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Russia Facing Europe: A Provisional Road Map

Russia would do well to review its recent practical steps with a view to refocusing and energizing its policies toward the European Union.

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Jean-Francois Badias / AP / TASS

Russia and Europe are not in confrontation — unlike Russia and the United States. They are, however, experiencing estrangement and, in some cases, alienation. There are several reasons for this.

The erstwhile platform for Russia-EU relations — the 1990s assumption that as Russia "modernizes" and becomes a "normal country," it will be "more like the rest of Europe" — is gone. A companion assumption that Russia would become permanently associated with the EU without sharing institutions with it is also history.

The Ukraine crisis has divided Europe and Russia, but it has also pushed Russia to pivot toward itself. This means seeing itself not as Europe's easternmost march, but as a large and independent geopolitical and strategic unit on a global level. Today's Russia, while culturally still European, is politically neither Asian nor Eurasian; it is simply Russian.

Europe, which was previously seen by generations of Russians as a mentor and model, is now seen essentially as a neighbor. It is respected as the principal trading partner, and a prime source of technology and investment. Yet despite being an economic powerhouse, the European Union is dismissed by Russians as a geopolitical and strategic player. When it comes to world politics or geostrategy, Russians see Europe as a follower — mostly willing, though sometimes reluctant — of the United States.

The Europeans' recent automatic support for the Trump administration's official reason for withdrawing from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, which Moscow describes as spurious, has only reinforced that view.

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As for Europe, it is divided not so much over what Russia is, as over how to deal with it. While a few countries in the east of the EU — mainly Poland and the Baltic states — view Russia as an existential threat, a number of others across the EU, even if they are concerned about Moscow's recent moves in Ukraine and suspicious of its "machinations" closer to home, are more focused on business opportunities in Russia. Finally, some Europeans try to discern logic — whether historical, geopolitical, or psychological — in Russia's behavior.

It is not surprising that, today, confusion reigns on both sides over the immediate future of Europe-Russia relations.

Several conclusions can be drawn from this state of affairs.

There is no going back to the 1990s. Russia's leaders no longer want their country to "belong to the civilized world," as the phrase once went, but instead want Russia to be a great power with global reach. Nor is there any going back to 2013, just before the Ukraine crisis. In any case, that was hardly a happy time in Russia-EU relations, with intense feelings of malaise on both sides.

Despite the ongoing U.S.-Russia confrontation, the NATO-Russia military standoff in Europe is still relatively low-level. While preparing for various contingencies, neither side seriously believes that initiating a military conflict with the other in that part of the world would give it any advantages. Moreover, both have good reason to believe that a major conflict there would soon almost certainly escalate to a nuclear level, after which it would be impossible to limit or contain it.

That said, the recent political changes in Ukraine have given reason to hope that the 2015 Minsk agreement on ending the conflict in Ukraine's Donbas region might actually be implemented. If successful, this would greatly reduce or even eliminate the risks of military escalation to a full-scale war between Russia and Ukraine. The going will hardly be smooth, given the rejection of the Minsk accords by Ukrainian radicals as "surrender to Russia," and

the zero likelihood of Moscow agreeing to hand Crimea back to Kiev. Europe's active support for implementing the deal, which France and Germany helped negotiate, would be immensely important, and it could pave the way for improved EU-Russia relations.

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Even if the EU sanctions imposed on Russia will largely remain in place for some time, there are opportunities for boosting economic ties in areas not affected by the sanctions. Indeed, Russia-EU relations will have to focus now on nonpolitical issues, from business ventures and technology transfers to humanitarian and cultural issues. Last summer's compromise on Russia's participation in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe demonstrates mutual willingness to stay connected, despite serious difficulties.

Going forward, the EU's policy toward Russia will continue to be influenced by several key factors. One is the dynamic interaction between the promoters of economic ties to Russia and the European Russo-skeptics, to whom Russia will always remain an existential threat. Another is the influence of the United States, whose attitude toward Russia will likely grow tougher in the foreseeable future, no matter who wins the U.S. presidency in 2020. Lastly, the EU will feel the impact of the Sino-Russian rapprochement against the background of intensifying U.S.-Russian confrontation and sharpening Sino-American rivalry.

On the basis of these conclusions, what could be the way forward for Russia and Europe in the next few years?

Russia would do well to review its recent practical steps with a view to refocusing and energizing its policies toward the European Union.

The obvious place to start is in Ukraine. After four-plus years of deadlock, Moscow needs to be proactive on Donbas. This means working closely with Kiev, Paris, and Berlin within the Normandy format. Stage-by-stage implementation of the Minsk agreement, using the Steinmeier formula to facilitate the process, would strengthen those quarters in Europe that are ready to begin materially improving relations with Russia. Optimistic expectations, however, must be held in check. Russia would need to be ready for a collapse of the peace process in Ukraine under pressure from the nationalist opposition to President Volodymyr Zelenskiy.

Quite separately, Moscow would need to complement its decision to facilitate the path to Russian citizenship for Donbas residents and other Ukrainians with a program to help with those individuals' resettlement in Russia and integration into Russian society and its economy. Russia does not need more land, but it certainly needs more people. To put a fine point on it, it needs more Russian citizens inside Russia, not outside of it. Of course, this program should also apply to people in other parts of the former Soviet Union, such as Moldova/Transnistria.

These steps would benefit Russia demographically and create a better atmosphere in at least some European countries. The full implementation of the Minsk agreement will depend on developments inside the Ukrainian body politic and on the attitude taken by Washington. For the moment, President Donald Trump, who is facing impeachment proceedings in the U.S.

Congress, is verbally supportive of Ukrainian and Russian efforts to resolve the conflict. There should be no illusions about either of these factors, but Russia showing bona fide readiness to fully implement its part of the Minsk deal will help Russian interests in Europe.

Moscow would also do well to abstain from overreacting to moves by NATO. The alliance's continuing enlargement in the Balkans — Albania, Montenegro, and soon North Macedonia — is hardly a threat to Russian security. Much of what NATO does elsewhere, such as in the Baltic region, is essentially about reassuring jittery allies, thereby shoring up its own credibility. These steps should not be ignored by any means, but they should be assessed for what they are actually worth, without exaggerating their importance. When it comes to actual increasing threat levels for Russia — for example, as a result of INF deployments in Europe — it is U.S. territory and its assets, rather than NATO Europe, that should be the target of Russian countermoves to restore strategic stability.

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In the age of global information commons, everyone in the world can influence everyone else. Russia and Europe certainly do, and will continue to influence each other by promoting views and ideas favorable to the influencer. Restricting this influence via ideas, about which the Soviet Union complained a lot in the past, and Europeans complain today, is hardly possible. What is possible and necessary, however, is abstaining from attempts to interfere in voting mechanisms and, more broadly, from seeking to insert oneself into domestic political processes abroad. Such interference, as history suggests, hardly ever works. It is right to keep contacts open with all relevant players in all European countries, but overtly or covertly helping some over others is not a winning approach. The principle of "influence, but no interference" could help to start rebuilding trust between Russians and Europeans.

There is not much that Russians can realistically expect from Europeans. Despite French President Emmanuel Macron's valiant efforts, they will not turn the EU into a geopolitical and strategic counterweight to the United States. They will probably not produce leaders of the stature of not only de Gaulle, Brandt, and Churchill, but even of Chirac, Kohl, and Thatcher. Europeans will continue to be largely absent on issues of military security in Europe: their silence in response to Trump's decision to withdraw from the INF Treaty was deafening and very telling. The EU's attempt at military cooperation should neither worry nor enthuse the Russians: the EU is not emerging as a new NATO, and the old NATO is not going away.

On the issue of sanctions, there should again be no high expectations. For the sanctions issue to be revised within the EU, either or both of its two leading members — Germany and France — would have to advocate for it. This is unlikely, even without strong U.S. pressure to the contrary, which will certainly ensue if there is a chance that the sanctions might be eased. The behavior of the three main European countries — France, Germany, and the UK — in regard to the U.S. withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action deal with Iran is a template for their future actions. When push comes to shove, the Europeans cannot ignore the Americans. The fact that the United States will for the foreseeable future remain Europe's main security protector, its best market and biggest economic partner, and a critical intelligence provider says it all. The United States leaning harder on its allies will not breed dissent; it will yield concessions by the party that will not risk a real break with America.

The most that Russians can hope for is for Europe to seek to promote its economic interests with Russia when it is reasonably safe to do so. Economic sanctions are very complicated instruments, and even the harsher ones that are coming in the United States still leave some room for doing business with the country under sanctions. On certain issues, European complaints about the adverse impact of Russia sanctions on EU economies might be taken into account by Washington. In rare cases, larger EU countries could stand up to the United States over their core economic interests. Thus, the North Stream 2 gas pipeline is likely to be completed. A better international atmosphere would help, but a healthier business climate in Russia would work much better to advance economic ties with Europe than any political concessions. On this latter point, however, it is also important to be realistic.

To sum it up, Russia need not concern itself about a new security architecture in Europe: eventually, one will grow out of its ongoing confrontation with the United States, together with the combined impact of Moscow's rapprochement with Beijing and the evolving rivalry between the United States and China. With Yalta 2 long overtaken by events, Europe itself has no wherewithal for a Helsinki 2. Meanwhile, mutual deterrence works for security, and business interests allow for a modicum of economic ties. For Russia, Europe is above all about economics and technology. Reducing or removing the political irritants that affect economic exchanges should help, but the most important driver of business ties is the domestic situation in Russia. Positive changes there are worth much more than any geopolitical concessions, or even successful attempts at penetrating other countries' political systems.

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