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Open Borders Are Russia's Birthright

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There is a key difference between the Rublyovka, a wealthy suburb near Moscow, and many other elite suburbs abroad. It is not in the size of its mansions or fanciful architectural styles — you can find millionaires with wild imaginations and bad taste all around the world.

In my opinion, what is unique about the Rublyovka is its fences. I have never seen such tall, monumental, truly gargantuan barriers anywhere, not in Europe, not in Asia, and not in America.

It's as if the owners of estates here are competing to build the strongest and most dependable fortifications. I wouldn't be surprised if, in the near future, members of our elite start building trenches, watchtowers and other elements of medieval fortresses.

Unfortunately, this maniacal endeavor to barricade oneself against the world outside (including next-door neighbors) is not only characteristic of suburban construction here. The history of the Russian state is also marked by periodic bouts of isolationism and fence-building.

Again today, the Ukrainian crisis and economic sanctions from the West have instigated discussions of Russia's "self-sufficiency," about the benefits of "depending on one's own strength," the danger of foreign influence, etc. At the same time, references are usually made to our country's history, its unique experience, traditions and culture, which can be preserved only through carefully controlling communication with the rest of the world.

Meanwhile, the historical experience of Russia indicates the exact opposite about the virtues of isolationism. Let's start with the fact that Kievan Rus was formed around one of the main international trade corridors of Europe, linking Scandinavia to Constantinople. Internationalism is our birthright.

The Russian state's periods of success were inevitably accompanied by openness to foreign nations. It has always been this way, from the time of Ivan III and Peter the Great to Catherine the Great and Alexander II. Even the Stalinist modernization of the 1930s was based in large part on Western technologies and the participation of foreign specialists.

Periods of stagnation and decline, however, go in tandem with stubborn attempts to shut out the outside world, minimize Russian dependence on other countries, and even limit contact with them. As they do today, those in power adhered to an ideology that warned of external threats to the foundational values of Russia, and even the Russian state itself.

But while in the past the destructive consequences of self-isolation might not have appeared immediately, today's world is so interconnected that players have to pay for a faulty strategy almost immediately. It appears that the historical "cost" in the 21st century for attempting to fence out the rest of the world will be much higher than it was in, say, the 16th, 19th or even 20th century.

But assuming that Russia is doomed to internationalize if it wishes to develop, then many of the current internal foreign policy debates are rendered meaningless and the proposed alternatives unsound.

For example, many talk today about a choice between "European" and "Asian" priorities in foreign political and economic strategy. But can Europe and Asia really be separated in a global world? Won't our successes and failures in Europe have a direct impact on our position in the Asia-Pacific region, and vice versa? And doesn't Russia's value to its European and Asian partners lie in part in its ability to serve as a geopolitical and geo-economic bridge between two continents?

Or should we turn to the no less pressing issue of the relationship between integrated efforts within CIS territory on one hand, and a strategy of strengthening cooperation with the European Union on the other? You frequently hear the opinion that these priorities are practically incompatible: either a stronger CIS or an expanded Europe. In my opinion, nothing could be further from the actual situation.

Successful integration with the CIS will only happen once Russia shows its willingness to build effective and mutually beneficial relationships with the EU in a wide variety of spheres. Efforts to oppose integration in Eurasia, meanwhile, are unsound in substance and counterproductive politically, given the historical trade links and political goals common to all CIS members.

Does this mean that Russian foreign policy is rigidly determined by the world's highly integrated nature and that we have no freedom of choice? Not at all.

Metaphorically speaking, a rational person won't struggle over the choice between acknowledging or not acknowledging the law of gravity. But he can choose practical methods of using these laws to his benefit and not to his detriment.

The process of globalization is like the law of gravity. It is outside our control, and it is controlled by no one else: neither the U.S., nor the rising economies in Asia, nor the European Union. It would be the height of naivete to suggest that somewhere in the world there is a headquarters of globalists giving orders to governments, corporations, political parties and the media. Globalization is an in-depth, chaotic and often unpredictable process.

But who will use this process to the greatest effect is still an open question. Here is where the choice of foreign political strategies and tactics becomes critically important. All countries, both small and large, can either be battered by the maelstrom of global change, or they can confidently set their course toward the shores of stability and prosperity.

In the epoch of globalization, the requirements for the foreign policy of any participant in international relations have risen sharply. It has become more and more important to act quickly and flexibly, and to gain maximum results with a minimum expenditure of resources. Much depends on a country's ability to coordinate the efforts of the government, private sector and civil society institutions, not to mention interagency coordination within the government. It has now become absolutely essential to have appropriate analyses from experts on foreign policy initiatives.

In some sense we can say that the new system of world politics will be more democratic than in the past because now the quality of a country's foreign policy may be able to compensate for a deficit of material resources.

It is also a historic chance for Russia, whose material wealth has been developed only in certain sectors, to compete with the leading global "centers of power." To use this chance to our best advantage, we need to learn the difficult art of raising the value of Russian "non-material assets" as quickly as possible. These include academics and education, culture and art, our innovative potential and athletic success — in a word, everything that falls within the definition of the trendy phrase "soft power."

Don't misunderstand me; I don't wish to suggest replacing traditional "hard power" with "soft power." That would be one more imaginary "choice" like those mentioned above. Russian foreign policy will be effective only when it uses the maximum possible range of modern tools, including both "hard" and "soft" power. It is just important to remember not to mix these tools up and reach for a butcher's ax when we need a surgeon's scalpel.

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