

COMMENTARY

Russia's Far Abroad

By JANUSZ BUGAJSKI
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Recent developments revolving around energy supplies and the future of Kosovo demonstrate how an emboldened Russia is intent on dominating the European agenda. Moscow's strategy toward the European Union consists of three core elements: disrupting EU consensus; gaining influence over key states; and preventing any further NATO and EU expansion.

In his landmark speech at the Munich security conference in February, President Vladimir Putin spelled out his priorities: to diminish the effectiveness of international organizations that obstruct Moscow's expansionist ambitions, and to restore Russia's stature as a global power. Centralized control over growing energy revenues has enabled the Kremlin to accelerate the pursuit of these objectives.

Moscow greatly benefits from the absence of a coherent EU policy toward Russia. Formal mechanisms exist to regulate relations, but these have limited impact as long as member states can't agree on the details, as illustrated by the failure to renew the EU-Russia Partnership and Cooperation Agreement. Policy differences are most visible between newcomers to the EU in Eastern Europe and the French, German and Italian governments. While the former are fearful of Russia's resurgence and therefore prefer limiting the Kremlin's influence, the latter three are apprehensive about provoking disputes with Moscow.

For Paris, Berlin and Rome, commercial pragmatism prevails over geostrategic calculations, thus reducing the effectiveness of any joint EU approach. For Moscow, increasing energy supplies and business inroads, especially in strategic infrastructures, will expand its political influence in key EU capitals. Conversely, Europe's growing energy dependence on Russia will undermine any unified response to Moscow's policies.

There are several telling examples of how Russia exploits EU divisions to its advantage. The planned Nord Stream pipeline under the Baltic Sea, contracted between Russia and Germany without an EU consensus, epitomizes Russia's approach. Nord Stream serves four objectives: to limit Russia's reliance on transit across Central Europe; to deepen West European dependence on Russia; to generate disputes between Germany and

Poland; and to marginalize the Poles and Baltics within the EU by depicting them as incorrigible Russophobes.

The Kremlin not only manipulates divisions between older and newer members. It also aims to forestall any common policy among EU newcomers. Hungary and Bulgaria have become the primary targets among former Soviet satellites. The Kremlin is capitalizing on longstanding personal connections with Socialist officials in these countries to construct pipelines and distribution points that will pre-empt Europe's energy diversification.

Hungary's Socialist government has reportedly decided to support the extension of Gazprom's Blue Stream pipeline through Turkey to supply Caspian gas under Russia's control to the EU. If implemented, the project may scuttle the EU's planned Nabucco pipeline, viewed as essential in avoiding overdependence on Russian-controlled gas. Financial windfalls have lured Budapest, as Moscow promises to transform Hungary into a European hub for Caspian gas.

In the Balkans, the Kremlin is extending its control over Bulgarian and Greek energy infrastructures and thereby weaving another web to entangle the EU. In mid-March, the Bulgarian and Greek prime ministers signed an agreement with President Putin to launch the Burgas-Alexandroupolis oil pipeline project. A Russian consortium, including Gazprom, will hold a 51% stake in the pipeline, with Bulgaria and Greece sharing the remaining 49%.

Once again, the goal is to make alternative routes and supplies redundant as Russia intensifies its control over Europe's energy needs. As the Bosphorus is congested with tanker traffic, various proposals have been tabled to supply oil across the Balkans to the EU. The Kremlin supports the Bulgarian-Greek route as it calculates that Sofia and Athens will prove more politically reliable than other Balkan capitals.

Imminent decisions on the final status of Kosovo provide an additional opportunity for Moscow to accentuate splits within the EU and across the Atlantic. While Washington and several EU capitals are eager to resolve the untenable status quo in Kosovo, Russian officials have endeavored to sabotage the most rational settlement. They encourage Serbia to resist Kosovo's sovereignty by questioning the competence of the U.N. special envoy for the territory. At the same time, Moscow appeals to countries such as Spain and Slovakia with significant minority populations by raising the specter of separatist precedents.

Russia's delaying tactics over Kosovo serve two purposes. First, it enables the Kremlin to interject as a major player in Europe's trouble spots, even though it has contributed little to regional security, political reform or economic growth. Second, Moscow benefits from international disputes over Kosovo as this further hinders the emergence of any Western consensus in containing Russia's ambitions in the Black Sea, Caucasus and Caspian regions.

After extracting maximum advantages from its position on the U.N. Security Council by postponing a vote on Kosovo's status, Russia's eventual acknowledgment of Kosovo's independence will serve another strategic goal. It will reinforce Moscow's hand in Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine.

Russia is unlikely to recognize the full independence of the secessionist regions of Transdnistria in Moldova, and Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia. Instead, it will exploit those trouble spots to keep Moldova and Georgia off-balance and outside the EU and NATO. It will also heat up the Crimean separatist question when necessary in order to bring Ukraine into a closer Russian orbit. In stymieing the emergence of a wider Europe and a broader trans-Atlantic community, Moscow is pursuing a "Eurasian" alternative to democratic rule and trans-Atlantic security.

Mr. Bugajski is the director of the New European Democracies project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington.