

## **How to survive in a sanitary cordon?**

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During the last election campaign for the Latvian parliament (Saeima), geopolitical risks were a never ending and colourful topic. For parties in the ruling coalition, threatening rhetoric has become a kind of Munchhausen's pigtail, which can be used to pull themselves out of a bog. The elections passed and peace has come instead of shockers intended for voters, it is time to distribute portfolios and sew dinner jackets for Latvia's presidency in the EU. Yet geopolitical processes are in full swing, causing Latvia problems which nobody thought about before.

Europe is sticking deeper and deeper in a new cold war between the West and Russia. The confrontation over „who will be the owner of Ukraine” has fully lost its initial ardour in the eyes of both the European integrators in Brussels and „imperialists” in Moscow. Yet none of the parties was given an opportunity to either retreat or to give in, at least no opportunity that can be taken advantage of.

I doubt whether the Kremlin can afford spoiling its reputation, which may be caused by popular indignation about the „surrender” of separatists in Donetsk and Lugansk restoring Ukraine's sovereignty over the rebel areas of „New Russia”. What good is it, from the perspective of a Moscow politician? The next logical step in the settlement of the conflict, the renunciation from the Crimea, is impossible for Russia. The peninsula can be taken away only by superior forces, creating a permanent ghost of revanchism in the conscience of a humiliated nation.

The EU, in turn, cannot drop its demand to Russia to return the Ukrainian territories within the borders of 2013. In this case, the ultimatum cannot be just formal, which would actually mean resigning oneself with the current situation. For Brussels, it would mean the recognition of bankruptcy for its political principles and capacity. The Crimea has openly joined Russia, and there is a fundamental difference from the North Cyprus, Abkhazia or the Transnistrian Republic, which were accepted in real politics along with the official stand asking for separatists to be put under control of the central governments in Nicosia, Tbilisi and Chisinau.

Therefore, the confrontation between Brussels and the Kremlin cannot be “frozen”; it has to ripen for some destructive result. The process of mutual alienation between the EU and Russia, the collapse of their political, economic and humanitarian co-operation has become irreversible. We, the Baltic States, are on the way to building a new “Berlin wall” on our Eastern borders (and also on those of the EU). Yet it becomes increasingly clear that from a manager of a transit way, Latvia is transforming, like in the decades between the two world wars, into a “sanitary cordon”, a potential front-line area.

The only winner, however accidentally, would be the United States. First of all, because the Ukrainian crisis has shown that there is a new foreign policy consensus in Washington. Despite their mutual hatred, the Democrats and the Republicans have common understanding that “Thanks God, Russians are our enemies again!” For US politicians, diplomats and the military, Kremlin was a complicated partner for co-

operation or at least for a dialogue. Now it is a convenient, even a very comfortable adversary. An adversary who will not cause any really disastrous problems to America, yet by calls for action and rhetoric it restores the moral right of Washington to be “the global policeman”. Humiliated Europe already had to recognise how important is NATO, how strongly it depends on the US, which ensures the military power of this organisation, and how short-sighted was the position of the Europeans who deliberately economized on military spendings.

Having simplified their relations with Russia to the traditional, unequal but reckless contest, the US can return to the key priority of their foreign policy, i.e. building a partnership with China. The co-operation between two powers may provide a political and economic platform for attracting other countries of the Pacific region, and Washington could become both a guardian and bait for the countries which are now conflicting with Beijing (Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan). Meanwhile Russia, despite its ambitions in this region, would be just an emotional ward of China.

This process would add more problems to the inability of the EU and Russia to fully solve the Ukrainian crisis and restore previous co-operation, using rational, diplomatic methods, which I have already described above. Russia will shift the gravity centre of its foreign policy to the Far East, in a hope to overcome the US in the fight for China’s sympathies. The EU, in turn, parallel to searching its place in the “new world order” to be established on the Pacific coast, will have to solve many internal problems, which will emerge as Brussels and Kremlin will turn their backs to each other. One of them will be a sharp economic decline in the countries located on the EU’s eastern borders, the new sanitary cordon, which have lost the opportunities of transit and export to Russia and the Customs Union. It will damage not only the permanent Russophobes, such as the Baltic States and Poland, but also Finland, despite its declared well-balanced foreign policy, as well as Romania and Bulgaria, in spite of Russophilia attributed to the latter.

For nations of the Baltic region, it will be certainly a tremendous political shock, because we are used to be proud of our significant role in the European transit since the times of the Hanseatic League, which is the guarantee of our welfare. Earlier the period of diplomatic tensions between Latvia and Russia was always followed by an economic co-operation boom or at least by growing bank deposits of non-residents, reassuring us that “they will not survive without us”. Now this conviction has turned out to be a mistake. We would rather discover that the real value of the Baltic States will be just the status of an “unsinkable naval base” for NATO and a bridgehead defending the rest of Europe from tank armadas. Then we will have to accept that our welfare in the future will be only ensured by manufacturers of barbed wire, concrete workers building new airfields, fuel carriers, doctors and nurses in military hospitals, bartenders and waitresses in clubs at military bases.

It would be nice if these risks would never become real. However, they do exist, and the likelihood of their becoming a painful reality is only growing. Let us hope that the President of Latvia and the National Security Council he chairs will evaluate this problem, so that they could duly ask the European Council and the European Commission to develop and finance the programme of supporting the new opportunities of economic development for those countries transforming into “the sanitary cordon” of the EU. Otherwise this territory, which is now sinking into

poverty, will inevitably become a “pale fence with holes”, but the Baltic States – a “weak link” in the future Eastern policies of the EU and NATO (or, speaking more clearly, the USA). No matter what will be these policies and what means will be used to implement them.