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4 A STRONGER EUROPE IN THE WORLD

JOINT COMMUNICATION ON EU-RUSSIA RELATIONS - PUSH BACK, CONSTRAIN AND ENGAGE

[ARRIVED]

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CONTENT

Context

Following the break-up of the Soviet Union, the EU and Russia formed a strategic partnership, based on the 1994 Partnership and Cooperation Agreement. However, under Vladimir Putin relations were increasingly strained by incidents such as the Russia-Georgia war of 2008, and the deteriorating human rights situation in Russia. Moscow saw the increasingly close ties between the EU and countries such as Ukraine and Georgia as a direct threat to its own interests. In 2014, the partnership broke down after Russia illegally annexed the Crimean peninsula, and provided military support for Donbas separatists. In July 2014, the EU adopted hard-hitting economic sanctions against Russia.

To provide clarity in this new context of heightened tensions, on 14 March 2016, EU foreign ministers and HR/VP Federica Mogherini agreed that EU-Russia relations should be based on the five following principles:

1. insisting on full implementation of the Minsk Agreements as an essential condition for any substantial change in EU-Russia relations; non-recognition of Russia's annexation of Crimea;
2. strengthening relations with the former Soviet republics in the EU's eastern neighbourhood (including Ukraine) and central Asia;
3. becoming more resilient to Russian threats such as energy security, hybrid threats, and disinformation;
4. despite tensions, engaging selectively with Russia on a range of foreign-policy issues, among them cooperation on the Middle East, counter-terrorism and climate change;
5. supporting Russian civil society and promoting people-to-people contacts.

Besides Ukraine, the two sides are deadlocked over many other issues, including Russian cyber-attacks and attempts to interfere in EU democratic process, as well as the continued erosion of civil and political rights in Russia, which reached a new level in April 2021 with the arrest and imprisonment of opposition activist Alexey Navalny.

In 2019, French president Emmanuel Macron called for a new approach, arguing that closer relations with Moscow were essential for European strategic autonomy. Nevertheless, the five principles are still the foundation of the EU's Russia policy.

Joint Communication on EU-Russia relations

In May 2021, the European Council held a strategic debate on Russia, in which it reaffirmed its commitment to the five principles, and asked the European Commission and the HR/VP for a report on policy options. This report, the Joint Communication on 'EU-Russia relations - Push back, constrain and engage', was published one month later, on 16 June 2021.

The Joint Communication does not advocate any changes to the EU's approach. Instead, it maps in detail the main challenges posed by Russia and steps taken by the EU in response. It notes the incompatibility between Russia's zero-sum geopolitical vision of the world and the rules-based international order. The document accuses Russia of attempting to weaken and destabilise EU Member States and their neighbours. It confirms that full implementation by Russia of its commitments under the Minsk Agreements is still the condition for lifting sanctions. It rejects the idea of a post-Soviet Russian sphere of influence, and notes EU support for its eastern neighbours in their efforts to build resilience. Meanwhile, the EU will continue to develop its own resilience, by strengthening energy security and countering Russian hybrid threats such as cyber-attacks and disinformation. Climate change, trade, the Middle East and the Arctic are among the areas of engagement. Finally, it summarises EU measures in support of people-to-people contacts between the two sides, in the fields of research cooperation, educational exchanges (Erasmus+) and support for civil society.

References:

[Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council on EU-Russia relations - Push back, constrain and engage](#), European Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, June 2021

[Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini at the press conference following the Foreign Affairs Council](#), EEAS, March 2016

Further reading:

[The EU and Russia: Locked into confrontation](#), EPRS briefing, July 2020

As of 20 October 2022.