

Western Strategy towards Russia

Central and Eastern Europe's approach

The European Union is situated next to a complicated neighbourhood. Russia has been and will remain, for many years to come, the biggest threat to the geopolitical security of the EU. This threat is mainly felt in Central and Eastern Europe and the Eastern Partnership countries; however, it reaches the entire transatlantic community, too [1].

The EU needs to have a long-term strategy for relations with Russia without having any illusion that in the near future Russia, under Putin's rule, may become a non-aggressive democratic state that abides by the European standards. The EU's strategy for relations with Russia must, first and foremost, be geared towards efforts aimed at assisting a post-Putin Russia to transform into a non-aggressive democratic country that follows European standards. This idea is getting increasingly more attention in Central and Eastern Europe [2, 3], but the EU and the West at large still lack a strategy for relations with Russia.

The strategy should also be clear on this - since efforts to pursue contacts or better relations between Putin's Russia and the EU or individual Member States are hopeless and even harmful, because they only delay the prospect of Russia's transformation into a pro-European country. Any efforts to return to 'business as usual', 'reset' with Russia or questioning of continuation of sanctions regime would seriously hurt unity of the EU in reaction to continued Russian aggression towards Ukraine, worsening human rights situation in Russia, attacks on Russian citizens abroad, interference in democratic processes in the West, cyber attacks, use of weaponised information and disinformation, etc. Sanctions regime must continue, and if need be, further strengthened. The effect of sanctions would be even bigger if they are part of wider longer-term strategy, whose ultimate goal is to help Russia to transform into a European country.

The analysis of the centuries-long history of Western Europe, as compared with that of Russia, suggests that Russia's becoming a European country is an inevitable historical process; however, it is one that will take a very long time.

This process should also represent the EU's principal interest in geopolitical security. Furthermore, Russia's transformation into a pro-European state has to be a general objective of the Russian people and the whole Western world, including Central and Eastern Europe, as this is the only way to guarantee peace and good relations between neighbours across the European continent.

Central and Eastern Europe on its own is unable to exert influence over Russia's development, but what we can do is get engaged in shaping Western policies towards Russia, provided that we know what kind of Western policy we want and seek.

Until now, our vision of such policy has been limited to continued Western sanctions against Russia and voicing of our understandable defence need for NATO's enhanced capabilities in our region in order to deter Russia. After all, that was all that we asked the West in our discussions on the aggressive Russia under Putin's rule.

Now we start to see that the two instruments alone are no longer sufficient. *The deterrence strategy has to be complimented by a long-term Western strategy towards Russia, which would help strengthen the prospect of a pro-European Russia.* And we do have an opportunity and a responsibility to assist the West with designing and implementing a strategy of the kind.

Why keeping the Western sanctions regime is crucial but only one part of the strategy, and why it is important to believe in the prospect of Russia's European transformation in future?

Russia is a post-imperial state whose public and the political elite, just like in other countries of the kind, suffers from huge psychological and behavioural problems developed as a result of the country's post-imperialistic complexes. This has led to the current aggressive behaviour of the ruling regime in Russia, which causes great suffering to the neighbouring countries.

This is why we need to focus on not only the ways to defend ourselves against Russia's aggressiveness, but also find intelligent means to assist it in overcoming its post-imperialistic complexes and transforming into a democratic country.

It is time for the West to develop a policy on Russia that is longer-term, proactive and based on a clear and overarching concept. The West had a similar approach during the Cold War when it pursued a long-term strategy of containing Russia, originating with George Kennan's Long Telegram, the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan. This strategy helped to create the EU and NATO, thereby resolving the historical conflict between Germany and France.

However, the transatlantic community continues to struggle with the second tectonic conflict on the European continent, that involving Russia and the rest of Europe.

While the post-imperial, kleptocratic and aggressive Russia under Putin is the cause of this conflict, it is up to the West to propose a long-term strategy to resolve this conflict. This strategy must be of the same scale and as systematic as the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan and the containment strategy were. The problem of Russia has been and continues to be as significant in the early 21st century as it was in the late 20th century. The changing nature of the problem requires new instruments to address it and revolves around several important elements.

The greatest geopolitical problem of Central and Eastern Europe lies in the fact that everyone in the West, the EU included, does not have a long-term strategy for supporting Russia's transformation.

It sometimes seems that only a single strategy exists and dominates in the largest Western capitals, and that is to forget Putin's aggressiveness as soon as possible and return to 'dialogue with Putin' [4]. This Western posture takes us nowhere. It does not assist Russia's transformation. On the contrary, it only undermines it. Maintaining a so-called dialogue with Putin is a hopeless strategy of the West, leading them to a geopolitical dead end – a strategy which, unfortunately, is still popular in some of the biggest Western capitals.

In the absence of a long-term Western strategy towards Russia, we keep noticing a number of momentary improvisations by Western leadership (which, by the way, Putin is capable of using very skilfully). Consider, for instance, the cases of some Western leaders calling, all of a

sudden, for dialogue with Putin and declaring that Russia – even under Putin’s leadership – is a pro-European country.

Without doing much and without changing his behaviour, but by taking advantage of this kind of momentary activeness by some Western leaders, Putin is aiming for his biggest goal yet, i.e. to finally break the isolation by the West, just like he did it at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

Hence, Putin’s strategy towards the West has been, and remains, unchanging. He is focused on making sure that the West continue to lack a long-term strategy towards Russia while staying satisfied with various momentary initiatives, such as pursuing a dialogue, a reset policy or partnership ideas.

Given the circumstances, what should be the objective of politicians from Central and Eastern Europe, who are best positioned to understand the threats posed by Putin’s regime?

We are convinced that now is the right time to make use of this period and of different formats in the West to make sure that it brings about not only set of random one-off initiatives, but also raises primarily the issue of a long-term Western strategy towards Russia. As part of Central and Eastern Europe, we should be the first to do so, for very good reasons, we are the ones who are mostly concerned about our geopolitical security on the European continent, we are the biggest allies of Ukraine in its fight against Russia’s aggression, and we are the most sensitive to Putin’s manoeuvres among the EU and NATO member countries.

The very discussion on a Western strategy towards Russia, basically, features two essentially different paradigms, which tacitly dominate the entire Western approach towards Russia. Some believe that some day Russia will return on the path of democratic development. That is why they need an intelligent and wise long-term strategy of the West to assist Russia in an uneasy transformation. Others yet think that it is hopeless to expect a democratic Russia. They maintain that Russia presents a ‘special case’ where it will never be capable of becoming a democracy and the West should simply deal with it and learn how to live in the neighbourhood of a wild and nuclear Russia, without entertaining any expectations that it will one day become a more normal state of European character. Having no faith in Russia’s capability to transform, the proponents of the latter approach tend to get adjusted to the neighbourhood of the current Russia by searching for dialogue with the leaders of the regime.

It is worth noting that Putin is making deliberate efforts to intimidate the West with his unpredictability and aggressiveness in order to, basically, convince the West that only the second of the two mentioned scenarios of Russia’s development is realistic. Once the West ceases to believe in the prospect of a democratic Russia, the authoritarian regime of the Kremlin will feel much safer, because in that case the West would only be left with the option of coexisting with the authoritarian Russia and pursuing ‘dialogue with Putin’. This would eventually consolidate Putin’s long-sought victory against the West and against the future of a democratic Russia.

We are convinced that the second scenario, albeit convenient for Putin and some of his friends in the West, is misleading and obsolete. All empires on the European continent are destined to fail. While some of them have already walked that painful path, Russia, however, remains the last country on the European continent to continue on that difficult road of collapsing empires.

Russia *can* be assisted, but this requires a clear strategy. This is our primary and fundamental assumption that the negotiations on a long-term Western strategy towards Russia should rest upon.

What should be the objective of the long-term Western strategy towards Russia?

First, we need to really help Russia return to the path of democratic European development. This goal can be achieved through a clear long-term strategy of the West and its consistent implementation rather than by pursuing a so-called dialogue with Putin or appeasing him. With the strategy in place, we should expect to see real change in Russia no sooner than the end of Putin's rule, while at the same time being aware that it will probably take several decades to see the results of this kind of strategy.

This means that not only Central and Eastern Europe, but also Berlin, Paris, Brussels, Washington and other major Western capitals and organisations, including the EU, NATO and the Council of Europe, need to take ownership of the said strategy. Therefore, we should primarily aim at a very clear strategic result, i.e. making the great West owners of the said strategy.

What should the long-term strategy of the West consist of?

We envisage this strategy as consisting of three major parts, namely:

- 1) deterrence;**
- 2) containment;**
- 3) transformation.**

I. A **deterrence strategy** has a clear and well-established objective of deterring Russia's military threat. Securing military presence of NATO member countries, particularly that of the US, in our region and further strengthening it account for a vital instrument of the deterrence strategy. The US Administration's National Security Strategy, published in 2017, identified Russia and China as major threats to the US national security. It would be good if the EU was likewise capable of having a clear security strategy of its own where it would identify Russia as a threat to not only the US but also the EU. This would make it much easier to explain why EU Member States must allocate 2 % of their GDP for defence and what the EU's own defence capabilities may or may not be needed for. This would ultimately make deterrence of Russia a genuine objective of the EU's security policy.

Sanction regime, which was introduced by the West as a reaction to Russia's aggression to Ukraine, must continue, unless Russia fully implements the Minsk agreements and return illegally annexed Crimea back to Ukraine. Any effort to weaken this sanction regime will be sending a wrong signal to Moscow - that the West is losing unity, therefore, is weak. This, in turn, will only further induce aggressiveness of the Putins policies. Therefore, any aggressive action of Putin's Russia must be met with decisive sanctions mechanism. The West must make clear that current sanctions is not the maximum, indeed, they may be softened if Russia implements its commitments, but equally, they can be further expanded, if Russia continues blatant violations of international law and norms.

Sanctions should entail asset freezes and visa bans with regard to gross human right violations, massive money laundering and corruption inside Russia. Such Global Magnitsky Act type sanctions mechanism has already been adopted not only by US but also in a number of countries in Europe. It would be a very important tool to at least partially fight impunity, protect human rights defenders. Such mechanism should become part of the EU legislation.

The West should also help to strengthen defence capabilities in neighbouring countries, which seek trans-atlantic integration.

II. A **containment strategy** is necessary for the purpose of effectively countering Russia's hybrid threats by preventing it from influencing the sentiments of our citizens, occupying the hearts and minds of our people, and affecting the outcome of elections and activities of political parties in foreign countries. The challenges are well known to all. The most effective ways to respond to them is, perhaps, something that we may be less aware of. It is nevertheless clear that NATO should be much more active in this field. It must have centralised capabilities which would primarily assist with tracing dirty political money, including movement of the Kremlin's finances used for hybrid aggression, and which would help individual countries halt such efforts by Russia. This would definitely contribute to containing Russia's hybrid influence, particularly in the areas where national capabilities are limited, such as following the movement of the financial flows of the Kremlin's oligarchs through different offshore accounts.

Clear and coordinated response to propaganda and efforts to distort truth, also deny historic facts, is also important. This is a part of active hybrid measures actively disseminated by bots, and troll factories by using social media. EU and NATO should evaluate such Russian media as RT and Sputnik for what they truly are - channels for blunt lies and disinformation, and not usual media.

During last decade, EU and NATO realised that energy dependency and monopolies are used by Putin's Russia for purposes of exerting political pressure on EU and NATO members, and this is a challenge which should be addressed by a joint effort. The West should continue to definitely eradicate dependency on Russian energy resources and supply, not implement new projects which increase this dependency. It is important to evaluate also energy projects being developed in the EU and NATO neighbourhood, as they are not only for ensuring income, but also for creating new points of tension or even physical threat, as for example in the case of the Astravets NPP.

III. A **strategy of transformation** refers to our thinking about not only the ways to defend ourselves from Russian threats, but also the means to assist Russia's transformation into a European country. A transformation of this kind is the only way to no longer be situated next to a threat posed by the Russia of today. The transformation will not happen overnight or even in a year or two. It is, however, necessary and doable. While the future of Russia is for Russians to determine, the West can help in that. This will nevertheless require an appropriate long-term Western strategy towards Russia.

So far, development of the transformation strategy has received very little attention in the West. This is where the EU's joint efforts should be currently focused on.

The underlying idea behind the transformation strategy is simple. Basically, there are two things that can assist the people of Russia in seeking, on their own, a transformation of their country, namely:

- 1) a 'success belt' along the Russian border (including Ukraine, in particular) to set a good example for Russians;
- 2) a clear message of the West to the people of Russia on how the future relations between the West and Russia could look like had Russia finally returned to the path of democratic pro-European development.

The example of the 'success belt' and Russia's transformation

One should not underestimate the impact of Russia having successful, democratic, and market-oriented neighbours along its borders. If they can succeed, Russia can too.

Therefore, one of our current major goals should be having a clear Western strategy on ways to build a 'success belt' along the Russian border (starting from Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova). Here in Central and Eastern Europe, we have created a success story by consistently implementing reforms and pursuing integration into the EU and NATO while, at the same time, the West kept opening the doors for us wider and wider. Unfortunately, the West are still not capable of promising the same kind of integration for Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia.

Our strategic goal should thus be very clear. We should aim for a long-term Western strategy towards Russia that would focus beyond helping Central and Eastern Europe to defend itself against Putin's aggressive Russia today, tomorrow and over the next decade. The strategy should also provide for immediate financial and political investment by the West into building a 'success belt' along the Russian border, in order to deliver Russia's positive transformation into a pro-European country in the long term.

The prospect of a transformed Russia can be relished only after Russia itself bids farewell to the aggressive Russia of Putin.

However, in order to see this happen in the long-term even in the post-Putin Russia, the West should and must act effectively and immediately by investing their political and financial resources into building a 'success belt' along the Russian border, starting with support for the economic success of and European perspective for Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia.

What Lithuania offered back in 2017 with its Marshall Plan for Ukraine (an initiative later renamed the European Plan for Ukraine) [5, 6] has been intended to kick-start the implementation of this strategy by mobilising the West to pursue concrete actions.

Ukraine's success is needed not only for preventing the return of the imperial Russia to the Ukrainian land, but also for the successful pro-European Ukraine to pass its success story on to ordinary citizens of Russia.

This is why it is the Western 'weapon' posing the greatest danger to the Kremlin's regime and feared most by Putin. Putin's strategic goal in Ukraine is to prevent the development of a successful state. That is why the West should do their utmost to thwart Putin's strategy towards Ukraine.

The success of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova is what the West can make happen, and it is currently the only instrument available for the West to help Russia transform into a pro-European country.

Therefore, an initiative capable of assisting the countries in becoming successful, which can relatively be referred to as a Marshall Plan for the Eastern Partnership, is the most important Western geopolitical instrument which the West has to put into effect with all its political and financial might and which can help the West resolve the tectonic conflict (the last of its kind on the continental Europe) between the authoritarian Russia and the democratic Europe.

The political might of the EU in creating success stories in its neighbourhood has always relied on its geopolitical soft power of offering the prospect of integration to the neighbouring countries. This has been best demonstrated by the successful experience of Central and Eastern Europe following the fall of the Berlin Wall, proving that this level of success could have only been achieved by welcoming the integration of those countries into the EU.

The fact that the EU is still incapable of offering a clear prospect of integration to the most advanced of the Eastern Partnership countries (Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova) does not mean that it cannot make right now any serious moves, clearly showing that the EU has been taking and will continue to take serious strategic steps forward once the Eastern Partnership countries make solid progress on the path of integration.

The way to do this is obvious. The EU has to modify strategically the Eastern Partnership and urgently take the initiative to draft and start implementing a new flagship instrument we dubbed the Trio Strategy 2030, which would be dedicated to the most advanced trio of the Eastern Partnership countries, namely, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. We have outlined the main elements of this strategy in a dedicated non-paper on Our Strategy on the Future of Eastern Partnership [7]. Hence, the key elements include:

- a) promotion of a differentiated approach of the Eastern Partnership by singling out the trio of associated partners and offering them new EU policy instruments;
- b) establishment of a coalition of like-minded EU Member States that are interested in the success of the Eastern Partnership, as was the case with the Berlin Process for the integration of the Western Balkans;
- c) implementation of the EU's new practical instruments to accelerate the integration and economic success of the trio.

Western dialogue with ordinary citizens of Russia rather than with Putin

The West need to change the interlocutor and the content in their dialogue with Russia. The dialogue with Putin is counterproductive, because Putin is not going to change and any overzealous Western attempts to seek dialogue with him will be further regarded as a manifestation of Western weakness. Any signs of Western weakness provoke Putin into behaving even more aggressively.

As regards strategic issues and Russia's future, instead of directly talking with Putin, the West must indirectly engage with a pro-European Russia of the future, which does not exist yet but may emerge after the end of Putin's era. The West need a strategy that would demonstrate the potential of relations with a post-imperial and non-aggressive Russia (which *is* going to happen one day!) and the prospect of a pro-European Russia by already presenting possible models of integration of a pro-European Russia into the Western structures, as proposed by renowned experts [8-10].

This could include a wide spectrum of promising future relations, including, among others, a visa waiver, a customs union, and a free trade and association agreement with the EU. This would be a kind of a Marshall Plan for Russia, which could even now be expressly presented in the Western strategy for relations with Russia. Finally, this would help ordinary Russians and the Russian elite unconnected with Putin's kleptocratic regime to understand what they are losing today because of the aggressive behaviour of the regime and what they would win with a pro-European Russia (after Putin) evolving in the long term.

All in all, this is how a Western strategy towards Russia could look like. To make it happen, the West should have more faith in Russia's capability to transform one day and embark on the path of democratic European development. Likewise, they should trust in their own potential to assist Russia on this uneasy path of transformation through a long-term strategy of support and its consistent implementation. Even if it takes several long decades for Russia to transform and even if a post-Putin Russia remains geopolitically aggressive towards the EU and the West

at large for many years to come [11], it is imperative for the latter to come up of and pursue right away a far more unifying and long-term strategy that would help to deter Russia's aggressiveness, prevent Russian hybrid attacks and, eventually, assist Russia's transformation.

Central and Eastern Europe should take the lead in forming a coalition of supporters of the Western strategy towards Russia. Naturally, the first partners could include our immediate neighbours, namely, the Scandinavian countries, Germany, and the UK, which has lately had a few words to say about Putin's Russia. Willing to get involved in the development of the outlined Western strategy towards Russia, the Eastern Partnership countries that have been mostly affected by Russia's aggressive expansionist behaviour, namely, Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, could also become active participants of the coalition.

However, in order to achieve the ambition of helping the appropriate Western strategy towards Russia see the daylight, Central and Eastern European countries themselves, first of all, have to nurture this ambition. This requires an overwhelming consensus among the politicians of these countries. The Members of the European Parliament elected in these countries could be the effective catalysts of change in the search for an ambitious pact of this kind. Then, an implementation plan and concrete actions must follow. This was also true when back in the day Central and Eastern Europe joined efforts to become members of NATO and formed the Vilnius 10 group to further their cause. This ultimately led us to the successful integration of our region.

It is time we replicate this practice.

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