FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 20.10.2020 | Fyodor Lukyanov

Russia and the West don't need each other anymore

The Navalny case is only pretext for a change in foreign policy that has been long in the making

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Less than two weeks after Germany's official reunification, the Norwegian Nobel Committee announced that the 1990 Nobel Peace Prize was to be awarded to the President of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev. German unity became the main symbol of change – just as the post-war division of Germany had established the Cold War in Europe and the world for long afterwards.

To fully understand the Navalny case and the debates over the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, we need to look further back in time. German Ostpolitik has always been based on the question of security. As the natural gas trade between West Germany and the Soviet Union steadily expanded since the early 1970s, material benefits were certainly important to both consumers and suppliers. The decisive factor, however, was that natural gas trading contributed to the management of the military-political confrontation. This is precisely why the US administration permitted the increase in gas deliveries, although it viewed the laying of the pipelines from east to west with suspicion – as it still does today.

After the Cold War ended, however, the premise underlying this security policy collapsed. For the EU and Germany, the natural gas projects were no longer necessary for geopolitical stability. Instead, they were increasingly considered an economic factor. Moreover, after the accession of Eastern European countries, a completely different view of Russian natural gas developed in the EU. The new members did not see it as a factor of stability, but as an instrument of hostile influence and lobbying.

The end of a special relationship?

It is only logical that, with Nord Stream 2 emerged, a gas pipeline would become the object of such heated polemic. The deliveries of energy sources to Europe, and above all Germany, have formed the foundation of relations with Russia for half a century, in business as well as politics. This model continued in the new era after 1991, when Germany was still Russia's main EU partner. Energy infrastructure played a role in determining the overall system. At first it prevented an escalation in the confrontation between the parties and later it was seen as the material framework for building a 'greater Europe'. This greater Europe was imagined as a natural prospect for the future of the European area – and in terms of geopolitics and economics, even an inevitable one.

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The usefulness of this concept has been exhausted, leading to the problem of the current relationship between Russia and the West. This is particularly evident in the case of Russia and Germany. The experiences of Willy Brandt's Ostpolitik and those of his successors, German unity under Helmut Kohl, and the initiatives in the spirit of 'rapprochement through closer ties' under Gerhard Schröder and Frank-Walter Steinmeier all were supposed to have created an immovable foundation.

Instead, Moscow today is quite reasonably bewildered at how quickly the 'special relationship' has dwindled away. The dark clouds in the relationship had been gathering for quite some time, but they culminated in the aftermath of the poisoning of Alexej Nawalny, who was taken in by Berlin's Charité hospital.

Values, values, values

In the three decades after its reunification, Germany has transformed itself from a state wielding limited influence into the dominant force in the EU. Now the main question to answer is how Berlin imagines the forms and limits of the European project. From the point of view of commerce and the reliability of supply, the partnership with Russia remains important. In a political sense, however, it has become rather difficult, with increasing friction between Russia and the EU.

The EU did not consider it necessary to offer Moscow special conditions but instead expected that Russia would conform to European rules and standards. Even in the particularly difficult 1990s, Moscow showed itself

to be disinclined to consistently meet these expectations. Its willingness to comply with the wishes of the EU decreased even more as its economy grew stronger. The greater the differences with Moscow became, the more the Ostpolitik focused on other countries: on Central Europe, which had already become EU territory, and on the Europe-oriented republics of the former Soviet Union.

The dialogue between Russia and the West, in which Germany is the main interlocutor, is looking incredibly absurd these days. 30 years ago, the focus of this dialogue was on values. At that time it was believed that all of Europe, including Russia, should establish a uniform set of values which would be based on the western-liberal model. The main public criticism directed at Russia was that it departed from this canon of values and thereby showed that it was not ready for true cooperation with the West.

The absurd Alexej Navalny case

The path that Russian politics has travelled over the past 30 years can be judged in various ways. What is clear, however, is that Moscow has not complied with the rules of conduct suggested by the European side back then. And Russia will not follow this set of values in the future either. This has less to do with the fact that its own evolution is irreversible, but rather that this canon of values is no longer considered universal. The world is entering a new epoch: ethical and moral pluralism is becoming a general reality, regardless of how Europeans feel about this development.

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In this sense, Russia would actually like to return to a time when its internal system of government was not a topic of discussion with its foreign partners. Ideally, that would be the early days of Ostpolitik, that is, the first half of the 1970s. At the time, one could not have imagined that such a costly and strategically crucial project as Nord Stream 2 would have been called into question because of the individual matter of a dissident, even if that dissident aroused sympathy in the West.

Today's dialogue between the West and Russia is basically not aimed at agreements or cooperation. The exchange of statements on the Alexej Navalny case is a theatre play that is not presented for the general public, but for the actors on both sides. No result can be expected here. The very fact that the absurd and illogical episode triggered an acute crisis of international proportions illustrates the current state of relations

between Russia and the leading powers of the West. The irrational nature of the event precludes the expectation of a sensible and acceptable way out. And the Navalny case is not the only one of its kind.

Russia and Germany drifting apart

The most important development is that Russia and the West are no longer indispensable partners for each other. Europe, for now, is preoccupied with itself. For the United States, its internal problems and the confrontation with China are paramount. Russia must rearrange its priorities and find an adequate model of behaviour in the world – one which is centred on Asia, with China as the most important partner.

If attempting to simplify the nature of Russian-German relations in 2020 as much as possible, the following picture emerges: for Germany, as the strongest country in Europe, the expansion of the European model to the east is no longer a priority. Russia, which long valued its relations with Europe above all else, is now establishing closer contacts with Asia. The specific circumstances that triggered the current crisis are therefore not the cause, but only the pretext for a change in policy. The priorities are drifting apart for objective reasons, while subjective factors are reinforcing this dynamic.

However, that does not mean that there cannot be an about-face. Russia, as the heartland of Eurasia with a European culture, and Germany, as the strongest country in Europe, which inevitably needs to acquire a new identity in the coming years, will need each other once again. But that will only happen when a new world order with clear contours emerges.



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