

UKRAINIAN DIVIDE AND ITS IMPACT ON THE RUSSIA-WEST RELATIONS*

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The Ukraine crisis is the first direct conflict between differing regional strategies of Russia and the EU – Brussels' Eastern partnership and Moscow's Eurasia Union concept. Ukraine has been central to both strategies, and the either/or choice presented to Kiev ultimately made conflict inevitable. It's possible to identify several crucial turning points in the history of this conflict: President Yanukovich's shift away from what had seemed Ukraine's European vocation on the eve of the EU's Vilnius summit, along with a Russian departure from Europe that was formalized by Vladimir Putin's return in 2012 to the power of the presidency. Deeper analysis still shows that the origins of the conflict are in fact rooted heavily in the 1990s.

"Don't bother us and we won't bother you"

Nowadays many Western politicians are nostalgic about the 90's. However, it was a period of the devastating shock therapy reforms, the military clash between Yeltsin and the Parliament in 1993, and the war in Chechnya. And it was a period when the Yeltsin leadership formulated its "sticks and carrots" policy vis-à-vis its CIS neighbours who were never regarded by Moscow as sovereign independent states. Russia's post-Soviet euphoria was replaced with a sense of loss of empire and status of world super power equal to the US. These concerns resulted in the Kremlin's policy of reassembling the CIS neighbours under the aegis "special relations" with Russia.

In that period the West –the EU, NATO/USA - was focused merely on the post-Communist Europe –the Yugoslav war, the CEE states return back to Europe or their inclusion into NATO and EU. Therefore the West offered Russia a pragmatic model for their relations –***don't bother us in CEE space and we won't bother you in your backyard.*** Interestingly, the West, though it was concerned about a revival of a new Russian empire, did not let this spoil relations with Russia, because the rest of Moscow's foreign and domestic policy suited it perfectly well. Aside from this, in the 90s neither European states, nor the US wanted to sort out the mess in the post-Soviet space while Russia could not afford to stay aloof watching

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what was going on in its immediate neighbourhood. As it could, sometimes in a very uneven and heavy-handed way it stabilized the CIS space having frozen a number of conflicts and deployed its armed forces in Abkhazia, Transnistria, Armenia and Tajikistan. But when the CIS was more or less stabilized and the problems of the CEE states were resolved, NATO and EU turned to the CIS space.

Without Russia is against Russia

When the problem of the Soviet Union's nuclear legacy was solved, the EU and the West as a whole became obsessed with the prospect of a new Russian empire. Supporting with one hand the weakening Yeltsin's regime (which was still viewed as the best possible), the West with its second hand started to build a new border against unpredictable developments in Russia. It saw the separation of Russia from its Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) partners as a guarantee that the USSR would never be brought back to life. And this principle was put at the centre of the EU and NATO regional strategies. This strengthened the "great power" sentiments of Russia's political elite, and also created fears that there was a Western strategy of "squeezing" Moscow out of vital interests like its relations with the countries of the CIS. Looking back in time one cannot but recognize that it was the most erroneous and counterproductive approach to Russia and its neighbors.

In all probability, if Russia had been part of the NATO enlargement policy, the Caucasus crisis of 2008 would never have happened. And had Russia been invited to join Eastern Partnership which was a regional dimension of ENP, the Ukrainian conflict would not have erupted. The lesson that can be drawn from this experience is that as long as Russia shares the continent with EU and NATO, which possess huge economic, technological and military power - "without Russia" will be always interpreted by Moscow as "against Russia".

Game without rules

The Kosovo precedent is widely viewed as a main reason of the growing tensions between Russia and the West. However, the problem is not so much with Kosovo precedent itself but rather with the absence of clear rules of behavior after the end of bipolarity. The Helsinki Final Act, recognizing in principle nations' right for self-determination, has given clear priority to the principle of territorial integrity, because in the bipolar world the risk of global confrontation was very high. The Helsinki principles were not legally binding but nobody could even think about violating them since the stakes in the bipolar world were very high. In the post-bipolar time international actors started to apply these principles selectively according to their foreign policy interests and preferences. Within two decades since the Paris Charter Summit, every one of the ten principles of the CSCE's Helsinki Final Act (1975), has been violated. One of the main questions of our days is whether the Helsinki principles are still topical.

Eastern Partnership and Eurasia Union: pro et contra

Both the EU Eastern Partnership (EP) launched five years ago in Prague and the Eurasia Union concept, presented by president Putin in 2011 had in their substance political goals.

The goal of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) is to bring partner countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) closer to the EU through deepened cooperation and integration on the basis of EU values, norms and standards. The bilateral dimension of the Eastern Partnership encompasses EU relations with the individual partner countries. This includes activities aimed at concluding Association Agreements, establishing Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas.

With all good intentions this project has several serious defects. **First**, it was a mistake not to invite Russia, the EU biggest eastern partner, to join EaP under the pretext that Russia did not like to participate in the EU regional strategies. **Second**, in its approach to the EaP partners the EU proceeded from its experience in the CEE and Baltic region where European identity and vocation were inherent. In the CIS area the situation was different. The European option has not become irreversible for these states. **Third**, like in the ENP, Brussels regarded all EaP members as one whole without clear priorities and differentiated approach to their eastern partners. **Fourth**, The EU conducted no assessments to understand how the DCFTA's would impact different sectors within the partner countries. As a result, it did not offer a well thought selection of financial measures, implementation of reasonable timelines designed to smooth transition to the EU norms and standards. **Fifth**, Brussels always preferred to talk to the political elites of its eastern partners but not to their ordinary people who were aware of all hardships that they would be faced with, but knew very little about finalite and benefits of the EaP implementation. **And the last** but not least, the EU never understood Ukraine's importance for Russia.

The Kremlin's focus on Russia's Eurasian vocation came at a time of the EU crisis, which discredited its image as a successful model of the regional integration and Partnership for modernization concept. The Eurasian Union is undoubtedly an important new dimension of Russia's foreign policy. Putin stated many times that the Eurasian Union would play an increasingly important role on the global stage to become a **bridge between Europe and Pacific** Rim, adding that the EU would have to deal with the Eurasian Union's commission along with Moscow. Generally speaking, there is nothing scary or bad in a regional integration if it is built on a voluntary basis, common interests and equal rights. However, it is not clear what this concept means in practical terms. Does it mean that Russia returns to its traditional model? What is the difference between the Soviet Eurasianism that resulted in "the biggest geopolitical tragedy" and the new concept? And is there any new convincing ideology of Eurasia Union that can embrace and unite very different peoples and states?

Could the Eurasia Union become a bridge between Europe and Pacific Rim, since neither Europe, nor Asia needs a bridge? China's trade turnover with EU and US is 6-7 times bigger than that with Russia.

What next?

The conflict over Ukraine has exposed some very uncomfortable truths – the CIS space became an apple of discord in Russia-EU relations and smashed to pieces their “strategic partnership” based on four common spaces of co-operation because none of these spaces addressed the CIS issue. It's a lesson that should be taken to heart on both sides. It seems unlikely that even a peaceful solution of the Ukrainian conflict can return EU-Russia relations to their previous level. The relationship will probably never be the same unless Russia clearly defines its identity. A future paradigm shift would be also contingent on the West defining a clear strategy vis-à-vis Russia, based on a careful balance between its values and realistic objectives as well as the lessons drawn from the past. Yet a peaceful solution would give the EU and Russia a chance to minimise the damage and at least save the key channels of interaction.