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COMMENT

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20 years after > Regardless of leadership, Ukraine and Russia are still drifting apart

Reforms, respect to neighbours and cooperation with Europe is the way for Russia to slow down further disintegration.

Analytical clichés are sometimes very powerful. For most Western observers, the year 2011 is primarily the 20th anniversary of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Only few would internalize an alternative and less Russo-centric perspective, namely, that by a number of nations it is viewed as an anniversary of independence and statehood.

Ukraine is a particular case in point. In August 1991, in the aftermath of the failed putsch in Moscow, the Ukrainian parliament adopted the Declaration of Independence, and this choice was confirmed by the popular referendum.

Since that moment, the Russian-Ukrainian relationship has remained a puzzle. In hindsight, it becomes obvious, even banal, that for Russia the problem was not so much Ukraine's transition to functioning democracy, which after all never happened despite all hopes, caused by the Orange revolution of 2004. It was rather Ukraine's quest for real freedom of foreign policy choices and the ability of its ruling elite to exploit sovereignty in the own interest. Consequently, for Ukraine Russia emerged as the main external challenge.

As it happened, from day one, under the leadership of several consecutive administrations, Ukraine

has been distancing from Russia. This looked paradoxical, since Ukraine could neither internally agree about the destination point of this drift, nor received any external guarantees concerning its European or Euro-Atlantic prospects. And yet, the process went on and is likely to continue.

The presidency of Viktor Yanukovich which started in 2010 provides the best illustration. When he came to power, he apparently had illusions. He wanted to believe that the policy of centralizing power, of "building Russia in Ukraine", would buy him a benevolent attitude and support by Moscow. However, these hopes were futile.

The reasons which help explaining the ongoing de-intensification of ties between Russia and Ukraine are many and fundamental.

To start with, Ukraine can only see its independence as independence from Russia. Such a view can not be compatible with Russia's post-imperial instinct to dominate in every grouping in the post-Soviet space of which it would be a member, to speak on behalf and at the same time not necessarily be bound by these organizations.

Meanwhile, Russia has been losing attractiveness in the post-Soviet space. Terror attacks, corruption,

xenophobia and many other social ills, well-known to the people able to follow Russian-language media, could not be compensated through economic subsidies, like cheap energy. Russian soft power was insufficient, and it could not – using the classical definition of soft power – make the others do what it wanted without resorting to coercion. Furthermore, whereas pressure could at times bring Moscow tactical gains, bullying would hardly improve Russia's image.

The story of the bilateral relations is an incessant controversy around Black Sea Fleet, gas prices, the status of the Russian language in Ukraine, the border issues et cetera. None of the problems was successfully solved and the atmosphere of a chronic conflict was created instead. The most recent part of this drama, which turned into a soap opera – the exchange of Russian Navy basing rights in Crimea for cheaper gas – is not expected to be the last series either, since Ukraine is not happy with the compromise.

Ukrainian business learned to view its interests as separate from and directly competing with those of Russia. Seeing the prospect for their exports elsewhere, Ukrainian companies supported country's accession to the WTO and are

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now pushing for the deep and comprehensive free trade area with the EU, while rejecting the proposal to join Russia-led Customs Union in the CIS.

Of course, the actual divergence between Ukraine and Russia in terms of the rule of law should not be exaggerated – it suffices to see the international corruption rankings of both countries – but it shouldn't be completely overlooked either; Ukraine is more free and pluralist. Internationally, Ukraine has an alternative, even if it is not happy with the limited offer which it receives from the West.

Finally, Ukraine is no longer alone. It belongs to an emerging region of “Europe-in-between”. In the beginning Ukraine was setting the dynamics, since Belarus then was choosing the status of Russia's ally and Moldova was too dependent on Moscow in many respects to seek an alternative. But now Ukraine can benefit from the political repositioning of its two neighbours, from their growing autonomy and strengthening ties with the EU.

It is simply impossible to imagine that any leader of Ukraine would have the capability to resist – let alone reverse – these trends, even if he or she so wanted.

For Russian and Ukraine, drifting apart is not a threat to good-neighbourliness and cooperation. What is natural to keep can survive. But this is a good reason for Russia to re-assess its policy in the whole post-Soviet space. The exclusive sphere of influence cannot be re-stored. Even if Russia becomes more powerful and learns to use its influence wisely, and even if its partners in the EU, wary of a possible imperial overstretch of their own community, were to tacitly agree with such a role for Russia, the habit of independence that has taken roots will prevent re-integration.

Reform inside and respect to neighbours, along with fostering own cooperative relationship with Europe, would be the best way for Russia to slow down the process of weakening its ties with the Western part of the post-Soviet space. But it remains to be seen whether the lesson will or will not be learned.