

The Courage to Rethink the Dualistic Structures of Wider Europe

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Let us for a minute put aside our opinions about the current regime in Moscow and the foreign policy of today's Russia. This is not to say that they are unimportant. Recent protests in several Russian cities have shown how much the regime matters and Russia's military role in Syria has demonstrated the impact of its foreign policy choices. But still, let us forget just for a moment what we think about the policies of the Putin regime and perform a mental exercise which we practice far too little in international politics these days: contemplate longer term choices in order to avoid that short term, ad hoc decisions determine long term outcomes. Let me put this more bluntly: without a long term vision and a thorough rethink of the Wider Europe structures, relations between the EU and Russia are doomed to run from crisis to crisis.

When serving as Russian foreign minister in the 1990s, Yevgeny Primakov warned that the eastern enlargement of NATO would inevitably lead to a deterioration of the geopolitical situation. He stated: 'Obviously I do not believe that NATO will attack us. However, on a hypothetical level a situation might emerge in which we will be forced to act in a way which is not in our best interest.' Also President Yeltsin warned back in 1995: 'When NATO approaches the borders of the Russian Federation, you can say that there will be two military blocks, and this will be a restoration of what we already had.' This suggests that the confrontation between Russia and 'the West' (a Cold War term in itself) has long been foretold. Deep concerns about how NATO enlargement would foster polarisation definitely predate Putin's presidency. After the collapse of communism in central and eastern Europe, the Euro-Atlantic complex around the EU and NATO was extended eastwards without a clear vision for Russia's place and role within these new European structures. By doing so, we have reintroduced exactly what we got rid of when the Cold War ended: two Europes with exclusive allegiances. Countries in between are forced to make choices, turning 'West' or siding with Moscow.

The challenge is thus to rethink the Wider Europe structures at times when this sounds counter intuitive. We missed the momentum for doing so in the 1990s, on various occasions, when trust levels were high. NATO and EU enlargement have happened, but it is not too late to reflect on one crucial challenge: how can we avoid that countries have to make *exclusive* choices, making them side only with Brussels or only with Moscow? One scenario is to conceive of Wider European structures as **double concentric circles**¹. The idea of concentric circles dates back to the 1990s. It referred to different degrees of European integration, with stronger forms of integration at the core and looser forms of cooperation towards the periphery. With *double* concentric circles I refer to similar circles of stronger and weaker forms of cooperation, but then both around Moscow and around Brussels (Euro-Atlantic Community). In the middle, the outer circles overlap and make it possible for countries in between to collaborate with both Russia and the EU instead of making exclusive choices. If we turn back the clock, under this scenario, Kyiv would not have had to make a hard choice in 2013 between joining the Eurasian Custom Union (ECU – today the Eurasian Economic Union) with Russia and signing an Association Agreement with the EU. A combination of both had been impossible as free trade arrangements with the EU were incompatible with the commitment to a Common External Tariff at the heart of a customs union. Today's argument that the Association Agreements were not meant to be geopolitical projects is off point. The problem is exactly that in a binary Europe, any choice ultimately gets perceived as a geopolitical choice, not one of economic integration. Suspicious of the

¹ The idea of double concentric circles was presented in a policy report '[EU-Russia Relations. Which Way Forward?](#)', written by four Jean Monnet Chairs.

intentions of their counterpart, the EU and Russia started observing each other's behaviour in the overlapping neighbourhood in a negative way, seeing geopolitical motivations, even if there were none. This is how the choice of Ukraine to join a form of economic cooperation ultimately got perceived as a crucial geopolitical battle and could so easily spiral out of control.

Self-evidently the challenges are enormous. What the double concentric circles minimally require is for the EU and Russia to maintain the longer term aspiration to create a free trade area from Lisbon to Vladivostok, so that countries can have both free trade arrangements and membership in a customs union. What this requires, is to move away from closed military alliances and to think of a functional collective security system in Wider Europe. Clearly NATO membership of countries like Ukraine would not be a good idea in this light. But this should not mean *Finlandisation*. The latter term is a Cold War term that presupposes a bipolarisation of relations. What is needed is exactly the opposite: a smooth overflow of different forms of European cooperation, which do not exclude each other, but where one form of cooperation benefits the other.

But we are still performing only a mental exercise. Many obstacles stand in the way, from mutual sanctions to the war in eastern Ukraine. After the annexation of Crimea any step forward will inevitably require a firm recommitment to the European border regime and a long stepwise process of trust building. There is little or no reason for optimism at this stage. Yet, we need the courage to rethink European structures in the longer term. Not to justify what has happened, but to develop policies which *a/so* consider long term visions. Ultimately, the choice will be between living with continuous instability and polarisation in Europe or finding imperfect ways to overcome this polarisation and to create stable forms of peace.