

Russian Foreign Policy and its relations with Western Countries

More than twenty years have passed from the fall of Berlin Wall and the relations between Russia and Europe-Western Countries is still a thorny problem in the international political debate.

The discussion is influenced by three “myths” reinforced by a common historical memory and that slow down and avoid the mutual comprehension and acceptance.

The first of these “myths” is that the actual problems between Russia and Western Countries are the consequence of the authoritarian trends of the second era of Putin.

The second “myth” is that Europe is responsible of this situation, because with the enlargement of Euro-Atlantic institution to the former Soviet Countries it also imported their anti-Russian prejudices.

The last one is the “myth” that presents Russia as less important on the international asset because it has not become a “modern” European democracy losing in this way its indispensable features to be a great world Power.

Trying to approach this subject with a wide perspective I would eliminate these prejudices to understand the inner roots of this laborious relationship.

The main problem Russia had to face was to handle the last ten years of decline of USSR, passing through the ‘80s and landing to the post communist transition, without losing their position of great world Power. This is the core of its identity, of its DNA and the basis of its foreign policy.

In order to maintain this “international status quo” Russia needed to reduce the cost of foreign policy and to manage the new social problems of the Country brought up by the enormous recent changes. Europe anyway, considered this attempt “weak” and not a good effort towards an evolution, mostly regarding the institutional and regulatory framework.

Russia on its part, did not accept limitations to its sovereignty, which is why it was not interested in joining supranational and intergovernmental Institutions as the Europe-Western Countries system is in fact.

After refusing the integration, what are Russian intentions? It is reinforcing its identity and its political place in the European system and out of the European system. The economic and energetic link between Europe and Russia is growing stronger.

There are choices made by Russian Foreign Policy that led to the current situation and to this crack in the system of values, we can understand the reasons of all this retracing the most significant historical milestones that gave Russia an impulse to development and to the economic recovery.

The necessity of defending the Nation and the “Status quo”, the stabilization of post-soviet Russia as a Nation and the conservation of its role of World Power, brought it to create a very personal vision of international relations.

This vision is based on three main ideas: the sovereignty of Democracy as a role model for the political asset inside Russian borders; the former soviet territories perceived as a special area of influence for Russia; the “multipolarity”, where Russia is seen as an independent “pole” and not aligned with the others.

These are the ideas that provoked a big embarrassment in the relations between Russia and Europe-Western Countries inside the pan-European Institutions.

Embarrassment that after more than twenty years from the Fall of Berlin Wall is responsible of the fact that Russia is not completely part of Europe although it is “in” Europe, for its economy, energy, strong bilateral relations with the member countries. Russia expected an acknowledgement of its status from these Institutions, mainly because of its power, although it did not share their common regulations. Europe-Western Countries on the other hand, did subordinate the relations with Russia to its sharing of a European common denominator in the regulations. Europe did not consider the “World Power” factor to be crucial in the acknowledgement of Russia as a part of itself. On the contrary this “World Power” factor created suspect and worry, especially after Europe’s experience of two world wars, so it decided to hold off Russia.

The sovereignty of Democracy and the influence on former soviet territories damaged the relations with the European Council and OSCE; the “World Power” status and the “multipolarism” damaged the relations with NATO.

This misunderstanding during the last twenty years is the result of two different mentalities colliding.

On one side stands Russia with its will of being acknowledged as a great world power. Although with the break up of USSR it lost some of its assets, it kept others (the nuclear arsenal, permanent seat in the UN Security Council, the vastness of its territory and its geopolitical centrality in Eurasia). Russia kept the firm belief of being a great World

Power; this is the reflection of its historical tradition and an idea that survived through the communism and through the collapse of USSR.

On the other side Western Countries expected that Russia, after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the soviet union, was well disposed to go for a change that could lead it to a new “western” democracy and ready to start a new era post-bipolarity.

The impossibility of finding a common ground for Russia and Europe has been a failure for both Countries that could not forget fears and doubts coming from the Cold War.

This failure is not to be condemned after all. Thanks to the globalization and to the economical interdependence new paths are now open between Europe and Russia. It is a relationship that could be a mix between cooperation and competition. Energetic community, free trade area and the joint management of the Pan-European Area of security, could be the foundations of a strong relation between Russia and Europe, being flexible enough to become a sort of Commonwealth.

Once problems like energy and security in the Pan-European area will be solved, Europe and Russia could focus on the solutions to other important issues as the climate change, the development, the fight against poverty, the slowdown to nuclear weapons and the stabilization of the crisis areas through peacekeeping operations.

To get to this point, Russia should convert its multipolarity into multilateralism. Thanks to its interdependence with Europe, Russia can complete its internal modernisation and its legitimacy as a “modern” World Power of this 21st century acting as a responsible and operating Nation in the new global system.

This would not only lead to an improvement of the relations with Europe but also with USA, thanks to the Euro-Atlantic links.

It would be wrong to think that a strong Russia could be a menace for the world stability, as it would be wrong to think that a weak Russia could be a better scenario for our security.

Russia has neither the intentions nor the opportunity to challenge the Western Countries on a global scale. Russian military budget is the 5% of the Americans. Russian leadership is basically pragmatic and focused on the reconstruction and on the redefinition of its Nation. For historical and geographical reasons Russia is a centre of gravity in the Euro-Asiatic area, but this does not mean its intentions are aimed to an expansionistic policy towards the neighbouring States.

Russia should stop thinking at the West as a hostile subject and overtake those acts that come from this prejudice.

On my opinion I think that these two ways of seeing each other must change, this is the only way to give new life to the relations between Russia and Western Countries.

Georgian crisis or Ukraine crisis will happen again if there is no willingness to smooth the issues once and for all.

Europe should put apart its rigid regulations and its necessity to convert Russia into a more “western” democracy to make way for cooperation on themes like energy and security that Moscow too considers as essential.

This could be a good start, especially because if we go back to the beginning of the UE, it was born to cooperate only regarding industrial area, but then the commitment of every single Nation brought it to be the supranational Institution that Europe is Today.

Europe and Russia have to leave behind the 20th century to enter the 21st century together.