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In the past seven years, while Europe has wasted time tinkering fruitlessly with its institutions, the world has seen some extraordinary changes. One need only recall that, in this short space of time, the global equilibrium dominated by American monopolism has come to an end, China has emerged solidly as a major global economic and military power, and the crisis hot spots in the Middle East and central Asia have increased in number, and in severity, compared with the recent past.

But, in particular, it is at the European Union's eastern borders that a really profound change has taken place: less than a decade ago, Russia was, economically and politically, a country that had been brought to its knees and was risking total collapse. Now, it has returned forcefully to the forefront of the international scene and is exploiting its regained stability and huge natural resources to re-negotiate its relations with the rest of the world. The future of Europe is thus destined, once again, to be decisively influenced by the direction that, for better or worse, the development of this immense country will follow.

The nature of this development will depend, essentially, on three factors. The first is the difficulty that this country, heir to the Soviet Union, is having finding a new identity; the second is the Western world's attitude to Russia, and the third is the interdependence that exists between Europe's economic-production system, which depends heavily on energy imports, and that of Russia which, while rich in natural resources, is backward.

With regard to the question of Russia's identity, there is a tendency, particularly widespread in European public opinion, to believe that this country is returning to its old authoritarian and nationalist ways. However, this question is far more complex and less clearly defined than one might think. It is certainly true that Russian foreign policy is currently guided by a determination to see the country becoming, once more, an autonomous power, able to command respect in the world. In view of the humiliating events of the 1990s, this is hardly surprising. It is also true that Russia is highly unlikely, in the short- to medium-term, to turn into a Western-style liberal democracy. Its political stability continues to be linked to the central government's capacity to regain and retain, or even strengthen, its monopoly on power. But even though Russia, today, is capable of using anti-West ideology as a means of uniting the country, and is reviving its nationalist symbols, it is also well aware that it needs the West if it is to be able to go on pursuing its own process of modernisation and to be part of the global economy. Russian politics is based on pragmatism and realism, and the Russian government knows that it is in its own deepest interests to co-exist with Europe in a climate of collaboration, not of conflict. Whatever area of Russian foreign policy one might choose to analyse, it always emerges that whereas, on the one hand, its guiding principle is always – inevitably – that of strengthening Russia's power and security vis-à-vis the outside world, on the other, the ways and means by which it seeks to achieve this remain very open, with Russia having to feel directly threatened before it will make choices that set it in opposition to the West, and to the United States, in particular. We could cite many examples in this regard, but it is enough to recall that the hard-line Russian response to America's decision to put anti-missile bases in eastern Europe came only after years of attempts, on Russia's part, to find agreements that might prevent things from reaching this point.

Thus, the attitude of the West is perhaps the most decisive factor in the evolution of Russian foreign policy. The Americans, ever since the Clinton era – notwithstanding the good relations with Yeltsin and the economic aid provided –, have continued to be mistrustful, this attitude ultimately making them press to see Russia surrounded and weakened. In the light of the current global situation and the USA's present difficulties it is hard to imagine American foreign policy changing at all. It therefore falls to the Europeans to adopt a constructive attitude towards Russia and, subsequently, to encourage the United States to do the same. Instead, all Europe has done, other than enter into general and formal cooperation agreements whose results have been negligible, is echo the positions adopted by the Americans: it has favoured NATO's enlargement to the East, supported the anti-Russia policies of the former Soviet republics that are subsidised by the Americans, and been willing to espouse strategic criticisms levelled at the Russian government. From this perspective, the enlargement of the European Union appears ambiguous, both because the EU has still not specified where its furthest boundaries might lie, or whether it intends to embrace, within them, countries that still share a strong interdependence with Russia, thereby effectively removing them from its sphere of influence; and also because this Union – which, after all, now has many fiercely anti-Russian members – has failed in its plan to become a pole able, autonomously, to guarantee security and stability, for itself and for the region around it. With regard to these two areas, in recent years its cohesion and its capacity, even just as an ongoing process, to serve as a framework of reference for unitary European policies, have declined dramatically and in today's Europe, each country strives only to pursue its own, often short-sighted, national interests. This applies to Poland and to the Czech Republic, which see themselves as America's loyal supporters, but it is also true of France and Germany, both of which are busy developing their own bilateral policies with Russia.

Europe's weakness and division are creating a dangerous situation of instability and are fomenting the worst nationalist and revanchist tendencies in Russian politics and society. In their present conditions, both the European states (increasingly looking like *dust devoid of substance*) and the European Union (structurally incapable of acting as an international political entity) have so little to offer that they cannot hope to push Russia in the direction of non-aggressive policies and constructive attitudes. What Moscow needs is an interlocutor that is on a par with it, an interlocutor equipped with a global strategy and with the ability to offer it, in return for a policy of cooperation between equals, the possibility of achieving true economic integration and of obtaining the support it needs in order to become part of the international institutions. But the Europeans cannot become this interlocutor by resorting to Community rhetoric or petty national manoeuvres, but only by becoming an actor capable of influencing the processes that take place on the global stage.

The problem, for the Europeans, is once again that of realising that the first step towards an effective and positive policy towards Russia must be that of creating the power that is needed in order to converse with this country on an equal footing, instead of relying on the inadequate existing powers. It will thus be the existence or absence of a European state of continental dimensions that, in the coming years, will shape relations between western Europeans and Russia, and between Russia and the rest of the world. But there can be no such state until an initial core of countries takes the initiative of creating it, starting with France and Germany and any other countries (from among or outside the Six) that can summon the will to do so.

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In den letzten sieben Jahren sind auf der Welt außergewöhnliche Veränderungen vor sich gegangen, während Europa sich mit erfolglosen institutionellen Nachbesserungen aufgehalten hat. Es sei nur daran erinnert, dass in dieser kurzen Zeitspanne die Phase des vom amerikanischen Unipolarismus beherrschten weltweiten Gleichgewichts zu Ende gegangen ist, dass China ganz konkret und im globalen Maßstab begonnen hat, eine Rolle als wirtschaftliche und militärische Großmacht zu spielen, und dass die Krisenherde im Nahen und Mittleren Osten sowie in Zentralasien im Vergleich zur jüngeren Vergangenheit zahlenmäßig sogar noch zugenommen haben und es sich dabei um ernste Krisen gehandelt hat.

Jedoch vor allem an den östlichen Grenzen der Europäischen Union sind tief greifende Veränderungen eingetreten: noch Ende der neunziger Jahre lag Russland wirtschaftlich und politisch am Boden, zudem war das Land von Auflösung bedroht. Heute ist es mit aller Macht wieder auf die Bühne der internationalen Politik zurückgekehrt und nutzt seine wieder gewonnene Stabilität und seine immensen natürlichen Ressourcen, um die Beziehungen zum Rest der Welt neu auszuhandeln. Einmal mehr wird somit die Zukunft Europas in entscheidender Weise vom Verlauf der Entwicklungen in diesem riesigen Land – ob zum Guten oder zum Schlechten hin – beeinflusst werden.

Diese Entwicklungen hängen im Wesentlichen von drei Faktoren ab. Der erste besteht in der Schwierigkeit für den Nachfolgestaat der Sowjetunion, seine neue Identität zu definieren; der zweite betrifft die Haltung des Westens gegenüber Russland, während der dritte darin zu sehen ist, dass die Wirtschaft Europas, die in starkem Maße von Energieeinfuhren abhängig ist, und die Wirtschaft Russlands, die rückständig, aber reich an natürlichen Ressourcen ist, komplementär zueinander sind.

Was die Identität Russlands anbelangt, so neigt speziell die öffentliche Meinung in Europa zu der Ansicht, dass dieses Land nunmehr den Weg zurück zu Autoritarismus und Nationalismus eingeschlagen hat. In Wirklichkeit ist das Problem sehr viel komplexer und vor allem weit weniger klar umrissen als man denkt. Zwar stimmt es, dass die wesentliche Leitlinie der Politik Russlands sich gegenwärtig in dem Anliegen manifestiert, das Land wieder in den Rang einer eigenständigen Macht zu erheben, die in der Lage ist, sich weltweit Respekt zu verschaffen. In dieser Hinsicht hat die Lektion, die das Land aus den Demütigungen der neunziger Jahre gelernt hat, ihm nicht viele Alternativen gelassen. Wahr ist auch, dass dieses Land kurz- und mittelfristig schwerlich eine liberale Demokratie in Anlehnung an das westliche Modell werden kann. Seine politische Stabilität hängt noch immer von der Fähigkeit der Zentralregierung ab, das Machtmonopol wieder zu erlangen und aufrechtzuerhalten und es sogar noch zu stärken. Wenn aber Russland heute die anti-westliche Ideologie als Klammer für den Zusammenhalt des Landes benutzt und die Symbole des Nationalismus wieder aufwertet, so ist es sich doch gleichzeitig voll und ganz des Umstands bewusst, dass es den Westen braucht, um den eigenen Modernisierungsprozess fortzusetzen und sich in die Weltwirtschaft zu integrieren. Pragmatismus und Realismus, die seiner Politik zugrunde liegen, bringen Moskau zu der Einsicht, dass ein kooperatives und konfliktfreies Zusammenleben in seinem ureigensten Interesse liegt. Welchen Bereich der russischen Außenpolitik man auch analysiert, stets gelangt man zu der Erkenntnis, dass einerseits das Leitkriterium – zwangsläufig – nach wie vor die Stärkung der Macht und der Sicherheit des Landes nach außen hin ist, dass aber andererseits die Modalitäten zur Erreichung dieses Zieles weitgehend offen bleiben und die Entscheidungen, die darauf abzielen, sich insbesondere den Vereinigten Staaten zu widersetzen, erst dann getroffen werden, wenn Russland sich unmittelbar bedroht fühlt. Diesbezüglich ließen sich zahlreiche Beispiele anführen. Hier sei lediglich daran erinnert, dass die scharfe Reaktion Russlands auf die amerikanische Entscheidung, ein Raketenabwehrsystem in Osteuropa zu installieren, erst erfolgt ist, nachdem von russischer Seite jahrelang versucht worden war, Formen von Übereinkünften oder der Zusammenarbeit zu finden, die verhindert hätten, dass die Dinge bis zu diesem Punkt eskalieren.