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Russia Between Europe and Asia

A. Gromyko

MODERN RUSSIA perceives itself, thinks and acts mainly as a European power. Its "Europeanness" is not related to the status of its relations with the European Union or other organizations west of the Russian borders. Being a Russian European is not synonymous to thinking that there is no alternative to the policy of integrating Russia into some alliances and groupings created in the Atlantic part of the Old World after the end of World War II and before the breakup of the Soviet Union. In building its foreign policy Russia proceeds from the premise that its most developed and densely populated part is in Europe and that for the past three centuries its political, diplomatic, economic, scientific and cultural history has been connected, above all, to this part of the world. Russia – one of the largest components of European civilization – has spread it over millions of square kilometers from the Ural Mountains to the Pacific Ocean, bringing it not only to Siberia but also to the Far East and Central Asia.

When Russia moved into the east and the south it carried a European way of thinking and European culture, being one of its sources. Compare Russia and Turkey: whose geographic position is somewhat similar. The lesser part of its territory is in Europe and the greater part is in Asia. However, with Russia it has always been a case of "extending Europe" from west to east and with Turkey, "extending Asia" from east to west.

Again, Russia's "Europeanness" and therefore the corresponding nature of its foreign policy, does not mean that our country has no interests in other parts of the world. Far from it! In the past, Russia and a number of other European powers built their empires that extended far beyond Europe's geographical borders. The entire history of the latter has been a series of actions to expand and penetrate other civilization areas. Transregional and global ambitions are not at odds with but in fact con-

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firm the point that Russia acts as a large (in this case the largest) European state.

At the same time, unlike other European states, Russia is unique in that its own territory lies predominantly in Asia where many dozens of indigenous non-European peoples live who speak non-European languages and practice other religions than Christianity.

There is no doubt that in the 21st century Russia has preserved the mainly European nature of its worldview; nor is there any doubt that it is remarkably unique, which consists in the diversity of ethnic groups, cultures and faiths. This is

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not a burden but a unique competitive advantage compared to other European countries. The latter, incidentally – not to mention the EU's ambitions – are doing all they can so as not to lose their presence far beyond the EU borders. Consider instruments of "soft power" such as Francophonie, Lusofonia, the British Commonwealth of Nations, etc. As for Russia, it physically lies largely in Asia, directly bordering – be it on land or sea – Turkey, the Trans Caucasus, Central Asia, China, Mongolia, the Korean Peninsula, Japan, etc.

Russia's foreign policy today is faced with the goal of diversification. And that is not some exotic goal. Quite the contrary, it was exotic that in the 1990s Russia left many parts of the world where it later began to recover its influence with such difficulty. This is not of course the same strategic depth that the Soviet Union was able to afford. Nevertheless, the interests of Russia, which occupies one-eighth of the world's land surface – with all the mineral, human, subsoil, forest and water resources – objectively require strategic relations in Europe, Asia, other continents – i.e., a transregional foreign policy with global elements.

Yes, we have plenty of domestic problems but the need to resolve them requires that the country's foreign policy be invigorated to ensure (ultimately) the fulfillment of domestic development tasks. If Russia moderates its "ambitions" and heeds the voices of those who are urging it to turn into "a regular European country," stop paying attention to regional and global problems that are not directly related to it, what should happen in practice? It will have to step down as a permanent member of the UN Security Council. Indeed, what is the need for that seat to a state that feels burdened by the problems of other regions in the world?

They may say: "But is UN Security Council membership at odds with the fact that 'normal European countries,' such as France and Britain, are there? And they will be disingenuous because neither regards itself as such but is doing all it can to preserve its influence in different parts of the world.

The need to reinforce the eastern vector of Russia's foreign policy has nothing to do with the idea of distancing it from Europe, which is absurd if only because it is impossible to distance oneself from oneself. In theory, it is possible to model Russia's political and economic "U-turn" to the East, meaning that it will also turn its back on the rest of Europe. And the arguments are quite weighty – the shifting of the focus of global politics and economics from the Euro-Atlantic region to the Asia Pacific region. First, if it continues, such a shift will continue for decades.

Second, such global processes do not develop straightforwardly and will not lead to the marginalization of Europe and the Euro-Atlantic region with Asia taking center stage. The focus in the 21st century will be on the realignment of the balance of forces in the world, not the emergence of a new center of hegemony, and the establishment of a multipolar world that has been a topic of much discussion in recent years. In these conditions it is beneficial for Russia to preserve and develop its positions equally in the West, East, and South. Its striving to become a Pacific power should not weaken Russia's influence in Europe; quite the contrary, by strengthening its role here it will become a more attractive partner for Asian countries, and vice versa. These two foreign policy vectors should be regarded as two sides of one coin – i.e., as cement and sand for the foundation of its wellbeing in the new century.

Third, and most important, is Russia ready for such a turn even if it means not a change of development strategy – from European to Asian, but reasonable diversification? Are the Russian state and society ready to fulfill such a wide-ranging task? Russian diplomacy has made considerable efforts along these lines in bilateral relations both with the leading states of the Asia Pacific region and with regional organizations. The APEC Vladivostok Summit has crowned that work. Nevertheless, there are significant domestic, objective difficulties along this path: the continuing depopulation of Siberia and Russia's Far East, local natural resources working mostly for European, not Asian markets, the absence of mega-projects beyond the Ural region (except for those implemented in connection with the APEC summit). The Moscow enlargement project, too, will gobble up huge funds in the European part of the country.

Geopolitically, urging Russia to move eastward or southward is tantamount to tilting at windmills. Indeed, what are the BRICS (and the formation of bilateral strategic ties with each member of this organization), SCO, EurASEC, and Eurasian Economic Union projects, as well as Russia's ongoing integration into different structures of the Asia Pacific region, if not the demonstration of a de-facto U-turn? The task now is to fill these constructions with a solid industrial, financial and infrastructural substance. The development of the majority of them shows clearly that the "East or West" dilemma is a false one for Russia. Thus, practically all integration projects in the post-Soviet space, where it seeks to play a leading role, include areas west, south, and south-east of its borders, and Russia cannot do without any one of them. By implementing these projects Russia does not reject one particular area at the expense of another but just the contrary, brings them together. The future of Russia's relations with its neighbors such as Ukraine and Belarus is probably no less important for it than interaction with all the Asian countries outside the post-Soviet space taken together.

What if the concept of Russia's "European foreign policy" is narrowed to its relations with organizations such as the European Union, the Council of Europe and NATO? Would that not justify the thesis about the need for its strategic reorientation from West to East? Indeed, relations with all of them are not at their best now; there are quite a few "difficult" partners for Russia in Europe and, together with the U.S., they produce a growing number of criticism directed at Russia on some issues or other; this is also where the "European" (read, American) missile defense system is being built.

However, first, turning away from problems does not mean solving them but, quite the contrary, aggravating them. Banging the door shut is not an indication of diplomatic maturity or experience.

Second, the sum total of disagreements with its European partners is growing as Russia's interaction with the EU space is strengthening and economic, social and cultural ties are progressing, not regressing. The law of life: the closer you live together, the more positive and negative situations arise that need to be dealt with through compromise.

Third, the problems of Russia's perception, in particular in Europe, are connected not only to antagonism from the outside but also the extensive but yet-to-be-tapped potential of Russia's "soft power." This was noted by the Russian president in his article "Russia and the Changing World," as well as during his recent meeting with Russia's diplomatic

corps.

Fourth, a mature foreign policy is guided by realism and pragmatism, not emotions and the "here and now" mood. The weakening of Russia's activity, including its diplomatic activity, in the European sector will run counter to its national interests. No one in the foreseeable future will take away the fact that the EU is a major market for Russia, accounting for the lion's share of direct and portfolio investments as it is entering international loan markets; that cooperation with its European business partners is key to the creation of most of modern Russian manufacturing companies; and that this is where Russia is involved in science and research mega-projects.

Fifth, to reiterate: In the eyes of Russia's new or potential political and business partners in the East and South interest in cooperation with it will be primarily predetermined by its role in "Greater Europe." Russia took "a place in the sun" there a long time ago, and the task now is to consolidate and expand its role at the new historical stage. As for "a place in the sun" in the Asia Pacific region, it has yet to be secured by proving its relevance and consistency. And it would hardly benefit Russia if it came there as "a European failure," a humiliated one, who has decided to tempt fate elsewhere.

I am confident that "Greater Europe" is a logical basis for Russia, by ensuring the reliability of which it will increase the chances for success in other parts of the world, primarily in the Asia Pacific region. It would be wrong for it to play the role of "another U.S." or "another China": It will simply not have enough resources for that, not even potential, let alone available resources. Russia can assert itself as an unquestionable heavyweight in the 21st century by consolidating its role as the EU's strategic partner and at the same time the core of the integration processes in the post-Soviet space. These two vectors of Russian foreign policy will not contradict but only strengthen each other. If Russia seriously wants to "move into Asia" it needs to rely on "Greater Europe." Russia's national interests consist not in setting itself against Europe or the Euro-Atlantic but in using its unique "Europeanness" to advance its own interests both in the West and the East.

Key words: Russia's role in Greater Europe, eastern vector of Russian policy, Asia Pacific region and Russia.