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Who Will Win the New Cold War?

By George Bovt

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It looks like a new Cold War between Russia and the West is inevitable, even if the conflict in Ukraine remains "frozen" in its current form until at least this summer. It became clear one year ago with the annexation of Crimea and the start of the war in eastern Ukraine that Russia's relations with Europe — and especially with the United States — would not remain the same as before.

Now is the time to ask how this new confrontation will look, both ideologically and institutionally.

The forms of Russia's interaction with the West that developed after the first Cold War — such as the Partnership for Peace with NATO and the working partnership with the European Union — have now sunk into oblivion.

And even if, for example, Russia returns to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe by the end of the year, it will face there only endless criticisms and lectures on how to behave.

And because those organizations are based on certain principles, membership in them only made sense for Russia as long as it was engaged in a dialogue on "common European values."

But now that Moscow has made it more than clear that it does not share those values, why bother preserving yet another venue for wrangling with the West? Membership on the UN Security Council offers ample opportunity for that.

With cooperation a thing of the past, the more pressing question is how this confrontation will take shape at the institutional level. Also, how can the international community institutionalize the "arbitration" process to resolve those questions that, however unpleasant, both sides must eventually confront?

Energy is one such issue. For now, the EU continues to buy gas from Russia, although it has already made substantial progress on its strategy to minimize energy dependence on Moscow.

The EU's decision to create an energy union is already one step toward "institutional confrontation." For starters, that union will consolidate EU member states' contractual relations with Gazprom, inevitably reducing the company's income from Europe even as it experiences major losses from the drop in energy prices.

As intrigue mounts concerning Russia's attempt to bypass Ukraine via Turkey, the West will counter with alternative supplies from Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Iran. Russia is also likely to experience sharp restrictions in access to the Opal pipeline in Germany.

The West will step up its reliance on liquefied gas and so on, with the goal of greatly reducing or ending altogether its reliance on Russian gas within two or three years.

The EU is also gearing up for an informational and propagandistic confrontation with Russia. It is already looking at creating an informational counterpoint to news network RT, but in general, the confrontation in the humanitarian and informational fields will differ significantly from that of the first Cold War.

Europe will not present it as a contest between two ways of life or two differing visions of the future — especially because Russia has yet to formulate its own vision of the future for domestic consumption, and to explain how it differs from the West's — but will probably boil down to a banal attempt at manipulating public opinion.

The contest between two competing social systems is over. Russia has abandoned the Soviet mantra of building the most just society of universal happiness, equality and fraternity.

Moscow's political allies abroad are no longer part of the "world communist movement," but individual states or political parties such as the French far-right National Front party of Marine Le Pen. Such alliances are not systemic, as the Warsaw Pact was, but individual and largely based on anti-globalization or anti-U.S. sentiment, or else on Euroskepticism.

If Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban or the Syriza Party in Greece were to lose power, it is unclear how those countries would define their relations with Moscow.

In the current confrontation, the West will focus on applying economic pressure on Russia — or put more simply, on strangling President Vladimir Putin's regime. Importantly, economic

conditions today differ fundamentally from those of the first Cold War.

Although the Soviet Union was greatly weakened by the war, it had a self-sufficient economy that relied only minimally on foreign markets. With the demobilization of the 1950s, former Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's "thaw" and the attempt to begin a "scientific and technological revolution" in the 1970s, the Soviet Union even demonstrated an ability to build up its industrial and technological potential.

However, at the start of the second Cold War today, Russia has essentially achieved the opposite — the ruin of its industrial base, and still worse, the loss of its former scientific and technological prowess.

While the Soviet Union could hold its own in the "space race" with the United States in the 1960s, today Russia obtains a lot of its key hardware — including crucial components for its military-industrial complex — from the West. And that is exactly the weak spot the West will strike.

The duration and final resolution of the current Cold War depends on how — and if — Russia will respond to this challenge.

If Russia does not resolve its technological and economic problems, it could witness not only the collapse of its industrial and social infrastructure and degenerate into a failed state within 15 years, but also lose its military potential for confronting the West.

That same time frame is also the maximum duration for this second Cold War. Of course, it will also depend on how long Putin remains in power and on whether the West feels that Moscow is actually strong enough to uphold a firm agreement reached on mutually acceptable terms.

If it isn't, the pressure will increase, thereby pushing Russia into an increasingly desperate condition if it cannot respond adequately to the external challenges.

At that point, Moscow will have only two choices: complete surrender on the victor's terms, or war as a final, desperate attempt to assert Russia's national dignity.

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