

Russia and EU Are Signing Their Divorce Papers

By [James Nixey](#)

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For all of Russia's protestations that it is an independent pole in the world, its long-term future, just like its 18th-century past, is most certainly in Europe. Almost 80 percent of the country's population lives west of the Urals. Europe is not just a market; it is a destination.

And yet right now, divorce proceedings are well under way. The signs have been there for a long time (well before Ukraine), but few thought it would come to this. Russia has not turned out as Europe had hoped. And for the current leaders in Russia, Europe has alternated between being either irritating in its rules-based approach or simply irrelevant to Russia's plans to regain its great-power status.

It has not been for want of trying, but the eight EU-Russia summits over the past four years were awkward affairs.

Russia was frustrated at what it saw as Western intransigence over its refusal to give way in the shared neighborhood, which in Russia's world view is not shared.

The EU, with its usual schizophrenia, hoped that there was a mini-Gorbachev reformist lurking somewhere within Vladimir Putin's soul, but at the same time was embarrassed to sit at the same table while Russia contravened internationally accepted rules and norms of behavior.

Europe has ignored the contradictions between its policies and Russian realities. Whether through naivete or willful misunderstanding, it has failed to recognize that its policies for bringing Russia closer to Europe fundamentally threaten the survival of the Russian regime.

In the EU's Partnership for Modernization, for example, Russia has taken the money and ignored the modernization.

EU funding for NGOs and civil society, though laudable, has only angered the Kremlin, as it views the development of civil society as an implicit threat to its hold on power. It is hardly surprising that the Kremlin has clamped down. And the Eastern Partnership, a praiseworthy (if half-hearted) project, is designed to move six of the other former Soviet countries away from Russia and into the West.

It is, perhaps, to the West's credit that it tries. But it is to its shame that it is surprised when Russia reacts aggressively.

It is often said that the West has no Russia policy. That may be, but at least it had an idea — and that idea was for Russia to be just like the West itself. What the West failed to understand was how threatening that was to Russia's sense of identity, its pride, and most of all to the livelihoods of the elite. This explains Russia's behavior. It does not justify it.

How and why did Europe get Russia so wrong? Part of the problem has been that the West's overwhelming interest in Russia since 1991 has been to make money. Russia, a completely new market of nearly 150 million people eager for Western goods, was almost too good to be true.

Little things like values and the rule of law were ignored in the quest for healthy profit margins. Politicians have been uncertain what to do with Russia the past 20 years, but corporate interests have known exactly what they want.

A second problem with Europe's approach is the belief that diplomacy will always work and that all problems can be resolved just by talking things through. This problem is particularly acute when experienced and wily Russian negotiators face up against European ingenuos who come out of talks thinking they have made progress, when in fact they have been fobbed off and lied to.

Nor do these diplomats learn from their mistakes. In many countries, embassy staff are refreshed every three years or so and their successors then repeat the same errors. Europe-wide abandonment of Russia expertise has been disastrous to its ability to handle Moscow well.

Europe's leaders are just as bad. Most chalk up poor relations with Russia to their predecessors' ignorance or incompetence, and egotistically believe that their administration

will be different. But over the course of their term in office, they eventually realize that "it's not us; it's them."

But by then it's too late: Either the presidency or prime ministership is almost at an end, or the relationship has degraded to the point of no return. European leaderships refresh themselves. Putin and his cronies stay on and stand tall.

The latest crisis and the downing of MH17 may have changed the equation. Realization is dawning among EU businesses that allowing Russia a free hand injects an uncertainty into investment and trade. Short-term sacrifice for long-term security is beginning to be seen as a serious option.

It has also become clear that Russia is now endangering Western European lives. Illegally ripping away bits of land from independent countries could have been overlooked, as it was in 2008 and as it might have been in 2014. But killing EU citizens, even unintentionally, has a more direct resonance with the populations Western leaders depend on to keep them in power. Doing nothing has become morally and politically unacceptable.

So the divorce is going through. The Kremlin is quite happy about it, for now. As for the EU, it is only reluctantly signing the papers, perhaps in the sad knowledge that it has failed or that it has been betrayed.

Russia's geography, population density, westward brain drain, and economic requirements at home suggest that it will eventually come running back to Europe.

Europe will welcome it with open arms once more. But if it wants to avoid repeating the disappointment of the past two decades, it should wait, however long it takes, for this president and this system to depart the scene.

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