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The Past, Present and Future of Russia-West Relations

By Michael Averko

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I recently received a question, asking whether the US can lead over the EU in improving relations with Russia?

From the Cold War period, Britain's Margaret Thatcher and American author Suzanne Massie, are credited with influencing Ronald Reagan, to seize upon the existence of an opportunity for improving East-West relations. In the post-Soviet era, reasoned individuals in Western Europe and the US offer hope for moving the US to a less confrontational (and dare I say saner) attitude towards Russia. (Gilbert Doctorow's November 20 Russia Insider commentary "Top US Foreign Policy Experts Increasingly Disagree with White House on Russia" relates to this thought.)

For a variety of reasons, Western Europe is more likely than the US to spearhead an improvement in Russia-West relations. To an extent, this is already evident (with the understanding that the EU nations aren't monolithic). Last week, the EU decided to not increase sanctions against Russia. The EU and Russia have greater trade relations, when compared to America and Russia. (From a counter neocon/neolib perspective, Finian Cunningham's November 20 Strategic Culture Foundation article "Europe Veering From US Abyss Over Russia?" delves into this subject.)

In terms of understanding international issues, it has been said that the US is geographically prone to being comparatively aloof than some others. The US hasn't had the level of major

powers on and/or near its borders as some other nations, including Russia. America's decades long economic and military prowess, has served to discourage the art of compromise, in favor of a my way or the highway approach to resolving global differences.

In contrast, smaller nations with less might can't as easily afford to make stupid mistakes. This last observation can get challenged, when such countries feel that they've the backing of a major power – a pointed shot at the NATO/EU affiliated Baltic states (particularly Lithuania and Estonia), whose tragic past shouldn't be carte blanche for pursuing overly headstrong agendas, as evidenced by their rhetorical posturing, on the complex situation in the former Ukrainian SSR. For their part, larger nations allied to smaller countries (whether nominally or otherwise) should be careful to not automatically assume that the smaller nation is always so right in a dispute with a larger neighbor.

At present, NATO/EU members Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia don't appear to be so willing as some others to pursue a confrontational stance towards Russia. Public opinion surveys in some major Western nations (including Germany and the US) suggestively challenge the notion that Russia poses a great threat. A predominating bias to the contrary exists within the higher levels of North American mass media, body politic and academia.

Some recent examples include Fareed Zakaria's opening comments about Russia, on his November 16 CNN show and a November 5 Munk debate on Barack Obama's foreign policy (aired on CSPAN), which pitted Zakaria and Anne-Marie Slaughter against Robert Kagan and Bret Stephens. That kind of point-counterpoint dialogue relates to a November 15 aired CNN segment, where that network's Senior White House Correspondent, Jim Acosta, said that "the world" gave Vladimir Putin a "cold shoulder" at the G-20 gathering in Brisbane. Acosta proceeded to mention the leaders of the US, Canada, UK and Australia. Acosta didn't mention the Indian, Chinese, Brazilian, South African and other G-20 participants, who didn't cold shoulder Putin at that forum.

Clearly, the world is much more diverse than what's presented in the circumstances regarding Munk and CNN's Acosta and Zakaria, as well as many of their peers at Western mass media TV networks. The reality is that these sources continue to have a considerable reach in North America.

RT is ironically accused of being biased in offering some valid perspectives, which tend to get downplayed in Western mass media. The November 12 RT CrossTalk show on the Berlin Wall and the "new Cold War", expressed thoughts which I noted in several 1990s era replies to Alexander Kwasniewski, William Safire, Thomas Friedman and Anthony Lewis, when The New York Times Op-Ed section had greater influence than the contemporary era of numerous online options:

"NATO Still Divides", March 16, 1999

"Why Russia Worries About NATO Expansion", January 20, 1995

"Central Europe Still Feels Wary of Russia; The Bullied Bear", May 15, 1995

“Through Bosnian Smoke, Russians and Serbs Turn to the West“, March 8, 1994

Looking back, some golden opportunities were missed at improving Russia-West relations, as a result of the faulty overview that was evident throughout much of the Western political establishment’s liberal-conservative divide – at a time when Russia wasn’t seen as great a threat.

In the long run, there’s a decent to good chance of seeing noticeably improved Russia-West relations. Though remaining a powerful presence, America is reasonably predicted by some (including Zbigniew Brzezinski) to have less global influence in the foreseeable future - a process that has arguably started. Among American foreign policy elites, more time is perhaps needed, to redirect away from the dubious stances taken against Russia.

One current stumbling block is the advocacy for existing Western sanctions against Russia over Ukraine, with the threat of increased measures, versus the official Russian view that the sanctions have limits in a globalized economy, which the Kremlin will be able to successfully manage. Russia will probably not change its position on Crimea. In the Lugansk and Donetsk areas, violence persists, with the chance for further escalation. Practically speaking, a grudging official to unofficial acceptance by the West of Crimea’s status with Russia, could be part of a settlement that sees the Donetsk and Lugansk areas having considerable autonomy within Ukraine.

There’re other present and possible future trigger points, which challenge improved Russia-West relations. The “New Cold War” term, typically includes a follow-up acknowledgement that the original “Cold War” was far more intense. That point serves as a cautious basis, for believing that the existing and (any) future differences can be reasonably managed among the global powers.