

The Skripal Case : A Revealing Sign of the New Post-Cold War Geopolitical Reshuffle ?

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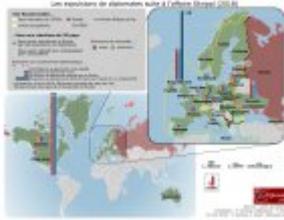
What does the Skripal case say about new, post-Cold War allegiances ? The United Kingdom remains an ally for many EU and third (i.e. non-EU) countries but some remain on the fence.

THE ATTEMPTED nerve gas poisoning of Sergei Skripal and his daughter on March 4, 2018 in the United Kingdom has resulted in a series of geopolitical effects. London's accusation that Moscow had organized the operation against a former Russian undercover agent quickly triggered a chain reaction of sanctions and counter-sanctions. Among the measures taken in response to the chemical attack on British territory, the expulsions of diplomats and Russian staff from the United Kingdom and supportive countries dominated the headlines. Russia has obviously denied any involvement in the event and responded with counter-measures via the expulsion from Russia of diplomats and staff of countries that have stood in solidarity with the UK. The press covered the declarations and counter-declarations for a while before losing track of the score in the match opposing the EU and Russia, the latter having established a clear lead : 58 Russians for 108 EU diplomats and staff expelled up to April 10, 2018. More importantly, media had few scruples in wheeling out the "Cold War" template, though this dated from a period (1947-1990 or 1991) marked by a bipolar structure of the world, with the United States and their allies on one side, and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and its satellites on the other. A URSS from which Russia has inherited a sizeable legacy, including its external debt, permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council and a nuclear - and chemical - arsenal.

What does the Skripal case say about new, post-Cold War allegiances ? The United Kingdom remains an ally (I) for many EU and third (i.e. non-EU) countries (II) but some remain on the fence (III).

I. The United Kingdom remains an ally

Since 1949 the United Kingdom has been a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), a military organization with a membership of 29 countries, including the United States and Canada. In 1973, the UK joined the European Economic Community, which, in 1993, became the European Union (EU). Since 2013, the EU has had 28 members, 22 of which are NATO members. On June 23, 2016 the British electorate responded to Prime Minister David Cameron's political gambit by voting in favor of leaving the EU (Brexit). Ever since, reality has come home with a vengeance, but exit from the EU is nonetheless planned for 2019. Since Brexit has made the EU look repellent to the UK and the negotiations are eating up substantial political energy, London could have found itself facing Russia's outraged denials alone. The message from Brussels, where there are as many EU as NATO institutions, could have been "let the ungrateful Brits deal with Putin themselves !" On the contrary, we have witnessed announcements of diplomatic measures from states standing shoulder to shoulder with the UK, spelling out to Russia that it has crossed a red line for the umpteenth time [1]. The result of these reactions is a new post-Cold War map of where allegiances now lie.



This map mostly reveals that former Republics of the USSR or Moscow satellites - which previously stood behind the Iron Curtain - have taken measures against Russia. This radical novelty in the European strategic environment is why the lazy recycling of the "Cold War" paradigm hinders our understanding : the breakdown is no longer the same. In addition, the means used by the different players have also changed. For instance, social networking did not exist in this form during the Cold War. Until proved otherwise, USSR was never suspected of influencing the presidential elections in the United States by manipulating social networks like Facebook or Twitter... which, in any case, did not exist at the time.

II. ... for many EU or third countries...

Which military organizations, EU and third countries have taken measures in support of the United Kingdom against Russia ?

Eleven EU members - from before the 2004 enlargement - have taken expulsion measures against Russian diplomats : Germany (4), Belgium (1), Denmark (2), Spain (2), Finland (1), France (4), Ireland (1), Italy (2), Netherlands (2) Sweden (1), United Kingdom (23).

Eight states which became members of the EU with the 2004 enlargement have also taken expulsion measures. They fall into three subgroups (A, B, C).

A. Three former Soviet Socialist Republics have taken measures against post-Soviet Russia : Estonia (1), Latvia (1), and Lithuania (3).

B. Four countries that had been USSR satellite states in the aftermath of WWII, and then benefitted from the opening of the Iron Curtain in 1989 before becoming members of the European Union in 2004, have taken measures against Russia : Czech Republic, born in 1993 from the peaceful dissolution of Czechoslovakia - (3), Hungary (1), Poland (4), and Romania (1), which entered NATO in 2004, followed by the EU in 2007.

C. One EU member from Former Yugoslavia - communist, yet on bad terms with the USSR - has taken measures against Russia : Croatia (1) which entered NATO in 2009 and the EU in 2013.

It should be mentioned that the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) - to which the territory of the former Democratic Republic of Germany (RDA) was added on October 3, 1990 - straddles two categories : former EU member and former satellite, a twofold identity that is largely overlooked in analyses of the 1990 NATO and EU enlargements.

The following third countries have taken expulsion measures against Russia : three former

USSR countries : Georgia (1), Moldavia (1) and Ukraine (10). It should be noted that these three countries have signed association agreements with the EU, a status that is not a stepping stone to membership. To this we should add that these three countries are not sovereign across the whole of their territory [2].

Two states from Former Yugoslavia, and now candidates for EU membership, have taken measures against Russia : Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYRM) (1) and Montenegro (1).

Other third countries are Albania (2), formerly close to the USSR but now candidate to the EU, and Norway (1), an AELE member which has twice refused to enter the EU. Outside geographical Europe, we find the following third countries : Australia (2), Canada (4 expulsions + 3 refused approvals) and the United States (60). Considering the ambiguous relations between the President of the United States, Donald Trump, and Vladimir Putin's Russia, it is fair to ask ourselves what the White House's motivations are. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) took part in - or participated in stimulating ? - the response (7 expulsions and 3 refused approvals).

We should underline that the map also shows whether or not the states are members of NATO, a military organization that contributed to the pace and scope of the EU enlargements. However, some NATO members have not, at this writing, taken measures against Russia.

III... but some remain on the fence

Six EU members — Bulgaria, Luxemburg, Malta, Portugal, Slovakia and Slovenia — merely recalled their ambassadors in Russia for a consultation in their capital of origin. Three of these (Bulgaria, Slovakia, born from the peaceful dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1993, and Slovenia, born of the breakdown of Former Yugoslavia in 1991-1992) are former communist countries.

On April 10, 2018, seven EU members or candidates had refrained from taking any sanctions against [Russia](#). Three EU members — Austria (member since 1995), Cyprus (2004) and Greece (1981) — had not sided with the UK. It would be interesting to examine the reasons behind the Austrian government's abstention. Four official or potential candidates for EU membership do not appear to have taken any measures against Russia : Serbia, Turkey*, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. Would this suggest that these countries are siding with Moscow ?

In the case of Cyprus, Greece and Serbia - and maybe to a lesser extent Bosnia and Herzegovina - does cultural and religious proximity lead to diplomatic proximity ? In Turkey's case, should we see an additional sign of Ankara's double game (or indeed duplicity) towards NATO and the EU ? We should remember that during the Cold War period, Turkey was the rampart on Russia's southern flank.

Need one recall that since 2005, Turkey is supposed to have been a candidate for EU membership, a postulate that implies a level of alignment with the latter's foreign policy... Ever since Ankara started to block the flow of migration from the Middle East, nothing seems to have held her back, but this dangerous gaming could become wearisome.

In any event, to return to our discussion of the member states, despite all the efforts made to implement joint reactions, once again, the EU remains true to its official motto “united in diversity”.

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Thus, since the opening of the Iron Curtain (1989) and the implosion of the USSR (1991), the post-Cold War world really has changed. Russia has lost its grip on several former Soviet Republics and satellites. Of course, this does not prevent her from trying to pull the strings in these areas and in former EU states, particularly through social networking, but also through state-controlled media such as RT and Sputnik. Moreover, the fact that some Central European countries (including Poland, and even Hungary) have expelled Russian diplomats does not make them model countries that duly respect shared EU values, starting with the rule of law.

However, despite those who look back nostalgically at the Cold War era, a time during which France possibly carried greater weight in world affairs, the framework of interpretation that applied at that time no longer suffices to decipher today’s world. Would Ukraine, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldavia and Georgia have taken measures against Moscow during the Cold War ? Would USSR satellites have expelled soviet diplomats ? Certainly not. The absurdity of the idea shows how much the concept of “Cold War” should be consigned to the 1947-1990 or 1991 period only. To speak of a “New Cold War” makes no sense in that it interferes with our understanding of the realities and areas under scrutiny.

Hence, taking the legacies into account, we should take stock of the new geopolitical and strategic situations in geographical Europe.

The Cold War is not coming back, any more than the dinosaurs.

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Plus

According to European Union sources up to April 10, 2018, 159 Russian diplomats and staff were expelled or had their accreditation request denied by the EU, third countries or NATO. In response, Russia expelled 194 EU diplomats and staff who stood in solidarity with the United Kingdom. Therefore, Russia has expelled 35 more individuals than the countries and organizations accusing her of the attempted murder of Sergei Skripal and his daughter in the United Kingdom. From Moscow’s perspective, is this “proof” of the innocence of its secret services ?

Up to April 10, 2018, 58 Russian diplomats and staff had been expelled from within the

European Union, but 108 EU diplomats and staff had also been expelled from Russia. Therefore, Russia had expelled 50 more persons than the EU countries, which accuse her of having crossed a red line : these persons are UK nationals working at the British Council and British consular staff in Moscow. Moscow clearly had a big lead in the game between the EU and Russia.

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Book

[. Gérard-François Dumont, Pierre Verluisse, "The Geopolitics of Europe : From the Atlantic to the Urals", éd. Diploweb via Amazon](#)



P.-S.

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Notes

[1] Among these red lines, the annexation of Crimea by Russia in March 2014, in violation of Ukraine's borders, or Moscow's support to the Syrian President accused of using chemical weapons.

[2] Since 1991, Moldavia has lost control over Transnistria, where the Russian army still camps. Since 2008, Georgia has lost some control over South Ossetia and Abkhazia where Russian troops station.