

The Forced Choice Between Russia and the West The Geopolitics of Alienation

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On Sunday of November 21, 2004, every half hour the news headlines of the British Broadcasting Corporation reminded listeners around the world that the voters in Ukraine were to make a crucial choice for their country on that day. The question, according to the BBC, was whether Ukraine would join Europe or remain with Russia. This rigid structure, placing Russia opposite the West and presenting Ukraine's choice as an either/or alternative with no middle position, was behind most of the comments and analysis concerning the 2004 presidential elections. Political and intellectual elites in Ukraine, Russia, Western Europe, and the United States, despite their diametrically opposed attitudes toward the two main candidates, silently agreed that Viktor Yushchenko was a pro-western candidate who was going to steer Ukraine away from Moscow, while Viktor Yanukovich would strengthen the ties between Ukraine and Russia at the expense of improved relations with the West. Only a few experts disagreed with this black and white picture, but their voices were hardly heard outside a narrow circle of academics.

I suggest analyzing the discussion about the Ukrainian elections (but not the elections as such) as part of the struggle for the definition of Europe and the notion of Europeanness. Europe is a very strong signifier, and whoever can determine its positive content controls an important source of legitimacy and power. Setting European standards and deciding who conforms to them and who does not is one of the most effective means of achieving political results.

The debate around the Ukrainian election clearly demonstrates that there are two main definitions of Europe struggling for a hegemonic position. In the West, Europe is more and more often defined as a zone of democracy, which excludes Russia as a (re)emerging authoritarian empire. Moreover, in many Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs) Russia is seen as the Other of Europe, as the power that had oppressed them in the past and thus embodies a diametrical opposite to their democratic European future. This vision is increasingly accepted by West Europeans: thus, the editorial in the *Financial Times* on November 23 argued that Ukrainians "demonstrated beyond doubt that, given the chance, their country could be a genuine European democracy. It is not condemned by its past and its geography to Russian-style authoritarianism."

Russia tries to overcome this isolation by attempts to build some sort of Russian Europe by consolidating its real or imagined leadership in the Commonwealth of Independent States, in particular among the European CIS members. For this reason the failure of the Russian plan of settlement in Moldova in 2003 was quite painful for the Russian foreign policy elite, and also is the reason why Ukraine plays such a crucial role in the Russian vision of Europe's future. Russian elites eagerly accept the rules of the game where their country is assigned the role of a bugaboo for the East Europeans, and never even try to look for any alternative vision of Europe and Russia's place in it. Decision makers think and act as if the geopolitical imagery of Russia and the West are two inherently antagonistic substances struggling for the spheres of influence. If this was self-evident and solely true, then politics in the end comes indeed to be driven by the geopolitical logic. Thus geopolitical metaphysics turns into political reality

The result is that Russia becomes increasingly alienated from the rest of Europe and from the West. This contributes to the remaining tensions between Russia and some of its neighbors, in particular the Baltic States, since identity politics on both sides is almost symmetrically built upon the denial of each other's belonging to Europe. Alienating Russia also makes it difficult for the countries which have close ties with Russia at the level of identity, history, economics and personal relationships -- like Belarus and Ukraine, --to integrate into the western institutions, as such integration is interpreted as necessarily moving them away from Russia. Negative economic consequences of this divide are particularly conspicuous. The ambiguous attitude to Russian investment, *inter alia*, leads to such scandals like the one over Mažeikiu Nafta, the Lithuanian oil refinery. Meanwhile Russia is investing taxpayers' money into the Baltic Oil Pipeline System, whose main rationale is the unwillingness to pay Latvia for the oil transit.

But perhaps most importantly, Russia's alienation destroys what very precious little is left in that country of the popular belief in liberal values, the only chance for Russia to stay on the track of democratic reform. Since the West insists on the adherence to democratic norms and procedures in the countries like Ukraine and Belarus, Moscow almost feels obliged to support the political forces that advance anti-democratic populist agendas. The example of Aleksandr Lukashenko should have taught Russian politicians to be skeptical about the idea that international isolation of undemocratic leaders will make them loyal to Russia. Yet as long as any pro-western politician is perceived as anti-Russian, there is very little choice left but to support authoritarian younger brothers. An inevitable consequence is that the Russian public is further disillusioned about democracy and tends to treat it as an ideological smokescreen used by the West to conceal its real geopolitical goals. The criteria for the evaluation of Russian leaders by the citizens are eased accordingly. After all, Russians' attachment to Europe cannot be exploited indefinitely: if they see that Russia has no role in the Europe of the EU and the Council of Europe other than being constantly accused of not being a good European, it can withdraw into Eurasia, and the project of the Europeanization of Russia will have to be postponed for the decades to come.

Fifteen years since the end of the Cold War, we have to recognize that the division of Europe has still not been overcome – it is just that the iron curtain separating the two superpowers and their allies has been replaced with a velvet curtain, which has moved further east. Where exactly it will run is, after all, a secondary matter (although it is by no

means unimportant for Ukrainian citizens, for instance). What comes first is that it separates the countries steadily moving towards democracy and prosperity from their unfortunate neighbors who have been unable to make their democratic choice and are therefore destined for miserable and hopeless existence under authoritarian regimes. This image does not even have to be too close to reality – after all, democracy and liberal values are arguably under threat everywhere, including their western homeland. Yet the new divide, even if it is to a large extent just a perception, is bound to cause increasing hostility between the East and the West, which will no longer see each other as partners in a joint democratic endeavor, but rather as rivals in the geopolitical struggle for the spheres of influence in Europe and elsewhere. Cooperation in the fight against terrorism provides but a narrow and unstable ground for greater mutual understanding. Besides, the consequences of the anti-terrorist coalition for the democratic development in its member countries are also questionable. Thus, political leaders and the general public both in the West and in the East give up the idea of democratic transformation east of the velvet curtain, and limit their cooperation to achieving pragmatic geopolitical aims in the areas of mutual interest.

A paradox which makes the situation especially difficult is that no one seems to be profiting from the growing alienation between Russia and the West, and thus the process seems to have no driving force; there is, in other words, no actor which could be accused of cynically promoting the image of inescapable geopolitical confrontation. The West is right in describing Russia as entertaining neo-imperial dreams and therefore using all possible means to keep and even restore its influence in the former Soviet republics. But the Russian politicians and journalists also have every reason to be disappointed with the fact that any links between Russia and the former parts of the Soviet empire cause extreme, and often irrational, irritation and resistance on the part of the West.

The role of the Central and Eastern European countries also cannot be described as unambiguously positive or destructive; it is not easy to even to classify them as actors on their own or merely as a stake in this geopolitical game. Many Russians would perhaps agree with President Putin's envoy for the relations with the European Union Sergei Yastrzhembsky, who in his interview with *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* on November 17, 2004 blamed the current crisis in Russia-EU relations on the new member states, whose representatives have allegedly "brought the spirit of primitive Russophobia to the EU." At the same time, Russia's often-awkward attempts to prevent those states from moving closer to the West (especially from entering NATO) are at least an equally plausible explanation for their attitudes towards Russia. It is moreover far from clear what are the benefits for those countries of being so Russophobic, at least after they have achieved their strategic goal of joining NATO and the EU. As argued above, the rigid dichotomy between Russia and the West is detrimental to the economic well-being and sometimes also political stability in many of these countries.

One may conclude that we are facing a situation of Gramscian hegemony in the absence of the standard Marxist culprit – the ruling class, which, in Gramsci's view, tries to present its particularist interest as coinciding with the interests of the nation as a whole. One cannot get rid of the feeling that a certain structure of meaning is imposed upon us with a view of making us act against our own interest, but one would have a hard time trying to find the political actor(s) responsible for this imposition. The customary model

of bad rulers acting against the interests of the good people is too simplistic for this case, as for many others: it seems that the rulers themselves are trapped in this dichotomy to the extent of being unable to even think about any alternatives.

However, the fact that it is impossible to locate the hegemonic force should not discourage us from the attempts to resist this hegemony, first of all by trying to provide alternative interpretations of the events. The first step in this direction would consist of the conscious decision to reject the image of Russia and the West as two necessarily hostile geopolitical subjects. This alone will not eliminate the conflict about the future of Central and Eastern European countries, but it is absolutely necessary to bring the debate out of the binary construction of their symbolically choosing to be with the West or with Russia into the field of substantial discussion about democratic values, norms, and procedures. It is too early to write Russia off as an authoritarian state, and after all, complete isolation of authoritarian states is not necessarily good for their neighbors. What is perhaps less obvious, but therefore even more important, is that the West should not be uncritically identified with democracy. This complacency can be very dangerous for western societies themselves, since it prevents meaningful and open discussion about the state of democratic institutions there. Another important consideration is that automatic labeling as democratic of anything which comes from the West imposes on western policymakers enormous responsibility, far exceeding the limits of politically feasible. Fortunately or not, democracies are never perfect in their functioning, and even less impeccable in their foreign policy conduct. The arrogance of the West in claiming the power over the meaning of democracy often leaves this notion completely discredited in the so called transition societies, simply because people there find it hard to approve each and every step of the western leaders. It is much more honest and sensible to see democracy as a joint endeavor of all Europeans and, broadly speaking, of the entire humanity, in which no one – not even the Russians – should be excluded in advance from taking part.