

European Union-Russia summit a diplomatic debacle

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The summit between the European Union (EU) and Russia, held May 18 in the Russian city of Samara, ended in a debacle for the European powers as antagonisms between the United States and Russia reach a breaking point.

The US has played a decisive role in antagonizing Russia and driving a wedge between European states with its recent plans for a new missile system. Poland and the Czech Republic have signed up to the missile plan, which is directed against Russia. For its part, Russia has reacted to the US initiative by intensifying attempts to increase its influence in neighbouring states that were formerly aligned with the Soviet Union. The European Union finds itself caught in the middle of this conflict.

The deep divisions between the EU and Russia, and within the EU itself, produced one of the most tense and bitter encounters with Moscow. The meeting was almost cancelled before it began, as various eastern European leaders threatened not to attend or to use it as a mechanism to vent their ire at Moscow's foreign policy. No joint declaration of the summit's decisions was released, under conditions in which nothing of substance could be decided.

Organised under the auspices of Germany's six-month presidency of the EU, the summit was intended to lay the foundations for the renewal of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), a 10-year-old pact that lays out some of the economic and political relations between the EU and Russia. The EU receives about a quarter of its oil and gas from Russia, while over half of Moscow's exports go to the EU.

The meeting saw Russian President Vladimir Putin, EU Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso and German Chancellor Angela Merkel exchanging thinly veiled diplomatic insults. Merkel expressed concern for the fate of Russian activists opposed to the Putin regime who were arrested outside the summit or prevented from travelling to Samara, saying, "I hope they will be given an opportunity to express their opinion."

Barroso commented that the EU had "sacred principles," including "democracy, freedom of the press, freedom of association, freedom of demonstration."

Putin responded by attacking what he said was the EU's failure to censure what he called persecution of the Russian-speaking minority in Estonia, a former republic of the USSR which has been an EU member since 2004.

The list of conflict points between European states and Russia is long and growing.

The eastern European states that joined the EU in 2004 were the most vocal in their hostility to Russia. Poland and Lithuania had argued that the summit be cancelled, angry at Russian policies

directed against them and wary of German efforts to steer EU policy towards Russia in a direction that benefits Berlin, especially in relation to energy supplies.

Poland has stated that it will veto negotiations on the PCA, citing the existence of a Russian ban on Polish meat imports. Lithuania is reacting to Russia cutting off energy supplies in an effort that many commentators regard as pressuring the government in Vilnius into handing more control of its energy infrastructure to Russian interests.

Relations are particularly strained between the Kremlin and new EU member Estonia over the latter's removal of a monument to Red Army soldiers who died during the Second World War, which Moscow has utilised to pressure the government in Tallinn. Estonia has accused Moscow of launching a campaign of Internet sabotage intended to undermine the country's IT infrastructure. NATO has sent "cyber-terrorism" experts to Estonia in an effort to minimise the damage.

Russia is responding more aggressively to the efforts of the US and the EU to exert their influence in what Moscow sees as its sphere of influence. The Kremlin is also taking a harder line against those eastern European states it deems to be working to undermine its role as a regional power. Vladimir Chizhov, Russia's ambassador in Brussels, said the accession of former Eastern Bloc states into the EU had created a "more complicated" relationship between Brussels and Moscow.

Barroso warned that any Russian action taken against an individual EU state would be considered action against all the members. "It is very important if you want to have close cooperation to understand that the EU is based on principles of solidarity," he said.

While Brussels, expressing the interests of Berlin and the other major EU powers, is willing to use the criticisms of Russia by the eastern European EU members in its negotiations with Moscow, the interests of these weak and impoverished states are not central to the EU's imperialist objectives. Rather, the European powers are concerned that Moscow's growing assertiveness on its western border is a threat to their own ability to dominate the region.

There are significant disagreements between Brussels and Moscow on a number of major foreign policy and economic matters. The EU has been lobbying for the passage of a United Nations resolution proposing the secession of Kosovo from Serbia, completing the break-up of the former Yugoslavia begun under German and US auspices in the early 1990s. Moscow has longstanding ties with Serbia and sees it as an ally in the Balkans, so is threatening to veto any UN resolution that the Serbian government is against.

Central to Moscow's new aggressive foreign policy is its attempts to rebuff Washington's plans to station parts of its so-called "Star

Wars” missile defense shield in Poland and the Czech Republic, which it sees as a direct threat to Russian military capabilities. Russia has responded by announcing a large increase in military spending, its withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and with threats to direct part of its nuclear arsenal against Poland and the Czech Republic. A major element in the US strategy to develop its own weapons system on European soil was to drive a wedge between EU member states in the east and the west. The debacle in Samara shows that the US strategy is bearing fruit.

While the major EU powers, especially Germany and France, are wary of the “Star Wars” program and expressed some sympathy for the Kremlin’s objections, the dispute only increases the reliance of the eastern EU members on US military might and raises the potential that Moscow may take a more aggressive stance in the region.

Moscow’s more aggressive military posture and efforts to be seen as a world power were expressed most vocally in Putin’s attack on US foreign policy at the Munich Defence Conference earlier this year. A recently published statement on foreign policy from the Kremlin stated, “The myth about the unipolar world fell apart once and for all in Iraq,” and that “A strong, more self-confident Russia has become an integral part of positive changes in the world.”

The Russian government has also taken a more active role in the Middle East, including holding high-profile talks with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf sheikdoms, threatening to veto US-proposed sanctions against Iran, and holding talks with Hamas.

This more assertive role directly impacts on the major European powers, which feel threatened by Moscow’s growing economic strength and projection of its geostrategic influence by military, diplomatic and economic means.

The most significant event to overshadowed the summit was the signing on May 12 of a deal between Russia, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan that will establish a new oil and gas pipeline along the Caspian Sea coast to Russia’s energy supply network. The deal is a major blow to EU and US efforts to improve their access to the energy-rich region independently of Russia, and a coup for Moscow’s efforts to establish its domination of the oil and gas supply routes across the former Soviet Union.

The EU had expected to come to an agreement with Russia that would establish a more stable supply of Russian energy imports in exchange for certain concessions to Moscow on trade and access to EU markets, in the form of a proposed Energy Charter. European governments, above all Germany, have been disturbed by Moscow’s assertive energy policy and are seeking to strike a more reliable deal with Putin while opening up Russia to further investment by European big business. Russia and the state-owned energy giant Gazprom have cut off oil and gas supplies to Ukraine, Belarus and Lithuania in the past two years in an effort to ramp up prices and exert political influence, moves which threaten Western European energy interests.

On May 11 the EU met senior representatives from oil and gas producing countries in the Caspian region in the Polish city of Krakow. The EU had hoped to use the meeting to steal a march on Russian efforts to secure its interests in the region, giving them extra clout in the run-up to the summit in Samara.

Moscow’s deal with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan the following day pulled the rug from under the EU’s feet. Jamestown Foundation analyst Vladimir Socor wrote in the May 14 edition of the *Eurasia Daily Monitor* that the announcement, made in the Turkmen city of Turkmenbashi, “cast a dark shadow on the Krakow summit” and left the efforts of Washington and the EU in the Caspian region “in ruins.”

Speaking in Turkmenbashi, the Russian, Kazakh, and Turkmen leaders stated that a final agreement on the Caspian shore gas pipeline would be signed by September 1, 2007, and work would begin in the second half of 2008. In another declaration, prearranged with Uzbek President Islam Karimov, the three announced a major upgrade of two existing Soviet-era pipelines carrying Turkmen gas to Russia through Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

The deal is likely to lead to the export of 90 billion cubic meters of Caspian Basin gas to Russia, an increase of 80 percent on current levels.

Russian interests are now in a far stronger position regarding the supply of vital oil and gas to the European and world markets, and the Kremlin will use this to attempt to dictate more favourable terms to its rivals. The US and EU-backed plan for a Trans-Caspian pipeline running from the Baku in Azerbaijan through Georgia and on to the Turkish port of Ceyhan—intended to bypass Russia—is threatened with irrelevance, in what BBC analyst Natalia Antelava said was “a huge blow to Washington, Brussels and Beijing,” which are all attempting to secure direct access to Turkmenistan’s vast resources of natural gas.

Russia’s energy minister, Viktor Khristenko, commented on May 12, “As of today, the Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline project does not exist.” However, the EU and Washington have too much at stake in the region to simply let Moscow get away with such a coup. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline is a centrepiece of Western energy policy, worth billions of dollars and necessary to circumvent Russia and weaken its global energy influence. While Turkmen President Kurbanguly Berdymukhamedov and Kazakh leader Nursultan Nazarbaev have signed this deal with Moscow, they are keeping the door open to the EU and the US over their pipeline plans.

It is worth noting that for all of the posturing over human rights between the EU and Russia, both Moscow and Brussels are furiously attempting to strike deals with despotic regimes in Central Asia such as those of Karimov and Berdymukhamedov, who recently took over from the deceased tyrant Saparmurat Niyazov in elections widely recognized as fixed. Merkel was prepared to criticize Putin for the violation of democratic rights, but her own support for the US war against Iraq makes clear she herself has only contempt for such rights when it comes to the interests of the major imperialist players.



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