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Together and apart: Russian debate on Europe

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POLICY BRIEF

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Together and apart: Russian debate on Europe

Mutual disappointment is nothing new in Russia's relations with the West. Times of trouble are more readily remembered and longer lasting than any period of *entente cordiale*. However, conflict and cooperation have rarely excluded each other. The 1975 Helsinki Final Act encourages member states to be "mindful of their common history and [recognise that] the existence of elements common to their traditions and values can assist them in developing their relations..." Alas, such causality does not appear to work. In order to do so, it would require preconditions that have, for a long time, been absent across Europe, and nowhere more so than between Russia and the West.

The roots

Peter the Great's brutal modernisation effort of the early 18th century put Russia firmly on the European map. However, progressive thinkers of the 18th and 19th centuries still saw Russia as lagging behind in technology, culture and politics. Foreign affairs, however, was a different matter – where the divergence of views from Europe was seen simply as reflection of national interest.

Russian poet, Alexander Pushkin, famously lambasted Europe for criticising suppression of the 1831 Polish uprising in the verse "*to Russia's Slanders*".¹ In 1881 writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky wrote that a "Russian is not only European, but also Asian"; that Russians should "get rid of the menial fear that we will be called Asian barbarians in Europe"², bemoaning Russians had done whatever it took to be acknowledged as European but collected only hatred in response. The principle reason for this, Dostoyevsky argued, was that Europeans could never see Russians to be one of "us". He continues

that Europeans would "never believe that [Russians could] indeed participate on par with them in the future fortunes of their civilization. [That Europeans] treat us as foreign to their civilization, as aliens, as impostors. [That Europeans] think of us as thieves who stole their enlightenment and dressed in their clothes..." For Dostoyevsky, the recipe to Russian success was in the pivot to Asia, where Russians could become masters rather than slaves.

Despite being almost 200 years old, Pushkin's verse remains commonly referred to when Russia is criticised by the West, and traces of Dostoyevsky's inferiority complex remain in the contemporary Russian debate on Europe, helping us to contextualise the depth of the challenge.

Us and Them

Whatever the acute political disagreements between Russia and the West are, Russian officials still insist that Russia remains part of Europe, but not only Europe. In 2016, when President Vladimir Putin was asked about then US President Barack Obama's claim that Russia was a 'regional power' he asked journalists to look at a map and to decide "what" Russia was:

"Is it part of Europe? Or is it part of the eastern region, bordering on Japan and the United States, if we mean Alaska, and China? Or is it part of Asia? Or perhaps the southern region?" Or look at the north. Essentially, in the north we border on Canada across the Arctic Ocean. Or in the south? Where is it? What region are we speaking about?"³

To a certain extent, Russia, the US, Canada

and Turkey are in a similar position vis-à-vis Europe – they are bound to it historically, and have experienced strong influence of European culture, but calling them European is an inaccurate description. Unlike the US, Canada, or Turkey, however, Russia is not a NATO member, keeping it further from ‘political Europe’, as the NATO goal was once described by Lord Ismay.

Intentionally or otherwise, the European Union has made the term *Europe* synonymous with the EU. If a Russian is to say, “I’m going to Europe”, which sounds quite natural, one thinks of an EU Member State, or country of the Schengen area. When sociologists ask routine questions about attitudes to foreign powers in Russia, they often ask about the US, the EU, China, Ukraine, Belarus, and Georgia.⁴ While attitudes toward the US were bumpier and more negative than those toward the EU, since 2014 there has been a clear tendency to see both the US and the EU as parts of the same malign West that sanctions and criticises Russia.

The “West” is a popular construct often analysed through the lens of conspiracy theories and US dominance. Since the beginning of the Cold War, Soviet scholars have paid significant attention to the both real and imagined disagreements between the US and Western Europe. In the current Cold-War-like climate, this topic has returned to fashion. Given that the EU takes a lowest common denominator approach to its politics, often set by states most critical of Russia and supportive of the US, Europe, i.e. the EU, is often viewed as US-dependent, weak, and acting against its own interest. Moreover, bigger countries such as Germany and France are viewed as failing to determine the future of Europe.

What the Russian conservative mainstream sees as European weakness is multifaceted. This relates to the political and economic dependence that limits European room for manoeuvre while Washington makes its decisions, and to a lesser extent, relates to a

lack of military capabilities, vividly debated in NATO’s Europe. It is also an alleged inability to cope with modern challenges such as irregular migration or climate change. In this context, European values are seen as either hypocritical (the western interpretation of democracy and human rights) or ‘rotten’ (gay marriage). On these issues, Russian difference is viewed positively – sovereign, strong, and reliant on ‘traditional’ values – qualities that correspond to the image of ‘good old Europe’, i.e. great powers, and not those of modern, weak Europe. The Russian interpretation of the fresh trend in the West to speak of the world as a dangerous great power competition is a sign of awakening, and not a mistake.

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These assertions are more than popular propaganda discourse. They are a function of the actual state of Russian politics and society that gives a mainstream an angle of looking at things and of believing what is seen.

The different angle

Much of the Northern hemisphere is present in the loose framework of the OSCE. Almost all states of geographical Europe, with the exception of Belarus, Kosovo and the Vatican, are members of the Council of Europe. But in the past few decades the bulk of Europe’s regional decision-making has happened elsewhere – in the EU and NATO. Yet, in spite of intellectual and political trial balloons⁵, most experts and practitioners do not believe that Russia could join either institution in the foreseeable future. In other words, Russia will have to think of the gap that divides itself from the West as a natural and constant

feature of its political, economic and security architecture. When internalised, this has a strong impact on decision-making.

As the old Russian adage goes, “the one who eats well doesn’t understand the hungry”. The EU’s political mainstream thinks of the Union as their home, while Russia sees it as foreign – a good neighbour at best. NATO countries believe that US presence in Europe is a good and necessary security guarantee; Russia views it as an unwanted destabilisation factor. When the EU or NATO proclaim that Russia has no right to veto, this is referenced as the established principles of decision-making, while Russia feels denied a voice awarded to almost thirty other countries, knowing that others can hope to enjoy it when they join the western clubs. For EU/NATO enthusiasts, enlargement is proof of the validity of these institutions, and the spread of good standards across various fields. For Russia, enlargement is a permanent loss of influence and an inability to bilaterally negotiate with a growing number of countries on issues that fall under EU competences, or where preference is given *a priori* to NATO’s military industries. The EU may wish to sell more goods to Russia in a free trade arrangement, but Russian industries may not be ready to compete or make use of advantages, at least this is what industrial lobbyists tell the government. Where the West sees space for progress on democracy and human rights, the Russian mainstream sees dangers to stability and security – some exaggerated; others real.

Certain political groups in EU/NATO countries share Russian concerns; mostly for their own reasons, not because of Moscow, and most are marginal on the far right or left of the political spectrum. Russia may not necessarily be happy about every aspect of the ideological stance taken by these alternative forces, but they do create a disturbance for mainstream policies, which, in turn, can disturb Russia.

Different attitudes lead to different conclusions and, eventually, different sets of policies. As another Russian adage goes, “what’s good for a Russian, is death for a German” which was meant to praise exceptional Russian resilience, although it could also be interpreted as an explanation for the concept of a zero-sum game.

The consequences

The worries of the EU are often believed to be non-issues in Russia. Conversely, issues pushed by Russia for international debate are often met with suspicion in the West because the Russian system, seen as ‘wicked and corrupt’, is not supposed to produce anything worthy of serious debate.

In the last few years, the EU has spent an impressive amount of time and energy on Brexit negotiations. The UK’s attempt to leave the EU has touched upon numerous strings that matter for the EU’s future, or, ‘for the future of Europe’. However, the Brexit debate is further removed to Russia than it is to the United States: Russia is no part of the Brexit negotiations, and, unlike the US, is not bound to Britain by a unique trade relationship. Russian business presence in London is well known, but its fate is not what concerns the Russian government or population. In fact, there may well be a sort of *schadenfreude* toward the super-rich compatriots should they face trouble because of Brexit and/or increased financial scrutiny. Long-term, Brexit could push the UK to enhance ties with other big powers, but it is difficult to imagine, given the overall poor state of official Russian-British relations, how this could benefit Russia. With the UK leaving, the EU may lose one critical voice on Russia, but others remain that could block any sea change to EU policies. Russia can easily take a wait-and-see approach to the painful divorce, where any outcome would not much alter the current perspective.

Russia has concerns for migration challenges that chime with those of the EU. Despite migration to Russia being different in scope and source, making it look like a separate issue, it does not perceive European troubles cold-heartedly. The scale of legal and/or illegal migration to the EU is often used as a scarecrow in the Russian discussion: an omen telling Russia not to follow the same path. Some view this as the beginning-of-the-end of Russia's neighbour – whose glory is a relic of the past. When “populist” politicians make this argument and face attack by the European mainstream, the average Russian is perplexed. They question why democracies of the EU marginalise those who say the truth. Red-lines in political correctness run elsewhere in Russia. This might be a consequence of lagging behind – as political correctness was understood very differently in the West too, half-a-century ago – but this can also be a reflection of a different political culture, which is here to stay.

“All of this sets the stage for a classic zero-sum game, in which Europe is the playing field.”

For the last few centuries, every war has also been a media war. Propaganda campaigns are easily forgotten when they become the past, but for people who live through them they are hard to ignore. Arguments quietly discussed by analysts turn into lances and swords in the hands of propaganda warriors. When Russian media services are criticised in the West, much of the Russian mainstream is almost cheerful – the reaction confirms that the target has successfully been hit. When Russians or western “populist” politicians blame “mainstream media”, run by tycoons, the interpretation is often of an attempt at the established order and basic freedoms, even if there is some truth to the criticism raised.

The conflict in and around Ukraine is not the first, but is the most serious, post-Cold-War blow to the Russia-West relationship. NATO has returned to its classic deterrence pattern, in which Russia is the one to be deterred. The course of action for the Alliance is an outcome of the consensus of member-states, who see their approach as defensive. The US has built up military partnerships with a number of European countries on a bilateral level, whilst the US Congress adopts law that calls Russia an adversary on par with Iran and North Korea.⁶ All of this sets the stage for a classic zero-sum game, in which Europe is the playing field deprived of agency – a handful of relatively small countries that fear further deepening integration more than they fear irrelevance. What is a gain for the US is a loss for Russia. Neutrality, too, is increasingly blurred as so-called “non-aligned” countries develop their military interaction with the US; Brinkmanship becomes a commonly used tool. The irony of the European Union's attempts to establish strategic autonomy is not missed by analysts as, for both sides, being tough on an adversary is politically commendable behaviour since each “only understands force”.

The strategies

Bringing novel lines of thought to political discussion is almost like reinventing the wheel. Spectrums of options are relatively clear and stable, but conditions and inclinations for their use change over time.

In the early 2000s, Russia explored an option of shaping “common spaces” with the EU and achieving joint decision-making at the NATO-Russia Council. Neither of these seem to have worked, but there is always a chance this half-forgotten toolbox might again become useful. Today proponents of Russia's close integration with the West are, by the course of events, pushed to the position of marginal idealists.⁷ Whilst their arguments are easy to grasp by westerners, they largely reflect the ‘western’ idea of progress. That is to say, if

a country is to achieve western standards of democracy, market economy, and respect for human rights, it will look at world affairs eye-to-eye with the West. The objection that the West themselves are not united on such issues is seen as marginal when placed in the context of the gap needing to be covered to become member of that prosperous 'western community'. At the opposite end, one could find hard conservatives who strongly believe in the inherently evil nature of the West, western-driven modernity, and globalisation. The influence of this school is often exaggerated, largely used in propaganda wars to persuade of the imminent threat posed by Russia.⁸ Whilst in Russia, it is used to deliberately polarise debate and highlight the moderate character of the government's actual policy. Between these extremes comes the broad mainstream, where some may drift visibly closer to one margin or the other. Individual bias may be affected by personal experience as well as professional milieu – foreign and security policy statesmen are less inclined to believe in their foreign counterparts' good intentions.

The core of the mainstream is heavily influenced by the policy line of the President, at least when it comes to foreign affairs, but he himself has to take into the account the gravity and inertia of the mainstream. The mainstream has become visibly more conservative following the 2014 Ukraine crisis, however this is not where the trend began. Back in 2006, Dmitry Trenin, one of Russia's most respected foreign policy analysts, noted that Russia was "leaving the West" as an almost natural bounce-back from a period of geopolitical retreat. Trenin suggested that the West needed "to calm down and take Russia for what it is: a major outside player that is neither an eternal foe nor an automatic friend".⁹ At the same time, the Russian mainstream tried to shape an offer for the West, which eventually became an offer of a peer-to-peer relationship. Back in 2010, a period of what some have called "Medvedev's thaw", a group of analysts headed by Sergey Karaganov pushed

for an "Alliance of Europe" which would make Russia, the EU "and the countries sandwiched between them" benefit from a "joint development project"¹⁰. Medvedev's official proposal on the European Security Treaty was seen by Russia as a constructive offer, all but rejected by the West.¹¹ The sad fate is that these proposals are interpreted by Russian conservatives as proof that the West is not ready to take Russian partnerships seriously.

"Russia's relations with the West are set to remain tense for a long time, but there is no intention to sever ties to the West completely."

President Putin still has a standing suggestion for Europe – the concept of Greater Eurasian Partnership, which integrates earlier ideas on terms favourable to Russia.¹² On the one hand, it is based on the "pivot to Asia" believed to help Russia strengthen its presence in the region (that many believe to be the future centre of global politics and economic development). On the other, it offers the EU to become part of the "common space" – one that would include Russia, China and other Eurasian powers. The critics dismiss this concept as pure rhetoric, but the centrality of it in Russian discourse is not accidental.¹³ For the core mainstream, this is the means to reconcile the irreconcilable. Russia enjoys good relations with China but cannot act as a peer in economic and demographic terms; Russia's relations with the West are set to remain tense for a long time, but there is no intention to sever ties to the West completely. The Eurasian Economic Union, although it could potentially play a key role in new trade routes from China, is faced with sceptical assessments from the West. In this manner, Greater Eurasia provides a positive outlet for what could otherwise be a stalemate, in which neither side is able to move.

Conclusions

Almost 140 years and several revolutions after Dostoyevsky wrote that Russians were treated as second-class persons in Europe this is still a widespread perception. Russians need visas to travel to most of Europe, where other Europeans do not. Along with a number of post-Soviet states, Russians do not have the right to work across Europe, a privilege of EU membership. Russian educational and other credentials are not be automatically accepted across Europe. European democracies look down on the Russian political system and the Russian economy is not seen as an actual, or potential, source of anything other than raw materials. The size and capacity of the market, while lucrative for many foreign companies, is still unimpressive in comparison to the EU's common market. While some of these issues might be resolved eventually, others may persist for another 140 years. The reasons for that are multiple and could be summarised by saying, Russia is not merely a European country, and it should not try to become one.

Paradoxically, while Russia's economic and other limitations are known and discussed in Europe, Russian abilities vis-à-vis Europe are often readily exaggerated. Russian internal debates on foreign policy usually end in frustration because of an inability to change unfavourable trends. Russian analysts may laugh or feel a guilty pleasure reading western articles depicting their country as almighty and omnipresent, but this distortion is one of the mechanisms that drives the adversarial relationship.

The fate of the EU is fully in the hands of its member states. As with other third powers, Russia may try to exert influence but it does not have tools to shape the EU in accordance with its desires. What Russia would want, would be the EU to be less tied to the US and more capable of taking pragmatic decisions. Russia would also find it helpful if the EU did not attempt the role

of a strict teacher, teaching manners and punishing disobedience. The assumption is that this kind of EU would rapidly discover the benefits it could get cooperating with Russia. While these wishes are unlikely to come into fruition through Brussels, some might be implementable on the bilateral level. This is often criticised as being a "divide and rule" strategy, but again the EU holds the key. Even in US-Russia strategic hard power competition, the EU is not simply a bystander. European NATO allies manage to make their voice heard in Washington, as well as in Moscow.

A zero-sum logic may push competitors to see Europe as a playground of mutual deterrence, which only further necessitates the search for diplomatic tools to strike the right balance and avoid worst-case scenarios. The US and Russia might think of political Europe as foreign, but somehow they still hold this part of the Old World dear to their hearts.

Endnotes

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