

## THE END OF AN ERA IN EU-RUSSIA RELATIONS

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Russia's approach to the European Union (EU) has changed fundamentally over the last few years. The Kremlin is no longer drawing gradually closer to crisis-stricken Europe. Instead, Russia is entering a period of domestic uncertainty and rebalancing its foreign policy to emphasize its Eurasian neighbors and China. Europe should take note. In order to develop an effective strategic approach toward their biggest neighbor, Europeans must deepen their understanding of the changing realities in Russia.

### The Russian Landscape

- For the first time since the late Soviet era, Russians are becoming interested in public affairs. This Russian awakening covers the entire societal spectrum, from libertarians to Orthodox fundamentalists.
- Russians are becoming more politically active and want more accountability and respect from their rulers.
- The government finds it hard to meet the challenge of ensuring robust economic growth and development and is unwilling to begin transitioning from authoritarianism to a political system based on the rule of law.
- Confronted with domestic challenges, the regime has become more insular and isolationist, seeking to solidify its base.
- The leadership has managed to stabilize its position, and opposition groups are in disarray. A “social explosion” is unlikely to happen anytime soon.
- The Kremlin's political relations with the EU have become appreciably cooler. Moscow no longer sees Europe—and its value system in particular—as a model.
- Russia is, and will continue to be, for the Russians themselves to fix. Outsiders can influence Russian developments only at the margins and not always positively.

### What the EU Can Do

**Focus on its own long-term strategic priorities.** The EU's policies should not center on what the Europeans want Russia to be or become. Instead, Brussels needs to work with Moscow on the EU's own wants and needs. Those priorities include ensuring peace and stability in Europe, expanding and deepening trade with Russia, avoiding overdependence on Russian energy supplies, and exploiting investment opportunities in the country.

**Deepen engagement with Russians at all levels and in all fields.** Even though outside powers cannot dictate change in Russia, expanding engagement on the economy, business, cultural activities, tourism, exchange programs, and more will substantially contribute to the transformation of Russian society. And this will create a better environment for the EU in the east.

**Phase out visa restrictions that apply to ordinary Russian citizens.** Opening Europe to Russians can effectively counter the Kremlin's isolationist trends. Moving toward a visa-free regime is the most effective way for the EU to use its soft power with respect to Russia.

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