

Europe and Russia Must Start Building Bridges

By [Pascal Lorot](#)

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More than a year after it started, the Ukrainian crisis seems stalled and has produced only losers — especially Ukraine. Having lost Crimea and part of its eastern provinces, it is paying a high price for the repercussions of the Euromaidan protests.

Despite Western aid, its economy is collapsing amid a political climate marked by radicalization in Kiev, as evidenced by the recent "historical memory" laws and sometimes tragic fates of former politicians or experts who were not in line with the new authorities. Prospects for integration into the EU and NATO are more distant than ever.

Another loser is Russia. Even though its economy is not "in tatters," — as U.S. President Barack Obama unwisely claimed last fall — and it is not isolated on the international stage, its situation is not much brighter. The Kremlin is "playing it by ear," without any strategy, and is encouraging a conservative groundswell that is clearly going against the country's modernization. Perceptions of Russia in the West are at their lowest in decades.

The third victim of the crisis in Ukraine is the European Union. After having raised disproportionate expectations by launching the Eastern Partnership in 2009, the EU is pitifully beating retreat without taking full responsibility for it, as was evident at the recent summit in Riga.

The political price of this inconsistency will be heavy. In Kiev, people are already feeling like they have been let down, while the Kremlin sees the move as a harbinger of its geopolitical victory. The European Union is also suffering economic losses. Western sanctions and Russian counter-sanctions favor the establishment of new trading alliances, mostly for the benefit of the BRICS and countries such as Turkey and South Korea.

The causes of this great pan-European misunderstanding abound. Future historians will consider with astonishment the missed opportunities to reunify the continent in the early 1990s, after Sept. 11, 2001 or during the Dmitry Medvedev presidency in Russia from 2009–2010. In Western Europe, including France, the elites lost interest in Russia. It was generally perceived as a residual power, which was threatening first because of its weakness, then because of what was perceived as displaced ambitions.

A strange country — European in appearance but refusing more and more openly the practices and rules of the Western game. The often sensationalized way Russia is covered by many Western media has shaped the public opinion for a long time, and the loss of historic and strategic memory among many senior officials and political leaders did the rest.

Russia — and Putin in particular — also bears a heavy responsibility in what some observers call — rather hastily, hopefully — the Russian-Western schism. Criticism from Moscow on double standards, Western inconsistency in the Middle East or the revival of right-wing currents in Eastern Europe would be more audible if the Kremlin was faultless.

Some will say, rightly, that this is not the first major crisis between Russia and the rest of Europe. More or less sustainable reconciliation phases have always succeeded confrontation periods. However, it would be hazardous to rely on this single pendulum effect. The Ukrainian crisis comes at a very particular geopolitical moment: the shifting of the world's center of gravity toward the Asia-Pacific region.

Careful observers of the Moscow scene notice further tectonic movements, primarily in the minds of many Russians: Western Europe is not the central reference anymore, whether in terms of economic development, societal evolutions or international behavior. Faced with this reality, two attitudes arise.

The first is to make do with the existing fractures, considering that the real frontier of Europe is between Ukraine and Russia. This vision, firmly anchored in European political thinking for centuries and dominant in the U.S., aims to confine Russia as far as possible in the northeast of the continent.

The other approach is to consider that Russia, despite the crises and the vagaries of history, is also "of Europe." The geopolitical configuration of the continent for the upcoming decades depends on the outcome of this titanic battle of ideas, which goes "two ways." (Western hawkish factions and Russian Eurasists mutually reinforcing themselves).

In this context, Germany and France have a particular responsibility. The first, Germany, because of its economic weight and its special relationship with Moscow born of World War II and the reunification. The second, France, because it is the only permanent member of the UN Security Council seen as credible by both the Ukrainians and the Russians and it knows — because of its history — the dangers of post-imperial seizures.

Paris and Berlin should act in five directions. First, by working with other EU states to preserve unity on Ukraine. Second, by pursuing a firm and realistic dialogue with Russia. Third, by putting pressure on Ukraine, which is dragging its feet on implementing the political component (in particular points on decentralization) of the Minsk II agreement.

Fourth, by keeping offside those — many within NATO and the U.S. Congress — who advocate arms deliveries to Ukraine. Finally — and this is perhaps most important in the long term — by encouraging Warsaw and Moscow to overcome historical wounds and recent disputes, because the continent's stability is unthinkable without a Russian-Polish reconciliation. For sure, there will be obstacles, but several factors point to a glimmer of optimism. The main one being that perhaps neither Russia nor the EU have an interest in letting Ukraine become a "black hole" at their borders.

Pascal Lorot is president of the Institut Choiseul for International Politics and Geoeconomics, and Arnaud Dubien is director of the Franco-Russian analytical center Observatoire.

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