

The two-headed Russian eagle, European partner or outsider?

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In the twenty years since the fall of the Wall, liberated from the constraints of the Cold War, in Europe and elsewhere events have just happened in the assumption that things would somehow spontaneously settle. In a widespread euphoria some political factors, mostly psychological, were neglected, which accounts for some foot-dragging if not outright resistance to adaptation to an envolving security environment, in the resurgence of nationalistic, defensive reflexes.

All the more so, apparently, in Russia where resentment runs high for having been deprived not only of swathes of territory but of its own very identity. But, if emotions are an inescapable component of national politics, not so nostalgia which can only derail them. The end of the Ussr was indeed quite a traumatic event on a continental scale, setting loose the members of the Warsaw Pact but also nations that history had made an integral part of Russia's *Weltanschauung*. If the course of events has eaten away at its territorial flesh, such a dramatic development cannot be attributed to Western aggressive intentions as they originate from the inexorable groundswell of self-determinations. The past long century has experienced a succession of them, from the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires to the end half a century later of the British and French colonial rules. The collapse of the Soviet 'empire of nations' need not therefore imply the severing of ancient ties, quite the contrary: reintegration is what one part of Europe has essentially been about since the end of the war. Instead of smarting with the feeling of having lost the Cold War, Russia should consider how best to interact with the multitude of emerged countries in a wider, more democratic, if overcrowded, globalised order. Instead of a last-ditch attempt to resist it, the challenge for everybody nowadays lies in the reorganization and reintegration of such a broad and diversified community of nations. Starting from the «common European house» that Gorbachev's *perestroika* called for twenty years ago¹.

¹ Italian magazines have recently presented the following important contributions about the perspectives of Euro-Russian cooperation: *L'Europa e la Russia a vent'anni dall'89*, «Cespi», 2009; *La partita del Caucaso*, «Ispi quaderni», 2006; David Kerr, *Dilemma of the middle continent: Russian strategy for Eastern Eurasia*, «Iai International Spectator», 2009, vol. 44, n. 2; Vladimir Boronovsky, *Russia's approach to security building in the Euro-Atlantic zone*, «Iai

The centrality of Europe

Contrary to the current mantra, the announcement of Europe's demise is quite premature. Nowadays, the center of attention may be in Asia but Europe remains a crucial crossroads and an indispensable world actor, provided it recovers coherence and unity of purpose in dealing first and foremost with its own unfinished business. In a world in a hurry to transform, Europe as a whole, including Russia, must recover the guiding role it held since the discovery of America. Instead, both the European Union and Russia are ostensibly shying away from their responsibilities, which gravely diminishes their respective international standing. In a radically novel strategic setting, the Eu's Common Foreign and Security Policy in the making cannot do without Russia. And Russia cannot expect to reestablish its political credentials solely in the pursuit of a restored superpower status with the Usa. In matters pertaining to the continent they share, the Union prides itself with the stabilizing influence of its enlargement policy, while Russia openly resents it. And the achievements of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (Osce), however incomplete, remain largely unsung, at a historical moment when they should instead constitute models for novel cooperative relationships world-wide, substitutive of the obviously anachronistic balance of military power, and transformative of the concepts of sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs.

One could argue that, with globalization, the world has finally caught up with the European integration process. Stitching up the residual tears in the European fabric can therefore be considered a prerequisite for the broader rearrangement of the international order. The Eu and Russia, with the Usa, should see to it quickly, instead of continuing to bicker about where the main responsibility lies. Brussels is apparently still waiting to be asked out in the strategic-cum-security field, while Russia seems stuck on the defensive, as if waiting for something to happen (from without? within?), holding its ground, wedded to the protection of a «privileged sphere of influence» in its self-proclaimed 'near abroad' of former Soviet States, in its age-old encirclement syndrome. Its privileged position in the Un Security Council, its presence in the main multilateral fora, as well as in the G-8, the G-20, the Quartet, Troikas, Quints, contact groups and a host of other restricted groups or special arrangements should instead stimulate it to engage more proactively in world affairs. Starting from the consolidation of a European-wide common law, the foundations for which have been set with the Helsinki Final Act of 1975 and the Charter of Paris of 1990.

President and then Prime Minister Putin's disappointment and frustration with the latter have found their way in the initial proposal of a «new European security architecture», to which Pres. Medvedev added the suggestion of a

International Spectator», June 2010; Micjael Emerson, *Spheres of influence in the pan-European space*, 2009 Ceps report.

«partnership for modernization», both of which still need some fleshing-out. Especially since the ‘architecture’ proposal is essentially economic and addressed to the Us through Nato, while the ‘modernization’ one focuses on the economic and technological side of relations with the Eu². They should therefore be more organically interconnected, in the awareness that military security cannot be the premise, but instead hopefully the result of a more multifaceted relationship with both Nato and the Eu. Which should also reinforce the usefulness of the Osce’s multidisciplinary approach, along the three dimensions of military, economic and human issues. A pan-European and Euro-Atlantic endeavor, where individual issues (strategic; nuclear; conventional arms; unresolved conflicts; economic and financial cooperation; energy; human rights and mobility opportunities), although dealt with in their own most appropriate contexts, would be considered comprehensively as the multi-faceted components of an encompassing whole.

Whether political vision is the pre-requisite for any practical cooperation, or the other way around, is still an open question. Confidence-building is a matter of spelling out the respective intentions and improving the public narrative. Moscow has reneged on the Gorbachev (the Paris Charter, 1990) and Yeltsin (the Istanbul commitments of 1999) commitments, on the grounds that the Us and the Eu supposedly took unfair advantage of them. And yet the twenty-seven are still ‘dizzy’ about an enlargement that has overburdened and scattered the common institutions; not to speak of the fact that Bush senior may have promised not to enlarge the borders of the Atlantic Alliance, but Gorbachev surely did not forewarn him that the Ussr would be disbanded, with the resulting instability. The May 2010 version of the Russian security concept still considers Nato the most immediate risk to national security, even though Moscow repeatedly stated that its uppermost concern is with terrorism, drug trafficking and international crime, as well as with respect to insufficient foreign investment and technological transfers, all of which are transnational issues that can only be dealt with through international cooperative measures internationally agreed upon and enacted.

The Eu-Russia relationship

On June 2008 President Medvedev had most appropriately said that «[...] Russia, the European Union and North America are the three branches of European civilization», adding that «the future world order is directly linked to the future of Europe». And yet, Moscow has so far neglected the European Union as a player in continental reintegration, in its apparent overriding concern with the restoration of an equal relationship with the Usa. In addition to the ‘reset’ between Moscow and Washington, Russia and the Eu should nudge each other on a ‘fast forward’ mode. President Sarkozy and Chancellor Merkel’s get-together with President Medvedev (in Deauville, France, on 18-19 October 2010) was declaredly designed to explore informally the ways and means to develop their partnership towards a common European security and cooperative space. It still

² The initial project of a political ‘strategic partnership’ between Brussels and Moscow has therefore been downgraded.

remains to be seen of course to what extent Paris and Berlin are still willing to act as the 'European locomotive', and also if the Russian leadership is prepared to act as a *primus inter pares* in multilateral frameworks, instead of pursuing what it calls a 'multivectorial' (i.e. 'multipolar' rather than 'multilateral'), case-by-case, essentially unilateral approach to international relations, not much dissimilar from the attitude it blames on the Usa.

Moscow should move away from its tendency to deal with individual European nations (as it did ostensibly on the Georgian issue with Pres. Sarkozy personally instead of the Union which he then represented, and in reaching bilateral energy agreements instead of adhering to a European Energy Charter), and dismiss its assertion that the Eu «Eastern partnership» constitutes an undue interference in Russia's self-proclaimed «privileged sphere of influence». It is as if the Eu were considered an aggressive compact, obviously not for its military might, as for its ability to influence the domestic affairs of other States. A compliment of sorts to the Eu supposed 'transformative power'. It would instead be in Russia's interest to seek out the Eu's soft power, not only for financial investments but also for crisis-resolution purposes. The first and foremost 'proof of the pudding' can only be a more constructive attitude in bringing to solution the many Gordian knots and frozen conflicts along the entire instability belt of countries, from Belarus to Ukraine, Moldova and the Caucasus, that have become contiguous both to an enlarged Eu (and Nato) and to the new Russia. The Five-day war in Georgia, a setback in pan-European relations, may have shown -as Moscow claims- the fragility of the present continental framework. The lack of a response in kind from the Western camp however constituted a proof not of helplessness, but instead of its cool-headedness and of the uselessness and anachronism of such a conflict. Other Russian initiatives are equally indicative, such as the recent visit of Pres. Medvedev to the Kurile Islands, addressed as it seemed mainly to China, whose economic pressure in the Far East and Central Asia could instead be counterbalanced by a more meaningful partnership with the Eu³. Russia's role and influence should be more significantly restored also with respect to other fragile truces that persist in the Balkans (Bosnia and Kosovo), and farther afield (Cyprus, the Middle East, Iran, Afghanistan), all of which need to be tackled separately but in a comprehensive framework, that would benefit from a more active and converging Eu and Russian involvement.

The pursuit of unilateral advantages through anachronistic international patterns would leave Russia in mid-stream, neither a status-quo nor an evolutionary power. Summitry, personal relationships among the big leaders of the world, bilateral deals between individual countries, may flatter the respective public images, but do not in themselves provide the tangible results nowadays expected by the man in the street world-wide. Previous attempts at more constructive cooperative initiatives have not made much headway. The 1994 partnership and cooperation agreement with the Eu has not been renewed (let

³ The 'Shanghai Cooperation Initiative' appears to function more as a stop-gap arrangement than as an actual partnership.

alone rearranged in four common spaces), nor has the 2000 Security and Political Dialogue gone any further than the similar 1997 Founding act and 2002 Joint Council with Nato. Any overarching international device of the sort that Moscow now proposes would obstruct the existing pan-European organizations (Osce and Council of Europe) to which Russia also belongs, and produce a multipolar continental system contrary to the very concept of indivisible security that Moscow declaredly pursues. Security can no more be considered only in its military or geographical dimension. Military security cannot be a prerequisite but must instead result from a broader, comprehensive approach, including the economic and human aspects already enshrined in the Helsinki Final Act, all of them indispensable components of any 'modernisation partnership'. Europe and Russia need each other not only for the sake of oil and gas flows, but also in the increasing recognition that their strategic interests fundamentally coincide. In fact, ever since the Second World War, stability and prosperity in the European continent have rested on the cooperative, converging effort of a Eu-Russia-US 'tripod'. After half a century of a Russian-American protectorate on Europe, the time should have come to establish in its stead a more equilateral triangle⁴. The European Council on Foreign Relations (Ecf) think-tank has even suggested a wider trilateral relationship (an 'informal triad') between the Eu, Russia and Turkey⁵, that would extend multilateral cooperation all the way to Central Asia. The strategic 'heartland' that it constitutes could instead also play a most useful role in linking Euro-American and Euro-Asian geopolitical realities.

In such a trend of thought, the Russian proposal for a new binding European structure appears too ambitious an undertaking. Rather than a 'new architecture', what would be needed is a 'garden' of sorts, steadily tended, growing organically by accumulation and sedimentation. Confidence-building needs to be strengthened especially with joint analyses and assessments, and practical cooperation on impending crises developed much further upstream than any eventual joint decision-making. A bottom-up rather than a top-down process. Basically, a shared political understanding, in the pursuit of converging ambitions. Towards a common European security and stability space, without dividing lines or spheres of influence, modeled on the Eu and itself a possible model for other sub-regional cooperative systems. Building on specific projects rather than abstract principles. Which is what the present state of the world calls for, in the interest of one and all, while respecting the specific requirements of each. Providing «new interfaces and new infrastructures» (as Pres. Medvedev himself put it in the recent Munich Conference meeting, held in Moscow on October 20, 2010), but also dispelling long-standing misperceptions, misconceptions and other distorted impressions harbored by the respective public opinions. Not only «a brainstorming to better understand the expectations and

⁴ The Obama Administration has apparently recognized the need to consider the Euro-Atlantic space as a whole, and set up a 'European and Euroasian Affairs Desk' at the State Department.

⁵ Ivan Krastev, Mark Leonard, *The spectre of a multipolar Europe*, European Council on Foreign Relations (ecfr.eu).

ambitions of each partner», as stated in the Deauville *communiqué*, but especially a comparing of notes among Europeans in the best tradition of informal track-two diplomacy. Of the kind that the Yaroslavl Global Policy Forum⁶, the Valdai International Discussion Club⁷ and the Munich Conference process actively pursue. Such a framework is available even at the intergovernmental level, if only the Osce were again resorted to, for it to produce its intended effects. What needs to be projected, fundamentally, is an improved and more coherent narrative of the respective intentions, for public opinions to relate to. The realization must sink in that every European country (including Russia) 'won' and must continue to benefit from the fall of the Wall, which crumbled out of exhaustion not as a result of a conspiracy.

Washington may then have been too expedient, assuming that they could have reordered world matters single-handedly. All other potential protagonists however stood by passively, or acted just as unilaterally as the Usa, in particular the Europeans, including Russia. International paradigms have changed; political mentalities must follow suit. The recently-held Nato and Osce Summits (with Pres. Medvedev in attendance) have cleared the rubble that stood in the way of a more meaningful and constructive relationship. The Russian-American relationship is obviously the overriding priority, but the Russia-Eu connection shouldn't lag far behind, and the Euro-Atlantic triangle should be restored for the common good, however diversified, of all the parties concerned. The Eu must do its share, while Russia should finally engage in a more meaningful *Westpolitik* of its own making. In the end, to paraphrase what Churchill once appropriately said about Western Europe, the Eu and Russia will either stand together or hang together. «We would like Russia and the Eu to be able to take joint decisions» said Vladimir Chizov, Moscow's Ambassador to the European Union. That would indeed constitute the most effective Ariadne's thread out of the obviously unfinished European business.

⁶ Assembled by Pres. Medvedev on September 10, 2010, with the attendance of many political personalities, present and former.

⁷ Promoted by Prime Minister Putin, the last session of which was held in the first week of September 2010, with the participation of international think-tankers, academicians and journalists. A report was issued, calling for a «Union of Europe» that would include Russia, the Eu, Turkey and Ukraine.