



# Could the EU and Russia Restore the Dialogue on European Security?

## A Scenario Planning Outlook

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Most international analysts agree that Western relations with Russia are at their worst in thirty years, and that they are unlikely to improve unless significant geopolitical changes are going to emerge.

In a previous article<sup>i</sup> addressing how should the EU deal with a revisionist Russia, challenging the post-Cold War European security order, two strategic options for shaping EU policies in its Eastern Neighbourhood have been proposed: 1) find a compromise solution with Moscow on how to fix the broken security order, and to roll back, to the greatest extent possible, the outcomes of Russian military intrusions in Ukraine and in Georgia? 2) defend shared values in the Eastern Neighbourhood, and eventually annihilate the Russian regional power and influence.

More recently, a new academic debate has started on whether, and how, to restore the EU-Russia dialogue to meet the interests of both parties, while trying to reconcile respect for international law with principled pragmatism<sup>ii</sup> into creating a new European security architecture. It might be therefore worth looking at the prospects of restoring EU-Russia

dialogue, as well as at possible grand-themes that could be dealt with in this framework, through the lens of security scenario planning.

### **EU Perspective**

Current geopolitical realities have shown that Russia turned from a “strategic partner” into a “strategic challenge” for the EU. This has resulted in EU's current policy towards Russia re-affirmed in the 2016 Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy:

*“Managing the relationship with Russia represents a key strategic challenge. A consistent and united approach must remain the cornerstone of EU policy towards Russia. Substantial changes in relations between the EU and Russia are premised upon full respect for international law and the principles underpinning the European security order, including the Helsinki Final Act and the Paris Charter. We will not recognise Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea nor accept the destabilisation of eastern Ukraine. We will strengthen the EU, enhance the resilience of our eastern neighbours, and uphold their right to determine freely their approach towards the EU. At the same time, the EU and Russia are*

*interdependent. We will therefore engage Russia to discuss disagreements and cooperate if and when our interests overlap.”*

This policy highlights EU's conditionality in restoring a comprehensive dialogue with Russia upon progress in implementation of the Minsk 2 Agreements on measures to alleviate the ongoing war in Eastern Ukraine. However, at present, neither party to that war favors Minsk 2 Agreements implementation over the ongoing state of “no peace, no war”.

For Moscow, the current status of Donbass is, on the one hand, a guarantee that Ukraine will not obtain either NATO or EU membership anytime soon, and, on the other hand, a bargaining chip for future international negotiations on the settlement of the status of Crimea.

For Kyiv, any political steps towards conflict resolution, under the terms of the Minsk 2 Agreements, are painful on two accounts: a) federalization of Ukraine implies a loss of sovereignty and a possible step towards disintegration of the current state of Ukraine; b) an autonomous Donbass within Ukraine having the right to a free choice on its relations with Russia and the Eurasian Economic Union would be a serious liability to its European integration prospects.

The current stalemate in implementing the Minsk 2 deal epitomizes the *Ukrainian Donbas dilemma*: bring the rebels in, and *de facto* undermine the stability of Ukraine as a unitary state. Or keep them out at the price of another significant permanent territorial loss

(in addition to Crimea), and a continued stand-off with neighbouring Russia.

In conclusion, restoring EU's dialogue with Russia is currently stuck with progress in Donbas conflict resolution, which, in the short term, neither party would be prepared to see through.

### **Russian Perspective**

The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation<sup>iii</sup> (approved on 30 November 2016) claimed that “Western powers” would bear the responsibility for the growing instability in international relations, at both global and regional level, because of their attempts to “*impose their points of view on global processes and conduct a policy to contain alternative centres of power*”. However, the same document farther stated that “*Russia's long-term Euro-Atlantic policy is aimed at building a common space of peace, security and stability based on the principles of indivisible security, equal cooperation and mutual trust*”, committing Russia as an advocate for the legally binding relevance of the indivisibility of security, irrespective of the affiliation with political and military alliances.

It further conceded that the EU remained an important trade, economic and foreign policy partner for Russia. Its priorities in relations with the EU would aim at establishing a common economic and humanitarian space from the Atlantic to the Pacific by harmonizing and aligning the interests of European and Eurasian integration processes, with a view to preventing the emergence of dividing lines on the European continent. It would also offer

to maintain an intensive and mutually beneficial dialogue with the EU on key items on the foreign policy agenda, and to step up combined efforts for developing practical cooperation on counter-terrorism, controlling illegal migration, as well as on fighting against organized crime.

In a recently published interview, Nadia Arbatova from the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow, underlined the futility of reducing the different perspectives of Russia and the West to a common denominator. Instead, she proposed a re-focus of the dialogue on how to overcome the current status of their relations while restoring mutual trust, and how to revise OSCE economic and security arrangements:

*“The crisis in the Russia-West relations stems from the profound misunderstanding of each other’s views regarding acceptable foundations of European security and stakes across the post-Soviet space. [...] Each side believes that it is she who is right, which is why all attempts to reduce the Russia-West different views to a common denominator will be just a waste of time and efforts. Rather they should agree on common and legally binding rules of behaviour along the Helsinki Act model.”<sup>iv</sup>*

Here actually lays one of the biggest challenges for the EU restoring the dialogue with Russia: would it be prepared to discuss a new “European security deal” with Russia before having the conflict in Ukraine resolved? Or to put it bluntly: would the EU be able to agree on pursuing a comprehensive and effective security dialogue with a revisionist Russia?

## **Assessing the Futures of EU’s Relations with Russia to the East**

Given the numerous variables in the EU-US-Russia triangle, as well as in the broader European security context, one of the most effective methods to discuss the potential and prospects of restoring EU’s dialogue with Russia might consist in scenarios planning for Eastern Europe.

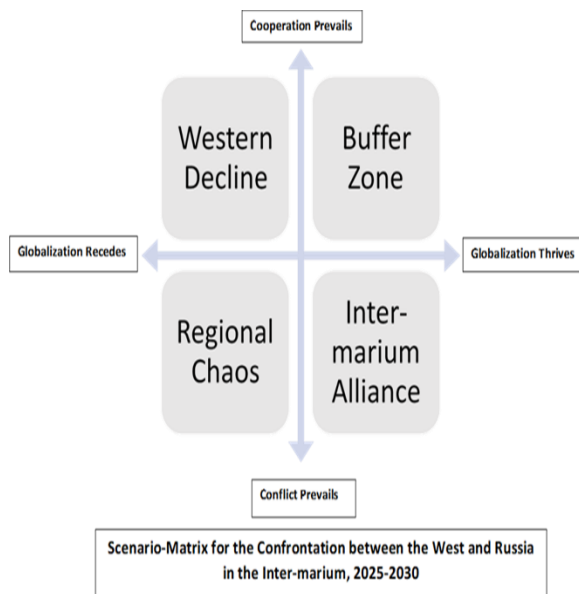
Research conducted over the last three years on “What security scenarios would most accurately outline the relations between the West and Russia in the geopolitical area between the Baltic Sea and the Wider Black Sea, in 2025-2030”? by means of the scenario planning method<sup>v</sup> suggested that, pending on EU’s choice of strategic options on relations with Russia -i.e. cooperative vs. confrontational- four security scenarios could be imagined:

1. Buffer Zone: Power Sharing and Limited/Controlled Stand-off.
2. Western Decline: European and Transatlantic Unity broken.
3. Inter-marium Alliance: New American Containment.
4. Regional Chaos: Turning Confrontation into War.

Further research upon those hypothetical scenarios resulted in a list of drivers of change and external forces in the next decade (2018-2027), as well as a scenario-matrix for relations between the West and Russia in Eastern Europe (Inter-marium).

The outcome of that research could be exploited to the benefit of setting up a meaningful discussion on the

prospects, and potential themes for EU’s dialogue with Russia.



For example, we may draw the conclusion that the EU dialogue with Russia would need to be restored in case three of the four envisaged scenarios would likely prevail: Buffer Zone, Western Decline, and Inter-marium alliance. However, the agenda of this dialogue within each scenario-type should be adjusted to the critical uncertainties chosen to describe the scenario-matrix: the evolution of globalization, and the rate between cooperation and conflict, in relations between Russia and the West.

### Buffer Zone

In “Adjusting the EU’s Geopolitical Posture in the Eastern Neighborhood”, it was suggested that the Buffer Zone scenario might best fit with the current interests and capabilities of the EU. Two key arguments in favor of this scenario were proposed at the time: 1) it may lead to comprehensive peaceful solutions to the regional conflicts which plagued the European security since the end of the Cold War; 2) it may enable

the EU to maintain a certain influence over the post-Soviet states by adjusting and/or expanding the Association Agreements, and by establishing a broader trade relationship with the Eurasian Economic Union.

However, the buffer-zone scenario might only evolve in case the EU acknowledged the Russian revisionist claims against the post-Cold War European security order. This may facilitate in turn a pan-European public and institutional dialogue on the necessity and possible content of a new agreement on regional power sharing, that would cooperatively shape and regulate the current European security environment, i.e. a **“new deal” on European security**. Acceding to this scenario would assume that conflict could not bring solutions to the challenges of our time – but more challenges. International experts should elaborate ways and means to bridge the existing gaps between Russia and the West in perceptions and visions of European security with a view to restoring mutual trust and re-shaping the legal and institutional frameworks of an *operational*, as opposed to the classical dichotomy “new” vs. “old”, European rules-based order.

For example, Michael O’Hanlon suggested in a recent article that “It is time that Western nations seek to negotiate a new security architecture for those neutral countries in Eastern Europe today. The core concept would be one of permanent neutrality—at least in the formal sense of ruling out membership in a mutual-defence alliance, most notably NATO.”<sup>vi</sup>

Critics might warn against the risks of having this scenario turned into the 21st century Munich Agreements of 1938, whereby the Western powers unsuccessfully attempted to appease Nazi Germany by recognizing the annexation of the Sudetenland of Czechoslovakia. However, it shouldn't necessarily turn into a new division of Europe into spheres of influence in case the political and security mechanisms to agree on the main tenets of implementing this scenario would be inclusive, transparent, and aiming at power-sharing in the common neighborhood rather than at racing mutually competitive integration processes.

However, over the last year, **structural changes in US policy against Russia** requires revisiting the implications for the future of Trans-Atlantic relations of EU's potential choice of the buffer-zone scenario. The US National Security Strategy, issued in December 2017, echoed in January 2018 by the new US National Defence Strategy depicted Russia (along China) as one of the main challengers actively competing against the US, its Allies and partners:

*“Russia seeks to restore its great power status and establish spheres of influence near its borders. [...] Russia aims to weaken U.S. influence in the world and divide us from our allies and partners. Russia views the North Atlantic Treaty Organization(NATO) and European Union (EU) as threats. Russia is investing in new military capabilities, including nuclear systems that remain the most significant existential threat to the United States,*

*and in destabilizing cyber capabilities. Through modernized forms of subversive tactics, Russia interferes in the domestic political affairs of countries around the world. The combination of Russian ambition and growing military capabilities creates an unstable frontier in Eurasia, where the risk of conflict due to Russian miscalculation is growing.”<sup>vii</sup>*

Furthermore, in January 2018, the influential Council on Foreign Relations issued a Special Report on “Containing Russia. How to Respond to Moscow's Intervention in U.S. Democracy and Growing Geopolitical Challenge”, which stated bluntly in its conclusions that *“The United States is currently in a second Cold War with Russia.”* It went further in suggesting that: *“Indeed, because of Russian policies, the United States and its European treaty allies regrettably are now forced to adopt a policy of containment to protect the sovereignty, security, and democracy of all NATO members, because Moscow seeks to undermine all three. Put differently, currently no acceptable grand bargain with Putin is possible that would produce more responsible Russian behaviour regarding European security and the West.”<sup>viii</sup>*

Those positions do imply a competitive/conflictual approach against Russia, which may send the future of Eastern Europe to the Inter-marium alliance, or, at worst, to the regional chaos scenarios.

Of course, behind those firm statements might stand unpredictable decisions of president Donald Trump, who has repeatedly expressed opposite views regarding relations with Russia. But

still, against a potentially sensitive strategic decision, such as on whether a “new deal” on European security with a revisionist Russia would be feasible or not, the EU should proceed with maximum caution and responsibility, bearing in mind the emerging East-West European divide stemming from divergent security threat perceptions.

### **Western Decline**

A plethora of events over the last years have seriously questioned the European project and the West European partnership with the United States. In the wake of BREXIT and of Donald Trump’s presidency in the United States, the scenario of Western Decline has become more credible than in the past. A corrosive EU policy of the Trump administration may, on the one hand, weaken NATO and incentivize the EU to undertake, on the medium and longer term, a much bolder role in European security. On the other hand, it may create new stakes for Russia to attempt geopolitical (though unlikely military) incursions within some of the Eastern European members of the EU. Deepening divisions among the newer and older EU members might lead, at best, to a breakdown of the European integration as we know it today, and, at worst, to renewed European geopolitical maps.

As it could be seen from the proposed scenario-matrix model, the Western decline scenario might result in growing cooperation between Russia and Western Europe, irrespective of US concerns with Russian intentions, as a weakening Europe would have no interest whatsoever to spend precious resources highly needed for internal

reforms on picking geopolitical fights in its Eastern neighbourhood against Russia. In case the Western Decline seemed to prevail, the choice of themes of the EU-Russia dialogue should move away from geopolitical and security drivers of change and external forces - which might potentially lead to regional chaos-, towards political, social, economic, and technological drivers and forces, which could help globalization thrive, while creating conditions for a return to the buffer zone scenario.

### **Inter-marium Alliance**



Restoring EU-Russia dialogue would also be necessary in case the drivers of change and external forces promoting conflictual scenarios, in particular the Inter-marium alliance (new American containment) would eventually prevail. A possible follow-up to the Western Decline scenario, this kind of scenario is not completely new. It embodies the geopolitical vision of the Polish general Jozef Pilsudski, who, in the 1920s, envisaged an alliance of the nations between the Baltic and Black Seas as the best defence of regional countries against a renewed German-Russian



*entente* that might have divided the Inter-marium upon subjective criteria, as it previously happened in the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. More recently, George Friedman (STRATFOR's Executive Director) argued for an Inter-marium alliance/confederation born from Eastern members of the European Union and current EU's Eastern Partners joining together to retain their sovereignty in the face of Russian power, as a key element of an effective US strategy to contain an aggressive Russia. Friedman saw this alliance not as an offensive force but rather as a force designed to deter Russian expansion, while he deemed NATO as being dysfunctional, and ignored the EU completely.

One essential criteria for determining the likelihood of this scenario against the disastrous **regional chaos scenario** would be the ability to prevent the current relations between Russia and the West from drifting towards unmanaged confrontation. According to the conclusions of the "Riga Dialogue 2016: Building Bridges for Euro-Atlantic Security"<sup>ix</sup>: *"Confrontation becomes unmanaged when there are no credible mechanisms to prevent it from spiraling out of control. Eroding or antiquated international agreements, a lack of trust and perfunctory dialogue are important markers"*. Conversely, managed confrontation between Russia and the West, thereby deterrence should go along with dialogue and agreements enabling greater transparency to prevent dangerous incidents from resulting in full-scale conflict, might become the last defence against the regional chaos

scenario. In this situation, the EU-Russia dialogue should choose from themes related to selected drivers of change, such as: the rise of anti-Western ideologies and policies in Russia vs. the rise of Russo-phobia in the West, re-focus of security on territorial defence, hybrid threats, shrinking access to energy for geopolitical or other reasons in Europe, unresolved conflicts in the common neighborhood, and the whole range of external forces, including responses to cyber, illegal immigration, and terrorist threats.

## Conclusions

Most international analysts would agree that Western relations with Russia are at their worst in thirty years, and that they are unlikely to improve unless significant geopolitical changes are going to emerge. In this context, looking at how the dialogue between the EU and Russia might be restored has become a critical necessity. To that end, it might be worth looking through the lens of security scenario planning at the strategic options for the EU to restore its dialogue with Russia, as well as at possible grand-themes that could be dealt with in this framework.

For the EU, who stated within the EU Global Strategy the conditionality of restoring a comprehensive dialogue with Russia upon progress in implementation of the Minsk 2 Agreements, the biggest challenge would consist in agreeing on pursuing security dialogue with a *revisionist* Russia. That was the case since restoring EU's dialogue with Russia is being stuck with progress in Donbas conflict resolution, which, at least in the

short term, neither Russia nor Ukraine would actually like to see through.

On the other hand, Russia seemed to be open to discuss possible new arrangements of power sharing in the EU's Eastern Neighborhood, but it would prefer a future-oriented dialogue on restoring mutual trust, and on revising existing economic and security arrangements, irrespective of past infringements or abuses of the international law on both sides.

How to reconcile those two essentially contradictory perspectives is unclear, at this stage. However, assessing the possible futures of Western relations with Russia in Eastern Europe by means of the scenario planning research method could offer useful insights into the potential and

prospects of restoring EU's dialogue with Russia.

Scenario planning research on "What security scenarios would most accurately outline the relations between the West and Russia in the geopolitical area between the Baltic Sea and the Wider Black Sea, in 2025-2030"? revealed that the EU dialogue with Russia would need to be restored in case three of the four envisaged security scenarios would eventually prevail. The Buffer Zone, the Western Decline, and the Inter-marium Alliance scenarios would require agendas for EU-Russia dialogue adjusted to the critical uncertainties chosen to describe the scenario-matrix: the evolution of globalization, and the rate between cooperation and conflict, in relations between Russia and the West.

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<sup>i</sup> George Niculescu- "Adjusting the EU's Geopolitical Posture in the Eastern Neighborhood", March 2017, from: [http://gpf-europe.com/upload/eu\\_geopolitical\\_posture\\_east\\_neighbourhood\\_2017.pdf](http://gpf-europe.com/upload/eu_geopolitical_posture_east_neighbourhood_2017.pdf)

<sup>ii</sup> Tony van der Togt – "EU's Eastern Dilemma: prioritising interests over values?", Clingendael Spectator, January 2018, from <https://spectator.clingendael.org/nl/publicatie/eus-eastern-dilemma-prioritising-interests-over-values>

<sup>iii</sup> Downloaded on 03/03/2017 from: [http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/2542248](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/2542248)

<sup>iv</sup> Nadia Arbatova- "European security in the context of the Russia-West crisis" in European Defence Vision, September-October 2017, from <http://www.union-ihedn.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Defense-188-Arbatova.pdf>

<sup>v</sup> George Niculescu- "The Western Confrontation with Russia: Scenario Planning in the Area from the

Baltic Sea to the Wider Black Sea", October 2017, from: [http://gpf-europe.com/forum/?blog=external\\_relations&id=204](http://gpf-europe.com/forum/?blog=external_relations&id=204)

<sup>vi</sup> Michael O'Hanlon – "Beyond NATO: A new security architecture for Eastern Europe", Brookings Institution, Washington DC, July 2017.

<sup>vii</sup> National Security Strategy of the United States, issued December 2017.

<sup>viii</sup> Robert Blackwill and Philipp Gordon - "Containing Russia. How to Respond to Moscow's Intervention in U.S. Democracy and Growing Geopolitical Challenge", Council on Foreign Relations, Council's Special Report No. 80, January 2018.

<sup>ix</sup> Andris Spruds, Diana Potjomkina- "Riga Dialogue Afterthoughts 2016", Latvian Institute of International Affairs, from <http://liia.lv/en/publications/riga-dialogue-afterthoughts-2016-building-bridges-for-euro-atlantic-security-542>