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WILL RUSSIA RETURN TO EUROPE?

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*Do not return to former flames,
your former flames do not exist.
There are but copies, like pristine flats,
where you once had a fleeting tryst.*

Andrey Voznesensky

Could Russia return to Europe in the foreseeable future? Not in the geographical sense, for geographically, of course, Russia has always been, is and apparently will always be a European country. In the sense of Russia being included in the institutions and values of the European Union, of returning to the path of integration with the European West, the path that Moscow left with a bang a few years ago when it slammed the door in Crimea and Donbass.

This is not so much a question of scholarship as it is a question of practical significance. Depending on how one views the historical prospects of a “reunion” between Europe and Russia, very different rational strategies can be built for the near future both in Moscow and in Brussels.

Come back to me, all is forgiven...¹

Today’s liberal discourse both in Europe and in Russia proceeds from the idea that Russia is destined to come back. Russia returning to

1. Title of a famous Russian song by Vladimir Lensky, released approximately between 1914 and 1917.

Europe is just as inevitable as Friedrich Nietzsche’s “eternal return.” Therefore, the only things that can be debated are the timeframe of Russia’s new turn towards the West and the price that the Russian authorities and Russian society will have to pay for the magnanimous Europe to take the prodigal daughter back into its caring motherly embrace.

Today’s liberal discourse both in Europe and in Russia proceeds from the idea that Russia is destined to come back. Thus Europe does not have any reason for concern.

Yet this narrative depends on a single condition: for Russia to “return,” Europe itself needs to be static and unchanging for decades. But the European world that existed two or three decades ago is no more.

The old social contract between the Russian authorities and society was breached by the former. Nationalism, xenophobia and militarism became the main sources of new legitimacy for the authorities.

Russia found itself by the wayside of European security and failed to become a major stakeholder in the “European project”, which ultimately determined Russia’s turn towards Asia.

Russia is currently lagging behind the average growth rate of the Asian economies by 4 per cent (by 5 per cent in the case of China and India).

As partners, the authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes in Asia are more comprehensible and reliable than European democracies.

Paradoxically, the only realistic path for Russia to return to Europe today is through Asia.

When it comes to the timeframe, optimists frequently mention the year 2024, when Vladimir Putin’s fourth presidential term ends and Russia finds itself at another fork in its historical path. Pessimists prefer to talk about later dates – the early or mid-2030s, for example, when “Putin’s generation” leaves the political stage for natural reasons, and people born after the collapse of the USSR make up the majority of the Russian public. The difference between the optimistic and pessimistic forecasts is, therefore, about six to ten years, which might seem like a long time from the point of view of current politics, but is just the blink of an eye for European history as a whole.

As for the price, assessments vary wildly once again. Some experts in comparative political transit believe that post-Pu-

tin Russia will stay on the path of gradual economic and political reforms that lead towards the European models of a socially oriented market economy and a pluralistic political system. Others, on the contrary, believe that the time afforded by history to post-Soviet Russia for its development has already been missed, that there are no more workable evolutionary mechanisms, and that the only remaining option is a radical breakdown of the “incorrect” governmental and property institutions that were formed at the beginning of the 21st century. The “revolutionary” path of freeing Russia from the legacy of the Soviet era should finally resolve the fundamentally important tasks of transforming the country that have remained unresolved since the early 1990s. That includes Russia’s organic merger with the “European family.” Of course, the transformation of Russia is impossible without prior repentance and a catharsis.

The wide range in the estimated timeframes and possible trajectories of Russia’s “historic return” does not cancel out the overall foregone conclusion: Russia’s return to prioritizing the European direction of its development is as inevitable as dawn following the darkness of the night or the spring warmth following the frost of winter. This deterministic view rests on at least three weighty arguments.

First, in terms of their history, culture, way of life and basic values, the Russian people (not only Orthodox ethnic Russians, but also, say, Sunni Tatars) are European and not Asian. Europe always has been and still is the principal magnet for Russian students and graduate students, as well as for

The European political mainstream still fails to comprehend fully what is happening in Russia, and even what is happening in Europe itself.

cultural figures, artists, businesspeople, scientists, scholars, intellectuals and even officials. Europe has the largest Russian and Russian-speaking diasporas, the largest number of mixed marriages and of people with bicultural identities.

In most social parameters (demographics, urbanization, education level, religiosity, social stratification, etc.) the differences between Russia and Europe, particularly Central and Eastern Europe, are not all that significant; in any case, they are much smaller than the differences between Russia and most Asian countries. Russia is part of European civilization, and therefore speaking about Russia’s “European choice” is meaningless. This is not a choice, this is destiny. And, as we all know, you cannot choose your destiny.

Second, only Europe can be an effective driver of Russian economic and social modernization – if only for the reason that it has comprehensive scientific, technological and social potential, the likes of which will not form in Asia any time soon, if ever. More importantly, Europe is truly interested in Russia making a technological breakthrough, as it could give a powerful impetus to its own technological and economic development. A fresh “graft” of Russia’s “wilding” would be more than useful for the still powerful and abundantly fruitful, yet aging, European tree.

At the same time, Asian partners are said to be quite content to continue using Russia as a reservoir of various natural resources, and at best as a transit corridor. For Asia, the development of Russia’s human capital is not a priority; Asia is keenly interested only in using Russia’s scientific and technological groundwork (primarily in the defence industry), which has been preserved since the Soviet era.

Third, it is only in conjunction with Europe that will Russia be able to preserve itself as a truly powerful actor in global politics. On its own, Russia is said to lack sufficient potential to claim the role of an independent “centre of power” on a global level. Regardless of the geopolitical constructions that will determine the new “Eurasian” world, Moscow will inevitably play the second fiddle to the rising Asian giants (China, India) that significantly outperform Russia in their economic growth. Russia’s transition to the “minor league” of Asian politics depends on the rate of depreciation of Russia’s remaining foreign political assets (nuclear weapons, permanent membership in the UN Security Council, and fuel and energy resources).

In Europe, on the other hand, Russia will find itself among powers of economically and demographically comparable potential. Moreover, in any development scenario, Russia will remain the largest and most powerful European state – a state whose interests cannot be ignored. Additionally, existing traditions of doing business in Europe, including the emphasis on multilateralism and taking minority positions into account, create more options for Russia than the openly utilitarian and strictly pragmatic Asian practices.

The European Union’s “Strategic Patience” as a Substitute for a European Strategy

Following this logic, we must conclude that, in the medium-term historical perspective, Europe does not have any reason for concern. Russia, like a disobedient runaway teenager, will face the foreign, harsh and not entirely friendly Asian world, draw the inevitable conclusions and come back to where it should be. At present the crucial task is to make sure the rebellious teen does not make a mess of things, cause harm to themselves or to others or get into some risky and dangerous business. And, naturally, the doors at home should be kept open if the runaway teen suddenly decides to come back.

If this is the case, the EU leadership should not be reproached for the fact that, over the course of four-plus years, it failed to develop any comprehensive strategy of interaction with Moscow. Such a strategy cannot exist by definition: everything depends on the processes that transpire on the Russian side of the European fault.

At best, the western side of the fault may assist in speeding up inevitable changes in Russia by promoting contacts through civil society, focusing on individual target groups (youth, small businesses, technocrats in power), and by engaging Russia in cooperation with the West in those areas

where the parties' interests clearly coincide (fighting international terrorism, nuclear non-proliferation, settling certain regional crises, etc.).

At the same time, Brussels should keep in its arsenal a sufficient number of "negative incentives" (sanctions and other instruments of applying pressure on Moscow) for the wild teenager to understand that there are certain "red lines" that should not be crossed. In other words, the European Union should have enough "strategic patience" and be ready for prompt and balanced response to the inevitable changes in Russia's politics and policies. Debates can go on and on about the specific balance of positive incentives ("selective engagement") and negative incentives ("containment"), but those will be debates on current European tactics, and not on the absent European strategy.

To quote Hegel, the mole of history burrows slowly, but it burrows well. Liberal "westernizers" say that that current estrangement between Russia and Europe is a tragedy for a great number of people on both sides of the European fault. Yet this gap is highly unlikely to determine the impending history of the 21st century, just like the cut-throat fight for African colonies between Great Britain and France at the turn of the 20th century did not become a determining factor for the global or European history of that century.

This liberal narrative that has become very familiar over the last four years could have been very convincing, even somewhat consolatory, particularly for those who have invested so much energy and effort into bringing Russia and the European Union closer. The first attempt to "return" to Europe was made about 30 years ago, and it failed. That is OK: we will take something from our mistakes, learn our lesson and try again. If not in 2024, then ten years after that. Yet, to be convincing, the narrative depends on a single condition: for Russia to "return," Europe itself needs to be static and unchanging for decades. The thing is, however, that dramatic changes take place on both eastern and western sides of the European fault.

Where Are You Pulling Us?

Listening to Russian and foreign "westernizers" today, you inevitably draw the conclusion that Russia is invited to return to the European world as it was 15, 20 or even 30 years ago. In that world, there was no conflict surrounding Ukraine and, moreover, there was no acute crisis in the eurozone, no migration flows of the kind we have witnessed in last few years, no Brexit, no rise of European right-wing populism. That world did not have a transatlantic split; there was no unprecedented economic growth in Asia, no global push for protectionism, no "Arab spring" and the dire consequences it brought. There was no crisis of international organizations and no decline of international law. In a word, there were none of the things that determine the priorities of EU countries today.

The European world that existed two or three decades ago is no more. It is gone forever, like some bygone *Belle Époque*, and it cannot be revived. To paraphrase a saying about the USSR that is popular in the former Soviet countries, those who do not mourn the Europe of the 1990s have no heart, and those who hope to bring it back to life have no brain.

It is not just a matter of Russia failing to fit into the old European world despite efforts on both sides. Had the Russian challenge been the only one, Europe would have been able to handle it somehow. The problem goes much deeper: the European world of the late 20th century failed to foresee the problems of the 21st century, much less handle them effectively. Moreover, one gets the impression that the European political mainstream still fails to comprehend fully what is happening in Russia, and even what is happening in Europe itself.

The vulnerability of the liberal narrative on the evolution of interaction between Europe and Russia over the past two to three decades is cast in particularly stark relief if we compare, even briefly, the political dynamics in Russia and Poland. When liberals speak of Russia's increasing alienation from Europe, they usually offer two main explanations for this phenomenon.

This first explanation is institutional. Over the course of 25 years, Russia failed to become a full-fledged member or at least an equal partner of Western European (the European

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Union) and Atlantic (NATO) bodies. Debates could go on and on about where the responsibility for the failure rests, but the fact is indisputable. Ultimately, Russia found itself by the wayside of European security and the "European project" as a whole and failed to become a major stakeholder in the project, which ultimately determined Russia's turn towards Asia.

The second explanation is systemic. In those same 25 years, Russia did not succeed in finding an effective new model of socioeconomic development, exhausted the possibilities of a resource-based economy and ultimately arrived at economic and social stagnation. The old social contract between the authorities and society was breached by the former. Therefore, nationalism, xenophobia and militarism became the main sources of new legitimacy for the authorities, which resulted in Moscow's inevitable alienation from Brussels.

In both cases, Warsaw is the absolute opposite of Moscow. Poland undoubtedly succeeded impressively where Moscow failed. Poland's integration into the structures of the European Union and NATO was exemplary. The country's current role in both organizations is hard to overestimate: for an "average" European country, it is entirely unique. Poland's socioeconomic development of the last two decades makes

not only “new” EU members, but even most old-timers jealous. It would seem that Poland is the last country in Europe where one could expect the rise of nationalism, a triumph of Eurosceptics, and doubt in sacrosanctity of liberal European values.

Nevertheless, the changes that are taking place in Poland today make many liberal Warsaw intellectuals draw parallels with the processes in Russia. Of course, these parallels are very tentative. However, if several years ago, Russian liberals dreamed of the country transforming into a “big Poland,” today this landmark is gone for good. The Polish case is breaking out from the overall logic of the liberal narrative in a manner that is too obvious. The impending trajectory of the evolution of Poland’s political system and of the values dominant in the Polish society is too unpredictable.

Modern Ukraine is another stark example of Europe’s gravitational field irrevocably weakening for Russia. The current political elite in Ukraine is desperately striving to repeat the successful integration experience of Central European states from two decades before. However, the optimism that prevailed in Europe 20 years ago has dried up, as have its financial resources. Meanwhile, the influence of right-wing populists who call into question the idea of the Union’s endless geographical expansion has grown significantly. Even the greatest enthusiasts of Ukraine’s “European path” are now forced to postpone the time when Ukraine might join the European Union, at least until the 2030s, despite the fact that

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Brussels treats Kiev far better than it does Moscow, and the current Ukrainian leadership has no shortage of influential lobbyists in Europe at various levels.

Now let us imagine for a moment that events similar to those that took place in Kiev in 2013–2014 Maidan transpire in Moscow in 2030–2035. Proponents of Russia’s “European path” come to power in the Kremlin; they solemnly announce the “only possible” course towards EU membership. How many decades will Moscow have to wait its turn? How many virtually insurmountable political, economic and psychological obstacles will block its path? How many European politicians will urge the people to wait, to not hurry and set Moscow yet another “final” exam?

There is every reason to believe that a reformed and democratic Russia will find itself not even in the position of Ukraine, but in the position of Turkey, which has been waiting long and in vain for Brussels to resolve the issue of its full membership in the European Union. There are grave doubts that the young technocrats who will populate the Russian government in 10–15 years’ time and influence major foreign policy decisions will want, in 2035, to see their country in the

position that Turkey was in back in 1987, when Ankara first applied for membership – not even in the European Union, but in the European Economic Community.

So, where exactly should Russia return? To the romantic Europe of 1995, full of enthusiasm and courage? To the triumphant Europe of 2004, confident in its power and in being on the right side of history? Or perhaps to the confused and scared Europe of 2016 that has lost its strategic landmarks? Maybe to the beautiful Europe of 2035 that exists only in the minds of several European visionaries? And what role in that beautiful future Europe could Moscow really play?

Two “Greater Europe” Projects

Proponents of the “return to Europe” proceed from the premise that time ultimately favours the “European project.” Having coped with its multiple “growing pains” and successfully left various crises and problems behind, the European Union will emerge from the current trials hardened, renewed and filled with new vigour. Maybe that is exactly what will happen. It would be a desirable outcome. Yet today, at the end of the second decade of the 21st century, this optimistic outlook is based rather on faith than on anything else. Only time will tell whether Europe will be able to convert this faith into specific actions and results.

For the time being, we are forced to rely not on faith in the future, but on the experience of the past. Even at the halcyon days of Europe–Russia cooperation, Moscow was not prepared to support the “Greater Europe” concept based on all countries of the European continent fully or partially adopting the statutory and regulatory framework of the European Union. With the existing systemic crises in Europe and unclear historical prospects of the “European project” itself, Moscow is even less likely to support this concept. How could one believe in Europe if Europe does not believe in itself? Especially since the “honeymoon” in EU–Russia relations ended and the centre of the global economic activity has shifted even more towards Asia, creating alternative integration possibilities, including options for Russia as a Eurasian state.

On the other hand, the European Union is not enamoured with Russia’s vision of a “Greater Europe” as a product of equal interaction between the European Union and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) with the existing positive baggage in cooperation between Brussels and Moscow (dialogue on various sectors and the visa regime, looking for a compromise in the energy sector, cross-border cooperation, etc.). The European Union lacks enthusiasm not only because European officials do not consider the EAEU to be an integration project comparable to their own, as they believe that at the first available opportunity most EAEU members will defect from Moscow to Brussels, but also because the European Union is poorly suited to conducting an equal dialogue with anyone, including even such partners as the United States and China. The European Union’s traditional strategy has always been to spread its standards, rules and norms geo-

graphically to other participants of the international system, rather than to adapt its standards, rules and norms to the specifics of those other participants.

It would seem that overcoming the dead-end that blocks the path of cooperation between Russia and Europe, while at the same time remaining within the framework of bilateral relations, is impossible. At least in the near future. In its current state, Europe does not have any convincing arguments to bring Moscow back to the model of relations that existed at the early 21st century. To put it bluntly, Brussels has nothing to offer Moscow, save for a return to the situation the way it was two decades ago, and even then only if Moscow gives up on all of its real or imaginary foreign political achievements of recent years.

Russia (even with the combined potential of the EAEU countries) does not have sufficient power to make Brussels (greatly weakened as it is compared to its recent heyday) conduct an equal dialogue with Moscow. For the European Union, an equal dialogue was impossible even at the height of Europe–Russia relations. It is all the more impossible today. This stalemate will persist even if a miracle removes the main obstacle in the way of Europe–Russia cooperation: the unabated conflict within and around Ukraine.

We should add that, over the last decade, the European Union has failed to become an independent global centre of power. It has continually attempted to conduct an independent foreign policy, move towards “strategic autonomy” from the United States and increase the foreign political coordination of the EU member countries, especially after the election of the open Eurosceptic Donald Trump in the United States. However, the moment Trump threatened the European Union with secondary sanctions should European companies breach unilateral American restrictions concerning Iran, the golden carriage of Europe’s independence immediately started to turn back into a pumpkin.

It is obvious that in any serious issue of cooperation with the Kremlin, Brussels will inevitably have to listen to what Washington has to say. And Washington will never be interested in a strategic partnership forming between the European Union and Russia. U.S. politics will most likely block it in any way possible. And it will succeed, too. Given the obvious power imbalance between Washington and Brussels, the latter can count only on tactical victories over the United States in defending its right to an independent policy regarding Moscow, and only in those cases when EU countries have a consensus on the “Russian question.” Such a consensus is a rare thing.

A Jump into Europe from a Springboard in Asia?

Paradoxically, the only realistic path for Russia to return to Europe today is through Asia. A lone “return” is not feasible; however, in the format of a “Greater Eurasia” created joint-

ly with China, India and other Asian partners, Russia might have radically new bargaining positions in the dialogue with Brussels.

As we know, the idea of “Russia’s turn to the East” has a long history. Attempts to implement this turn were undertaken under various historical conditions and in various formats over at least the last 150 years. The results were ambiguous; on the whole, despite individual achievements, Russia thus far has not become a full-fledged player in the Asia Pacific.

After EU–Russia relations took a sharp turn for the worse in 2014, the role of the East for Russia’s foreign political and economic strategies has objectively increased. Much has been done in this area over the past four years. Nevertheless, the prospects of forming a single Eurasian economic, strategic, sociocultural and humanitarian space with Russia as one of the principal founders of a “Greater Eurasia” remain vague. Moreover, the long-term trend to push Russia into the periphery of many strategic integrational processes in Eurasia remains.

Particularly troubling is Moscow’s frequent tendency to view the “turn to the East” as a way of avoiding the need to resolve Russia’s truly fundamental problems, or at the very least as a way of postponing decisions regarding them for some indefinite future. It is believed that the “turn to the East” removes the need or at least reduces the urgency of implementing deep structural reforms of the Russian economy.

As a “Greater Eurasia” created jointly with China, India and other Asian partners, Russia might have radically new bargaining positions in the dialogue with Brussels.

In reality, this turn places even greater demands on both the quality of Russian diplomacy and the quality of the country’s economy. Building a “Greater Eurasia” will in any case prove more difficult than building a “Greater Europe,” even though the latter task, which formed the principal content of Russia’s politics and policies for two decades, was never resolved.

Overcoming the multiple obstacles (geopolitical, strategic, economic, social, cultural, anthropological, etc.) that stand in the way of the formation of a “Greater Eurasia” and searching for ways to overcome them is a fundamental task for Russia’s foreign policy, as well as for its domestic development. We should proceed from the premise that, in order to fully fit into the emerging Eurasian community, Russia will need to do far more than preserve the overall positive dynamics in trade relations with China, develop “showcase” multilateral institutions such as BRICS and the SCO, hold large-scale Asian investment forums and expand traditional trade and economic ties with Asian partners.

With Russia currently lagging behind the average growth rate of the Asian economies by 4 per cent (by 5 per cent in the case of China and India), its missing the beat of the continent’s current new technological revolution, and its minimal

participation in the emerging continental scientific, educational, cultural and humanitarian space, the task of fully fitting into a “Greater Eurasia” is even less feasible than Russia fitting into a “Greater Europe.” Russia’s starting positions in Asia are far weaker than they are in Europe: Russia has less accumulated experience there; its infrastructure is worse; there are more cultural and civilizational problems; no large Russian-speaking diasporas, etc. Asia is stricter than Europe, competition on Asian markets is more cut-throat, “might makes right” is the rule in economic relations, etc.

At the moment, however, compared to the “European project,” the “Eurasian project” has at least two decisive advantages for Russia. First, Russia’s relations with most Asian countries do not have such a long trail of historical grievances, mutual claims and negative stereotypes that are typical of relations with many European partners. For most Asian countries, Russia does not look like an existential threat, and the negative image of Moscow is not a source of national identity. On the contrary, Russia is perceived primarily as a major potential opportunity for economic expansion, and there are few opportunities of such scale on the Asian continent.

To illustrate the profound differences between the attitudes of European and Asian countries to Russia, we need only compare the lists of participants in the latest St. Petersburg International Economic Forum (SPIEF, May 2018) and in the Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok (September 2018).

The value of Russia for Asia is precisely that it is different. It complements Asian countries more than it competes with them.

The only European leader to attend SPIEF was President of France Emmanuel Macron. Meanwhile, the President of the People’s Republic of China, the prime ministers of Japan and South Korea, the foreign minister of India and the heads of many other Asian countries were present at the Eastern Economic Forum. Put yourself in Vladimir Putin’s shoes and answer the question: which geographical area would you find it meaningful to focus on in the near future?

Second, unlike the “European project,” the “Eurasian project” is only just beginning. There are no fixed rules of the game here yet, no procedures that are set in stone, no powerful bureaucratic structures, the likes of which have long taken deep root in the European Union. Moreover, it is not at all evident that the “Greater Eurasia” will copy the cumbersome European constructions: instead of Europe’s bricks, Asia may use light relocatable polymer structures. Therefore, Russia will find it easier to join Eurasian processes as an equal participant, and even a leader in some areas.

One could add that, as partners, the authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes in Asia are more comprehensible and reliable than European democracies. Interacting with President Recep Erdogan or Chairman Xi Jinping is easier and more understandable than with President of the European

Commission Jean-Claude Juncker or the leaders of individual European states – at any rate, in those cases when quick and specific results are required. In the current highly fluid and poorly predictable international situation, the speed of decision-making is crucial.

“I Will Surely Come Back, Wrapped up in Work and Friends...”²

Russia’s turn towards a “Greater Eurasia” by no means equals Russia’s transformation into an Asian state or some puzzling hybrid “Eurasian” country. This is impossible. And even were it possible, it would be pernicious for Russia and for the entire “Eurasian project.” The value of Russia for Asia is precisely that it is different – it is not like most Asian countries. It complements those countries more than it competes with them. Renouncing Russia’s European identity by dissolving it in the currently non-existent “Eurasian” identity would be a national disaster for Russia. Fortunately, such an evolution does not appear feasible.

Instead of futile attempts to construct a phantom “Eurasian identity,” Moscow should consider the positive experience of Australia and New Zealand, which succeeded in fitting into the emerging Asian Pacific community largely due to their evident economic, political, cultural and civilizational differences from their surrounding Asian societies. The paradox is that as Russia immerses itself deeper and deeper in the Eurasian context, it will have to focus more on boosting its European nature. And this is impossible without active cultural, educational, academic and social interaction with the European Union.

To illustrate Russia’s possible “return” to Europe in some indefinite future, let us consider the curious experience of the Asia–Europe Meeting (ASEM) forum, a mechanism for regular meetings between heads of state and government of Asian and European countries. The forum has been held every two years since 1996, with the venue alternating between Asian and European states. Ministers of foreign affairs, transportation, education, culture, finance, labour and employment meet between summits. Even though ASEM remains an unofficial dialogue process, its role in the interaction of its partners in politics, security, finance, economics and social and cultural areas should not be underestimated.

Russia tried to become a partner of the forum since its inception, but for a long time these attempts were blocked, primarily by European states, under the contrived pretext of Russia’s unclear geographical affiliation (!). Ultimately, Russia did join the ASEM, at the 8th Forum summit in Brussels in 2010. However, it was only admitted into the organization thanks to the energetic efforts of its Asian partners. And today, Russia is a partner within the ASEM’s Asian, rather than the European, subsection.

2. Extract from Прощание (Farewell), a song by Vladimir Vysotsky (1966)

Clearly, this experience could be used in the future in the framework of such formats as the “One Belt, One Road,” “16+1,” “BRICS+” and others. Additional opportunities open up for Russia because the European Union itself has started to experiment with possible new formats of collaboration with Asian countries (the currently fashionable concept of transcontinental “connectivity”).

Russia’s “inserting itself” in complex transcontinental projects will require a high level of diplomatic art, political flexibility and readiness to play the “second fiddle” in many cases to China, India or ASEAN. But, most of all, it will require a transformation of the Russian economy in such a way that would justify Moscow’s meaningful participation in such projects. Moscow’s symbolic participation as a goodwill gesture on the part of Beijing or other Asian capitals will be of little use for Russia; sooner or later, excessive elements of transcontinental structures will disappear. Riding into Europe on China’s coattails will not work.

Everything said above is not an attempt to belittle the significance of the European Union for Russia. The “European project” is very important for the entire world and for Russia. It is still the most successful integration project of the previous and current centuries. The builders of the new world order will undoubtedly borrow much from the European legacy, both from the successes of the European Union and from its failures. Even if the European Union does not become a key strategic partner for Moscow in the foreseeable future, it can and should remain the socio-economic model that fits best Russia’s needs and possibilities at the current stage of its development.

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Speaking about the possibilities of a strategic partnership, the future of Europe–Russia relations depends primarily on the way the European Union shapes up in five to ten years, by the time the new Russian political cycle starts. We would like to hope that grim forecasts of the collapse of the European Union by that time will prove entirely unfounded. Optimally, the question of “Russia returning to Europe” should have lost its relevance by then. It could be replaced by a no less pivotal question: How will Moscow and Brussels interact within the emerging “Greater Eurasia”? Ultimately, Europe, even with European part of Russia included, is just a large peninsula at the western end of the huge Asian continent.