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The Kremlin's 'Ugly Duckling' in Deauville

By Gilbert Doctorow

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In the run-up to the summit of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, French President Nicolas Sarkozy and President Dmitry Medvedev in the French coastal town of Deauville last week, there were expressions of concern in the U.S. media over the prospect that the three leaders would be discussing the structure of European security, leaving the United States on the sidelines. These were the three nations that had colluded to frustrate the United States before its invasion of Iraq in 2003 by denying it United Nations Security Council approval. Would they again come together to damage U.S. global leadership in a new balance of power?

Washington's specific concerns arose from Merkel's interest in bringing Russia regularly into the midst of European Union policymaking by creating a new entity called the EU-

Russia Political and Security Committee. When implemented, the idea may effectively remove the United States from a major dimension of intra-

European relations.

The Deauville summit was feared all the more because it was scheduled just before the long-awaited NATO summit in Lisbon where the alliance is to decide a new strategy for the 21st century and could upset the calculus of allied voting.

The United States was not the only country to fear the worst should a German-French-Russian axis reconstitute itself. This is a nightmare scenario for new EU members from Central Europe and the Baltic states. Besides that, there is a good deal of skepticism over possibilities for cooperation with Russia in security issues even in some EU countries of long standing, such as Sweden or Britain. They fret over what they see as a successful Russian tactic of divide and conquer when the two drivers of the EU — Germany and France — make policy toward Russia without the participation of other EU members.

This very resentment and sense of alarm may be the reason behind the release two weeks ago of an 80-page study titled "The Specter of a Multipolar Europe" by the European Council on Foreign Relations, a think tank funded by U.S. financier George Soros. The report's overarching idea was to ensure that Europe would be acting as a single entity when dealing with Russia, using the new facility to forge common policy conferred by the Lisbon Treaty.

But it now appears that the worries of being sidelined in Washington and some European capitals were unjustified — mainly because Russia came away with close to nothing.

Most media commentary on the results of the summit both in the West and within Russia has focused on the question of ending the visa regime for travel between Russia and the EU. This has been a key foreign policy objective for Medvedev. Instead, what Medvedev got from Merkel and Sarkozy was the hazy idea of creating a common economic and security area between Russia and the EU some time before 2025 that will, among its other features, involve visa-free travel.

In the world of politics, time is measured by the short intervals between elections and, thus, 15 years essentially means "never."

In her nominally kind explanation of how the visa regime could only be revised in a step-by-step manner, Merkel let drop the remark that she and Sarkozy appreciated how important visa-free travel was for the Russians. Indeed, is it not important for Western corporations doing business with Russia? The hint of condescension was clear and was left hanging in the air.

Sarkozy, who was otherwise politically challenged by his compatriots rioting against his pension reforms while the summit was taking place, emerged radiant in Deauville. Perhaps this triumphant feeling was connected with the truculence he showed toward Medvedev.

Sarkozy had no problem ticking off to the media the areas of common interest which, in his view, bind together Russia and the EU: Russia's wealth of natural resources, enforcing sanctions on Iran and finding a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The order of priorities in this list betokens a patronizing attitude, which was further expressed in Sarkozy's affirmation that Europe wanted to help Medvedev with his modernization program. This would sound normal if the object of Europe's solicitude were Rwanda, but it sounds insulting when addressed to Russia. Moreover, Sarkozy had in mind

not state-to-state assistance but direct foreign investment of private firms, where decisions are made based on a risk-return assessment. However, in the dirigiste mentality of the French president, private and public pockets are sometimes confused.

There was hardly a word said in the closing ceremony about European security except for Medvedev's announcement that he would go to Lisbon for meetings in parallel with the NATO summit. If the relationship with the Western powers proceeds along the lines set down in Deauville, he will be spending a lot of time in waiting rooms.

In the end, Medvedev was treated as inconsequential by his interlocutors. I couldn't help but be reminded of how former President Boris Yeltsin looked visibly uncomfortable as the "ugly duckling" seated next to European leaders.

When Medvedev launched his poorly conceived campaign to redesign the structure of European security in November 2009, he was rescued several months later by Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who turned the initiative in a very different direction, linking it to reinvention of the Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe.

This time it is scarcely possible for the Foreign Ministry to rescue Medvedev from himself and from his incurable naivety. It is fairly obvious that he will be a one-term president, just like U.S. President Barack Obama, but for exactly the opposite reasons. Whereas Obama has been inexcusably weak in facing down the Pentagon, Medvedev has shown himself to be inexcusably weak vis-a-vis Russia's international talking partners and adversaries.

Thus, the notion that his political fate somehow depends on arm-wrestling with Prime Minister Vladimir Putin misses the point entirely. It is scarcely possible that Medvedev will be supported by his party for a further term, quite apart from the role Putin chooses to play in Russian politics after 2012.

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