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Russia flexes new muscle in Europe

By Robert Marquand, Christian Science Monitor
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Belgrade, Serbia - From the Baltics to the Balkans, Russia's resurgence is beginning to tie Europe in knots; creating tensions among nations and fears of ethnic instability and border disputes, and divisions between the US and its continental partners.

In nearly every key relationship Russia has with Europe, the Kremlin under Vladimir Putin – who this week hinted he may stay in power – has pushed its way back to a central place at the decisionmaking table on Kosovo, Iran, energy, military alliances, and nuclear proliferation. And as a key supplier of natural gas to Europe, it's managed to do so at very little economic risk to itself, say diplomats and experts in Europe.

Take the highly emotional question of the territory of Kosovo here in Serbia.

A mere year ago it seemed Kosovo would soon be independent. After seven years of a UN mission and billions of dollars from Europe to stabilize the region, the script went like this: Belgrade would deliver the Kosovar Albanians. Moscow wouldn't interfere with Kosovo independence, allowing the Balkan crisis to be brought to a close. Finnish diplomat Martti Ahtisaari might even win the Nobel Prize for a grand plan to grant sovereignty to Kosovo's majority Albanian population with a guarantee of minority rights for Serbs.

But Russia has departed from the script, strongly backing Belgrade's efforts to keep Kosovo ahead of a crucial Dec. 10 deadline for independence.

It's a move Serbs welcome.

"We thought Kosovo was lost," says Ljubica Gojic, a foreign-affairs specialist at B92 TV in Belgrade. "But now we feel very differently. We feel we have a protector or an advocate in Moscow that will help represent our views in a just manner."

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice last week emphasized that the current negotiations were not open-ended, and underscored Kosovo's independence as the only workable option in US eyes.

But no Belgrade leaders will approve that by the Dec. 10 deadline, setting up a troubling course of events, experts say: Should the US and leading European nations recognize Kosovo outside the UN, Russia may back independence for three renegade enclaves in Georgia and Moldova, which could embolden Serbs in Bosnia to join with Serbia. The scenario is a "nightmare," says a European diplomat in Belgrade.

"The new Russian track of assertiveness, arm-twisting, and influence-grabbing has changed the story," says Jacques Rupnik, a European expert at Sciences Po in Paris. "The EU was counting on Russia to compromise on Kosovo since Moscow had no reason to object. But they have objected, and for very little cost. Europe is divided on Russia and it will be on Kosovo."

How Russian resurgence affects EU



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Russian maneuvering on Kosovo is just part of a new geopolitical game that Putin has opened in the past six to eight months in the European neighborhood – one seeking to restore Russia's traditional sense of being a great nation, taking a tougher line on Russia's sphere of influence, and ending what many Russians felt was national humiliation during the 1990s, as Moscow struggled to adjust to post-Soviet realities.

Many experts in Europe have been slow to acknowledge Russia's resurgence – and its divisive effects on Europe's attempts to achieve a common foreign policy. But that is changing, largely due to recent Russian political, economic, and security moves, including opposition to the proposed US missile shield, Russia's cyber attack on Estonia, Gazprom's control of gas to Europe, spy scandal disputes with Britain, Russian bomber violations of Norwegian airspace, Moscow's reticence to sanction Iran on uranium enrichment, and Russia's exploding of the largest-ever nonnuclear bomb last month.

"Europe's strategic partnership with Russia isn't working properly," says Thomas Gomart, an expert with the Paris-based IFRI. "It is clear more and more that Russia is the biggest issue for Europe in the next decade. Moscow is the new player in setting up a multipolar world weighing against the US. What we haven't answered is whether Russia is a partner or a threat."

American diplomats assert categorically that Moscow knows the proposed missile shield, which would be hosted in part by Poland and the Czech Republic, is actually designed for Iranian missile capability. But they say Putin continues to treat it as a threat to Russian security.

European nations and the NATO alliance have not yet set limits on what enlargement of the European Union means – but Russia has been stiffly fighting EU and NATO enlargement in Ukraine, Belarus, and the Caucasus.

Moscow created jitters last winter with warnings about withholding crucial gas deliveries that make up 26 percent of Europe's total supply. But Monday, as Putin acknowledged he could stay in power – Russia also issued a statement through Gazprom that Europe will not have to worry about gas shipments since it will develop the Shtokman fields 600 miles offshore in the Barents Sea.

To be sure, experts say, Russia has been struggling itself over the past decade – after a half-century of being at the center of the cold war. Putin took over a Russia with a weak government, and has been steadily recentralizing authority in the Kremlin. But holding the world's largest natural gas reserves and substantial oil reserves in a hot energy market, Russia is quickly developing cash assets. Putin's aim is to end Russia's humiliation and restore its sense of greatness, experts say. A key part of that is countering US dominance.

"Putin took over as very pro-West, but soured over all the criticisms of his policies," says Pierre Lorrain, a French writer in Paris and longtime Russian expert.

"For him, Russia is a great power, and it will be back as one of the biggest powers. Putin wants to be the man that makes that turnaround. He knows the Russian people think the rest of the world wanted Russia weak. So it is important for him not to give up any more ... of Russia's power."

Until 2005, the Kremlin made clear distinctions between NATO, which it disfavored, and EU enlargement, which it saw as a natural economic progression. But in recent



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years, as the EU swelled to 27 countries, Putin and Moscow have been less accommodating.

"It is difficult for Russia to cope with new developments of the former satellites," says Laure Delcour of IRIS in Paris. "EU and NATO enlargement created tremendous changes in 10 to 15 years. Russia can't cope with these changes yet. It takes a lot of time to digest enlargement. For Russia, NATO is a problem of interference in the near abroad."

A strategy of deepening divisions

Inside the EU itself, divisions over Russia are especially stark. Former Soviet satellite states like Poland are far more concerned than EU members like Germany and France – though that may be changing somewhat as well. French president Nicolas Sarkozy, who meets Putin Oct. 9, recently termed his handling of Kosovo a form of "brutality."

The Germans in particular have been divided over the meaning of a resurgent Russia – with figures like former foreign minister Gerhard Schröder actively pursuing a pro-Russia policy that would center Berlin between Moscow and Washington. German Chancellor Angela Merkel, on the other hand, has taken a tough line with Russia's newly assertive behavior.

Last February in Munich, Putin disparaged the 1988 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces treaty and the use of NATO forces outside UN mandates, as well as "unilateral illegal actions" – a reference to the Iraq war. It was a clear call for a multipolar world, which US Defense Secretary Robert Gates later parried by saying, "As an old cold warrior, one of yesterday's speeches almost filled me with nostalgia for a less complex time. Almost."

Yet one senior German official told the Monitor, "We publicly came out with Gates, but about half my colleagues in the building agreed with Putin."

Some diplomats say that Russia is reviving an old strategy of sowing division to boost its influence.

"I have to hand it to Russia, they have the greatest diplomats in the world," says a senior US diplomat. "I think they enjoy stirring the pot, sitting back, and watching everyone struggle over these European questions." A senior European diplomat intimately involved with Kosovo admits that "Russia's hardened position on Kosovo is a wonderful way for Putin to split the EU and to create difficulties for the US."

Mr. Lorrain says he believes that despite the remonstrations, Putin is committed in the long run to democracy, Russian style. "People like Putin know NATO is not a threat. There's no *causus belli*, nothing between the EU and Russia that could lead to war. But governments need to think of worst-case scenarios."