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Russian foreign policy: the art of avoiding choices is in high demand

Vladimir Putin's re-election campaign may not be comfortable about addressing Russia's foreign policy situation. Skirting the issue would, however, shift the debate towards domestic issues, where making promises is even harder.

The new political season in Russia will not be "business as usual". Although the results of the forthcoming presidential elections are easily predictable and Vladimir Putin is expected to stay in power for another six-year term, voters still need to be convinced that they are making the right choice. Foreign policy has a leading role to play in this regard, taking into account the fact that Putin's current legitimacy is largely based on popular support for the president's past actions in this very field.

In 2012 campaigning was easy for Putin.

Relations with Europe were relatively unproblematic. The European political class was imbued with illusions concerning Russia's "modernization", which had become the only "talk in town" during the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev. In turn, self-confidence and condescending overtones were clearly in evidence in the Kremlin's rhetoric when it spoke about "Europe in crisis" and possible Russian financial assistance for "suffering" EU economies.

Catching "China's winds in the sails of our economy", as Putin put it, appeared to be a feasible proposition when Russia was preparing to host an APEC summit in Vladivostok in September 2012. The G20 chair in 2013 was expected to provide new opportunities for global outreach, along with the Sochi 2014 Olympics.

A breakthrough in post-Soviet re-integration seemed to be within reach by means of creating the Eurasian Union, presumed to include Ukraine.

The only problem was relations with Washington, which turned sour after the failure of the "reset", and particularly after the Russian protests during winter 2011-12, viewed in Moscow as being orchestrated by the US. But as long as it was obvious that the Obama administration did not have the appetite to apply any real pressure on Russia, the issue could easily be ignored.

Now the situation is much more challenging.

Moscow is stuck in both Ukraine and in Syria, which have become a drain on Russia's resources and a key irritant in relations with the West.

Hopes that Donald Trump would turn the page and reboot cooperation with Moscow proved to be groundless. Champagne, uncorked in the Russian State Duma to celebrate his election, was wasted. It took an embarrassing six months after Trump's inauguration before his meeting with Putin could take place on the margins of the G20 summit in Hamburg, and the results of the conversation were deemed modest at best. Little else should be expected in the immediate future either. On the one hand, Trump faces severe limitations at home. Congress and most of the policy-making

community perceive Russian international behaviour as a direct security threat and are demanding a tough response. On the other hand, whereas for Trump a "deal" is synonymous with victory, Moscow cannot concede anything without losing face.

The EU is demonstrating remarkable unity and refuses to soften its stance towards Russia's annexation of Crimea and its actions in Ukraine's Donbas. True, the internal discussion among EU member states continues, and some bilateral relationships with Russia are more preferential than others, but what matters is the fact that economic sanctions remain in force and are routinely extended.

Russia's "pivot to Asia" is delivering very slowly, if at all. Experts from the Moscow Carnegie Center have recently opined that the "low-hanging fruit" in Russia-China relations has been reaped, that all politically motivated agreements have been concluded, and that Russia should not expect any "easy money" from China. For most analysts, the Russian-Chinese relationship is not a partnership of equals. Rather, Moscow accedes to initiatives, such as "One Belt, One Road", which Beijing is determined to undertake in any case.

The Eurasian Economic Union has not become an effective instrument of Russian regional influence. This Union did not acquire a political

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dimension and is not in reality even an economic union. It has introduced only one fundamental freedom – the freedom of movement of labour. The movement of goods, services and capital has not been liberalized, and member states even operate different customs regimes. Most significantly, post-Soviet partners did not support Russia in its conflict with and over Ukraine. On the contrary, Belarus, Russia's declared closest ally, used the opportunity to distance itself from Moscow and seek re-engagement with the West.

All this leaves Putin with very little to promise during the campaign. Non-Western options have been tried but, thus far, have ended unconvincingly. Normalization with the West on Russia's terms is hardly within reach. Normalization on Western terms cannot even be considered as it is unacceptable to the Russian security elites and the majority of the population. Increased confrontation with the West, however, is not affordable and would be very risky.

The default choice in this situation would simply be to deny that things are not going great. It is entirely possible to feign triumph, arguing that NATO's and the EU's geopolitical expansion has been

halted and that the sanctions have had no impact on Russia. It is possible to appeal to patriotic feelings and nurture the sentiment of a "besieged fortress". It is possible to sarcastically reprimand the West for the latter's foreign policy mistakes and failures. It is, after all, possible to rely on Russia's highly professional diplomatic corps in managing the daily agenda.

The problem is that if nothing new is said on foreign policy, the election debate will inevitably shift towards domestic issues. But on that front it is even more difficult to promise a brighter future for a country in which nothing is going to change.