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On Trust and on True Causes of the EU-Russia Relations Break-up

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At first, it is important to explain what was not the main reason for the break-up in the EU – Russia relations and then to proceed with suggestions about a real root of the problem.

It is a common place to hear that the main reason for the break-up was a lack of trust. According to this logic until trust is restored, the relations will remain in limbo. Trust (and mistrust) is evoked time and again to analyse the current state of affairs on the Old continent.

It is not easy to find a person who would object to a notion that trust is essential for mutually beneficial outcomes. In our life, it is a highly valuable thing to have people whom you trust. Distrust is something that is natural to try to avoid.

Trust is important for personal relations, for businesses and other collective actions and even for politics. Trust can be compared to advantages, which one gains in the financial sector when actors get rid of transaction costs. In business, trust gives you opportunity to act cheaper and faster. This is one of the reasons, why countries create monetary unions.

Trust enables people to rely on other persons or entities without "safeguarding procedures" to insure one from risks or to minimize those risks. Trust is one of basic topics in behavioural science, psychology and even in economic modelling as in the book "Trust" by Francis Fukuyama. Therefore, trust can be both a personal and a collective notion.

Having said that, it is difficult to pinpoint trust because its meaning or meanings are ambivalent and ambiguous. Is trust a result of certain actions or a consequence of them? Is trust a constant or a variable? What is a connection between trust and interest? Why so many people or businesses who or which initially trust each other often fall apart or why there are so many examples in history when states turn from friends to foes and visa versa?

Does it make sense to say that certain states trust or should trust each other? Most states are inhabited by millions of people who never meet each other and therefore never get the opportunity to decide if they trust or mistrust strangers. The "tyranny of geography", i.e. proximity to each other, might have been a reason for generating trust. But many neighbouring countries were or are enemies not trustworthy friends, take for example France and Germany in the past or China and Japan, or India and Pakistan. The "tyranny of history", i.e. sharing the same experience and legacy and identity, might have been such a factor. But in real life long spans of friendly relations or close, even similar identities do not preclude peoples from jettisoning affinities and instead choosing competition or even war with each other.

Personal trust, including sympathy, empathy, positive personal chemistry, etc., no matter how fragile trust may be, does exist and is of course very helpful. However, it is a dubious undertaking to project it on interstate relations at least as a dominant condition. Personal trust existed even during Cold War years between, for example, some diplomats and politicians in opposing camps but it did not lead to building durable trust between states.

The secondary importance of sympathy or trust has nothing to do with the idea that good personal relations do not matter. The subjective factor in history is not less important than the objective one. Personal, face-to-face interactions may be truly important. The meeting of president Putin and president Obama in September 2015 at the United Nations or their later encounter the same year in Antalya at the G20 summit – both were important to make things improving. But it is important to point out that personal trust can be both a strong instrument to advance collective interests but in the same way it can be counterproductive if one's personal sympathy gets the upper hand over collective interests (in case if they do not coincide).

For example, Andrey Gromyko strongly believed that sympathy should not be confused with state or national interests. If both things coincide – good for personal relations; if sympathy or perception of sympathy or even trust run counter to state interests – then the former not the latter should be discounted.

All in all, trust certainly plays a role but not the leading one in building long-term relationship. There should be other ingredients, which, together with trust or in its absence can provide stable partnership.

Interests are the indispensable pillar of partnership. If interests are not tactical but strategic, than probability is high that relations will be accompanied by trust and affinity. It is difficult

to imagine how it may be the other way around, i.e. that trust persists with no interests firmly in place.

The next pillar is structures and mechanisms, which enable actors, who have common interests, to lock themselves in partnership. Perhaps this is the most important prerequisite for strategic cooperation.

Another pillar is common challenges and threats. The First and the Second World Wars were vivid examples how different actors under existential threat can make themselves trust each other (if only for a limited period of time). The “war with international terrorism” and now the war with ISIL can become a similar “lock-in” mechanism.

A lot is said about similarities of political systems and more broadly about values as a solid ground for trust. To some extent, this is true but again to a certain extent. Wars among ancient Greek cities or medieval Italian city-states, or examples from our times – as the strategic relation between the US and Saudi Arabia and other Gulf theocracies, on the one hand, and rows between the UK and Spain over Gibraltar or between the UK and Argentine over Falklands, on the other, are relevant examples. Abolition of death penalty in the Council of Europe is a sacred cow; in the US death penalty is still widespread. But such a schism in values does not persuade many people to assert that Europe and the US are incompatible in their values. Quite the opposite, usually they are portrayed in value terms as a single whole (which is the opposite extreme).

Another question: do actors who trust each other spy on each other? If individuals do so, trust between them is considered to be absent. For some reason, when spying is done by states, the reply is not always so clear-cut. If, for example, the US spies on Germany or Germany spies on France, etc., and as a result trust, even if preserved, significantly weakens, why still states keep treating each other as close allies? Apparently, due to strategic interests, effective joint structures and mechanisms, as well as common challenges and threats.

In a nutshell, trust is important but usually it is a consequence not a prerequisite. There is a set of conditions, under which trust can be sustained or can be generated.

The broad perception is that there is no trust between Russia as a state and the EU’s members and that we should either restore it or create it to get on friendly footing. This is a delusion. Indeed, it would help if our states trust each other. But before they are able to do so they should do something more important — to sort out their strategic thinking, to comprehend their common long-term interests, which are many, to create strong mechanisms and institutions, which can lock both parties in durable partnership.

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