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New European and international environment

Revisiting relations between Russia and Cyprus



By Andreas Theophanous

The European Union is facing today profound problems which challenge and even threaten the pillars of its own foundations. The crisis of the Eurozone has generated very painful and socially unacceptable outcomes. The recipes that are being offered have not led to the constructive resolution of the issues at hand. On the contrary, there seems to be a deterioration of conditions. It would not be an exaggeration to say that many cities and broader regions of the European South are beginning to face serious symptoms of social disintegration.

It is within this context that we should assess the crisis in the relations between the EU and Russia, as well as the fact that indeed the Union seems to be absent from today's difficult and complex international environment. This includes our region, the Eastern Mediterranean. Analysing these issues will be also helpful in rethinking and revisiting relations between the EU and Russia, as well as between Russia and Cyprus. To do so it will also require courage and the ability to think outside the box.

During the Cold War, relations between the Soviet Union and the West were difficult and antagonistic. Nevertheless, even then there was an understanding that Europe had to maintain a minimum level of cooperation with the Soviet Union. In the new era, we have witnessed a fundamental paradigm shift.

The new international environment is such that encourages new approaches and initiatives. Yet it seems that Europeans have not focused adequately on what could be seen as obvious: that the upgrading of relations between the EU and Russia could be mutually beneficial, economically, politically, socially and indeed even strategically. Perhaps, this is the outcome of inertia – in the sense that in some quarters Russia is still perceived in Cold War era terms.

The Ukrainian crisis has escalated in ways which could lead us back to an antagonistic environment similar to the Cold War period. One could raise the question about whether this was inevitable. I feel that the EU and the US could have acted differently showing a deeper understanding as well as respect of the sensitivities of all parties involved. And Russia could have acted in a more restrained way protecting its vital interests on the one hand but avoiding severe criticisms and sanctions on the other.

The EU is taking a position as if it has the moral high ground on all issues. This is obviously not the case. For example, while the EU is very eager and prompt to impose sanctions on Russia, it has been for years tolerating the Turkish occupation of the northern part of Cyprus, as well as



other criminal excesses. Furthermore, it should not escape our attention that the EU itself has its own deficits and weaknesses. It will not be an exaggeration to note that the EU faces today a democratic as well as a solidarity deficit. Furthermore,

I am convinced that the economic policy pursued in order to address the Euro crisis and the serious recession in several countries of the European South require substantive rethinking. This is also the dominant view in the United States.

The European Union must work under a different set of circumstances and also engage on a new set of relationships. There is no doubt that the enhancement of relations between the EU and Russia will contribute to economic prosperity as well as to stability, security and cooperation.

In conclusion, allow me to share with you a few thoughts on the relations between Russia and Cyprus and how these may be perceived.

It has been repeatedly stated that the decisions of the Eurogroup in March 2013 had been particularly harsh and even punitive. One of the major objectives of those decisions was to contain Russian presence in Cyprus. This was extremely unfair.

Interestingly enough, this raised questions in several EU capitals about the implications of the relations between Russia and Cyprus at a time when the geopolitical

significance of the Eastern Mediterranean was and is increasingly growing. It has to be understood in the EU that the fact that there are strong cultural, historical, economic and political links between Russia and the Republic of Cyprus does not necessarily create a conflict of interest in Cyprus' commitments to the EU. Quite the contrary.

If we assume that there is potential for a deeper partnership between the EU and Russia, the role of Cyprus may turn out to be much greater than we think.

Be that as it may, Cyprus is facing today a great economic crisis while at the same time it has to address the Cyprus question and also formulate a comprehensive energy policy. At a time that the European solidarity is at a level much below of what was expected, the Republic of Cyprus must critically reconsider its options.

It goes without saying that Cyprus has to also rely on support from friends inside and outside the EU.

The article is an abridged version of Prof Theophanous' welcoming address at a conference organised by the Center for European and International Affairs of the University of Nicosia in cooperation with the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Cyprus.

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