

Avoiding a new Cold War: The future of EU-Russia relations in the context of the Ukraine crisis

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How can relations between the EU and Russia be repaired in the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis? Cristian Nitoiu summarises the findings of a new report on the future of EU-Russia relations which highlights three routes toward easing tensions: including Russia in the post-Cold War security order in Europe; creating meaningful linkages between the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union; and bridging the gap at a social level between the EU and Russia's citizens.



The feeling that we are experiencing the emergence of a new Cold War is increasingly creeping into western and Russian discourse. While this idea was raised a few times during the last decade, many voices in the policy and academic communities rejected the grounds for claiming the re-emergence of a Cold War type of global standoff. Critics of the new Cold War thesis usually point to the fact that the current international context is not characterised by a global clash between two mutually exclusive economic, social and political ideologies. From a western perspective the absence of such a global confrontation is beyond doubt.

However, the Kremlin has isolated itself, and seems to increasingly feel comfortable with the idea that the West is an existential threat which seeks to destroy the Russian way of being and its social and political practices. The ideology promoted by Russia is fuzzier than that of the Soviet Union, but the level of antagonism and confrontation embraced by policymakers and (unfortunately) large areas of the population are similar, if not more dangerous than during the Cold War.

If during the proper Cold War discourse in Russia focused on avoiding full blown (nuclear) conflict and constructing a cooperative future, now discourse in the public sphere focuses on winning a future war against the West and surviving the harsh international environment. Nuclear weapons are not presented as a deterrent, but as tactical weapons in defending Russia from the West. We might not be living in a genuine Cold War, but we are definitely experiencing the tensest period in relations between the West and Russia, with the possibility for nuclear war arguably even greater than during the proper Cold War.

In a new special [report](#) '*Avoiding a New 'Cold War': The Future of EU-Russia Relations in the Context of the Ukraine Crisis*' we provide a series of clear policy recommendations on how to move discourse and policies from a deeply confrontational mind-set to a more cooperative one. Even though we rarely refer in the report to the idea of a new Cold War, this does not mean that we fail to recognise the serious challenge to peace and security in Europe posed by the current state of EU-Russia relations. Some of the contributors to the report specifically reject the notion that a new Cold War has emerged. However, as the rhetoric around the concept is increasingly being imprinted in Russian and western discourse, it is hard to overlook it.



Russian President Vladimir Putin, Federal Chancellor of Germany Angela Merkel, President of the French Republic Francois Hollande and President of Ukraine Petro Poroshenko take part in the talks on a settlement to the situation in Ukraine, February 2015. (Credits: kremlin.ru)

Regardless of whether they recognise that a new Cold War is inevitably on the horizon, contributions to the special report stress that the persistence of antagonism and conflict can have disastrous effects. The report argues that the EU and Russia are responsible for the current standoff and dangerous security environment in the shared neighbourhood. Building on this assessment the chapters propose a series of solutions that can help Russia and the EU establish trust and cooperation.

The report contains 14 chapters divided in three main sections which look at: a) the evolution of EU-Russia relations, b) the clash between the two in the post-Soviet space, and c) the role of economic relations and energy security or third party actors. The arguments presented in report span the full spectrum of approaches regarding EU-Russia relations, from Russia 'hating', to appeasing the Kremlin, but also taking a more balanced middle ground.

Much of the academic and more policy oriented analysis published since the Maidan protests in late 2013 has been biased and deeply normative. By mirroring the full spectrum of more or less normative views we arrive to a series of policy recommendations, which we like to think are pragmatic and acceptable to both European and Russia policymakers. We recognise the fact that Russia and the EU never sought in the last 25 years to create an equal partnership on the European continent. This points to three underlying problems and potential solutions.

First, the post-Cold War security order on the European continent has excluded Russia as an equal actor on its own terms. Rather than providing more stability and security, this fostered deep frustration and disenchantment in Russia. While there is a lot of room for debate regarding the genuine value that an equal security status for Russia might bring to smaller European states, there is a great deal of truth in the idea that the West consistently ignored the Kremlin's concerns during the last 25 years. In this context, we propose that Russian and European policymakers go back to the drawing board and discuss their concerns and vision of security in the post-Cold War order. In practice this might mean a grand bargain or a Helsinki 2 agreement. However, any type of agreement should not be a 19th century great power mutual diktat which leaves the small states in between highly vulnerable.

Second, the asymmetric and exclusive character of the EU and Russian integration projects in the post-Soviet space

can be viewed as a key cause of the Ukraine crisis. The incompatibility between the EU Association Agreements and membership to the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) left the post-Soviet states faced with a choice between one or the other, and forced them to abandon their traditional (or 'natural') dualist multi-vector foreign policies. We argue that the two integration projects should be made more compatible; this might entail establishing a free trade area between the EU and the EEU. While the legal and political complexity of achieving such complementarity cannot be overlooked, some there are several ways of going around these challenges which we describe in more detail in the report.

Third, both in Russian and European societies we are currently experiencing a rise of nationalist and extremist movements masked by seemingly patriotic ideas. This is a concern for governments on both sides of the new 'Iron Curtain'. In particular, Russian nationalism seems deeply rooted in society. This is not surprising, as status in international relations means a great deal for the majority of Russian citizens. In the face of economic, social and political restrictions, Russian citizens are forced to turn to the illusion of glory in world politics in order to build their self-esteem.

This is clearly not a healthy attitude, and can, if sustained in the medium to long term, create a deeply militarised mind-set in Russian society which sees the use of military force as a source of pride and a legitimate tool of international relations. In this sense, we propose that the EU should strive to reconstruct bridges between European and Russian societies. For example, this might involve increasing exchange programmes for Russians to visit and live in the EU, or possibly providing visa liberalisation for Russian students.

We put forward a series of other recommendations, primarily referring to the way the EU and Russia can start to cooperate outside of the post-Soviet space. For example, they could draw on the example of the Iran nuclear deal and cooperate on other issues on the global agenda such as Syria or North Korea. This would kick off rebuilding both diplomatic and societal links between Europe and Russia.

While our policy solutions might not be easy to implement, ignoring them and doing nothing to establish cooperation will surely lead us to an increasingly dangerous situation, if not a new Cold War.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics. Read the full LSE IDEAS report: [Avoiding a New 'Cold War': The Future of EU-Russia Relations in the Context of the Ukraine Crisis](#).

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About the author

Cristian Nitoiu – LSE IDEAS

Cristian Nitoiu is a Dahrendorf Postdoctoral Fellow in EU-Russia relations and Ukraine at LSE IDEAS. Before this he held research positions at Trinity College Dublin and the College of Europe (Natolin campus, ENP Chair). The research for this article was supported by the Dahrendorf Forum, a joint initiative by the Hertie School of Governance, LSE and Stiftung Mercator.

