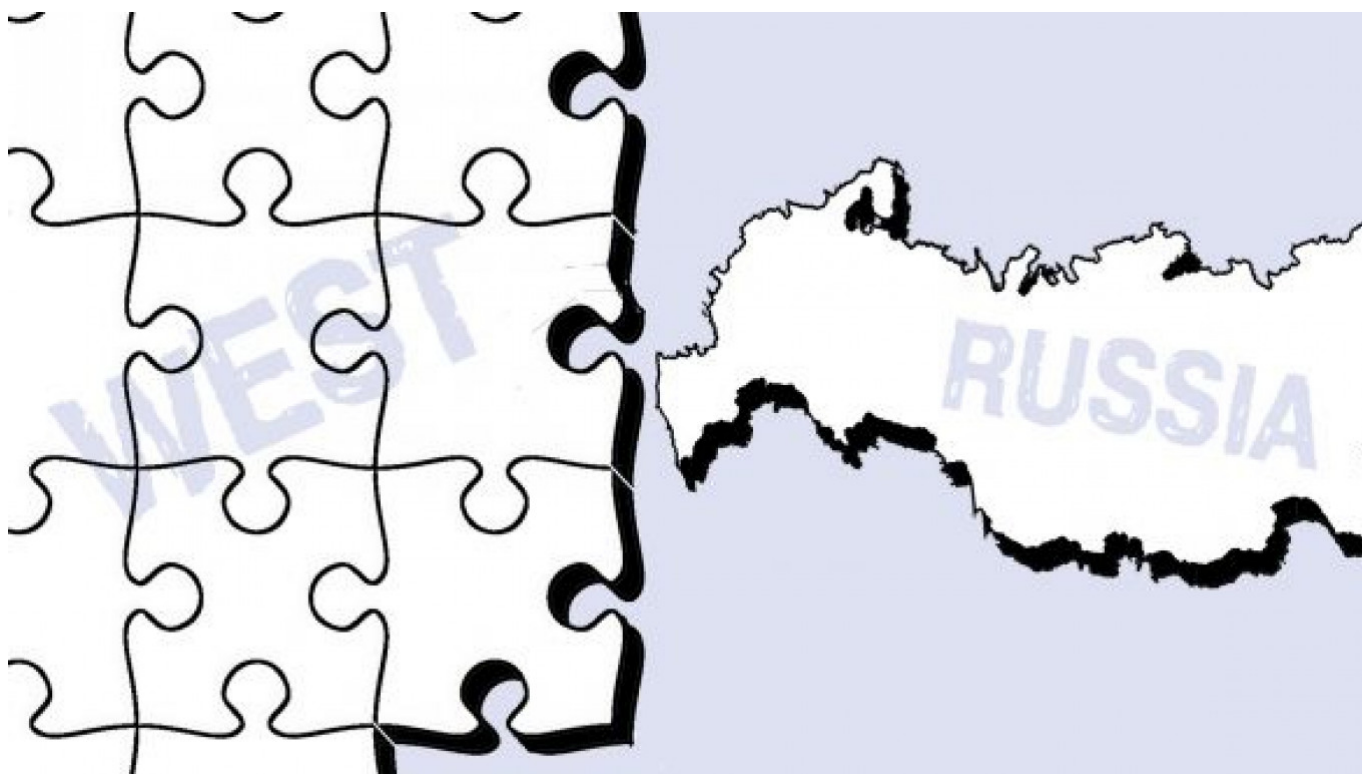


5 Barriers to a Western Partnership

By [Yevgeny Bazhanov](#)

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Are Russia and the West ever capable of becoming close allies and partners?

For centuries, Russian society had been split between Slavophiles and pro-Westerners. The Russian Empire viewed Europe largely as a military, political, ideological and economic threat and remained on guard, never opening up completely.

In 1917, the Bolsheviks shook the country to its foundations. Inspired by Marxism — an ideology that was imported from West — they were committed internationalists who dreamed of a universal brotherhood of nations under the flag of socialism and communism. But their dreams were soon shattered. The capitalist West, despite having pockets of socialist and communist sympathizers, was, on the whole, hostile toward communism. As a result, the Bolsheviks evolved away from the original goal of international socialist revolution and toward Soviet nationalism and geopolitical dominance in countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America that were traditionally anti-U.S. and anti-Western. After 1945, the combination of geopolitical and ideological antagonism eventually led the Soviet Union and the West into the Cold War.

Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, President Boris Yeltsin and other pro-Westerners tried to put an end to the Cold War and integrate Russia into the “civilized family of nations.” Now, 20 years after the end of the Cold War, what is hindering a close partnership between Russia and the West?

First, the memory of the Cold War plays a big role. For Russians, the West as a whole was their enemy, and many Russians still believe that the West has aggressive and hostile intentions toward Russia. The eastward expansion of NATO and U.S. attempts to establish a global hegemony only confirmed Russia’s suspicions of U.S. intentions

Second, geopolitical disagreements have been another obstacle in U.S.-Russian relations. Russia has a long tradition as a superpower and will never agree to play a subservient role in global — much less European — affairs. In addition, one factor that severely aggravated U.S.-Russian relations is that Washington never fully recognized Russia’s right to be a regional leader in the former Soviet space.

Third, opposing political positions inhibit the partnership. The West opposes what it views as growing authoritarianism in Russia, while Moscow suspects that the West, under the false pretext of “supporting democratic institutions,” meddles in Russia’s internal affairs with one goal: to destabilize and perhaps even break up the country.

Fourth, economic disputes between the West and Russia also complicate the relationship. As an energy supplier, Russia favors high prices for its oil and gas. As a consumer, Europe wants low prices. Russia strives to dominate the European energy market, but Europe tries to prevent it. Because of the relative backwardness of Russia’s economy, disputes constantly arise regarding product quality and environmental standards. Many Russian goods receive discriminatory treatment in European markets, and Western businesspeople grumble at the adverse and often lawless business environment in Russia.

Finally, Russia’s high level of corruption and organized crime scares European and U.S. investors away. Russia is also perceived as a channel for drug trafficking and illegal immigration from Eurasia.

But despite these significant obstacles, there is still a lot of potential for strengthening Russia’s partnership with the West. The driving force behind this natural convergence is Russia’s pressing need to modernize and diversify its economy. Post-Soviet Russia is committed to build a market economy and a democratic society. As a result, for the first time in history, the Russian economic, social and political models are not antagonistic to the Western model. For its part, the West has an objective — if not self-serving — interest in seeing Russia become a well-functioning civil society with a prosperous market economy.

The process of globalization and modernization necessarily means that Russia will never return to Soviet-style isolationism. The economic centers of the modern world — Europe, the United States, China, India and Southeast Asia — are becoming increasingly dependent on one another. If Russia were to reject economic ties with those power centers, the country would become so weak that it would disintegrate.

In addition, common security risks and threats — mainly terrorism — will naturally bring Russia and the West together to fight the common enemies on all fronts.

One other factor that will help the partnership is that Russia will gradually cure itself of its complex as a “defeated superpower” and will come to terms with its more modest geopolitical role in the global arena. For its part, the West will cease to view Moscow as a geopolitical rival.

Thus, the outlook for improving ties with the West is very positive. At the same time, however, Russia will never fully integrate into Western civilization in the same way that France, Britain and Germany have done. Because of its traditions (which are more aligned with the East than the West), the country’s enormous size and its geopolitical ambitions, Russia will remain an independent power center that will never be firmly in the East or the West, but at the same time it can play an important balancing role between the two.

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