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Italy and UK Deliver Russia Unique Foreign Policy Opportunity on a Platter

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12/9/2016

Russia may look big on the map, but its foreign policy has often been perceived as being a reactive one. It has always felt a need to protect itself from outsiders, so called “Great Powers” encroaching on its borders, whether it was the French, Germans or the creeping establishment of NATO bases on its borders.

If the West doesn’t like Russia organising a referendum in Crimea to ask the locals if they want to remain part of the new US-created Ukraine, when the West has moved into plenty of countries and let people choose what sort of country they want to live in only after they have re-crafted the state to their liking, bought off the political class, it only has itself to blame.

Good for the goose is good for the gander

The positive steps that Russia is now taking are also reactive – Russia waits for the West to compromise itself by doing the opposite of what its values claim it is supposed to do, then does the same itself – “if it is legal for your side, which says it shouldn’t be, it is also legal for us.”

If the West does not like Russia entering Syria on the invitation of the Syrian government, which is legally free to make that invitation, while the West was invited there by nobody and is

supporting organisations the same West declares to be terrorist, it also only has itself to blame, not another country for taking the West at its own word.

However, a purely reactive foreign policy has its limits, as the Soviet Union discovered when its subjugation of so many states and peoples never progressed beyond that level. Consequently Russia, and the rest of us, might want to take an interest in a new and growing global trend. Taking advantage of this would give Russia an opportunity to play a more positive and constructive role in the world than it is doing at present – and also win it many powerful friends, who, though still important, are going to go turn to somebody for help sooner or later.

Pasta it

The latest manifestation of this trend is the defeat and resignation of Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi. He hasn't lost his parliamentary majority, so has no reason to leave, but has lost a referendum on changes to the Italian Constitution which he proposed and campaigned for.

There has long been a big divide between politicians and people in Italy. This is a legacy of the Transformism system which endured until Mussolini's day, in which political enemies were transformed into friends by the distribution of public contracts and no one knew whose side anyone was on. The later tradition of well-organised factionalism, and thus internal horse trading for favours, within parties hardly helped, and even the mass prosecutions of the Tangentopoli era, in which several cities saw every single one of their elected representatives jailed for corruption, have done little to alter this prevailing culture.

Renzi is one of the new breed of politicians who came along after the corruption scandals, with a mandate of reform and avowed distaste for the "political class". The changes he proposed to the Constitution were an attempt to achieve such a reform by putting more power in the hands of the Executive and less in parliament, where it is assumed the problems lie. But in practice they would have given more power to Renzi himself, who is perceived to have done exactly what the politicians he claims to oppose did in the past: cut himself off from the people to play his own private game. This was the opposite reform to the one people wanted, and on a 70% turnout around 60% of them voted No.

Plenty of other Prime Ministers have lost referenda without resigning. The key point here is that the No campaign was spearheaded by two populist parties, the Five Star Movement and the Northern League. Members of these parties have gained considerable electoral success by being exactly what Renzi once promised to be: anti-politicians who want to overthrow a corrupt system. It is the political system, rather than Renzi, which has lost this referendum, and his resignation will probably be the first of many.

Already it is being suggested that Italy could leave the Euro, or the EU, as a result of this referendum, as these are projects beloved of the discredited political establishment. Parallels are being drawn with the UK's Brexit referendum, which also resulted in the resignation of a Prime Minister who could still command a majority in parliament.

That referendum was also won on an anti-political establishment platform, and those on the winning side are now trying to make up new rules as they go along. Following a legal case, the High Court has decided that the British government must secure the agreement of parliament before invoking its Article 50 Leave notice. This is the standard procedure, as leaving the EU will involve changing laws, and does not stop Brexit taking place, though it may delay the process.

But No leader Nigel Farage, who left politics after the referendum saying he wanted his life back, is now promising to lead a 100,000-strong march to the Supreme Court in an attempt to intimidate the judges into allowing the government's appeal against this decision. The idea behind this is that both parliament and the courts are the political establishment, so must be swept away in favour of what Brexit supporters happen to want at any given time, whoever determines that. A complete overthrow of the UK's political system and institutions is what is being proposed, which no one on the British mainland has seen in their lifetime.

Many Italians indulged the Red Brigades terrorists in the 1970s because they would have been happy to see their whole political system, and those in it, overthrown. This is not a new issue there. Nor is it in Greece, where Syriza was elected on the same platform after the country had historically swung between polarising secular leaders and military rulers who everyone had equally had enough of. Nor is it in France, where extreme rightist Marine Le Pen is attracting support from people who could never be called extreme right simply because she has a similar anti-establishment image.

Nowhere to go but up

But political establishments stay in power for a reason. You can't overthrow a whole system overnight, because a lot of people depend on it for their livelihoods and status. Leading politicians have friends everywhere – in all the public bodies, all the international organisations, all the think-tanks and mainstream media outlets. They can accept losing power as long as they remain part of the system. They are not going to be dispossessed, thrown out of the system completely, by those who maintain that it was the politicians who dispossessed them long ago.

One of the main arguments politicians use when under threat is legitimacy. Government and politics are conducted according to various rules, through various institutions. When someone acts outside those institutions – as anyone who wants to overthrow them inevitably does – they are not acting legitimately. Whatever the rights and wrongs of their arguments, they won't play by the rules so do not have a voice. This was the argument of Saddam, Ceausescu, the last Empress of Austria-Hungary and also Viktor Yanukovich.

If the political class, and whole political structure, of Italy or the UK are overthrown by popular revolt those who are then dispossessed, tainted forever with the label of "enemies of the people", are not going to go quietly. They will maintain that they, and the institutions they are part of, are legitimate and the new ones invented to remove them are not. They will also expect the international community to rescue them, as there has to be some common base of legitimacy for the international community to exist at all.

Crucially, these international institutions are the ones it is most difficult for any new political system to change. They will be peopled with holdovers from the old system, the one which calls itself legitimate and thinks the newcomers have no right to be there. One of the objections to the EU is that it is full of these “system junkies” who have been sent to the EU because they have failed at home, but are still loyal to the existing system and not going to try and destroy it from within Europe.

Russia has always argued, rightly, that both the forced removals of Yanukovich in Ukraine were illegitimate, even if they had an unquantifiable degree of popular support – unquantifiable because elections weren’t held until after the event. The legally correct action would have been to protest against his governments but not overthrow them with violence, or using external assistance which only a host government can permit.

Likewise Russia has argued that the US intervention in Syria is illegitimate, as it is not permitted under international law to invade another sovereign territory to conduct regime change, even if “popular will”, again unquantified, is involved. It maintains that its own presence in Syria is legitimate because the recognised sovereign government asked it for help. It could equally argue that Russia didn’t make these laws, it was international bodies such as the UN which did so, and these are led, in practice, by the US.

This begs the question as whatever the other arguments involved are, how Russia is still arguing for the legitimate order and the West is trying to overthrow it. That argument can only be pushed so far while Western politicians see themselves as the forces of legitimacy, so assume Russia must be the opposite. But if those politicians are overthrown by populist movements they regard as illegitimate, suddenly Russia and dispossessed Western leaders have common cause, and many supporters in international mechanisms who can fight that cause. This is a gift horse a wise nation should not look in the mouth.

Poacher turns gamekeeper

Those brought up in the Cold War, as myself, never would have thought we would end up living in a world where Russia supports legitimacy and order and the US supports its overthrow. The populist movements in Western countries clearly have official sanction, as they are supported by the international press barons who run most of their media. The election of Donald Trump, a billionaire supported by poor people who think governments don’t know what their lives are like, means this is unlikely to change for the next four years at least.

Citizens of other former Soviet countries will also find this a difficult notion to swallow. However this gives Russia an opportunity to create its longed-for “sphere of influence” in these countries on the cheap, simply by staying out of their internal affairs, stop meddling, and allowing the same global trend to start working there—and sit back and watch foreign influence wear out its welcome.

Many post-Soviet states have seen disputes over the constitutional legitimacy of their governments, or changes of government. Even in Estonia, that bastion of Westernness, there have been disputes over the electronic voting machines used by 20% of the electorate, which are

setting the scene for future claims of vote rigging. The traditional connection between a dispossessed former leader and Russia is also weakening: as the old generation dies off, political disputes become battles between who can be more native than the next person, but a legitimacy question is often involved.

Those who feel they have been removed illegitimately in these countries now have a native, not Russian, reason to hold the same position Russia does. By downplaying this connection, but nevertheless acknowledging it, Russia can gain international support even from its implacable enemies, who want the West but not what it does. As Russia will be one of the few countries which will support those who feel that they are legitimate and those who deposed them are not, it can extract a lot from this relationship amongst the holdovers of such people still very active in the international arena.

Dispossessed politicians often take a lot of resources with them. If supporters of Tsar Nicholas II weren't dukes when they left Russia they were by the time they arrived in the West, and were able to acquire lifestyles to match. Similarly supporters of Tony Blair, now dispossessed by their own party following the rise of Jeremy Corbyn, are using considerable financial muscle as well as organisational strength to keep arguing their case, and the same can be expected in Italy, given the desperation to hold on to the corruptly awarded government contracts and appointments which have long been a feature of Italian state life.

Russia may not have actively sought to be the major power defending legitimacy and lawfulness but it has had the role thrust upon it. More and more currently influential politicians and their supporters, who are being swept away in popular revolts aimed at destroying the systems they prospered under, are defending themselves by using the same arguments as Russia. These people will do all they can, and look for any friend, to regain what they see as their legitimate rights from those who have illegally usurped them. In the geopolitical arena, Russia has far more to gain than lose from exploiting the windfall opportunity this "New Global Trend" is delivering it on a platter.