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Russia Is Losing Friends and Alienating Peoples

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Russian politicians constantly claim that the former Soviet republics are a foreign policy priority. Moscow devotes considerable attention and spends huge sums of money maintaining the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, the Eurasian Economic Union and the Eurasian Customs Union. However, this increasingly begs the question of what actual benefit they provide for their members.

Let's start with the purely political alliances. It is well known that the CIS was originally viewed as a form of "civilized divorce" between the former Soviet republics. That was largely true, except in the cases of Georgia and Ukraine, which withdrew under circumstances that could hardly be considered civilized.

By contrast, the CSTO was established as a voluntary organization with seemingly clear objectives. But what result do we see now?

Over the last 10 years, the organization conducted more than 15 large-scale joint military

exercises aimed at combatting terrorism and extremism, but where was the organization when, for example, Kyrgyzstan came to the brink of a full-scale civil war in 2010?

Did a contingent of CSTO troops deploy to Osh to prevent the massacre of civilians? No. Did the CSTO member states at least formulate and agree on a common position regarding the Kyrgyz problem? Again, no.

In recent years Russia twice deployed its troops to the territory of neighboring states — in 2008 to South Ossetia, then a part of Georgia, and in 2014 to Crimea, then a part of Ukraine. Borders changed, but did any of Russia's allies officially recognize those changes? Not one.

Did the CSTO member states at least formulate a common position regarding the Ukrainian crisis? No, again.

In fact, conflicts are gaining steam between the post-Soviet republics. Armenia and Azerbaijan have practically been at war since November 2014. What type of alliances are possible when prospective members are at war with each other?

The problem is that concerted action is very much needed. However much Russian leaders deride NATO, there is no denying that even after the end of the Cold War its member states conducted dozens of joint maneuvers, it possesses a highly capable military command and, despite some enduring tensions between Greece and Turkey, the alliance members operate as a unified whole on foreign and defense policy matters.

The West unquestionably has common goals and values, along with mechanisms for projecting them in the world. But what does Russia have that would unite it with potential allies other than some vague fear of the outside world?

Russia's economic unions look no more convincing. Any form of integration first requires certain concessions or accommodations on the part of its initiators before it can bear fruit.

But Russia's unabashed attempt to buy the friendship of Belarus and Armenia is not a promising form of cooperation — much less the brutal military operations designed to compel Ukraine into alliance.

Of course, even the closest allies can disagree at times, as the United States and Europe often do. However, reliable cooperation requires a solid foundation, and in the case of the West, it comes in the form of $1.1 trillion in annual bilateral trade and mutual investment totaling $3.8 trillion.

For years, Kazakhstan was the chief advocate of Eurasian integration, but after the first 10 months of 2014, its share of exports to other members of the Customs Union had fallen to 6.1 percent from 11.8 percent in 2010. In 2011, President Vladimir Putin made the case that over the next five years the Customs Union and the Eurasian Economic Union would account for 15 percent of member countries' gross domestic products — or roughly $300 billion in trade.

If that is true, was it worth sacrificing those organizations to impose a ban on $6 billion worth of European foods imported to Russia — for the sake of which Russia now intercepts consignments of foods sent from Belarus to Kazakhstan, even with the probability that those products will never reach their destination, or else will return home bearing new labels? And if

it is worth it, were Putin's earlier arguments of its benefits just banal pre-election promises — or has everyone completely forgotten how to calculate profit and loss?

At the same time, successful economic unions always follow the principle of unity in diversity. For example, countries with practically "socialist" economic models co-exist alongside those with very liberal economies.

However, Moscow will only cooperate with states that accept Russia's economic model of nationalization — a model that has proven ineffective in recent years.

Moreover, Moscow ultimately turns its back on any state that does not want to end up like Russia, in what Putin euphemistically described as "the trap of zero growth." That is no way to form an alliance.

People become friends when they share common values, interests and world views. In working toward common goals, friends support each other and strengthen their relationship. In the same way, when the members of international alliances share a common ideology and values, and when they are prepared to come to each other's aid, it

creates a stable union.

Russia, on the other hand, seems patently incapable of making friends. It prefers an overbearing and ostentatious show of love — and not even with a real partner, but with an imaginary image of that partner.

Nothing better describes what happened this year between Russia and Ukraine than these lyrics from a famous romantic song by Alexander Malinin: "Surrender lovely creature. I declare my love for you!" Such "romances" might make for great melodrama, but they cannot build a stable alliance or improve strained relations.

If Russia really wants to undertake the difficult but theoretically feasible task of consolidating the former Soviet republics, it should, on one hand, reflect on the ideology and values at the core of such a project, and on the other hand, about how to improve the effectiveness of the Russian economic system as it stands today.

Both tasks are extremely difficult. This is first because Russia is turning away from the Soviet universal model that was clearly focused on the future to an incredibly narrow one fixated on its Soviet past. Integration is built on overcoming history, not reconstructing it.

And second, it is because Russia's elite have become accustomed to offering their loyalty in return for immediate gain, but are not accustomed to considering the long-term "profitability" of such transactions.

That will lead Moscow officials to become frustrated with integration and, in turn, trigger frustration among its partners. That will ultimate destroy an otherwise worthwhile, if not vitally necessary, project.

In the end, unions and alliances that are not based on common values cost far more than they are worth and deliver little more than mutual disappointment.

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The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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