

2015 Promises Bad News for Russia

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The global system will not reach any major milestones of development in 2015. However, judging from events in the opening weeks of this year, the general global trends that were already evident will become more clearly defined in the coming months. Let's take a look at several of the most important.

Europe will once again become the focal center of events affecting the rest of the world. The attempt by the European Union to regain its former global role, in particular in the Middle East, did not succeed in making it an influential player, but only deepened instability among its neighbors and sent shockwaves throughout EU member states.

The failure of multiculturalism is now recognized officially, but no other policies exist to replace it. The European establishment simply does not know what to do. Ordinary citizens are increasingly upset by the situation, and also frightened by the presence of neighbors from a different culture that seem to have no intention of assimilating into traditional European lifestyles.

That affects the political landscape as well. And although the ultra-right forces in Europe are

poorly equipped for leadership and highly unlikely to gain power anywhere in Europe, a general shift to the right is inevitable.

This will deepen the feeling of general Euro-skepticism and create pressure to return more authority to national governments. Pro-integration forces, led by Germany — the main beneficiary of European integration — will seek to strengthen discipline in the community and "bring it into line."

The litmus test will be the elections in Greece on Jan. 25, in which the leftist Syriza party — that advocates revising agreements on Greece's external debt — have a chance of winning. The degree of severity Berlin employs in response to such an initiative — from readiness to ease the terms of repayment to simply calling for the EU to evict Greece as a member — will show how far Germany is willing to go in making the European Union conform to its wishes.

Also important will be Britain's parliamentary elections in May that could basically decide whether that country will remain in the European Union, as well as elections in Poland in the fall. There, a victory by the right-wing conservative party of Jaroslaw Kaczynski — who is anti-European and anti-German — would complicate the political balance within Europe and make the anti-Russian element in the EU even more aggressive.

In Ukraine, the public could become increasingly frustrated with leaders who have yet to achieve any of the goals proclaimed at Maidan. Groups that are unhappy over the confrontation with Russia are gradually consolidating their power.

At the same time, however, the general condemnation of Russia's policy is perhaps the only unifying foreign policy factor for the EU itself, and in its relations with the United States. As a result, the West will try to maintain that mindset out of widespread fears that trans-Atlantic relations might weaken yet again.

As for Russia's own Ukrainian crisis, the only conceivable positive scenario is if the conflict in the eastern region is frozen, hostilities cease and the warring parties disengage. No lasting settlement is under discussion at the moment.

The United States is entering a period in which U.S. President Barack Obama, a Democrat, faces an openly hostile Republican Congress. The country is already gearing up for presidential elections in 2016.

Obama, who will finish his second and final term in office, must already work to secure his "place in history" by achieving successes in domestic and foreign policy. However, the Republican-controlled Congress will do everything in its power to prevent that by torpedoing all of Obama's initiatives.

Russia has nothing positive to expect from the U.S. this year. The best it can hope for is continued restraint on the part of Obama who, unlike his political opponents, is in no hurry to provoke Russia by supplying weapons to Kiev.

In the Middle East, the main process is likely to be the continued weakening of the existing states due to external factors and general instability. As of yet, no effective means have yet been developed for combating the Islamic State. Airstrikes can at most slow this new force

from establishing itself in the region.

The instability of most regimes in the area — including those, like in Saudi Arabia, that seemed eminently enduring — is becoming increasingly evident, auguring major geopolitical changes.

The success of the Islamic State poses a potential future threat to Russia as well, but it is inadvisable for Moscow to join in the measures Western states are employing against that terrorist organization. This is primarily because those measures have proven ineffective. It is better for Russia to closely monitor events and to prepare for the time when those of its citizens who are currently fighting with Islamic State forces decide to return home.

China is experiencing a period of deep internal transformation. The communist leadership is attempting to cleanse the party apparatus as part of a public anti-corruption campaign. The main goal is to eliminate the risk of widespread and growing discontent over inefficient and corrupt government officials.

Beijing recognizes that the internal instability of societies and political systems is the main source of vulnerability in the modern world, and that the threat of someone exploiting that instability is far more dangerous than a direct military confrontation with a major adversary.

And because the world clearly views China as a strategic opponent of the United States, and with its economy now as large as that of the United States, observers think there is a high probability that tensions between the two countries will increase over the next decade. It is also clear that China's domestic problems could become a serious factor in such a confrontation.

Russia's relations with China are flourishing, due in part to such objective factors as Asia's growth and the new focus of world attention on that region, and in part due to the crisis in Russia's relations with the West. That shift opens up numerous opportunities, but Moscow must also exercise constant caution: China never makes even the slightest concession concerning its own interests and its position in the current situation is stronger than Russia's.

Thus, the main task facing Russian leaders in 2015 is to formulate a basis for relations with China such that it will be able to use the mechanism of checks and balances at any moment, and also avoid getting caught up in the confrontation between China and the United States that will inevitably arise a few years from now.

This year will be a serious test for the Russian state because 2015 promises exclusively bad news. Some argue that the current crisis is actually good for Russia's rulers because it will rouse them from the sleepy and complacent condition they had fallen into during more prosperous years and will force them to think and act.

So far, there is no sign that the Russian authorities have even the slightest idea of a development strategy suited to the new situation. Perhaps circumstances will force them to come up with one.

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