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From Rivalries to Dialogue

By Ana Palacio and Vasil Hudak

President Vladimir Putin's meeting in Paris with EU leaders took place as relations between the Russian Federation and its key Western partners -- the United States, the European Union and EU member states -- are at a new low. An increasing number of Western voices are calling for much tougher policies toward Russia, including possible exclusion from the Group of Eight. They point to the ongoing centralization of political, economic and social life. This includes the new appointment of regional governors and growing state pressure on independent media and civil society institutions, as well as the treatment of Yukos and recent changes in allocating licenses for natural resources exploration.

For their part, Russia's leaders feel betrayed and misunderstood by the West. They stress that Putin's main concern is to preserve Russia's territorial integrity at all costs. Moscow presents this as the main underlying reason for consolidating influence over Russia's regions and for regaining control over the nation's critical natural resources. Only a strong and stable Russia, they argue, can be a reliable and predictable partner for the West in addressing such global challenges as international terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, or in dealing with China.

These conflicting views are most obvious in the former Soviet Union. Called the "European neighborhood" by Brussels and "near abroad" by Moscow, this region is undergoing a profound change initiated by the Rose and Orange Revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, respectively. Pro-democracy changes in these countries are viewed in Moscow as part of a Western plot to isolate Russia and to diminish its importance in global affairs. Because of its symbolic value and ethnic ties, the loss of influence in Ukraine is a particularly sensitive issue for President Putin. The question "who is next?" can be felt in Moscow's corridors of power. At the same time, anti-Russian attitudes are growing, from Moldova, where anti-Russian rhetoric has helped Moldovan Communists stay in power, to Armenia, where traditionally pro-Russian political leaders are switching to a pro-Western position. Moscow is reluctantly realizing that its influence in the former Soviet Union is decreasing as a new generation gradually replaces old communist apparatchiks, and this new political class dares to look for new approaches. However, Russia's influence, potentially both positive and negative, should not be underestimated. It is a key economic partner for these countries and holds enough cards through open or indirect military influence in frozen conflict zones to destabilize them.

The present crisis between Russia and the West should be turned into an opportunity to cooperate in their shared neighborhood. First and foremost, the West should acknowledge Russia's potential to be the main positive contributor in the region. Russian leaders should demonstrate their country's ability to constructively deal with such critical issues as frozen conflicts and energy security. Meanwhile, such strategic decisions as the future development of energy transport and communication infrastructure should be handled by creating an integrated European transport and communication network and combating the perception that this is a tool to diminish Russian influence. Russia should transform its approach to the countries in the near abroad from one of domination to one of cooperation among equals, respecting the political choice of each nation's citizens. Stable, prosperous and secure neighbors are in Russia's national interests.

A serious effort should be undertaken to explore ways of coordinating the increasing economic and political integration of the countries in the EU neighborhood, and their traditional ties to Russia and the



other former Soviet republics. Countries such as Ukraine or Georgia should not feel they are being pushed to choose between one or the other.

It is important to move from the current zero-sum approach to a new dialogue and cooperation based on accepting the choice of the countries within the shared neighborhood. Leaders should work together to create a European space of security and prosperity that would include Russia, the EU and the countries of the European neighborhood and that would enjoy the economic and political support of the United States. Such a constructive long-term agenda would bring security and prosperity to the region, while serving as an important turning point in now sour relations.

Ana Palacio, a former foreign affairs minister of Spain, and Vasil Hudak, vice president of the EastWest Institute and director of the EWI Brussels Center, contributed this comment to The Moscow Times.