

Can “Coronavirus Diplomacy” Bring the European Union (EU) Closer to Eurasia?

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The European Union (EU) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), an association of post-Soviet states, effectively serve a similar function to each other as an economic bloc. Unlike the 27-member EU, the EEU has only 5-members as many post-Soviet states allege it is nothing but an attempt to revive the Soviet Union, which the countries of the West do not want to promote. The West’s resistance has brought no economic benefit to it and this geopolitical duel was reflected in the limited success of sanctions against Russia. However, [the credibility of the EU and the liberal orders continues to diminish](#) as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. Therefore, the coronavirus pandemic actually creates a unique opportunity for the EU and EEU to integrate into a single system, or at least move closer together.

Russia’s dominance of the EEU is both a positive and a negative for Eurasian integration. Russia’s large market forms the basis of the integration potential of the EEU, however, limited economic growth, sanctions and its participation in global geopolitics create risks for the Eurasian integration process. However, Eurasian integration would be in the interest of EU as it will connect European states to new markets in Central and East Asia far more efficiently and quickly than by other means. The EU claims that it works towards common markets and efficiency but does not seriously consider connecting Lisbon on the Atlantic Ocean to Vladivostok on the Pacific Ocean.

The EU is losing its position as a top trading partner of the EEU, and it’s not just because of China’s growing importance. As a trading partner of the EEU, China has already surpassed most of Europe. The role of the EU as a trading partner of the whole EEU is due to the important role of the EU for Russia. However, Russia has been slowly turning eastward from the EU for years now as the future leading economies of the world will shift from the West to Asia.

Coronavirus is certainly accelerating this reality as the entirety of the Anglosphere and Western Europe head towards a severe recession unable to handle the economic pressures of the pandemic. This pandemic and economic downturn effectively means that only China and Russia will compete for investments in the extremely resource rich Central Asia. As EU economies begin to recover in the aftermath of the coronavirus and their energy demands are not being met access to Central Asia may become a priority. Ironically, Russia is the only means for the EU to enter the markets of the post-Soviet countries outside of Eastern Europe. Therefore, with the liberal order severely damaged in the face of coronavirus, it will have to be acknowledged in the West that the EEU project as a whole is a force for good and the EU will have to admit it made a mistake by not initially recognizing the EEU.

With this in mind, the EU must show independent foreign policy and resolve its disputes with Russia, even if Washington insists on enacting hostiles relations with Moscow. As the EU originally began as an economic union without much of a political nature, by returning to their roots will mean naturally a change in foreign policy. If the economy is the concentrated expression of politics, then mutual economic interests should be the foundation of reconciliation between Brussels and Moscow.

French President Emmanuel Macron is one of the leading voices in normalizing relations with Russia, despite his harsh rhetoric against Moscow time to time. Let's consider Macron's Facebook post from last year where he said

“progress on many political and economic issues is evident, for we're trying to develop Franco-Russian relations. I'm convinced that, in this multilateral restructuring, we must develop a security and trust architecture between the European Union and Russia.”

With Macron stressing that Russia is part of Europe, he expanded on General de Gaulle's famous phrase that Europe stretches “from Lisbon to the Urals,” to say that Europe extended to Vladivostok, close to the North Korean border. Macron is one of the most powerful voices in Europe and strongly endorses a weakening of U.S. influence in Europe through various means, including criticism of NATO and suggestion to have it replaced with a European military.

The EEU's vision of Lisbon to Vladivostok as a common space is the best way to avoid a crisis on the Eurasian landmass. For countries like Ukraine who are stuck between both East and West, the integration of the EU and EEU would actually serve as a stabilizing factor. Therefore, as the coronavirus has exposed weaknesses in the liberal globalized order, an opportunity has actually emerged where the EU and EEU can more closely align and integrate.

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