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## **Can the “Green” Dialogue Become a Driver for Restoring the Dialogue Between Russia and the EU?**

Since 2014, the devolution of the U.S.–Russia relations has been characterized by four interrelated processes. The first and most important is the **devaluation of common values** and the build-up of a confrontation of beliefs and ideas. It has got to the point where Russia has begun to dispute the idea of it being part of the European civilization,<sup>1</sup> and identity issues are increasingly becoming a cause for mutual grievances and misunderstandings.<sup>2</sup> Looking from Russia, one often gets the impression that some EU states, particularly those in Eastern Europe, are engaged in a contest for the best new interpretation of the history of World War II and the relations between the peoples of the former USSR, trying to find new grounds for distancing peoples and ethnic groups. As an attempt to find such a moment in history and a national state of mind that could serve the purposes of the current political situation, this new “primordialism” has already become a routine instrument for building new borders between “us” and “them.” The Russian leadership also contributes to the spread of this new “primordialism,” committing wholeheartedly to its criticism of liberalism as a universal ideology<sup>3</sup> and striving to consolidate its international leadership in defending traditional values and the right to “one’s own path.”

The devaluing of common values has directly resulted in **disassembling common spaces**, including people-to-people contacts. Today, the never-implemented idea of a visa-free regime is exacerbated by a number of scandals with Russian spies penetrating into the European Union as well as by borders closures on account of the pandemic. It is far more difficult to enter the European Union today than it was five years ago. Yet, free movement of people who carry ideas and values is the key means of communication that stands in the way of deepening the rift in ideas and values.

Another important process that is rapidly developing amid the devolution of EU–Russia relations is the deliberate **deconstruction of economic interdependence**. The European Union’s strategy to reduce energy dependence on Russian hydrocarbons, the global trend towards increased protectionism, and the course of economic autarky that Russia settled on in 2014 are augmented today with a new challenge to economic interdependence, which is the EU’s transition to green energy.

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<sup>1</sup> Russia Is a “Distinct Civilization,” Putin Says. *The Moscow Times*, May 18, 2020. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/05/18/russia-is-a-distinct-civilization-putin-says-a70295>

<sup>2</sup> Malinova O. Obsession with Status and *Ressentiment*: Historical Backgrounds of the Russian Discursive Identity Construction. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, no. 47 (2014), pp. 291–303. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2014.07.001>

<sup>3</sup> Vladimir Putin Says Liberalism Has “Become Obsolete.” *Financial Times*, June 18, 2019. <https://www.ft.com/content/670039ec-98f3-11e9-9573-ee5cbb98ed36>

Russia has put forward various assessments of the European Green Deal approved by the European Union in 2019, marking the intensive stage of energy transition. Some experts prefer to stress that developing green energy in the EU is another step in putting an end to energy dependence on Russia and the unstable states of the Middle East as well as a way to build up the EU's competitive edge by making more efficient use of resources, developing new technology-intensive sectors and imposing a carbon border tax on carbon-intensive products from outside the EU. In this case, combating climate change is the niche where the EU is attempting to expand its own global role and where the EU has quite a shot at leadership. This realism-based approach calculates Russia's possible losses and focuses on ways to minimize them. Another opinion, more typical of the liberal paradigm, is based on the premise that the EU—if acting on its own—is, a priori, incapable of achieving the desired results in combating climate change, since it is not the main polluter on the planet, while China, the U.S., India and Russia account for the bulk of emissions. So, without truly global cooperation, the EU can hardly achieve its goals. Consequently, an era of new opportunities is opening up for increasing collaboration under the slogans of shared responsibility for saving the planet. In his Address to the Federal Assembly, Russia's President Vladimir Putin paid unprecedented attention to preventing climate change and environmental pollution, which demonstrates a clear trace of the EU's new climatic agenda and a desire to show that Russia is not alien to the universal human values of fighting for quality of life in the future.<sup>4</sup> In his speech at the 2021 Leaders' Summit on Climate, Putin also stressed that green transition is certainly a window of opportunity for establishing a dialogue.

If the goal consists in establishing a dialogue, then another important process needs to be reversed, namely that of **de-institutionalizing cooperation**. Few formats for dialogue with Russia and the possibility of restoring them have become a new factor in the disagreements within the European Union. Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron's proposal that a direct dialogue be resumed was not supported by all member states, which demonstrated once again that the time for a direct political dialogue has apparently not come as of yet, and the most we can hope for in the near future is some cautious advances in practical interaction (most likely in a bilateral format) on issues that can potentially be depoliticized. The "green transition" can probably be considered in this context. In addition to a strictly bilateral dialogue on energy cooperation matters, a "green dialogue" is also important from the perspective of transforming the geopolitical situation for both sides.

### **New Geopolitics of the EU's "Green Energy"**

Energy transition entails a number of major geopolitical challenges, requiring a transformation of the EU strategy for collaboration with regions and nations, certainly including Russia, which have played a particularly great role in ensuring the EU's energy security.

The first challenge lies in altering the pattern of interdependence with the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), as well as Russia. The EU's transition to renewable energy sources (RES) reduces its dependence on hydrocarbons from those regions, especially after 2030, when gas consumption is to be decreased. For MENA nations and for Russia, this entails a major drop in national budget revenues, and it will require a transformation of the economic model, possibly producing social instability in some of these states. The latter is particularly important for the EU owing to the situation concerning migration in the Mediterranean. The EU has already been quick to adopt

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<sup>4</sup> <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/65418>

visionary documents to establish a new framework for shaping a new pattern of interdependence. On March 9, 2020, the European Commission announced the EU's comprehensive strategy with Africa,<sup>5</sup> which includes five priority partnerships: green transition, digital transformation, sustainable growth, peace and governance, and migration and mobility, also intending to usher in an era of closer cooperation with African states. In February 2021, the new "Agenda for the Mediterranean"<sup>6</sup> was presented in Brussels, claiming that the COVID-19-induced crisis in the region gives Europe and other regional nations a unique chance for cooperation geared towards environmental, digital, sustainable and fair recovery. The overall funding for the "Agenda" under the Neighbourhood and Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) will total €7 bn (possibly increasing to €30 bn). Five of the twelve priority cooperation areas have to do with green transition, sustainable development, regional connectivity, digitization, green growth and climate.

On the one hand, the new stage in the EU's cooperation with the Mediterranean states seeks to help them avoid the negative consequences of economic restructuring and to promote economic development and social stability in the region by introducing new technologies, improving the environment and creating new jobs. On the other hand, the EU itself is entering into a state of a new dependence on the states of the Southern Mediterranean since it needs the wind and solar power that abound in the region. So, the EU is extremely interested in establishing and implementing new partnerships as fast as possible. In particular, the Germany–Morocco hydrogen energy partnership is already in place, while French companies are developing wind and solar energy in Tunisia.<sup>7</sup> Construction of interconnectors between the Northern and Southern Mediterranean has received a new impetus. In particular, Italy and Tunisia are building the Elmed interconnector to link Tunisia's power grid with the European grid in 2025, with Morocco having launched energy exports to Spain in 2019 via seven underwater cables connecting the two states.

The second challenge the EU faces in developing RES is to preserve and advance its regulatory influence in the neighbouring regions. This challenge stems from a decline in interdependence potentially shrinking the EU's influence on the direction in which these states develop, pushing them to diversify partnerships and look for cooperation with potential rivals of the EU that do not tie their investments to any democratization and human rights commitments. For North Africa, this primarily means China, whose investment in RES and overall trade volume with the Southern Mediterranean is steadily growing. There are similar justified concerns that Russia might increase its eastward exports following a drop in hydrocarbon exports to the EU, though its dependence on China might grow accordingly. We should add China's increasing technological competitive edge, particularly in solar energy.

The third challenge, largely stemming from the first two, is the need to intensify diplomatic dialogue with international partners – for a "green deal" not to be perceived solely within the realistic paradigm as a zero-sum game, but rather as improving one's own competitive edge by creating barriers in the way of others. Citing political differences as reasons for ignoring opportunities to cooperate with certain states in combating climate change will definitely harm the

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<sup>5</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/system/files/communication-eu-africa-strategy-join-2020-4-final\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/system/files/communication-eu-africa-strategy-join-2020-4-final_en.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_21\\_426](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_426)

<sup>7</sup> Bennis A. Power Surge: How the European Green Deal Can Succeed in Morocco and Tunisia. ECFR, January 2021. URL: <https://ecfr.eu/publication/power-surge-how-the-european-green-deal-can-succeed-in-morocco-and-tunisia/>

EU's reputation as a globally responsible leader. So, pursuing dialogue, including with Russia, is more of a necessity than a choice in this case.

### **Russia: A Forced Rule-Taker?**

For Russia, the challenge is not only to adapt to the inevitable contraction of the hydrocarbon market and to diversify its economy, but also to make sure the country seizes the opportunities to do business in other countries and regions. In particular, it remains to be seen how the EU's new African and Mediterranean strategies affect the prospects for Russia's regional economic presence, which is largely associated with energy projects. After all, the question for Russia is how not to fall by the wayside of the new European green deal and China's Belt and Road Initiative, as the interests behind the two projects inevitably overlap in the Mediterranean. Will Russian companies have enough competitive edge to participate in international "green" energy projects? Won't Russian companies be excluded as not complying with the new environmental standards? Could Russia become a rule-maker in the global green deal rather than a mere rule-taker?

As conventional wisdom has it, if you want to grasp the rules of the game quickly, you should start playing it. And if the rules have not been fully set yet, it is crucial to join the game in time.

Institutionally and rhetorically, Russia adheres to combating climate change and environmental pollution. Russia has ratified the 2019 Paris Accords, adopted a series of internal strategic documents, such as the National Action Plan for the First Stage of Adaptation to Climate Change up to 2022<sup>8</sup> and then the Russian Federation's Long-Term Development Strategy<sup>9</sup> for Low Greenhouse Gas Emissions up to 2050. The country has also developed a series of national climate and environment projects. In reality, however, Russia's progress in the area has witnessed few successes. In particular, in 2021, Russia was ranked 73<sup>rd</sup> out of 115 states in the annual World Economic Forum's ranking measuring how much states progress in transferring to clean energy,<sup>10</sup> while the share of wind and solar power in Russia's UES balance is only 0.15 per cent. Calculations indicate that—should the most ambitious plans be implemented—the RES share in Russia's energy generation will have reached 2–2.5 per cent by 2035.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, Russian companies have been rather active in going "green", launching "clean" detachment of "dirty" assets into separate subsidiaries<sup>12</sup> in order to attract investment and export their products to the EU while leaving products with a high carbon footprint for the domestic market. Owing to the absence of a domestic market, "green projects" launched in Russia, such as RES and hydrogen equipment,<sup>13</sup> are clearly export-orientated. Russia is unlikely to receive assistance in exploring its own internal capabilities and need for RES. The principal actors here are, traditionally, the state, businesses and civil society, which particularly articulates the need for "going green" and introducing climatically neutral innovations. Yet, since this need has been recognized and expressed, it is high time Russia looked for potential partners. On the one hand, such partners would need to be sectoral technological leaders capable of sharing best practices in implementing

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<sup>8</sup> <http://static.government.ru/media/files/OTrFMr1Z1sORh5Nix4gLUsdgGHyWIAqy.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.economy.gov.ru/material/file/babacbb75d32d90e28d3298582d13a75/proekt\\_strategii.pdf](https://www.economy.gov.ru/material/file/babacbb75d32d90e28d3298582d13a75/proekt_strategii.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/11201991>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2021/01/31/856101-chetvertii-energoperehod>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.rbc.ru/business/21/05/2021/60a66e829a79472bd0e8ec91>

<https://www.rbc.ru/business/19/05/2021/60a3b6719a7947d63af44697>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4654965>

domestic projects while simultaneously “guiding” Russia in international cooperation projects. On the other hand, such partners should not strive to politicize economic cooperation.

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In the foreseeable future, this cooperation is likely to develop primarily in the bilateral format with several EU member states. However, if Brussels abandons the politicization of the “green dialogue,” a new energy approach might drive the overall EU–Russia dialogue as well, doing what the “partnership for modernization” failed to do. A new “partnership for sustainable development” could help the parties to both keep the face and reverse the devaluation of values, the deconstruction of interdependence, the disassembling of common spaces and the de-institutionalization of interactions. Interaction within the “green transition” will require the formation of a consensus around a new values matrix, new dialogue formats, the establishment of a common contact space, and a dialogue between academic communities on the one hand, and businesses involved in the “green transition” on the other. It will thus be conducive to shaping a new type of interdependence. The “green dialogue,” therefore, constitutes a new window of opportunity that can be used in equal measure to both deepen the confrontation and to find a way out of it.