

Does Russia want to break up the European Union?

By Kadri Liik

Does Russia want to break up the European Union? It is an interesting question, but one that is frankly irrelevant for European policy.

There is no question that Russia is a problematic international actor. It annexed Crimea, it is fuelling a war in eastern Ukraine, and it conducts massive military exercises on the borders of NATO. Russia supports anti-establishment political parties in the West, bribes Western politicians and business executives, and spreads disinformation throughout the West.

Why is Russia doing all this? Broadly, two competing answers are offered. According to the first, Russia is aggressive and expansionist. It wants to restore its sphere of influence, or maybe even to recreate the Soviet Union. It wants to occupy the Baltic States, destroy NATO, and break up the EU. It wants to restore its great power status and do away with the Western-led liberal order.

In the alternative view, Russia is weak, isolationist, and insecure. It thinks of the West as an aggressor. The West is trying to pick off Russia's last remaining allies and overthrow the regime in Moscow by spreading subversive Western values and funding pro-Western organisations. Thus, Russia is acting defensively.

An accurate description of Moscow's motivation is more complicated than either of these simplistic narratives. But the more important question for our purposes is: why do we need to know Russia's motivations? How would knowing them change our policy? The Soviet Union saw the war with Finland, the invasion of Poland, and the occupation of the Baltic States as defensive measures. Moscow's viewpoint did not lend these actions any legitimacy in Western eyes.

So why should we bother understanding Moscow's motivations? Don't we need to resist bad Russian actions regardless of the reasoning behind them?

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As far as military matters are concerned, knowing Moscow's motivation is still important. If Moscow is an expansionist aggressor, countries should prepare for war and invest in troops and weapons, or engage in an arms race to deter Moscow.

If Moscow is weak and insecure, countries should still invest in defence capabilities, but should also invest a lot in communications, arms control, and trust-building measures. A paranoid insecure power can be very dangerous, but this danger stems not so much from expansionist intent as from misreading others' intentions. So, in the military sphere, reading Moscow's mind does indeed matter.

However, things look different when non-military matters are considered.

We complain that Russia is trying to break up the EU, and prefers to deal with member states individually. But if we always ask Brussels to deliver bad news to Russia and try to reserve the good news for the member states – is it then surprising that Russia prefers member states?

If we want to prevent this, we should invest more in common policies. We should have more intra-EU discussions on Russia policy that could lead to joint analysis and joint strategy. We should empower the European External Action Service (EEAS) to have a bigger role in the execution of that policy. And if at times we choose to empower certain member states, we should still make sure that they implement shared policies.

We complain that Russia is bribing our companies and buying up politicians. So why do we elect politicians who can be bought? And why does our legislation allow companies to engage in shady deals?

We worry that Russia is trying to spread its propaganda in the West. But trusted quality journalism of our own could easily put Russia's propaganda channels out of business.

We fear that Russia is financing radical political parties in the West. So maybe something should be done about party financing laws?

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Overall, it is the current wobbly state of the Western liberal model that opens up space for all sorts of challengers, be they from the Islamic State (ISIS), Vladimir Putin's Russia, or the European far right. The only way for Russia to harm the EU is by using the loopholes the Europeans themselves allow to exist.

Thus, instead of investing much energy in discussing Russia's designs for the EU, the EU should work on putting its own house in order. This will make the EU stronger, better, and more legitimate. Addressing the Russia threat – if there is one – will be a fortunate side effect.

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