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Dawn breaks on new era in EU-Russia relations

An EU focussed on itself currently lacks appetite for enlargement. That's why relations with Russia might enter a new era

Read this article in Russian.

Several recent and unconnected events presage a new phase of development for Europe. What that phase will look like, no one can predict, but it's clear that the era is over of building an all-Europe house using blueprints devised immediately following the Cold War.

Presidential elections in Ukraine ended unexpectedly, not just in that the new president is a former comic actor, but in terms of the scale of his predecessor's failure. For however people might feel about Petro Poroshenko, he embodied a clear political worldview and goal for his country: to move away from Russia and toward the West, at any cost.

Neighbouring Moldova, meanwhile, has seen its own small miracle. Sworn enemies — those who support aligning their nation with Russia on the one hand, and Europe on the other — joined together to rid the country of their oligarch leader, who had essentially privatised the state. That unlikely union was backed by Moscow, Brussels, and Washington.

Then the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), which had insisted for the last five years that Russia could not return to the organisation after losing voting rights back in 2014 over its actions in Ukraine, suddenly resolved the issue in a matter of weeks and welcomed Russia back into its fold.

And over in Georgia, mass protests sparked by the ill-fated appearance of a Russian Duma deputy in the Georgian parliament resulted not in the usual cannonade of propaganda by Russia, the EU, and the United States, but in a weary shrug.

The EU will be focussed on itself

These events do not signify that the long-awaited rapprochement of Russia and leading European countries has finally begun, following years of crisis. What is actually happening is that the political and ideological structure of Europe itself is changing.

As French President Emmanuel Macron put it on 1 July 2019, after twenty fruitless hours of trying to elect new leaders to key EU posts: 'We need to change our rules … As long as we have not reformed the functioning of our intergovernmental method, we will not be credible at an international level or to our constituents, and it will be impossible to enlarge the EU in any way.'

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The recent elections to the European Parliament formalised the new reality, which is not so much the triumph of anti-EU forces, as many had feared, but the fragmentation of the political field, which makes it hard to manage. This is what Macron was complaining about after talks with a never-ending stream of participants who must all be listened to. This is likely only the start, with the EU set for a full-scale transformation. Not all aspects of that transformation may necessarily be planned: a lot will change spontaneously and of its own accord.

The EU will now spend years focussed on resolving its internal problems. Its energy, desire, and resources for dealing with its external configuration will be significantly diminished. The main task now is to minimise risks and expenses.

Less confrontation with Russia?

Ukraine will be encouraged to establish a less confrontational status quo with Russia, which happily coincides with what voters want. What happened in Moldova was an attempt to restore at least some relevance to state institutions so that they can manage for themselves. Georgia, meanwhile, is remote even geographically, and is not a priority.

It's not that European interest has been lost completely; just that that interest is being transferred to a different category. Under the logic of the greater Europe idea, the 'EU neighbourhood' countries were a significant part of the project: one of the Key Performance Indicators considered

important for the organisation's strength was the unswerving expansion of the Eurosphere. This resulted in a drawn-out battle with Russia, which was constantly reacting — increasingly sharply — to what it perceived as being driven further and further back into the depths of Eurasia.

Now the motivation has changed. The EU is taking up a defensive position, using the language of its transatlantic ally: 'EU first!' This is not isolationism but pragmatism, which in the case of the EU — as an integrated alliance built on a set of values — signals a revision of the ideas at its heart and a sharp decrease in any desire to project power, including soft power.

In this context, what happened in PACE is particularly interesting. In both Russia and Ukraine (which had opposed the Russian delegation's return), the assembly's rapid change of heart is usually explained away as being down to money: Russia contributes €33 million in membership fees per year. Yet it's not just about the money. Russia's departure from the Council of Europe — which is what Russia had threatened if its full rights were not restored — would ultimately have deprived the entire organisation of its reason for existence.

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Most members of the Council of Europe are either in the EU or are affiliated with it, like the Balkans. Armenia and Azerbaijan's problems, and even Ukraine's, are too small to devote the activity of such a large organisation to them. There are two states in the Council of Europe who are regular troublemakers and whose participation gives it real substance: Russia and Turkey. Russia's departure would have set a precedent that Turkish President Recep Erdogan could have taken advantage of, given the opportunity.

A new geopolitical landscape

The deconstruction of the 'European house' means communications between various segments of the European world must be streamlined, especially since, unlike during the Cold War, there will be no clear structure for any conflict with Russia: it will likely be fluid and ever-changing.

Previously, the main instrument for such communication was considered to be the OSCE, but times have changed. As surprising as it may seem, the Council of Europe could lay claim to the role previously fulfilled by

the OSCE, as the only space bringing together everyone, making it the lowest common denominator. Now it's needed not to force members to obey certain norms, but to search for common ground at a time when Europe is increasingly fragmented.

If strategic dialogue is resumed, it will in any case be between Russia and the United States. For everything else, the Council of Europe is quite enough, not least because Washington, with its current idiosyncratic wiles, is not part of it.

The unusual events that have taken place recently are the start of a different era that will require self-determination all over again. First and foremost, that concerns countries that are neighbours to both sides: countries that have gotten used to being at the centre of a fierce battle, where politics has meant a constant geopolitical choice — which has all too often acted as a surrogate for a strategy for the country's own development.

The relationship between Russia and the EU is entering a period in which any kind of ambition is most likely irrelevant, at least until the global re-forging of the landscape that is taking place both in the global arena and inside individual countries leads to the appearance of some at least vague outlines for the future. A house may no longer be being built, but perhaps we will now get by without fortified structures.

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