

Europe in Crisis

“OLD,” “NEW,” OR INCOMPLETE?

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 515

March 2018

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In this policy memo, we bring together the results of our recently [published](#) research to shed some light on how the idea of Europe has been contested in Russia and in Central Europe as represented by the Visegrad Four (V4). Based on our findings, we suggest, first, that despite persisting differences between normative and geopolitical contexts in which Russia and the V4 have existed, Russian and Central European discourses have exhibited a degree of convergence toward a new understanding of Europe. Their imagery of Europe, which places a premium on national sovereignty and cultural integrity, is currently in conflict with mainstream (hegemonic) Western ideas of Europe as a cosmopolitan and supranational project that should be characterized by higher degrees of openness toward the cultural “Other” (including refugees).

Our second major point is that developing these new visions is only part of the story. Apart from using them for domestic political consumption, the narrative of an “alternative” Europe is an important element of a political strategy of influencing the existing understandings of Europeanness in the Western “core” itself. This political gamble, played by the Kremlin and to a lesser extent by some Central European leaders, is ultimately aimed at reshaping the meaning of Europe so that it would be more accommodating toward their political stance. In this sense, the Russian and Central European narratives on a “new” or “alternative” Europe are mutually amplifying, even if they are not necessarily crafted by the same political actors and can also conflict on many other issues such as memory of the Second World War.

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A Europe “Defined” by the Refugee Crisis

The refugee crisis of 2015-16 sparked a new debate about Europe. Perceived challenges to European security posed by the waves of migration and the ensuing policy responses brought to life new-old questions about the meaning of basic concepts such as sovereignty, solidarity, culture, and identity. This debate has been raging both in the Western European “core” and in different zones of what has been known as Europe’s periphery.

Overall, the debate about Europe suggests that questions about its constitutive values are presently far from being resolved. Thus, despite the drastic expansion of the European Union in the post-Cold War era, Europe remains incomplete.³ In his recent article, French political scientist Jacques Rupnik [pointed sharply](#) to the “inadequacy” of the concept of Europeanization which, according to him, failed to specify “who actually defines what the European model is.” For some time at least, the model proposed by Brussels seemed to be the hegemonic one, and only few in Europe questioned the moral right of the EU to embody and speak on behalf of the whole European political community. The most ardent skepticism came from Russia, which, under Vladimir Putin, has been reinventing its own narrative of an “alternative” Europe, or, in the [words](#) of Norwegian political scientist Iver Neumann, “true” Europe. However, prior to the major European crises, there was limited political market for Russian narratives on European identity.

The European crises of 2014 (Ukraine), 2015 (migration), and 2016 (Brexit referendum) left a profound impact on all actors situated both in different areas of Europe’s core and its peripheries. In the core itself, the growth of “sovereignist” nationalistic populism challenged the liberal consensus on Europe as a supranational project, and, as exemplified by the Brexit case, questioned the inevitability of European integration and the EU’s very future. For Russia, as a peripheral European player, the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the hybrid war in Donbas resulted in unprecedented isolation from the West. This sparked new attempts to “return to Europe,” this time by changing Europe itself by redefining it toward its more accommodating, nationalistic, and anti-liberal version that would acquiesce to Russia’s treatment of Ukraine more easily.

During this time, audiences in Europe seemed to be more prepared to consume Russian narratives. Following the 2015 refugee crisis, new dividing lines emerged in Europe with the V4 rebelling against the system of hosting and distributing immigrants from the Middle East among EU member states according to quotas imposed by Brussels. The Polish and Hungarian establishments were particularly vocal in this respect, making promises to bring a “cultural counter-revolution” to Europe that would, according to

³ See the PONARS Eurasia blog post by Vlad Strukov and Andrey Makarychev: “[\(In\)complete Europe vis-à-vis \(in\)complete Russia](#),” June 2017.

them, restore national sovereignty, secure a return to traditional Christian European values, and end what they perceived as the *diktat* of Brussels. Thus, in the V4 group, a [new-old European identity began to crystallize](#) that was in juxtaposition to post-Cold War Western liberalism and that only partially accepted solidarity as a constitutive norm of the EU. Furthermore, not unlike the Kremlin, Central European leaders, such as Hungary's Viktor Orbán, thought the time was ripe to find an audience in Western Europe for their own narratives. Following the Brexit turning point, Orbán blamed it on European institutions that, according to him, had been infringing on the sovereignty of the British people. Prior to the referendum, Orbán had also used a British tabloid to try to convince UK citizens to stay in the EU, so as to balance the centralizing tendencies in Brussels with traditional British Euroscepticism, which he saw as a political ally against German and French inclinations toward European federalism.

We have therefore been observing a series of interventions into the political meaning of "Europe" that tend to originate in the European periphery but resonate well with the debates also raging in the Western European core. The congruence between Russian and Central European narratives on a "new Europe" is both striking and alarming for those whose political bet is on a "united" Europe as opposed to a "new" Europe. In truth, the latter is a misnomer, as the political program embedded in the discourse of the latter is mostly that of an anti-globalist rebellion and a "return" to "traditional" values of nationalism, sovereignty, and social conservatism. In essence, it is a political recipe that refers us back to the 19th century and its Concert of Europe and Holy Alliance.

Russia's European Games

Russia has long been a champion of this geopolitical vision. The irony is that its most likely allies are located in Central Europe, comprised of a group of countries for which Russia has never had much respect. It is not only that the "East" of Europe is not seen as genuine Europe by many Russians, but rather as some kind of half-European or "under-European" ("*nedoevropa*") periphery, sometimes referred to denigratingly as limitrophe states. Also, the traditional "great power management" mindset of Russian foreign policy makers forbids them to think in terms of equal relationships with anyone but great powers. From their perspective, the "dwarf states" ("*karlikovye gosudarstva*") of Central and Eastern Europe can be seen as geopolitical instruments but never as true partners. Therefore, those leaders in the V4 that have tried to reincarnate the geopolitical imaginaries of Central Europe as a bridge between the West and Russia (between "Europe" and "Eurasia") may thus ultimately find themselves disappointed when facing the emerging reality of a new edition of spheres of influence as an intrinsic part of Russia's geopolitical project.

On the side of the Central European states, the options of geopolitical convergence with Russia are also limited. Despite their deliberate misbehavior on the issue of refugee quotas, even the most vocal critics of the "Brussels' *diktat*," such as Orbán or Polish

conservative politician (and de facto leader) Jarosław Kaczyński, remain structurally locked into the EU. Not only do all V4 countries remain economically dependent on Western Europe, but their citizens have also become used to the multiple benefits that European integration has offered. Thus, freedom of movement guaranteed by the Schengen agreement remains essential for the political survival of the V4 Euroskeptics. This was quite evident from their nervous reaction to the idea of breaking up the Schengen zone in order to deal with the refugee crisis more efficiently. This fear of being left out of Europe's "freedom of movement" signals their strong attachment to the European project at least in some form, even if they are developing their own counter-hegemonic narratives on European identity.

Thus, discursive convergence between Central Europe and Russia notwithstanding, the scenario of any Central European state detaching from the EU and NATO in order to associate, for example, with the Eurasian Economic Union or any other Russia-sponsored regional arrangements, looks implausible. In realist terms, Russia's resource base does not allow Moscow to attain the ambitious goal of bringing Central Europe back into its informal empire, even if geopolitical fantasies of that sort are occasionally voiced in Russia. Rather, Moscow has acted as an opportunistic "spoiler power" exploiting every weakness of the European project that it could find.

The refugee crisis offered ample opportunities for that. As the EU was facing the challenge of mass-scale human inflows, the Russian discourses and the geopolitical imaginaries it created repeatedly castigated Europe for abandoning its cultural roots and betraying traditional European (Christian) values in favor of a false multiculturalism. The Russian Orthodox Church enthusiastically contributed to this narrative, using it as a springboard for reinstalling itself as a pivotal religious actor in Europe. The Russian narrative on Europe was highly Spenglerian in spirit, pointing at weakness and decadence, and incriminating a principle inability to deal with structural problems exacerbated by the migration crisis. Apparently, these Russian messages to Europe addressed several different audiences. The Kremlin's links with Euroskeptical nationalists and populists are part of the strategy to address those segments of the Western European public that feel increasingly disappointed by European integration and the effects of globalization on their lives. Here, the Kremlin pursued a trans-ideological approach, siding opportunistically with those political forces that mounted the most radical criticism of the EU, irrespective of their position inside the decomposing left-right political spectrum.

A more specific audience has been Russian-speakers in the EU, in particular in Germany, which hosts a large diaspora of Russian-speakers composed of ethnic Germans who were repatriated from the former Soviet Union after the end of the Cold War. A significant share of them espouse social conservative views, resist the policies of liberal multiculturalism, and, in terms of voting preferences, favor the Euroskeptical Alternative for Germany (AfD) over Angela Merkel's Christian Democrats. The

targeting of Russian speakers in Germany is epitomized by the case of “Our Lisa,” a fabricated media story of a teenage Russophone girl who had allegedly been raped by migrants. The story was spun enthusiastically by Russian state media but turned out to be fake news, although it did create additional tensions between Moscow and Berlin. This targeting of Russian-speakers as a particular segment of the EU population signals two things. First, it demonstrates the flexible approach of the Kremlin, which, as part of its disinformation practices, chose different narratives to manipulate various social and cultural groups. Second, it shows that the outreach of the so-called Russian World, understood as a regional and global community of Russian-speakers, is not limited to the post-Soviet area, but also has audiences in Western Europe. The discourse of the Russian World has a strong element of “biopolitics” in it, that is, it focuses on populations rather than territories and reiterates the need to protect and to care for these populations. In the case of Russian-speakers in Germany, this “care” is justified through geopolitical imaginaries in which Europe is narrativized as “false,” as culturally decadent and politically weak, and therefore unable to protect its citizens from the dangers brought by the migration crisis.

However, Russia’s geopolitical imagination lacks consistency. Not only does it opportunistically switch between the radical left and the extreme right to promote its agenda in Europe, it also fails to be consistent with Russia’s own foreign policy in the region. Thus, if sovereignty and cultural homogeneity is the name of the game for Russia, as its narrative on Europe indeed suggests, then one would expect Moscow to support ethnocentric nationalism in the Baltic states. On the contrary, Russia is a vocal critic of Latvian and Estonian attempts to homogenize their own societies by integrating the Russian speaking communities into the dominant national culture.

In this context, Russia’s relations with Poland promise to be a particularly interesting case. Poland has lately been drifting somewhat closer to the nationalist and illiberal model represented by Putin and promoted by Orbán. However, Polish and Russian nationalisms are historical antagonists. Political and ideological convergence per se does not automatically imply cordial relations, but it is not implausible to assume that resentment toward European liberal cosmopolitanism as their shared “Other” may ease historical animosities. We have already witnessed something similar in the rapprochement of the Slovakian and Hungarian extreme right during the migration crisis.

Conclusion

Returning to the issue of congruence between Russian and Central European discourses, there is one key point to be made. There is much talk recently of growing Russian influence inside the EU, and the illiberal trends in the V4 seem to be creating a favorable environment for Russian disinformation practices. It is true that the Russian geopolitical narratives lack consistency, and Moscow’s strategy of creating political alliances inside

the EU suffers from ideological opportunism. This, on the other hand, does not mean that ad hoc interventions into European politics cannot be used to weaken the European project through exploiting and exacerbating the already existing structural weaknesses. What is most important, however, is that with or without Russia, these weaknesses already exist. The illiberal discourse in the V4 may be converging with the Russian narrative on “false Europe” but it is not caused by it, even if the effect of mutual amplification is possible. The V4 illiberalism is not a Russian special operation; it has indigenous roots. In fact, we believe that the simultaneous and largely independent rise of similar discourses proves the existence of serious structural problems that Europe is facing. This is why the term “incomplete Europe” is the most appropriate one to describe the present situation.

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