that the extension of U.S. sanctions on the project under the Biden Administration will cover not only private but public companies as well. The administration, that is continuing to describe the project as “a bad deal for Europe” is under the legal requirement to submit a report to Congress in every three months to name entities involved in the pipeline construction that are eligible for sanctions and the next report is expected to be ready in May 2021.⁷

Furthermore, the NDAA and the negative U.S. stance on Nord Stream II are not the only impediments ahead of the project. In addition, Europeans, and even the German authorities, are not always on the same page with the proponents of the project. For example, in May 2020, Germany refused to extend waivers of EU gas directives to the operators of Nord Stream II in order to overcome TEP regulations.⁸ And in January 2021, following the imprisonment of Navalny, members of the European Parliament voted in favor of a non-binding resolution calling for an immediate halt of the project.⁹ Despite these obstacles, delaying or canceling Nord Stream II will not be an easy option for Germany since millions of euros

⁶ Timothy Gardner, “Russia to Germany Gas Pipeline Targeted in US Defense Bill” Reuters, 4.12.2020, <https://in.reuters.com/article/us-usa-defense-congress-nord-stream/russia-to-germany-gas-pipeline-targeted-in-us-defense-bill-idINKBN28E31I>, (Accessed on 11 December 2020).

⁷ Natasha Bertrand, Ben Lefevre, Andrew Desiderio, “Biden Ready-ing New Sanctions on Russia over Nord Stream II Pipeline”, *Politico*, 12.03.2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/03/12/biden-sanctions-nords-stream-pipeline-475552> (Accessed on 18 March 2021).

⁸ “Germany Denies Nord Stream 2 Pipeline Waiver of EU Rules”, *EURACTIV*, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/energy/news/germany-denies-nord-stream-2-pipeline-waiver-of-eu-rules/>, 17 May 2020, (Accessed on 11 December 2020).

⁹ Jorge Liboreiro, “EU Parliament and Biden Administration Pressure Germany to Stop Russia Pipeline”, *Euronews*, <https://www.euronews.com/2021/01/27/nord-stream-2-eu-parliament-and-biden-administration-pressure-germany-to-stop-russia-pipeline> on 27 January 2021).

have already been spent on the project. In March 2021, a spokesperson from German Ministry of Finance confirmed that Berlin is in contact with Washington on Nord Stream II and sanction issue and the rumors about bargaining between Germany and the U.S. to acquire sanction relieved construction and operation of Nord Stream II.¹⁰

By the time of writing this paper, the EU did not manage to build a complete energy security resilience to Russian gas and the Nord Stream II project continues to be one of its energy diversification options. The Russian side also has every reason to want to complete the Nord Stream II project. It means money and keeping having access to European market bypassing the Ukrainian route. However, there is confusion among Europeans on this almost completed project, and this makes the Kremlin angry and nervous. This confusion is a direct result of the changing dynamics of the European energy market. The market has become increasingly more competitive and diversified, and reveals a potential of being buyer-friendly in the future. “Gas-on-gas competition” is strengthening in the market and developments in the LNG sector and energy infrastructure as well as the availability of U.S. shale-based LNG for European buyers affects this change. Moreover, in November 2020, the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) began its operations by carrying Azeri gas to Europe. Like the Trans Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP), the TAP is one of the legs of the Southern Gas Corridor (SGC) and is strengthening the European energy security by offering a non-Russian gas option to the market. The European security strategy tactics, like the anti-monopolization and liberalization of the energy market, the unification of energy infrastructure throughout the EU, increasing energy efficiency and the share

of renewables and clean energy resources in the energy mix, also reinforce the bargaining position of European buyers vis-à-vis Russia. In the future, if the ultimate objective of the EU Green Deal, namely the decarbonization of the European economy, is achieved, it will create a radical impact on the energy relations between the EU/European states and Russia. Today, however, according to observers, we are not at that point. There is no sign of a honeymoon in the Russia-EU energy relations. At the same time, the two parties are not in a position to divorce either. In value, both the extra EU 27 (the trade between the EU and the rest of the World) total and Russian imports of energy products (mainly natural gas and oil) rose between 2016 and 2018, and

The Baltics and the Eastern European countries are still in need of reducing their dependence on Russian gas exports.

experienced a very slight fall in 2019.¹¹ Despite this decrease, Russia was the largest supplier of natural gas to the EU, both in 2019 (44.7%) and in the first semester of 2020 (39.3%). In terms of oil, Russia keeps its domination: the Russian share in the oil imports to the EU 27 was 28% in 2019, and 26.4% in 2020. Accordingly, energy imports to the EU from Russia as a share of total imports to the EU from Russia increased by 3.2 percentage points from 61.4% in 2016 to 64.6% in 2020.¹²

The Baltics and the Eastern European countries are still in need of reducing their dependence

11 “EU Imports of Energy Products: Recent Developments”, October 2020, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/pdfs-cache/46126.pdf>, p. 7. (Accessed on 17 December 2020).

12 Ibid., (Accessed on 11 December 2020).

10 Bertrand, Lefevre, and Desiderio, “Biden Ready New Sanctions”.

	SHARE IN 2016	SHARE IN 2019	SHARE IN 2020 (FIRST SEMESTER OF 2020)
Energy imports to the EU from Russia	61.4%		64.6%
Russian share in oil exports to the EU		28%	26.4%
Russian export of natural gas to the EU		44.7%	39,3%

on Russian gas exports. They took some initiatives in this regard like the LitPol Link, but still these countries need time, money, or financial funding from the EU, and coordinated political support from both the EU and the U.S. in their search for alternatives to Russian gas.¹³ Unless these conditions are provided to them, they must find incentives to deal with Russia. At the same time, they are afraid of the Kremlin's policies because of continuing dependence on Moscow's energy power and try to balance it with a more anti-Russian stance. This dilemma can, on the one hand, hinder the building of a consistent EU policy vis-à-vis Russia. On the other hand, it carries the risk of creating further divisions and confusion in European cycles regarding the appropriate strategy against Russia and may strengthen the nationalist tendencies of the member states, which in turn can emphasize bilateralism in dealing with the Kremlin.

WHY IS KEEPING THE DIALOGUE OPEN BETWEEN MOSCOW AND BRUSSELS DIFFICULT?

Putting the blame on the aggressive Russian foreign policy in the near and far neighborhood of the EU is the easiest way of answering the question of why the EU and Russia did not achieve any progress in the 2005 roadmap goals.

¹³ Gabriella Gricius, "Poland and Baltic States Reduce Reliance on Russian Energy", *Global Security Review*, 10 June 2019, <https://globalsecurityreview.com/poland-baltic-states-reduce-reliance-russian-energy/>, (Accessed on 11 December 2020).

Within the framework of an assertive foreign policy, Russia wanted to guarantee its command and to control the major connection lines running from the east to the west, and from the north to the south. It is true that Moscow modernized its armed forces, intelligence, and cyber capabilities, and its air and naval power in order to increase the Russian power projection capability. The Kremlin also enhanced Russian readiness and rapid deployment capacity by using not only conventional but also asymmetric and hybrid instruments like the "little green men" and the Wagner group. As a result, Moscow succeeded in posing a serious - but a very limited - military challenge to the West. This challenge is usually summarized as an A2/AD challenge. In other words, Moscow has no control and no command but just an area denial capacity in limited geographical bubbles like the Kerch Strait, coastal Syria, and Kaliningrad.¹⁴

The Russian area denial strategy is not limited to military zones of confrontation. Moscow has political and diplomatic capacity to exploit frozen conflicts, political unrest, and social fragmentation in the border states between the Russian and European/Western zone of influence. Therefore, in recent years, we have witnessed the consolidation of the Russian impact on geopolitical confrontation areas like the Caucasus, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Western Balkans. Unlike

¹⁴ Nursin Güney and Vişne Korkmaz, "New Russian Mahanism Failed: Futile Geopolitical Dreams in the Black Sea and the Mediterranean", *The New Geopolitical Realities for Russia, from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean*, ed. by Nursin Ateşolu Güney (Lexington Books: London, 2019), pp. 7-30.

Russia, the EU seems to lose its drive to forward Brussels's various strategies aiming to create rule-based and norm-based connectivity with those regions. This loss of interest is mainly because of the union's financial limitations which came to the surface especially after the crisis in 2008 in terms of shortages and indecisiveness in building permanent and autonomous military capacity, and the reluctance and incapability of the EU to promote constructive dialogue with key players in the respective regions. The latter is mainly because of the divergent national interests of member states and the deep political divisions among its members related to the future direction of the union's common foreign and security policy.

These shortages became more visible during the coronavirus crisis in which economic uncertainty deepens the disparities in the union in different sectors and across different member states.¹⁵ The ambiguous prospect of full economic recovery might increasingly tight hands of EU bureaucracy and the European member states in different conflict resolution processes like in Ukraine, Karabakh, Syria, and Libya. These conflicts resulted in forced displacement, ethnic cleansing, and destruction of critical infrastructure, and cannot be resolved only through negotiations on the terms of peace settlements. Any peace settlement should be coupled with reconstruction efforts which need a solid and long-term commitment by the peace provider in financial, political, and military terms.¹⁶ Without these commitments, conflict resolution efforts can easily become "empty normative technical talks" - usually European initiatives in its neighborhood are accused of being such

technical, normative, and endless talks. That is why from the Caspian to the Mediterranean in the neighborhood of the European Union, other countries, like Moscow and Ankara, have started to emerge as security providers.

FACTORS REDUCING THE ESCALATION POTENTIAL IN EU-RUSSIA RELATIONS

The lack of capabilities is also the main reason behind the difficulty in finding alternative strategies for the EU to deal with Russia. Until 2014, European cycles under the impact of German leadership adopted the "Russia First" strategy. This strategy was based on the perception that Moscow is a weak actor and the Kremlin can be motivated to change its behavior via trade and investment. However, in 2014, European bureaucracy had to face the reality that Russia is not that weak, and that the Europeans do not have enough instruments to force Moscow to act more moderately despite the high volume of bilateral trade and European investment in Russia. Since then, two alternative visions for the EU's Russian strategy have emerged. However, both visions need to build a European power projection capacity in the political, economic, and military sense.

The first strategy has been adopted by the EU members of Northern and Eastern Europe and has stressed that the EU should take a moral and active common stance against Russian policies in Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, and the Western Balkans. This approach is based on "conditionality, treats dialogue as a reward, and resorts to solidarity with pro-democratic forces and civil society" both in Russia and in the Russian neighborhood.¹⁷ Although sometimes European lead-

¹⁵ "European Economic Forecast", Autumn 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/economy-finance/ip136_en_2.pdf, (Accessed on 11 December 2020).

¹⁶ Syuzanna Vasilyan, "Novel Solutions to Resolve the Conflicts in the EU's Eastern Neighborhood", *College of Europe Policy Brief*, February 2018, <http://aei.pitt.edu/97349/>, (Accessed on 17 December 2020).

¹⁷ Kadri Liik, "Russia Policy after the US Election", European Council on Foreign Relations, 30.10.2020 <https://ecfr.eu/article/russia-policy-after-the-us-election/>, (Accessed on 17 December 2020).

ers adopt the major rhetoric of this stance, Brussels does not embrace this vision officially. For example, during the 2020 tension between Russia and the EU on the elections in Belarus, both Poland and Lithuania tried to follow a proactive policy to show European political support to the protesters, but these attempts were not backed by Brussels. Likewise, despite the harsh criticism by European leaders regarding the imprisonment of Navalny protesters, Europeans did not take restrictive actions against Russia. Hence, the EU bureaucracy seems to know the limits of the EU in offering a different geopolitical and economic alternative to the EU neighborhood.

In 2014, European bureaucracy had to face the reality that Russia is not that weak, and that the Europeans do not have enough instruments to force Moscow to act more moderately despite the high volume of bilateral trade and European investment in Russia.

The second approach, known as the French approach, is based on the argument that the EU should learn to act as an autonomous geopolitical actor. In this sense, Russia, as a geopolitical player, should be gained back, and a Russia-EU rapprochement is to be one of the keys of the new strategic, autonomous European stance, which is to be independent of NATO in the realm ranging from the Black Sea region to Africa. Between 2014 and 2019, for example, Macron tried to reset European relations with Russia via a bilateral rapprochement between Paris and Moscow - mostly to give a boost to European strategic autonomy. However, the French president failed to convince the Kremlin to act in accordance with

the line of European interests in Libya, Syria, the Black Sea region, and the Mediterranean. The major outcome of Macron and Putin's personal dialogue, the Normandy Four initiative – a peace talk format between Ukraine, Russia, Germany, and France - seemed to raise hopes for a permanent settlement on Donbass mainly because of concessions which the Ukrainian side agreed to give.¹⁸ But the parties have not managed to reach a peace settlement yet, and by the early 2021 the situation in the Eastern Ukraine has continued to be described as “fragile” by international agencies.¹⁹ The French president neither succeeded to deescalate tension between Germany and Russia after the poisoning of Navalny, nor did he succeed in using his contact with Putin to revive the Minsk group's control over the Karabakh peace process. As a result, even in the days when Macron was talking about NATO being brain-dead and when U.S. President Trump insulted European leaders by calling them “free riders,” the rapprochement between Moscow and the EU was not embraced by Berlin and Brussels.²⁰

WILL BIDEN'S PRESIDENCY BRING ANYTHING NEW TO THE TABLE?

The new U.S. president, Joe Biden, signaled stronger Trans-Atlantic-friendly policy preferences towards the European countries and institutions. First, German Defense Minister Kramp-

¹⁸ Fischer, “What the New EU Leadership Should Do about Russia”, *The Moscow Times*, 05.12.2019, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/12/05/what-the-new-eu-leadership-should-do-about-russia-a68482>, (Accessed on 12 December 2020).

¹⁹ “Eastern Ukraine Situation Will Remain Fragile Without Means to Calm Mounting Tensions, Under-secretary-general Tells to Security Council”, *The UN Press Release*, 11.02.2021, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/sc14434.doc.htm>, (Accessed 18 March 2021).

²⁰ Ibid.

Karrenbauer wrote a piece in *Politico* and stated that “illusions of European strategic autonomy must come to an end: Europeans will not be able to replace America’s crucial role as a security provider.”²¹ Without doubt, she did not picture Europe as a weak, defenseless, free-riding entity, but emphasized that despite economic difficulties, Europe is developing its capabilities and there is no reason for the European states to avoid flexing their muscles in the EU neighborhood. As is known, Germany is one of the EU member states which supported a more autonomous EU position and backed some of Macron’s initiatives in this regard. Thus Kramp-Karrenbauer’s comments should be taken to relate to the “capability gap of the EU” – namely, the gap between its ambitions and its actual power – rather than a tangible split between France and Germany.²² This capability gap is the result of both political divisions in the EU 27 on current security concerns like the refugee issue, migration, energy security and EU missions like IRINI, and the financial difficulties of individual member states to spend more on defense.

In July 2020, for the first time in the history of the EU, European leaders succeeded in reaching an agreement on a European budget which is designed for 2021-2027. This budget includes a security and defense section to strengthen the EDF (European Defense Fund), to initiate the EPF (European Peace Fund), and to increase the military mobility of European forces authorized in European missions.²³ Never-

21 Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, “Europe Still Needs America”, *Politico*, 2.11.2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-still-needs-america/>, (Accessed on 17 December 2020).

22 Nick Locker, “European Defense: Rhetoric vs. Reality”, *Charged Affairs*, 25.11.2020, <https://chargedaffairs.org/european-defense-rhetoric-vs-reality/>, (Accessed on 17 December 2020).

23 “EU’s Budget 2021-2027: What’s in It for Europe’s Defense”, Friedrich Nauman Foundation for Freedom, 06.08.2020, <https://fnf-europe.org/2020/08/06/eu-budget-2021-2027-whats-in-it-for-europes-defence/>, (Accessed on 17 December 2020).

theless, the recent “Coordinated Annual Review on Defense (CARD) Fact Sheet” published by the European Defence Agency (EDA) highlights that “the current outlook for collaborative Research and Technology spending levels remains insufficient, and puts EU strategic autonomy at risk.”²⁴ The CARD also underlines that member states prefer to spend more on national capacity development. Therefore, according to Locker, European leaders decided to reduce the EDF’s budget by 39% compared to the original proposal during the July 2020 Leaders’ Summit negotiations.²⁵ Within this framework, Kramp-Karrenbauer’s comments are not a sign of the intention to jump on the Biden bandwagon, but a sign of a necessity to find a common ground with the U.S. on European security issues in order to compensate European inefficiency in capacity building.

The second signal, in this regard, came just after the December EU Leaders’ Summit. One of the issues on the agenda was related to Turkey. Before the summit, France, Greece, and Greek Cyprus sought a tougher EU response to Turkey’s active foreign policy, including Ankara’s natural gas exploration in the Mediterranean and Turkey’s political support to Turkish Cypriots in their decision to partly open Varosha. Just like the EU strategy on Russia, the EU’s Turkey strategy is inconsistent and reflects divergencies and conflict of interests among its members. On the one hand, Brussels refrained from taking a harsh stand against Turkey and stated that dialogue should be open with Ankara. But European leaders also agreed that the Eastern Mediterranean should be taken as an

24 “Results of First Coordinated Annual Review on Defense”, European Defence Agency, 20.11.2020, https://eda.europa.eu/docs/default-source/eda-factsheets/2020-11-20-card_p.2, (Accessed on 17 December 2020).

25 Locker, “European Defense: Rhetoric vs. Reality”.

interest area of the union.²⁶ On the other hand, the EU leaders stated, “The EU will seek to coordinate on matters relating to Turkey and the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean with the United States.”²⁷

The major implications of these developments for the EU-Russia relations are twofold: on the one hand, the Europeans seem to agree on the fact that they should not ignore the USA /NATO factor during the presidency of Biden in their efforts to deal with the Russian challenge. On the other hand, since Europeans know their capability limitations and since they know that the European market is still important for Russia, it is unlikely that the cold relations will move towards escalation and harsh confrontation.

WHAT DOES A “TRANS-ATLANTIC RESET” MEAN FOR RELATIONS WITH MOSCOW?

The EU leaders did not hide the fact that Europeans in general expect “a Trans-Atlantic reset” after Biden’s election. Biden looks like he supports the consolidation of the NATO alliance to deal with challenges including the one posed by Russia.

The Russian military challenge has been mainly the A2/AD challenge in both the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. After the NATO Wales and Warsaw Summits, however, leaders of the Transatlantic Alliance succeeded in

strengthening the conventional deterrence of NATO by deploying multinational rapid reaction spearhead units in the Eastern Europe and the Baltic. Furthermore, Turkey, Bulgaria, and Romania, three Black Sea states, are NATO members. Turkey and Romania host NATO air defense systems. Ankara has full sovereignty over the Turkish Straits - the easiest way for Russia to access the Mediterranean from the Black Sea. All these factors balance the strategic impact of the emerging Russian A2/AD challenge on European security.²⁸ These factors, of course, do not roll the Russians back from what they have already gained in terms of the A2/AD zones. Any strategy aiming to roll the Russians back needs more direct U.S. commitment - beyond deterrence - and carries actual risk of confrontation. Neither the Obama nor the Trump Administration were eager to take such risks and it will be illogical to expect Biden to shoulder the cost of a direct confrontation with Russia.

Nonetheless, one can expect the Biden Administration to adopt more critical rhetoric against Russia. In March 2021, Biden, himself, seemed to realize this expectation by calling Putin “a killer”.²⁹ Besides, the Biden Administration described Russian assertiveness as destabilizing in the recently launched Interim National Security Strategic Guidance.³⁰ Therefore Washington seems to keep stressing “democracy, human rights, environmental concerns, safe digitalization, property rights, free elections and similar liberal values and norms” to increase political and economic pressure on Russia. It is not a se-

26 Nurşin Güney, “Bir Adım İleri Bir Adım Geri, Tatsız Tuzsuz bir AB Zirvesi”, *Star Açık Görüş*, 13.12.2020, <https://www.star.com.tr/acikgorus/bir-adim-ileri-bir-adim-geri-haber-1594192/>, (Accessed on 17 December 2020).

27 “EU to Impose More Sanctions on Turkey over Eastern Mediterranean Tension”, *Daily Sabah*, 11.12.2020, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/eu-affairs/eu-to-impose-more-sanctions-on-turkey-over-eastern-mediterranean-tensions>, (Accessed on 17 December 2020).

28 Güney and Korkmaz, “New Russian Mahanism Failed”.

29 “Biden Says Putin is a Killer and Will Pay a Price for Election Interference”, *DW*, 17.03.2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/biden-says-putin-is-a-killer-and-will-pay-a-price-for-election-interference/a-56901310>, (Accessed 18 March 2021).

30 Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, March 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>, (Accessed on 18 March 2021).

cret that both the EU and the U.S. will be happy to see Russia overstretched. But, going far beyond that will be too costly for the United States and this is the reason why Washington will most probably leave Europeans to deal with conflict resolution issues in the EU neighborhood where the Europeans have confronted Russia with their own means.

It is worth remembering that the Biden Administration will need Russian support on certain issues like the future of the Iranian Nuclear Deal and the issue of non-proliferation, the future of intermediate nuclear forces, and the consolidation of the multilateral management in the Arctic. That is why the Biden Administration did not miss the opportunity to approach to the Kremlin for the extension of the New Start Treaty in the January 2021. If the Biden Administration prefers to prioritize U.S. interests in the Asia-Pacific as was the case during the Obama Administration, then the U.S. will seek more intensively to guarantee Russian cooperation in both Europe and Asia. Additionally, the coronavirus pandemic and the trauma of the January 6 attack on the United States Capital continues in the U.S. It would not be surprising if for the first months, and maybe even for the first years, of his presidency, Biden is too busy to deal with external developments - apart from the Iranian nuclear issue.

Recent developments in the South Caucasus highlight not only the ineffectiveness of the Western-initiated conflict resolution processes but also make it clear that Russians can opt for a strategic restraint if they perceive a greater strategic gain can come from it. During the Karabakh conflict, the Kremlin acted carefully not to let any disruption in the transfer of Azerbaijani oil to the West. The independent and uninterrupted flow of Caspian oil via the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline to the Western market is

the most important strategic priority of the U.S. Since this was achieved and guaranteed after the BTC pipeline became fully operational in 2006, Washington has implicitly left the Caspian-Black Sea region as the special interest area of the Russian Federation.³¹ Neither Georgia, Ukraine, nor Karabakh caused any change in this distant U.S. attitude. The U.S. increasing defense investments in Greece, Bulgaria, and Romania lead questioning whether this distant U.S. attitude will prevail. Although there is no doubt that the U.S. tries to increase the cost of challenging balance of power in the region for Russia with these investments, Washington has not yet decided to go further to resettle the status-quo prevalent before the Russian assertiveness in 2008. Therefore, Europeans must face the necessity of revising their expectations on the future U.S. support in the EU's mediation and regionalization policy efforts in Georgia, Ukraine, Karabakh, Moldova, and the Western Balkans. Apart from power projection and a capacity problem, to do so, Brussels should solve two basic problems which are affecting the bargaining power of the Europeans vis-à-vis Russia.

KEY PROBLEMS IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD: INSUFFICIENT EUROPEAN NEIGHBORHOOD POLICY (ENP) AND TURBULENT RELATIONS WITH TURKEY

The first problem is related to internal difficulties of the “moral power of the European Neighborhood Policy.” European policies designed

³¹ Nurşin Ateşoğlu Güney, “Montreux Convention as a Factor of Stability in the Black Sea”, *French Year Book*, JP Pancracio (ed), (University of Paris: Paris, 2017).

for its neighborhood show many problems like inconsistency, coherence, value priorities, inclusiveness, etc.³² As a result of these problems, the national policies of certain European states towards the European neighborhood can be counterproductive to the EU's future role in these regions. For example, the French National Assembly's decision to recognize the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh will endanger the neutrality of the Minsk co-chairs and lead to further marginalization of the EU's role on the Karabakh issue. Likewise, it was told that French vetoing the start of the EU accession talks for Albania and North Macedonia led local elites in the Western Balkans to intensify their cooperation with Russia.³³

Europeans still do not know the future direction of the U.S. foreign policy, the impact of the Abraham Accords, or Biden's Iran policy on the geopolitical balance in the region.

The insufficiency of the ENP in the Caucasus and the Eastern Mediterranean was obvious for the observers of the Karabakh, Syrian, and Libyan conflicts. However, the EU has not even succeeded in denying Russian access to the Western Balkans. One of the instruments used by Russia to have access to this region is the Balkan Stream project. As is known, Russian gas arrived to the Turkish coast on the Black Sea on January 8, 2020, via TurkStream, which is one of the cornerstones of the Turkish-Russian

win-win cooperation schemes. The land transit branch stretches to neighboring countries, from where the gas is transported to Bulgaria, Greece, and North Macedonia. Bulgaria and Serbia hope that the gas will go to Serbia within a very short time via the Balkan Stream (previously referred as TurkStream II), which was recently completed by Sofia, and then to Hungary, when the entire infrastructure will be completed.³⁴ Possible reactions by the U.S. and the EU are expected since the United States was opposed to the South Stream and the EU convinced Bulgaria to take measures in the South Stream project against Gazprom in accordance with the TEP.

For some critics, the Balkan Stream is nothing but a resurrection of the South Stream under a different name.³⁵ For the EU member Bulgaria, the Balkan Stream is part of Sofia's efforts to establish a Balkan hub to increase energy diversification for Europe and the EU, so the onshore extension from Bulgaria to Serbia is a self-standing project.³⁶ The Serbian section of the pipeline received an exemption from the EU related to the TEP in 2019.³⁷ Some EU officials acknowledged that they are sorry for this exemption and nobody can ignore the obvious fact: the Balkan Stream – in other words, Russian gas and Gazprom – still has a good chance to access the European market as a part of the ener-

32 Syuzanna Vasilyan, *Moral Power of the European Union in the South Caucasus*, (Palgrave: London, 2020), pp. 69-118.

33 Maxim Samorukov, "Did Emmanuel Macron Hand the Balkans to Russia?", Carnegie Moscow Center, 19.12.2019, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/80649>, (Accessed on 17 December 2020).

34 "Bulgaria: Construction of Balkan Stream Has Been Completed", *Ibna - Independent Balkan News Agency*, 9.11.2020, <https://balkaneu.com/bulgaria-construction-of-balkan-stream-has-been-completed/>, (Accessed on 16 December 2020).

35 Georgi Gotev, "How Bulgaria Gave Gazprom the Keys to Balkans", *EURACTIV*, 30.10.2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/energy/news/how-bulgaria-gave-gazprom-the-keys-to-the-balkans/>. (Accessed on 17 December 2020).

36 Dimitar Bechev, "TurkStream 2 or Balkan Stream? Either Way, Moscow Is Main Beneficiary", *Middle East Institute*, 02.11.2020, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/turkstream-2-or-balkan-stream-either-way-moscow-main-beneficiary>, (Accessed on 17 December 2020).

37 Sergey Makagon, "Time for Europe to Rethink the Trans-Balkan Pipeline", *Atlantic Council*, 20.11.2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/time-for-europe-to-rethink-the-trans-balkan-pipeline/>, (Accessed on 17 December 2020).

gy diversification plans of certain EU countries like Greece, Bulgaria, and maybe Hungary. Until now, the European bureaucracy has to turn a blind eye to this development. This example is sufficient to show that Europeans have to provide a little incentive to their neighbors, even to some EU members, to act in total accordance with the EU agenda. What can the Biden Administration do about this? Finding an answer to this question is not easy at a time when the future of the U.S.-EU LNG trade is becoming complicated as a result of the Green Deal and EU decarbonization.

The second problem is related to Brussels's fluctuating relations with Turkey. Having tense relations with Ankara created complications for the EU and tied Brussels's hands vis-à-vis Russia mainly because of three reasons. First, the current geopolitical developments in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Karabakh proved that Ankara has its own area of control, and A2/AD capacities. Turkey is in control of the Turkish Straits, one of the key zones to secure geopolitical military balance in the Mediterranean. On a permanent basis, Turkey can project its military, political, and economic power by different means to the A2/AD bubbles in its neighborhood, which is also the neighborhood of the EU. Furthermore, Turkey is a NATO member, a candidate for EU membership, and, on a regular basis, Turkish officials make statements that Ankara is open to dialogue with the EU in order to solve problems.³⁸ It is also worth remembering that the SGC is one of the alternative gas connections for Europe, and therefore Turkey is part of the European energy security and diversification strategy. The role played by Ankara will be reinforced in the future

when it completes its energy hub strategy in full. Hence the newly emerged and the already existing risks of European or Trans-Atlantic security can be managed more easily and the visibility of the EU will be increased if Turkey-EU cooperation strengthens.

Second, increasing tension between the EU and Turkey will constrain the European strategic presence in its neighborhood and increase divisions among its members. Some experts warn that widening the gap between Ankara and Brussels butters Russian bread. The Europeans lost Syria, Caucasus, and will lose Libya unless they cooperate with Ankara.³⁹ Russia and Turkey can find ways to cooperate although they do not always share a common interest and although they both project power in the same geographical realms.

Third, Ankara is developing and determined to develop its strategic autonomy which is seen as the main insurance to secure Turkey's sovereignty rights in its neighborhood. Turkish officials announced that Ankara will not be deterred from protecting its sovereign rights. Hence any policy to deter Ankara in this regard will be counterproductive.

Therefore, the final decisions of European leaders at the December 2020 Summit on the Eastern Mediterranean issues are disappointing. The EU leaders' call for a U.S. action in the Eastern Mediterranean is also full of ambiguities. Europeans still do not know the future direction of the U.S. foreign policy, the impact of the Abraham Accords, or Biden's Iran policy on the geopolitical balance in the region. In this regard, the recent positive messages from Brussels to Ankara for the normalization of relations are promising.

38 Rabia İclal Turan, "Turkey's Door Remains Wide Open for Dialogue" *Anadolu Agency*, 04.12.2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/turkey-s-door-remains-wide-open-for-dialogue/2065184>, (Accessed on 17 December 2020).

39 Nathalie Tocci, "Peeling Turkey away from Russia's Embrace: A Transatlantic Interest", *Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)*, 14 December 2020, <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/peeling-turkey-away-russias-embrace-transatlantic-interest>, (Accessed on 17 December 2020).

CONCLUSION

The major contours of the Russia-EU relations have not changed since the 2008-2014 period when Russia used its offensive capacity in the European neighborhood. But the spirit of the relations lost its drive. The EU has to do business with Russia as usual mainly because of the energy dependency between some members of the EU and Russia. However, Brussels has no intention to deepen relations with Moscow. Brussels has neither the financial resources nor the political decisiveness nor the coherency between its members to deter Russia from gaining political, economic, and military A2/AD zones in the European neighborhood. The Europeans seem also uneager to take cost of alternative policies vis-à-vis Moscow. While Europeans are worrying about the loss of Libya to the Russians, after Syria and Karabakh, Moscow is increasing its visibility in the Western Balkans. Brussels's sour relations with Ankara are also not helping. Turkey

emerged as one of the actors displaying both will and might to hold a regional balance in the geopolitical areas where Russians adopt an offensive foreign policy strategy, and, at a very minimum, Brussels needs to develop, at least, normal relations with Turkey.

After the 2020 U.S. Presidential elections, Europeans seem to be waiting for the Biden Administration with a "wish list." However, they cannot be sure about the Biden Administration's willingness to accept this wish list. What the EU needs is being a geopolitical actor. And, geopolitical actorness needs military capabilities, coherent strategic vision related to the nature of threats and risks, realist planning in the neighborhood, and good relations with balance-holders like Turkey. If the EU fails to meet these criteria, Russia, an almost overstretched and sanctioned actor, will continue to play in the European neighborhood as if it were Moscow's backyard.

WAITING FOR THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION CAN WE EXPECT A CHANGE IN EU-RUSSIA RELATIONS?

VIŞNE KORKMAZ

SETA | ANALYSIS

This analysis explores the relations between Russia and the EU in terms of energy partnership and geopolitical cooperation and confrontation. It explores how the EU's lack of diverse capabilities in the areas of defense and energy affects the union's ability to develop an alternative dialogue framework with Moscow. The analysis elaborates, among others, on the Biden Administration's European expectations and offers an outlook on potential future political and geostrategic relations and developments between the EU, Russia, the United States, and Turkey. The competitive relations between the EU and Russia seem likely to continue during Biden's tenure as president of the USA.

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