The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Trump Can’t Drive Europe Into Russia's Arms

Russian authoritarianism has rendered rapprochement with Europe untenable.

By Leonid Bershidsky

February 18, 2019



Gage Skidmore / Flickr (CC BY-SA 2.0)

As the U.S. demands more from Europe and castigates it ever more stridently, it’s increasingly clear that Russia is missing a historic opportunity. If President Vladimir Putin hadn’t made Russia an unreliable partner for its neighbors, he’d be poised to realize his fondest dream — of displacing the U.S. as Europe’s security guarantor.

U.S. pressure on Europe has gone far beyond President Donald Trump’s tariff threats and military-spending harangues. U.S. officials are demanding obedience in many other areas, too. This month alone, Gordon Sondland, Trump’s envoy to the European Union, said the EU

“really should be linking arms” with the U.S. to “check China” in every respect.

Richard Grenell, the U.S. ambassador to Germany, lashed out at the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project expanding Russian natural gas exports to Europe.

Vice President Mike Pence, speaking in Warsaw on Feb. 14, deviated from the written text of his speech to strengthen his demand that European countries abandon the 2015 Iran nuclear deal as the U.S. has done. At the Munich Security Conference on Feb. 16, Pence again exhorted Europeans to fall in with the U.S. on Iran, on market access for Chinese companies such as Huawei and on Nord Stream 2.

Despite European officials’ determination to preserve what’s left of the U.S.-led liberal world order, the cracks in the transatlantic alliance are obvious. They were one of the themes of the Munich conference and they showed in the prolonged silence Pence faced when he conveyed greetings from Trump, expecting applause in response.

Related article: Russia and Ukraine: A Destructive Codependency

And polls in key European countries show that once relatively pro-American voters no longer trust the U.S. This month’s DeutschlandTrend survey shows that only 24 percent of Germans consider the U.S. a trustworthy partner; over 50 percent did before Trump’s election.

Europe needs a counterbalance to U.S. influence. Had it not grown so dependent, U.S. officials would have had to scale back their demands and start talking to Europeans as equal partners. Ideally, the EU shouldn’t just be able to stand up for itself economically (to be able to stand up to U.S. sanctions when that’s in the European interest) but also be capable of ensuring peace in its neighborhood — the Balkans, Middle East, North Africa and the former Soviet Union — and suppressing terrorist threats like the one from the Islamic State.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization has these functions now, but, for historical and U.S. policy reasons, it’s more focused on the more hypothetical Russian threat.

Europe is a long way from both economic and military independence from the U.S., though.

Stronger ties with one of the other two major powers, China or Russia, would be another option. And if Russia were to try weakening Europe’s U.S. dependence, it wouldn’t be starting from scratch. Ever since Mikhail Gorbachev’s years as leader of the Soviet Union, Russia has sought a “new security architecture” in Europe that would reduce the importance of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and instead empower the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, a large but amorphous grouping that includes Russia.

That idea is still alive in Moscow — at the Munich conference, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov mentioned it again as he called for closer economic and security cooperation between Europe and Russia.

"*The EU and the statehood of the countries within it are based on values and rules as much as interests.*"

China is less of a natural partner for the EU than Russia because of the cultural distance between them. According to the DeutchlandTrend survey, 35 percent of Germans consider Russia trustworthy; 28 percent think that of China, making it only slightly more attractive than Trump's U.S. as a partner.

An alliance between the EU and Russia would have obvious economic and geopolitical advantages. They share a border. Russia has the resources and the military might Europe needs to police its neighborhood; that could be used to ensure stability in places such as Syria and Libya.

If Russia were on the same side as Europe and involved in joint security planning, much of the tension would be gone from the western Balkans. If NATO lost its importance as the main security umbrella for Europe and that role passed to some structure in which Russia has a say, Russia wouldn't need its frozen conflicts and buffer zones in the former Soviet Union, either. The conflicts would be easier to resolve with European participation.

The security alliance would be reinforced by a powerful mutual attraction between Russia and Europe; nine of the 20 biggest foreign companies in Russia are from the EU, and 10 of the top 20 most popular tourist destinations for Russians in 2018 were in the EU. Collectively, the EU is Russia's biggest trading partner.

But only marginal political forces in Europe talk about an alliance with Russia, even now that the U.S. is unpopular and increasingly perceived as unfriendly. Lavrov's appeals in Munich fell on deaf ears.

It's easy to see why. The EU and the statehood of the countries within it are based on values and rules as much as interests. Even if it's unclear what values Trump's U.S. stands for and what rules it respects, at least it's a functioning democracy that doesn't depend on the whims of a dictator or an oppressive state ideology.

European leaders have to fight fair elections, build coalitions, deal with independent-minded judges and a domestic opposition that can't be steamrolled. It's difficult for them to accept a corner-cutter as a trustworthy partner. And indeed, regimes run by "bosses" and "strongmen," according to a classification developed by political scientist Olga Chyzh at the University of Iowa, are more likely than democracies to enter into international agreements but are less likely to comply with them.

Russia was too weak to count in the 1990s, when it tried to adopt European values and rules, and its institutions were too unstable. By the time Medvedev pouted in Berlin about a wealthier and more powerful Russia's absence from the European security architecture, the country had turned firmly authoritarian, with rigged elections, a puppet judiciary and strengthening media censorship. It couldn't be a reliable security guarantor because it was a potential predator. Putin's aggression against Ukraine in 2014 only proved this, strengthening European leaders' resolve to stick with the U.S. security umbrella because it was so well-suited to containing Russia.

Putin, for whom resistance to U.S. hegemony has long been a foreign policy priority, shot himself in the foot twice, first by dismantling Russia's institutions in Europe's plain sight and

then by attacking Ukraine after it moved toward closer ties with the EU. Of the two strategic miscalculations, the second may seem more critical: Starting a war not far from the EU's borders is not the way to build alliances. But the swing toward authoritarianism was the source of all future errors.

Putin has presented his screw-tightening as necessary to save Russia from falling apart. But there's nothing about free elections, independent courts and a free media that causes nations to disintegrate or prevents them from building military strength. Putin took the easy path, consolidating personal power and treating democratic institutions with contempt, because he was cynical about Western calls for more democracy.

As one of Putin's top ideologists, Vladislav Surkov, wrote in a recent article, "The multi-level political institutions copied from the West are often considered partly ritual, maintained so we'd be 'like everyone else,' so that the peculiarities of our political culture wouldn't irritate and scare our neighbors so much."

Related article: Europe Should Woo Russia When Putin's Gone

The perception in the Kremlin was that European partners, too, saw things this way. In a major speech in Berlin in 2008, then-President Dmitry Medvedev said, "In some cases, we're simply told: Don't be so prickly, so scrappy in international affairs, and as for democratic development and human rights, these are less important and we'll close our eye to this."

In reality, however, the Kremlin misheard the Europeans. They were willing to put up with an authoritarian Russia but they'd never trust it to be a counterweight to the U.S. To harbor that ambition, Russia needed to work on trustworthiness, and that would have meant treating institutional democracy seriously.

A democratic Russia wouldn't have invaded Crimea or helped seal off eastern Ukraine from the rest of the country. And, in a way, regular leadership changes guarantee policy continuity better than authoritarian rule does; it's easier for the Europeans to hope the U.S. will return to normal after Trump than to entertain the Russian alternative.

The Trump presidency would have provided a democratic Russia with a unique opportunity to make a case to Europe about the need for a security system that's not skewed in favor of the U.S. From the Europeans' perspective, working on an alliance with Russia wouldn't just put Trump in his place: It would make future U.S. leaders treat Europe with more respect. But an undemocratic Russia is of no use to Europe. It is at worst a threat and at best unpredictable. Instead of working patiently to make Russia more European, Putin went off in the opposite direction, and a once-in-a-lifetime chance is no longer available to him.

Even if Russia turns towards democracy after Putin, the opportunity for displacing the U.S. as Europe's partner probably won't be there anymore. By then, Europe will find other ways to ease out of U.S. dependence — or to sink deeper into it if it surrenders to Trumpian demands.

This opinion piece was first published by Bloomberg View.

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

Times.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/02/18/trump-cant-drive-europe-into-russias-arms-a64529