

Stimulating public debate about the future - four comments and one proposal on the EUREN Report 2

In November 2020 we asked prominent Russian researchers to share with us their views about EUREN's Report 2 on "[Alternative futures of EU-Russia relations in 2030](#)". See also [EUREN Brief no. 23](#) by Irina Busygina and [EUREN Brief no. 25](#) by Dmitri Trenin as well as [the recording of the EUREN Expert Panel](#) about "The EU and Russia ten years from now" on 26 November 2020.

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First of all, I would like to congratulate the authors of the EUREN Report 2 on "Alternative futures of EU-Russia relations in 2030", as well as all project participants on the excellent scientific and practical work, whose results deserve wide discussion and dissemination.¹ I have four comments and one suggestion on the report.

1. Methodology

In my opinion, the "EUREN scenario-building: method and process" chapter is quite justified by the goals of the report. It is perfectly clear that a scenario is not a forecast or a prediction, not a linear projection of the present into the future, but a very specific way

of reflecting on alternatives, possible bifurcations, and options for future trajectories. Moreover, the scenario-building reveals not just the future options, but also today's problems and the alternatives. From this point of view, the scenarios concern not only our future, but also our present.

The variation among the scenarios underlines the general uncertainty and the fundamental unpredictability of the future. In that respect, wild cards or black swans are often cited; the authors of the report prefer gray rhinos. I will not argue about the terms, for they do not change the core of the matter; in fact, these are just ways (theoretical and empirical) to stress the poor predictability of future events. Here is an example: more than ten years ago, Ivan Timofeev, Irina Busygina, and I built alternative scenarios for Russia's future in 2020.² According to numerous focus groups, held from Kali-

¹ Sabine Fischer, Ivan Timofeev, Alternative futures of EU-Russia relations in 2030, EUREN Report 2, // <http://www.eu-russia-expertnetwork.eu/en/analytics/2020-11-euren-report>, (November 2020).

² Russia 2020: alternative scenarios of the near future, by Andrei Melville and Ivan Timofeev; Stockholm: Axel and Margaret Ax:son Johnson Foundation // <https://publications.hse.ru/mirror/pubs/share/folder/5fxcv8w3ez/direct/84197574.pdf>, (2010).

ningrad to Vladivostok, the most improbable and undesirable scenario was “Fortress Russia”, which described a mobilized country in a hostile environment. What do we see today? A seemingly unrealistic and undesirable scenario has turned into reality.

2. Four scenarios, four *raison d’être*

Each scenario proposed in the report is based on contemporary trends.

“Cold partnership”: The authors consider this to be the most probable and desirable option under the current circumstances. Nevertheless, this option assumes significant (not to use a stronger term) changes in the policies of both Russia and the EU. I would like to extend this scenario and ask what changes in domestic and foreign policy would make it possible. Given the actual conditions, this “modest” scenario, alas, is unlikely to come true automatically.

The *“Descent into anarchy”* scenario fosters reflection on a whole range of current trends both in the EU and in Russia. Basically, it extrapolates real current threats into a not-so-distant future. On the one hand, we are talking about the danger of disintegration of the EU, and Europe as a whole; on the other, about the “anti-Western stabilization” of Russian foreign policy (as well as domestic policy). Moreover, doubts emerge over the political and ideological autonomy of today’s Europe, which will probably become a “junior partner” of the United States, while the “European idea” is in crisis. This scenario reminds us that this option cannot be ruled out, and that solutions to counteract it should be sought today, not somewhere in the distant future.

The *“On the brink of war”* scenario is certainly terrifying — but ten years ago “Fortress Russia” seemed an improbable horror. By the way, just a few days ago, when an American destroyer entered Russian territorial waters, journalists started talking about the threat of a “third world war.”³ And a recent poll by the Public Opinion Foundation shows that 53 percent of Russians fear the threat of nuclear war.⁴ In other words, this “horror story” is not groundless.

The *“Community of values”* scenario seems pure fantasy today, relevant only as a reminiscence of the already for-

gotten “new political thinking.” Indeed, today the political trajectories of Russia and the EU seem to be utterly at odds and will remain so in the fairly long term. So, is this beautiful dream completely useless? No, it has its sense for the scenario building process, reminding us of the broad value framework that the USSR/Russia and the West/Europe followed in the old days of unfulfilled hopes and illusions. As mentioned above, a scenario is not a linear forecast of the future; it indicates the bifurcations and reminds us of the past and the present. And here we can recall the “cycles” that characterize Russian political and intellectual history, the alternation between essentially liberal orientation “toward the West” and conservative “anti-Westernism”. Now while all the trends seem to negate the idea of “cycles,” the beauty of forecasting lies in the uncertainty of the future. But, of course, “it takes two to tango,” and the Russian “cycles” have always had an important foreign policy dimension.

I should add that one can imagine another plot, which could become an independent scenario or be somehow embedded in the scenarios discussed above (for example, in “Descent into anarchy”). I am talking about a kind of *“neo-isolationism”*: a demand for this is clearly perceived today in certain circles of the Russian political elite and the expert community. Options like “withdrawing into oneself” and developing a new ideology “for internal use” are being discussed.⁵ In theory, these plots could also be included in scenario-building on future EU-Russia relations.

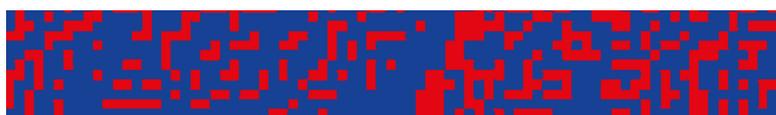
3. The reality of the confrontation

Three of the four scenarios presented in the report are in one way or another based on the same premise, of long-term confrontation between Russia and Europe/the West lasting at least until 2030 (or even beyond). And today there are seemingly few reasons to question that trend. Neither side cherishes hopes of change in the other’s policy. The authors of EUREN Report 2 extrapolate this trend into the foreseeable future (with the exception of the “dreamful scenario,” whose specific function has been discussed above) and focus on security threats, which are the central concern of the project. But I think that a deeper problem lies here. What matters is not just the costs of specific foreign policy choices, deriving from planning mistakes and subsequent misperceptions, but also much more fun-

³ Paul Wither, “Brink of World War 3: Russian ship threatens to RAM rival as chaos erupts at sea”, // <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1363866/world-war-3-russia-us-navy-warships-black-sea-territorial-waters-vladimir-putin>, (November 24, 2020).

⁴ Russian Prepares for Total War With the West, The Jamestown foundation, // <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-prepares-for-total-war-with-the-west/>, (December 10, 2020).

⁵ Sergey Karaganov, “Offensive in the war of ideas”, Rossiyskaya gazeta, // <https://rg.ru/2020/11/26/sergej-karaganov-oboronitelnaia-tradicia-neumestna-v-nyneshnem-mire.html>, (November 26, 2020).



damental disagreements and contradictions concerning the key national interests and the common “philosophy” of the parties. We just want different things today and we think differently.

Quite often the current international moment is seen as a return to the Cold War, whose dangers are discussed primarily in terms of international security. This is true, but it is not only a matter of threats to global and regional security, although they are extremely important. There is also a basic confrontation between today’s “world perceptions” and the interests arising from them. Once upon a time, during the “first Cold War,” foreign policy and military confrontation between the two blocs stemmed to a large extent from the global rivalry between universal ideological systems that had convinced adherents and sought for dominance. Today, the “European idea,” as well as the “Western idea” in general, is experiencing hard times, everyone is speaking about the “crisis of liberalism,” about the challenges of populism, nationalism, and other threats to seemingly unshakable European values that have claimed to be universal and attracted countries and continents for many centuries.

But even in Russia no substitute for the rejected and forgotten communist universalism has arisen, there is no big idea that could inspire. The idea of an “anti-West” cannot truly mobilize the Russians, despite its growing popularity in the developing “non-Western” world. The new Russian “offensive” ideology “for domestic consumption,” which some of our colleagues talk about, is still just a propaganda slogan. The days of the Great Victory of the Second World War as the basis for a new national idea are over. At the same time, I am not inclined to bury the European liberal idea. History shows that liberalism and democracy periodically face acute crises, and Europe is now clearly entering one of them. It will be up to Russia to make a civilizational choice, when this becomes possible. And of course, we have no reason to simply imitate someone else’s decisions — especially when they are not making them. It seems that the confrontation within and outside the security field will continue in the foreseeable future. No exit scenario is in sight.

4. Russian perspectives

The Russian perspectives largely derive from the above. The scenarios of Russian internal development proposed in the report offer various perspectives, some of them quite exotic. But several of them make an important observation: the year 2024 (with a continuation in 2036) may not be as fateful as some foreign and domestic observers believe. The current track is already stable and, in general, not particularly dependent on specific events. We know from comparative politics that the same political system (set of basic political institutions) can exist in different specific regimes. It can be assumed that if the political regime is consolidated and durable, it will also be able to modify its basic institutions (as we see, for example, in Kazakhstan).

5. Public function of the report

My final thought is also a proposal. Very few discussions about the future of Russia and the world are being conducted within Russia, as if something is paralyzing thought as well as action. One typical example is the latest focus group research on public opinion carried out in 2020 by the Levada Center and the Carnegie Moscow Center. They found that Russians do not have an intelligible image of the future, neither positive nor negative. There are different private perceptions and expectations (demand for state aid, desire to “shake up the oligarchs,” irritation with the bureaucracy, etc.), but there is no concept of the options for the future development of the country, not to mention the international sphere; by the way, such an attitude can support the isolationist tilt.

The EUREN Report 2 could be used as a stimulus for such discussions, both expert and public. An important public function of the proposed scenarios, no matter how politicians and experts treat them, is to stimulate public reflection and to discuss alternatives for the further development of the country and the whole world.

The content of this paper is the sole responsibility of the author and does not represent the position of individual EUREN members or EUREN as a group.

