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Russia and Europe in the Aftermath of the Georgian Conflict: New Challenges, Old Paradigms

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At the end of June 2008, a press release issued upon the occasion of the 21st EU–Russia summit in Khanty-Mansiysk solemnly proclaimed ‘the start of a new phase in the process of deepening the strategic partnership’. This ‘new phase’ turned out to be short-lived, as only two months later an extraordinary meeting of the European Council concluded that EU–Russia relations had ‘reached a crossroads’.

Despite this striking change in language, it is still worth asking whether a new period in EU–Russia relations has really begun. No doubt a genuine partnership based on common values is now well beyond the horizon, but Europe’s interest in maintaining some kind of partnership is real and strong. It is my contention that whereas Russia has opened a new chapter in its European policy, the EU as a whole, with the usual variations among its individual states, is reluctant to admit the fact, let alone follow suit.

Russia is now proposing a new set of rules whereby the EU should acquiesce in its right to use force against a sovereign state that is one of the EU’s close partners. Rather than accept this, the EU vocally refuses to continue ‘business as usual’, but less loudly agrees to conduct business almost as usual. Having considered the possibility of economic sanctions against Russia, Europe made a rational choice against it. But while the EU decision not to seek a full break in relations with Russia is fully understandable, the ‘Russia first’ approach, which clearly manifested itself during the crisis, will seriously weaken EU strategy in eastern Europe, encouraging revisionist and great-power thinking in Moscow. To say that a European security system cannot be built without Russia or against Russia’s interests now implies that it can be built against the interests of Georgia, which was not the case before August 2008.

Russia’s actions have taken Europe by surprise. The uncompromising Russian stance on Kosovo was also a surprise. Since Kosovo, Russian external policy has evolved and produced results, both doctrinal and practical, so that today it looks comprehensive and qualitatively new.

Moscow has demonstrated a new readiness to support its words with deeds. In the past, it was never short of harsh rhetoric, including statements about protecting its compatriots abroad. But it did little to demonstrate the seriousness of its intentions and deliberately avoided spelling them out. After August 2008, its claims will gain a lot more credibility, even if there are no more dramatic steps in the immediate future.

Contrary to the template of the last two decades, when Russia was constrained to react in a defensive manner to the actions of the West, this time it has seized the initiative and presented Europe with a *fait accompli*. Actions were taken so quickly that the EU, with its slow bureaucratic machinery, simply did not have enough time to plan a response.

Furthermore, in Georgia Russia adopted a position of absolute unilateralism which, as observed by the prominent Russian commentator, Fyodor Lukyanov, may be an element of President Dmitri Medvedev's distinctive style. If Vladimir Putin, both as president and as prime minister, felt the need to explain, to persuade the West, to point out its double standards – in other words, to have a debate – Medvedev's laconic interviews show that he does not think talking is necessary. From now on, the West will be informed of Russia's actions, but its approval will not be sought.

For the EU, this conclusion may have significant consequences. The Georgian conflict took place after the EU had been officially downgraded in Russia's hierarchy of priorities, despite its economic importance. If the Foreign Policy Concept of 2000 considered Russia–EU relations to be 'of key importance', its successor document from July 2008 treats the EU as 'one of the main trade-economic and foreign policy partners'. This is not to say that other Western actors, NATO for example, will necessarily be given more weight than the EU in Russian policy, but it does suggest a high degree of confidence *vis-à-vis* Europe.

Why is it so difficult for Europe to respond? This question has a simple answer. Europe instinctively wants to keep the old paradigm of Russia–EU relations which, for all its shortcomings, was generally comfortable and not too demanding. The paradigm did not require Europe to formulate a strategic goal for its policy, promote Russia's internal transformation or induce it to comply with bilateral agreements. Neither did it require a consolidated effort to integrate the new eastern periphery of the Union. The post-Soviet countries dependent on the West were not likely to reorientate their course towards Moscow, especially when, after the coloured revolutions, the latter's influence was waning. Most importantly, the traditional EU paradigm allowed pragmatic interaction with Russia in many spheres, especially energy, investment and trade.

Yet a distinction needs to be made. The problem is not the EU's colossal imports of Russian oil and gas, which actually create interdependence, stabilize relationships and generate market opportunities. The problem is that the desecuritization of relations with Russia after the end of the Cold War

gradually blurred the boundaries of the morally acceptable. When prominent European public figures perform paid services for Russian state companies, it is hard to expect their attitudes to Russia to be completely impartial. In critical moments, this matters.

The Russian–Georgian conflict has not dislodged this paradigm because Moscow can deploy several strong arguments to justify its actions. It has used the Kosovo parallel to reproach the West, though the parallel is far from exact. International law only constrains when those who invoke it observe it, whereas one exception becomes a precedent for another. The first shot of this conflict was not fired by the Russians, and Georgian troops (like those of Milosevic) did use heavy weapons against civilians whom Tbilisi considered its own citizens. Even those who see Russia as a security threat cannot easily dismiss these arguments. They influence public opinion and strengthen the possibility of interpreting Russian actions in Georgia as a ‘special case’: exactly the justification used by the West in Kosovo.

Against this background, it is simply unrealistic to expect the EU to toughen its policy towards Russia and turn towards open confrontation. It is easier to leave things as they are.

In the immediate future, Moscow will try to pursue a path of accommodation with the EU in order to help overcome the effects of August 2008. Russia’s leaders have already confirmed that Russia will continue to recognize that Crimea is part of Ukraine and that the 1997 interstate treaty with Ukraine remains valid. The authorities in Tiraspol, capital of Moldova’s breakaway region, Transdnistria, have demonstratively agreed to resume negotiations with Chisinau. Taking into account the reluctance of Russia’s closest CIS partners in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to express their full solidarity with Russia’s actions in South Ossetia, it behoves Russia to treat them as a special case, rather than the start of a new trend.

In the longer run, however, it would be in Europe’s interests to find the courage to face the new realities. After Georgia, Russia will feel emboldened to raise its geopolitical game in the region, and this promises to create new tensions not only with Ukraine, but also with Belarus, which seems to have started exploring the possibilities of moving closer to Europe. A Cold War response is neither feasible nor appropriate. But substituting new rhetoric for serious policy revision will not help the EU.

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