EU-Russia Relations in the Post-Soviet Space

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Significance of the document: a view from Russia

The Global Strategy for the European Union «Shared Vision, Common Action: a Stronger Europe» replaced the first 2003 Security Strategy of the EU «A Secure Europe in a Better World». Discussions about revising the general foreign policy platform of the Union were continuous, but in December 2008, even in the situation of financial and economic crisis and war in Georgia, the EU Council adopted only few amendments to 2003 Strategy (Report on Implementation of the European Security Strategy «Providing Security in a Changing World»). The «Arab Spring» compelled the EU to reconsider approaches to the neighborhood policy both in the South and in the East, while leaving intact the formal framework of the Security Strategy.

This testifies to two important circumstances. Firstly, EUGS came as a response to the particularly significant challenges, which necessitated a truly substantive revision of the foreign policy concept and agenda of the EU. Obviously, the turning point, after which the former EU strategy became meaningless, was the Ukrainian crisis of European security (which the EU assumes to be essentially «Russian»). Secondly, in spite of the fundamental shifts, the new Strategy does not necessarily mean a new policy. Technocratic capacity of the EU to work out general conceptual framework of «political unity» is in contrast with the (in)ability of the EU countries to implement common agreements. The long life of 2003 Strategy despite the cardinal transformations of both international environment and the EU itself, as well as its partners, had inherently devalued the document.

On the one hand, EUGS should be viewed with utmost seriousness as an attempt of the EU to formulate its political-diplomatic response to the changed circumstances and modern challenges to its security and relations with external players and partners. On the other hand, this is a political document, which defines gener-
ic framework of the European unity rather than a future-oriented European policy, including its stance towards Russia and the post-Soviet space.

Therefore, it is important for Moscow not to dissociate itself from the document, which includes a number of evaluations and provisions that it can find unpleasant, but to engage in a dialogue with the EU and its member states. GS underlines: «A fragile world calls for a more confident and responsible European Union, it calls for an outward- and forward-looking European foreign and security policy»1. Russia should accentuate the fact that any global strategy is unviable without global partners. Russia objectively continues to be such a partner for the European Union. The five EU Guiding Principles towards Russia (approved by the EU Council on March 14, 2016)2 do not in any way provide clear guidelines for the application of the EU Eastern policy. The focus should be on mutual relations rather than (pre)conditions. Until then, the EU «fundamental package» is hardly acceptable for Moscow.

The inadequate reflection of the «Russian factor» in the EU Global Strategy is quite obvious. Relations with Russia are dealt with only in the paragraph «European Security». Russia is featured exclusively in the negative context as a repository of threats to peace and stability in Europe. Russia is missing in other parts of GS, which is in contrast with its role in the world and understanding of its strategic significance by the EU itself («Managing the relationship with Russia represents a key strategic challenge»)3. In the paragraph «Partnership» GS mentions the UN and its specialized agencies, the USA, NATO, «regional organizations and strategic partners in Asia, Africa and both Americas who share our stand», ASEAN, G20, as well as civil society and private sector. Likewise, no place was found for Russia in other sections, unlike, for example, «a peaceful and prosperous Mediterranean, Middle East and Africa», «a solid transatlantic partnership» or «a direct connection between European prosperity and Asian security».

Therefore, EUGS reaffirms that Russia is no longer seen in Brussels as the EU strategic partner and that it is a country, with which it is impossible to build enhanced cooperation on the basis of mutual interest. The «strategic goal» of this sort of relations is geared to maintenance of the status quo in the context of pro-


2 Foreign Affairs Council, 14/03/2016.  

tracted crisis and zero sum game. This is exactly why Brussels cannot answer the question who will set the agenda for selective engagement instead of offering Moscow its minimal list of tentative areas of «cross-interests».

Such an approach a priori puts in conflict any motivation and interests of the EU and Russia in the post-Soviet space. Looking at EUGS, Moscow simply does not see its own place in this space. The second of the five Guiding principles towards Russia (Strengthened relations with the EU’s Eastern partners and other neighbors, including in Central Asia) can be perceived by Moscow not just as contradicting with its interests, but as being bluntly anti-Russian. Such an approach of the EU in the situation of crisis in its relations with Russia cannot be seen as anything else but a consolidation of the Western course to contain «aggressive and revisionist» Russia and particularly in Russia’s priority area of Eurasian integration.

Global Strategy and the EU Eastern Policy

Although EUGS acknowledges the «existential crisis, within and beyond the European Union», it does not reflect the fact that the crisis of the European security system and that of Russia-EU relations stems from the exacerbation of fundamental contradictions between the East and the West, which failed to solve the dilemma of harmonization of the «two Europes» under the «united and indivisible common European space».

The Ukrainian crisis of European security is defined by EUGS as a «violation of international law by Russia» in connection to the «annexation of the Crimea» and «destabilization of Eastern Ukraine» but is not considered to be a systemic conflict of interests. The EU proceeds with a faulty position that substantial changes in its relations with Russia are subject to complete fulfillment of Minsk Agreements. Moscow denies its being a party to the conflict and maintains that the conflict is instigated by the Euro-Atlantic expansion to the East disregarding Russia’s interests in the post-Soviet space.

EUGS is not aimed at a serious review of EU Eastern policy and at the resolution of the harmful geopolitical conflict, but, instead, at the tactical political and diplomatic adaptation to the changing security environment. There is no «consensus inside the EU on the type of European order that may gain ground after the crisis
is undone, and there are obvious and serious differences between member states on this issue»

Given the EU’s approach and Russia’s attitude to it, and in the situation of systemic crisis in Europe, the conflict of interests in the contested neighborhood is bound to be reproduced. Russia is no longer a strategic partner for the EU, but still is recognized as a strategic player. However, the interests of this strategic player that do not comply with the EU are not recognized. EUGS disregards evident and pragmatic recommendations, for example: «the EU’s Eastern Partnership policy would need to consider the Russian factor more explicitly, and cater for Russia’s sensitivities better to make the EaP successful» (Gunnar Wiegand and Evelina Schulz, 2015)

The EU undertakes a commitment that «in a more contested world, the EU will be guided by a strong sense of responsibility», while realigning its relations with the partners to the East and to the South from its borders. But it is planning to «work with core partners, like-minded countries and regional groupings». This interpretation of «European responsibility» only increases Russia’s concerns about the EU’s ambitions and actions in the post-Soviet space, including through targeted EaP.

In fact, Russia is offered once again to agree with the logic that the space of «stability and prosperity» around the EU should be further expanded. However, during six years before the Ukrainian crisis, the EU and Russia proved unable to negotiate a new basic agreement; this explicitly shows that their political and economic interests differed substantially and came into collision in the CIS territory. Moreover, there is a clear understanding in the EU of the reason why Russia could not become part of the Eastern Partnership as one another EU-centric model. In spite of that, the EU does not consider any other options (for example, convergence between «two integrations»).

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1 Leonard M. A vision for the EU’s new foreign policy strategy. Commentary. – 24th April, 2015. (http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_a_vision_for_the_eus_new_foreign_policy_strategy3006)

Neither the Ukrainian crisis, nor the establishment of the EEU on 1 January 2015, have affected the egocentric integration philosophy of the EU: «To achieve possible economic integration with Russia, a very similar method as the one already pursued with EaP partners should be used, since Russia seems to aim at very similar policy goals as the EU in terms of economic integration».¹ The field of interaction even in the selective format relying on «cross-interests» will be quite limited due to the geopolitical competition. It is not surprising that EUGS looks at its Eastern policy through the prism of political containment of Russia: «We will strengthen the EU, enhance the resilience of our Eastern neighbors, and uphold their right to determine freely their approach towards the EU». In reality, «the possibility of selective engagement with Russia on issues of interest to the EU» will be a predominantly forced engagement in the areas of conflicting interests – not in the space of common neighborhood, but in the disputed space in-between the «two integrations».

At the same time, the text of EUGS also harbors an intrinsic contradiction. Until recently, it had been stated that the essence of the EU strategy lied in the ambition to change others by exporting its model.² But now the EU seems to revise this formula: «We will not strive to export our model, but rather seek reciprocal inspiration from different regional experiences». A question arises: is it a major change of strategy, and what could become the essence of a different political-economic method? Still, it seems that this novelty does not change the fundamentals. It just calibrates «export» ambitions according to the perceived transformation potential of the focus countries.

Already the «Arab Spring» forced the EU to shift the emphasis – from providing stability to the support of democracy in the neighborhood countries (conditioned by the principle «more for more»). In fact, these changes did not affect the EaP. In the context of current European crisis the question is: to what extent this conditionality can be applied to Eastern partners. EUGS maintains that Tunisia and Georgia, «whose success as prosperous, peaceful and stable democracies» resulted from their Euro-orientation, «would reverberate across their respective regions». Yet, the citizens of these countries can hardly agree with this assessment.

¹ Wiegand G., Schulz E. – P. 349.
Unsuccessful examples of the EU neighborhood policy are not mentioned in EUGS, not even the previous EaP «success story» – Moldova.

Counter to the thesis about the attractiveness of the European Union and the success of its integrational-democratic mission it is becoming more and more apparent that the updated approach to partnerships is not effective neither in the South nor in the East. There is no consolidation of stability (through pro-European reforms), nor success in democratic reforms (in conditions of an increasing instability). Brussels acknowledges the existential crisis, which is unquestionable against the background of Brexit, and yet is making a paradoxical statement: «Our Union has enabled citizens to enjoy unprecedented security, democracy and prosperity». What does this «unprecedented level» consist of? Such statements can only increase lack of confidence in Brussels’s policy and strengthen skepticism among the EU’s Eastern partners.

EUGS gives no answer to the dilemma of «stability – democracy» and proclaims «state and societal resilience to our East («stretching into Central Asia») and South», as its external priority. Determination to obtain «sustainability» as a provisional symbiosis between stability and democracy is a technocratic formula but not a practical guideline. The responsibility for potential «instability» is shifted outward – onto the focus countries and external destabilizing factors. Apparently, according to Brussels’s logic, the EU Eastern policy a priori offers «stability and prosperity» and cannot, due to its orientation to sustainable development of partners, produce «instability» either outside or inside the EU.

This technocratic design actually testifies to the inability of the European Union to respond to current internal and external crisis by the traditional methods of soft expansion. The EU is losing its attractiveness inside the Union (especially after Brexit) and becoming increasingly unappealing for the neighborhood. Euroskepticism is a reflection of the dangerous processes of internal socio-political erosion of the edifice of European integration.

Eastern partners of the European Union agreed to the rules of the game according to the «more for more» principle but were not prepared for «less». They see the EU political method not as a framework for promoting mutual relations, but as a «not-too-soft» European stick instead of expected carrots given for the «pro-European» reforms. Many of the EaP focus countries are disappointed with its results. They continue to strive for European attention and resources but not for the «European standards».
On the other hand, explicit failures and increasing difficulties of the neighborhood policy, as well as the drastically changed priorities and practical agenda of the CFSDP reduce the desire and ability of the EU to go ahead with spreading the European integration and normative order to the East. Besides, the EU’s interests are apparently shifting beyond the EaP – towards Central Asia. The EU policy of a «soft stick» and a «hard carrot» is losing its efficacy in the post-Soviet space and being transformed into a «principled pragmatism».

«Principled Pragmatism»: With Whom Shall Moscow Talk and What About?

The Global Strategy acknowledges the need for going back to the targeted pragmatic policy in the neighborhood space: «Principled pragmatism will guide our external actions in the years ahead». With this regard, the EU Neighborhood policy and the EaP seem to lose strategic pivot. This, in turn, deprives the EU Eastern partners of the hope to achieve European integration.

The relocation of Eastern policy into the «pragmatic track» is hindered by the rigid political framework of the EU within its set of five Guiding principles, as well as in EUGS. There is no answer to the question about the way to build relations in a deadlocked situation when they are conditioned by fulfillment of Minsk Agreements. How does the EU expect to «strengthen relations with the Eastern partners of the EU and other neighbors, in particular in Central Asia» (the second principle) without cooperation with Russia? It is noteworthy that the forth principle of «selective engagement» with Russia does not cover cooperation in the post-Soviet space. Moscow will be particularly sensitive to the increased EU’s interests toward Central Asia, where Euro-Atlantic activities in the context of progressing confrontation between Russia and the West will be seen by Russia as a threat to its national security.

Russian opposition to the Eastern activity of the EU will increase. Sanctions, as well as the fall in energy prices, are not seen by Moscow as temporary. The content of the formula «business as usual is impossible» has changed: if previously it was the Western political pressure against Russia, now it is taken as a fact, a stimulus for political planning and decision-making. For Moscow, adaptation to the broken relations with the EU/NATO is over; there is a strategic drift towards Eurasian partners and projects, including within EEU, CSTO, SCO, BRICS, etc. In the conditions of confrontation with the West, Moscow as the key transregional player will advance its interests without orientation to the cooperative model of «common spaces».
EUGS clearly pinpoints a number of new goals, which are changing the EU’s image and increasing Moscow’s sensitivity to its Eastern policy. There is a clear intention of the EU to strengthen its defense dimension: «the idea that Europe is an exclusively ‘civilian power’ does not do justice to reality, […] For Europe, soft and hard power go hand in hand». For this reason, the new ambitions of «strategic autonomy» are perceived by Moscow in the context of the ongoing conflict of interests, notably in the post-Soviet space, although in the past the EU’s S&D dimension was not seen as damaging to Russia.

For instance, there is a new twist in the calls by Kishinev to replace the current peacekeeping mission in Moldova/Transnistria with Russia’s participation by an international mission, preferably under the EU mandate. The escalating conflict between Russia and the EU over Syria makes one explore this as a template in the post-Soviet space (Ukraine, Nagorno-Karabakh, Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia). The ability of Russia and the EU to facilitate the settlement of protracted conflicts within the framework of joint negotiating formats has been declining.

The parameters of strategic autonomy of the EU, which Moscow always supported in the past, have changed now. After the signing of the Joint NATO-EU Declaration at the Warsaw Summit on 8-9 July 2016, the European Union is actually bound by political and operative guidelines of NATO. The Declaration provides for joint response to the «unprecedented challenges» to cyber security and to hybrid threats, operative interaction at sea, consolidation of collective defense and interoperability, coordination of military exercises, including hybrid scenarios. Hence, the new Strategy of the EU, including its relations with its Eastern neighbors and Russia, cannot be viewed beyond the context of NATO policy, which is about deterrence of Russia. This kind of «EU’s strategic autonomy» will motivate Moscow’s actions in the post-Soviet space.

Pragmatism of the EU provokes a collision of national pragmatisms inside the EU. For some time, it looked as if a responsible leadership, which Germany had been claiming (including in the S&D)\(^1\), could be the European response. But Berlin does not seem to cope with the role of a European leader, and its partners are not prepared to play to the tune of German realpolitik. It is not clear, who will be in charge of the EU Eastern policy. The Brussels traditional answer – «on the basis of a multilateral consensus» – is not a pragmatic one. Estonia that will chair the EU in the second half of 2017 suggests to relocate the Eastern Partnership summit from Tallinn to Brussels in order to reaffirm that EaP is «not only an issue

of Eastern Europe but an issue of the whole EU» (J. Ligi, Foreign Minister of Estonia)\(^1\).

EUGS clearly demonstrates that the so-called «common framework», which Brussels suggested, does not give it leverage for developing a proactive Eastern policy. The method of pragmatism is likely to strengthen not the CFSDP in the post-Soviet space but the intra-institutional imbalance within the EU – by means of relative consolidation of positions of the European Commission in its relations with the Eastern capitals. The Weimar Triangle (Germany-France-Poland) no longer allows to grow the crystal of the EU common Eastern approach on its platform. Poland’s political evolution (internal and external) does not permit it to claim the role of a representative of the EU in its relations with the Eastern partners and even less so with Russia. Berlin has tied its hands with the EU sanctions against Moscow. Influence of Paris has been weakened by the unpopularity of the former French president and the dwindled role in relations with key partners (Germany, UK, USA). This internal imbalance and deficit of leadership in the EU increases the influence of Washington, whose policy restricts Europe’s maneuverability in relations with Russia, in the post-Soviet space and Central Asia.

Moscow cannot expect significant changes in its relations with the EU without progress on Russia-USA track. The restoration of political dialogue with Brussels in the foreseeable future is hardly possible. It is unlikely that in 2017 there will be significant improvements in Russia-EU relations due to the period of adaptation to the changes in the US Administration and elections in France and Germany (which coincide with the beginning of Presidential electoral cycle in Russia).

**«The Way Ahead»: Towards Mutual Deterrence**

Russia cannot ignore the fact that the EU Council (20 October 2016, Brussels) came to the «obvious» conclusion, as its Chairman Donald Tusk put it: «it is clear that Russia’s strategy is to weaken the EU»\(^2\). Moscow does not agree, and declares that it always wanted to see the EU «strong, consolidated and self-maintained», but if Tusk’s formula keeps, it will have a negative effect «on the

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\(^1\) Эстония предлагает перенести саммит "Восточного партнерства" в Брюссель. Estonija predlagaet perenesi sammit "Vostochnogo partnerstva" v Brjussel' [Estonia suggests to move the Eastern Partnership summit to Brussels] https://ria.ru/world/20161026/1480053167.html

entire complex of Russian-European engagement»». Moscow stresses that the case in question is not to shut the political doors for economic cooperation and is discouraged in this regard by Germany’s abandoning its pragmatic approach in favor of a politically motivated one.

In spite of the obvious scope for economic linkage, chances are low to see in the foreseeable future the post-Soviet space as a space of EU-Russia cooperation. «Partnership for Modernization» (2010), which could have become an instrument for «progressive drawing together of the two interconnected and mutually complementary economies»², has failed to materialize, while the Eurasian integration project has lost its European vector. In the future, sharp competition and protectionism will determine economic relations between Russia and the EU in the post-Soviet space. Principled pragmatism, declared in EUGS, reflects the understanding of the need to vindicate economic and political interests within the containment paradigm. Mutual containment in the post-Soviet space has now overshadowed the common European perspective. The EU’s new «pragmatism» is perceived by Moscow as strengthening of the Western policy of political-economic and military-political expansion to the East.

The German 2016 Presidency in OSCE did not managed to achieve anything that could have allowed to lower the degree of confrontation and outline a rapprochement trajectory (notwithstanding Moscow’s active support of the Chairmanship/OSCE). Minsk Agreements have been sabotaged by Kiev. The collision over Syria, in spite of the common challenges of international terrorism and extremism, has aggravated the conflict between Russia and the West.

The settlement of protracted post-Soviet conflicts has almost disappeared from the practical agenda of Russia-EU interaction. In this context the positive shifts in the relations between Russia and the associated partners of the EU – Moldova and Georgia – and the growing Russia’s influence in the Armenia-Azerbaijan reconciliation on Nagorno-Karabakh, are seen in Brussels as a challenge rather than an opportunity. The settlement of the post-Soviet conflicts does not fit in the EU agenda. The EU and Russia will have a task to preserve the mutually acceptable status quo and to safeguard the non-escalation.

¹ Lavrov: РФ удивлена тем, что Германия следует в фарватере русофобского меньшинства в ЕС. Lavrov: RF udivlena tem, chto Germanija sleduet v farvatere rusofobskogo men'shinstva v ES [Lavrov: Russia is surprised that Germany moves in the fairway of the Russophobe minority in the EU]/ TACC, 25 октября 2016 г. http://tass.ru/politika/3731400
² Ibid.
Conclusion

Only all-European cooperation, as a philosophy of international relations, could extricate Europe from the deadlock. This guideline must be preserved as an unquestionable political focus both for Russia and the EU. To go back to the Common Europe idea is possible only on the basis of the Ukrainian settlement.

The post-Soviet space is not a sphere of geopolitical rivalry. The course toward harmonization and convergence of the «two integrations» is the only pragmatic platform for overcoming the current dangerous crisis of the European security.

The emergence of new crises or escalation of the existing ones, including those in the post-Soviet space, threaten to grow into regional conflicts with involvement, according to the EU Global Strategy definition, of the superpowers.

The selective engagement between Russia and the EU in the conditions of major crisis and conflict of interests cannot be seen as a proper political method, as it inevitably reproduces and intensifies their differences, including those within the post-Soviet space.