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# Europe Urgently Needs a Geopolitical Purpose

## The weaknesses and contradictions within the EU have emboldened Russia in its policy regarding Ukraine.

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**Zuma / TASS**

Russia's build-up of forces on its border with Ukraine is not only a challenge to Ukraine. It also marks the latest phase of a campaign of pressure on the EU. The weaknesses and contradictions of the EU's response have emboldened Russia to pose a more severe test now. This is a dangerous moment for Europe and the transatlantic alliance.

The campaign began in early February when EU High Representative Josep Borrell visited Moscow and was humiliated at every turn. Borrell concluded that "Russia is progressively disconnecting itself from Europe and looking at democratic values as an existential threat".

Yet on the three issues that dominate its relations with Russia, Europe has shown inconsistency and weakness.

The EU has been most vocal about Russia's treatment of opposition leader Alexei Navalny, who last year nearly died from poisoning by the internationally-outlawed nerve agent Novichok. Arrested on return to Moscow, he now languishes in a penal colony. Russia has made this a European case, finding Navalny guilty of embezzling a French company (which says it suffered no damage) and failing to report while recovering in Berlin from his poisoning. The European Court of Human Rights has condemned the guilty verdict.

But the EU has not matched its words with actions. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov threatened to break off relations with the EU if it imposed sanctions that "pose risks for our economy, including in the most sensitive areas". Though a candid admission of sanctions' effectiveness, this threat caused the EU to limited itself to token measures. Crucially, it did not impose the far wider sanctions that Navalny himself advocated.

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The second issue is the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline. If completed (it is 94% built) this will deepen Kremlin's influence on German and weaken Ukraine. It is unpopular within the EU and opposed by the United States. Yet Germany insists that the issue be kept separate from the Navalny case, human rights concerns, cyber-hacking of the Bundestag and a growing agenda of other difficult issues.

The third issue is Russia's Sputnik-V vaccine. In February EU Commission president Ursula von der Leyen pointedly asked why Russia was offering Sputnik-V to other countries despite low take-up in Russia itself. Yet after tensions over poor vaccine procurement dominated the latest EU summit, Emmanuel Macron and Angela Merkel phoned Putin to discuss potential Russian production and supply of Sputnik-V for the EU.

This phone call served Russian ends in three ways. First, it shows that member states are ready to override von der Leyen and Borrell's concerns.

This meets Russia's wish to deal with them individually, not with the EU as a whole. Second, on the vaccine issue the EU is *demandeur*: Russia can explore its need and extract a political price. Third, France, Germany and Russia spoke in the so-called Normandy Format, agreed in 2014 to discuss the Ukraine conflict. But though Ukraine was excluded from the call, Merkel, Macron discussed it and other regional security issues with Putin.

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Merkel and Macron also raised concerns about Navalny's health. Putin is unlikely to worry about a man who has released a video, watched over 100m times, that portrays him as a deranged kleptocrat. The day after their phone call, Navalny began a hunger strike in desperation at his declining condition.

Russia can draw three conclusions from its diplomacy of pressure. First, EU solicitude about

Putin's personal enemy — a man he has tried to kill and is now at his mercy — will carry no consequences. Second, Germany will oblige Russia in its strategic goal of completing Nord Stream 2 regardless of Russia's behaviour in other areas. Third, domestic EU criticism of a vaccine rollout that lags by only a few months is strong enough to compel member states to override Commission concerns and seek Russia's help.

In short, the EU has responded with division, gesture politics and strategic impatience. Russia has exploited this weakness to condition Europe to accommodate, not resist, it in advance of its military build-up. This appears to have worked.

While the U.S. and Britain have expressed grave concern, France and Germany have issued a statement calling on both sides to de-escalate — as if Ukraine is a potential aggressor in the defense of its territory.

The risk now is that a major Russian offensive against Ukraine splits the continent from the Anglo-American world.

Russia may believe this is the right moment to attempt a decoupling of the Atlantic Alliance that the Soviet Union never achieved. If it waits, Biden will heal the damage done by his predecessor to the alliance and Europe will recover from COVID-19. The stakes are high not only for Ukraine but for the West. To avert this, the EU urgently needs to find geopolitical strength and purpose.

*The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.*

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