

*Europe should adopt a policy of benign neglect towards Russia, President Ilves recommends.*

In the last five years we have witnessed the culmination of a long process that began with the collapse of authoritarian-totalitarian communism in Central and Eastern Europe and in Russia. As a result those countries who managed a transition to democracy at first attempt have become members of NATO and the European Union, the two pre-eminent organisations of liberal Western democracies. If we were to limit our field of sight to the ten post-communist countries belonging to the above organisations, we could indeed assume that the end of history in the Fukuyaman sense had been reached. Yet when we look beyond the borders of Europe, at Russia and the countries in between, such as Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia that have not yet finished their march towards the West, we can see history still seething on. Right before our eyes.

But if we pause briefly to think about it, the real change that has occurred since the turn of the century is the collapse of the Fukuyaman or – perhaps more properly – the neo-Hegelian dream of an inexorable march toward liberal democracy. While occasionally sustained by developments such as the Rose and Orange revolutions, the sad fact is that the collapse of communism in 1989-91 produced a rather small catch for liberal democracy. The countries that eighteen years later are firmly in the camp of democracies constitute a clear minority of those liberated almost two decades ago.

Instead we see that an alternative path – authoritarian, often mercantile capitalism – has been the preferred route for a number of countries. Were these countries simply poor and ruled by rent-seeking authoritarians, this would not perhaps bother us so much. We could simply wait for their respective demise as we saw take place in Georgia four years ago, when the people said: "Enough."

But Georgia has neither oil nor gas. Authoritarian capitalism well endowed with natural resources, i.e. oil states with corruptive yet efficient secret police and muzzled journalism, has proved to be quite a viable alternative.

*Russia is back!* Is the hubristic catch phrase in Moscow today. A pity – the people of Russia deserved a step not back but forward, towards the 21st century. And while we are glad to see Russia getting out of the economic doldrums of the 1990s, in too many ways what is back is what made life in the Cold War so unpleasant: belligerent behaviour, bullying of neighbours, political and military support for unsavoury regimes, blocking of initiatives that involve our, i.e. European security, most recently in the case of Kosovo. We (or at least some of us) are unnerved seeing the norms of liberal society trampled underfoot: absence of the rule of law, arbitrary judicial decisions, muzzled media – especially electronic media, the recurring abuse of psychiatry, suppression of the opposition. *Plus ça change, plus c est la même chose, a pessimist would say.*

Gone of course is the unsustainable ideological baggage of communism. Yet getting rid of an unsustainable ideology does not necessarily mean becoming liberal and democratic. We know all too well that non-communist regimes can also act badly. I am not going to provide a catalogue of ills here, but we can sum things up more or less as follows.

Russia today no longer aspires to be part of a liberal West; instead it sees its own path as a “managed democracy” based on its own traditions of rule. It sees its path as a model for others and sees liberal democratic rule in former communist lands, especially on its borders, as a threat. And acts on that perception. Revisionist, even “resurrectionist” in its view of its own past, increasingly nationalistic and jingoistic, it can, thanks to the enormous rise in energy prices finance behaviours we all thought had been consigned to the dustbin along with communism.

We in the liberal democratic West need to deal with this change. Policies that seemed hopeful in 1997 are woefully inadequate in the face of the oil-*Realpolitik* of 2007. We need to firmly grasp three things:

First, we must abandon our own hubristic idea of being able to change Russia as we please, guide her towards democracy. We in the West, neither through the European Union, through NATO nor through bi-lateral relations are not going to *influence* the domestic policies of Russia. In the Yeltsin era perhaps there was a general desire to join the West. This historical “moment” lasting from the late Gorbachev period to the end of Yeltsin’s presidency is gone. It was already receding rapidly before the dramatic increase in energy prices. It is gone today for perhaps decades.

Secondly, great power politics is back, in every way. The Kantian eternal peace that we all

dreamt of after the fall of the wall is as much of an illusion as it was in the Cold War. We see a need to assert oneself for whatever reason, some of them bordering on neurotic, simply for the purpose of assertion. Seeking "respect" for Russia through bullying, in some cases militarily, as we have seen twice in Georgia this summer, flying long-range bomber missions; threatening the retargeting of missiles on Europe ... all this should give us serious pause.

This is not the kind of respect enjoyed by countries that have accomplished something in creative development. This „respect" is to be gained by threats of retargeting missiles. *Greatness, glory, derszhavnost*

as a

*sine qua non*

of statehood and political identity are just as alien to liberal democracy as the nineteenth century, where such concepts belong. Yet the diplomats of every European country must keep such categories in mind when dealing with Russia.

Third, the West is different as well. The Manichean opposition of the Cold War kept politics and politicians firmly laced in a moral stays. Now the moral and political clarity of the Cold War era is gone. Today, it is possible to buy people, publicly and without shame, something that in the Cold War would have been unthinkable at least at the level of heads of government and senior politicians. Today, the billions and billions of petrodollars generated by state-owned Gazprom and Rosneft are simply too much for some people to resist.

In the Cold War we would have been talking treason, today it's just a golden parachute, a nice earner after leaving public service. In brief, tremendous sums available for buying Western politicians, as well as the disappearance of the Cold War ideological watershed, mean we can no longer presume that at least certain political unity should be obvious in the activities of the Western leaders.

When I say these developments should give us pause, I mean that not as an expression, I mean that literally. We need to recognize that the European security arrangement in a broader sense is facing a new challenge, and figure out how to proceed. Europe needs a new "consensus on Russia", something that will not be arrived at overnight. If nothing else I would suggest, at least until after the Russian election, a period of active reflection for NATO and the European Union. To reflect upon the unity and unanimity we could muster up considering the oil dollars, the competition on power deliveries, the different vulnerability of member states.

The people of Russia have the right to choose their own path, and certainly we all wish for Russia to do well. Russia needs to come to terms with itself. And if there is talk about another Cold War, it is certainly nothing that anyone in the West might be looking for. Therefore, while taking a period of reflection and avoiding undesirable and unnecessary arguments on the eve of presidential elections, we should resort to a policy of *benign neglect* towards Russia.

I choose these two words carefully. They come from Daniel P Moynihan, a US senator and scientist, who used them in 1966 and in a completely different context – racial relations in the USA – yet certainly one of overcharged and angry rhetoric, violence and mistrust. In the context of the US, Moynihan's words were (often deliberately) interpreted as an appeal to terminate federal aid programmes, although actually Moynihan was talking about benign neglect towards rhetoric, which would help to avoid unnecessary accumulation of tensions. In the context of Western-Russian relations, benign neglect means that we ignore Russian rhetoric, we ignore discrimination of the political opposition and government-controlled media, but only until such behaviour remains domestic and does not violate the Convention on Human Rights. This means a measured benign neglect with clear rules.

Some of these rules would be as follows.

First not to carp on lack of democracy in Russia. We are not going to change anything. We should have no hopes that there will be freedom of the media or free and fair elections. So why bother? We deal with other authoritarian regimes without harping on their failures. We can do with Russia too, all the more since we know we will have no effect. And yet we must not forfeit the progress gained in the field of human rights ever since the Helsinki CSCE Final Act of 1975, when the Soviet Union conceded to the universality of human rights. This means that Europe cannot fail to protest if someone is put in a mental hospital for political reasons, as was often the case in the Soviet Union and this summer also in Russia.

Secondly, we, including my own country should call a moratorium on our own responses to Moscow's ever-roughening rhetoric. For several reasons, the success of liberal democratic changes in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland is especially painful for Russia, which is why, in a peculiar way, Russia has resorted to the rhetoric of the 1950s when dealing with these countries. We in turn can most certainly refrain from responding to the Orwellian histrionics, tough as it may be when we are accused in domestic politics of failing to respond to calumny. Still, it bespeaks of maturity in both a person and a nation to be above vulgar attacks, refrain from responding to something that is simply below our dignity.

But this in turn requires a third element: a firm European position that undemocratic regimes like Russia do not have a legitimate claim on what EU member states do or how they do it. If we refrain from comments on the domestic policies of an authoritarian state, we have even less reason to discuss the actions of democratic European countries with such a state. This is the real touchstone of the Union. Will the member states be able to resist special offers in the field of energy, market access, or simply banal sops offered to leading politicians?

The member states must address these matters seriously. In any case, Europe must give serious thought to „strategic partnership” with Russia. If the President of Russia is threatening to target missiles on Europe, as it happened this spring, then what „strategic partnership” are we talking about? It is pointless to base European Union’s foreign politics on illusions.

Moreover, the sphere of interest of the Western liberal democratic community is not limited to the borders of the European Union and NATO. We must, I repeat must support and help genuine fledgling democracies under attack from Russia or other totalitarian countries. Two independent fact-finding missions by experts from EU and NATO countries have ascertained that Russia flew into Georgia’s air space, and fired a missile. The silence of the current EU presidency on attacks on Georgia is not acceptable. Passing off responsibility to the OSCE when everyone knows that an organisation where Russia has veto is incapable of response in such a matter, is unconscionable and contrary to the fundamental principles of the European Union.

The European Union must recognise that these countries are being beleaguered and threatened, and work out a way for efficient and objective observing, assessing and responding to this kind of behaviour. The European Union must have permanent viable mechanisms, which would enable active response to incidents that pose a risk to security in its neighbourhood, wherever they might occur. As a more specific measure I suggest we form an EU team for investigating military and security issues, just as we have Civilian Response Teams (CRT). Then we would no longer be able to hide behind the impasses of member states separately investigating incidents, whereas no steps are taken on the EU level. Unfortunately, such acts and incidents have already become part of Russia’s policy towards its neighbours – consider the announcement about Gazprom once again increasing prices on the day after the elections in the Ukraine.

To countries like Ukraine and Georgia, countries that have made the choice for democracy, we need to send a firm signal that they will get our political support. It is even more important, in order to end the current paralysis of the European Union and NATO, to free ourselves from the misconception that steps taken to support these democracies would automatically open a

back-door to EU or NATO membership to these countries before they are actually prepared to accede. At the time when enlargement is generally suspended, the EU should, instead of worrying about the "back door", carefully consider what can be done for these countries – and this should be considerably more than the *laissez-faire* approach characterising the current neighbourhood policy of the European Union. We should, for instance, find out to which extent we can offer those countries the four freedoms of the EU: free movement of goods, capital, services and people. Although this does not give them membership or even votes in the EU, such steps might substantially help to bring these genuine democracies closer to Europe. Of which development Europe would stand to gain most.

Perhaps most importantly we need to understand that our own hubris about our own role in changing Russia can lead to dangerous results. We have forgotten the severe lessons learned by the West when dealing with the Soviet Union, and adopted a strategy which simply does not work with a country for whom reverting to Soviet diplomatic traditions signifies the return of glory. Facilitation of the visa regime is a typical example. We gave this privilege to Russia, when genuine candidates, such as Macedonia, or even negotiation partners, such as Turkey, have still not been recognised this way. Worse still, Russia does not hasten to fulfil the readmission agreements or sign respective bilateral protocols with all member states. Russia has not introduced more civilised registration requirements for EU citizens travelling to Russia. What might be achieved by such policies?

For all these reasons, we need a time out. At least until the dust inevitably stirred up by the elections will have settled again, NATO and the European Union must adopt benign neglect towards domestic developments in Russia and concentrate upon drawing up a new strategy for the time following the elections. By nature, benign neglect is not a policy that can lead to a breakthrough – it means freezing the relations to a certain extent.

And Europe needs indeed to overcome its simplistic faith the possibility of breakthroughs, because as the visa regime and readmission agreement example demonstrates, a breakthrough on paper has no significance in reality. It is not a breakthrough to accept flanking limits after a threat to leave CFE. It is not a breakthrough that eight years after the OSCE summit in Istanbul there is still no movement on removal of troops from Moldova.

In this period of benign neglect, however, we need an active debate on how to defend our members and the precious democratic accomplishments, the fruits of our great efforts in the last fifteen years. Europeans must build their own future, in their own image. Let us approach Russia again when we know what we are doing, or when Russia demonstrates readiness to act in a way that would not make us talk about another Cold War. Both would mark the beginning of

a new era.