

# Russia Between “Old” and “New” Europe

## New Policy Articulations

PONARS Policy Memo 333

*Andrey S. Makarychev*

*Danish Institute for International Studies*

*November 2004*

A number of recent developments have sharpened the interest in Europe’s eastern margins where Russia finds itself in direct contact with NATO and the EU. The accession of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia in 2004 to these entities, the scaling back of U.S. involvement in the Baltic Region (in particular, the de facto termination of the Northern European Initiative), the appearance of an “Old” vs. “New” European divide, the emergence of the Eastern Dimension (ED) sponsored by Poland, and a clearer articulation of the importance of contacts with CIS countries in foreign policies of the Baltic states have highlighted the importance of this region.

U.S. policy in Europe is aimed at politically elevating the role of countries that have been traditionally considered as marginal (i.e., geographically located at the edges) at the expense of its relations with nations that once constituted the European core. It is within this context that the New-Old Europe debate has to be explored.

The New Europe seems to be a rather competitive space. Following Poland's ED initiative, Lithuania has started to think of presenting itself as a political leader in the Baltic region. The Lithuanian quest for leadership is underwritten by the Vilnius – 10 group, the Northern Baltic 8 caucus, and the 3 plus 3 initiative aimed at establishing institutional links with the Caucasian republics. Lithuania, in presenting itself as the executive arm of NATO and the EU in the Caucasus, wishes to be a bridge for the region to the West. Estonia, too, under the strong influence of the United States, has recently made considerable efforts to establish political liaisons with Georgia and Azerbaijan. These developments constitute foundations for a new type of policy environment at Europe’s margins where Russia is bound to border the countries sharing the U.S. concept of security. By the same token, Russia belongs to neither “Old” nor “New” Europe, which warrants some degree of autonomy vis-à-vis the whole debate and makes the Russian discourse rich in both variegated meanings and intellectual gaps between them.

The first gap is caused by a clash between a wider and a narrower view of Europe. One group conceptualizing the New Europe sets more or less fixed geographic parameters for it. For many Russian commentators, the difference between the “Old” and the “New” Europe roughly coincides with the West-East gap in the continent. Therefore, the Old Europe appears to embrace the New one.

This vision is articulated differently in two other concepts. One of them is an idea of the second Europe based on a temporal understanding of Europe's construction, presupposing that the less developed countries ought to catch up to the leaders. The concept of "a different Europe" contains a much more pronounced identity-based component and is grounded in a rediscovering of a "nonwestern Europe," to which Russia seems to belong.

In contrast, some Russian analysts attribute the concept of the New Europe to the whole continent. The New Europe is viewed as a common EU-Russian project, which points to the Russian subjectivity as a New European actor. Understandably, most Russian policy analysts choose to equate the New Europe with the wider Europe, rather than with the former socialist countries.

The second gap has to do with articulating Russia's sympathies to either of the two Europes. One group of Russian experts is distrustful of France and Germany due to their alleged ambitions to monopolize the European identity. There are also strong cultural underpinnings of Russia's critical attitudes toward these two countries. In the interpretation of some Russian scholars, they embody a tendency of growing self-denial of national interests and identities. Russia, therefore, seems to denote what Europe itself is proud of—both refusal of national egos and valorization of supranational integration.

Yet the criticism of Germany and France is seriously challenged by other pundits (like Alexander Dugin and Sergey Belkovskii) who think that it is the Old Europe with whom Russia has to negotiate cases like Kaliningrad. Their reasoning is quite compelling since in global issues Germany and France are inclined to frame EU-Russian relations with long-term strategic commitments. Within the Russian academic community, there are voices assuming that the Russian-German alliance is the key factor in all-European stability. Russia gravitates to the Berlin-Paris nexus the argument goes on, since these two countries are committed to the preservation of traditional Christian values, which Russia by and large shares.

Leaning toward the French-German couple is an indication of Russia's search for her own European subjectivity, which is ultimately considered as a precondition for Russia's self-assertion both vis-à-vis and within Europe. Recreation of what could be called a great continental family (sometimes geographically overextended to a Madrid-Paris-Rome-Berlin-Moscow-Delhi-Tokyo imagined axis) continues to be a part of the Russian strategy to resist U.S.-led globalization. It is a rediscovery of traditional Europe as an interlocutor and an agent in regaining Russia's own subjectivity. In the meantime, the evanescence of Europe as a world power (or its substitution by a post-Europe) would make a significant part of the Russian policy community feel uncomfortable. The dispersion of European subjectivity, paradoxically, appears to be more painful for Russia than dealing with a powerful Europe. It is from this interpretative angle that one has to understand both the disdain of post-Europeaness and, vice versa, the enthusiastic discovery of a certain degree of vitality in the Old European nations. This reasoning could be transformed into a clear sympathy for the Old Europe. In the meantime, implicitly exposing their friendliness to Europe, some Russian analysts relate their hopes with its rejuvenation as an effect of enlargement.

The Russian discourse on the New Europe is to no lesser extent split along similar lines. One standpoint, grounded in the criticism of France and Germany, perceives Russia's neighbors taking, (as in the case of Kaliningrad) more pro-Russian stand(s) than other EU members and the EU in general. It is also assumed that the direct neighborhood may be considered as an important resource to be exploited through a variety of potentially profitable transborder arrangements. In particular, Russia is believed to be able to take advantage of Polish eagerness to eventually become Moscow's lobbyist in the EU. There were some attempts to welcome the Visegrad group as an institution able to plug into the Russian concept of all-European security, a vision which is compatible with the Visegrad group's self-perception as a comaker of the EU Eastern European policy.

The attraction of the former Soviet countries for Moscow might also be grounded in Russia's ability to influence their internal policies. It is understandable that, pragmatically speaking, Russia has more chances to exert an impact upon domestic developments within Latvia, Estonia, or Lithuania, than to change the way that policy is being made in France or Germany. The perspective of Russia being in a position to have its say in shaping the policies pursued by the Baltic countries are quite discernible in the Russian discourse.

The Baltic states could also be positively featured as countries to constitute the backbone of Russia's stable relations with NATO, in the sense that this alliance is expected to be appreciative of Russia's relative tolerance displayed in the accession of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. In the meantime, NATO membership of Russia's neighbors could be a means of smoothing Moscow's relations with NATO. This logic is split into a number of arguments. The first one is that the Baltic states are said to debilitate NATO and complicate its operational management. Secondly, it is argued that NATO, by accepting the Baltic states, has voluntarily displayed an absence of strict standards of membership. Thirdly, some Russian commentators deploy the accession issue in a purely commercial context presuming that the Baltic states are predominantly motivated by "making money" than providing some service to the alliance. It is emblematic that all arguments preclude Russia's tranquility toward NATO enlargement.

Yet, in the meantime, there is an opposite tendency of representing the New Europe as composed of a group of trouble-makers annoying both Russia and the EU. In the Russian media, the accession of former socialist countries to the EU in 2004 was repeatedly depicted as an invasion to stimulate the growth of prices in the EU and threaten European agriculture. "Europe became larger and poorer." Newspaper headlines of this sort duly reflected the state of mind among many opinion makers in Moscow.

Security issues were also divisively actualized by the Old-New Europe debate. When the three Baltic republics celebrated their double accession, the Russian media was full of stories pointing to possible deployment of NATO armed forces in close vicinity to Russia's westernmost territories and a probable threat that might be caused by AWACS (Airborne Warning and Control System) military jets. The war of words reached its apex in the decision of Riga's authorities to bar Dmitry Rogozin from Latvia.

For their part, many Russian politicians characterize the EU newcomers as the United State's fifth column in Europe. The heart of today's Europe, is to be found in the United

States, which makes the New and the Old Europe clash with each other. Some Russian analysts relate the New Europe with the New Atlanticism.

Concomitantly, Moscow tends to suspect the New Europe of undermining Russian international positions. In the Russian media, coverage of the postaccession period of the Baltic states is framed by multiple descriptions of “vodka tourism” and gasoline smuggling. A resolution of the Lithuanian parliament in September 2004 banning visa-free transit travel of Russian citizens to and from Kaliningrad exacerbated the Russian criticism of Vilnius.

Russia’s European discourse confronts a number of challenges. One of them is grounded in debates on the scale and limits of EU power. The question is to what degree of EU strength can Russia allow itself to admit and attribute to the EU. One possible reaction to this dilemma is the Russian accentuation of ongoing European weakness. Opinions of some Russian politicians are marked by a denial of Europe’s attraction to Russia by presenting the EU as a presumably exhausted entity lacking political will and an identity of its own. Not surprisingly, the theme of possibly dismantling the EU is regularly debated among Russian experts.

The focus on European existential weakness leads to an interesting twist exemplified by a hypothesis that the New European project could be implemented by Russia herself. At this point, distancing itself from Europe leads to an attempt at the self-construction of Russia’s role. This not only makes Europe an entity with scarce or even nonexistent political will, but also questions the strategy of Russia’s integration with Europe.

A different strategy pertains to the actualization of the idea of two empires by stressing the imperial background of the European integration. Naturally, this approach leaves much room for both the EU’s actorship and a potential division of spheres of influence between Moscow and Brussels.

These points lead to the second major challenge Russia is trying to tackle, namely finding a balance between stressing Russia’s specificity/exceptionality on the one hand, and accentuating Russia’s normality/typicality on the other. The question could also be reversed: how specific should EU policies toward Russia be, or should Russia be put on the same ground as its neighbors?

The ED initiative seems to sharpen this debate due to a tendency of selectively offering partnership arrangements to the eastern countries. There exists a widespread feeling in Russia that Poland is reluctant to accept the common rules of the game and is eager to distinguish Ukraine (and potentially Moldova and Belarus) from other eastern neighbors, which transfers the whole issue to the domain of power politics.

## **Conclusion**

Russia seems to have at its disposal a certain menu of choices as related to the New-Old Europe debate. The first option would be to reinterpret a New Europe as a Wider Europe, a move supposedly based on accepting the New Regionalism vocabulary of transborder networking. This would mean that Old Europe is considered irrelevant and is to be left behind. The Old Europe in this interpretation is attributed to the past and doomed to dismantlement.

The second option that Russia is considering is to stay above polarizing opposites. It could mean taking a wait-and-see stance resembling the Russian version of Euro-skepticism. Its gist would be to declare both EU and NATO enlargement not problematic under the premise that the bigger the unions are, the less manageable they become. This posture might also be grounded in Russia's sense of self-sufficiency as an autonomous pole of gravitation in Eurasia.

The third option would be to get involved in the Old-New Europe debate by taking sides (i.e. through prioritizing Russia's relations with either part of this dichotomy). Russia's pro-U.S. stand would certainly bring it closer to supporting the New Europe concept, while the preponderance of anti-U.S. attitudes could possibly lead Russia to Old Europe. Should Russia opt in favor of the latter option, this move could most likely be facilitated by equating the Old Europe with true Europe, while the New Europe is to be located in the category of false Europe. The New Europe option could be attained by finding common ground with the ED initiative, which is the first political product of the New Europe.

The fourth option would be to ignore the EU, which would be conducive to transcending the Old-New Europe debate. One pathway under this scenario means viewing Russia as the Real Europe (a rhetoric that might work basically for domestic consumption) or—in a less radical variant meant for an international audience—as a part of Proper Europe, along with Ukraine and Belarus. At any rate, Russia will have to either try to find its own version of the New and Old Europe, or to substitute this dichotomy with other binaries better tailored to the Russian understanding of itself.