

Russia-EU: Reset or partnership?

The current state of relations between Russia and the European Union can be described at best as "a bad peace." The old framework partnership and cooperation agreement has long expired, and negotiations on a new one stagnate; the "road maps" to create common spaces between Russia and the EU (economic; humanitarian; external security; freedom, homeland security and justice) completely abandoned, and various rows - from the pending impact of the war in Georgia to the customs conflicts - come to the fore.

Abnormal situation in the relations with the EU, including the lack of a full-fledged ideological base, has already become evident. So a new policy strategy submitted by the Ministry of Foreign affairs to the President sets a goal of reaching an agreement between Russia and the European Union with grand title "Partnership for Modernization". The strategy lists Russian priorities of the partnership: technological development and mutual exchange of technology, achieving compatibility of technical standards and regulations; practical support of Russia's accession to the WTO; facilitation of human contacts and progress towards visa-free regime. The urgent need of attracting European "smart" investments and highly skilled labor is also stressed.

Such an approach to cooperation with major economic and political partner of Russia in the international arena appears as fully pragmatic. We are indeed lacking extensive scientific and educational exchanges, direct investment in processing industries, new technologies and production methods, the refined technical standards and regulations; and Europe has a lot to offer in this regard. In other words, the EU, which is truly interested in Russia's modernization, is urged to take an active part in its promotion.

However, a natural question arises: why this mutually beneficial program is not fulfilled now? The main problem of relations with the EU currently is neither "Russophobia", nor a complete failure of the Europeans to take concerted decisions, nor even the excessive focus of EU member states at their ongoing and very serious economic troubles, as Russian politicians and diplomats so like to allege. The Georgian war, murders and persecutions of independent journalists, lawyers and human rights activists, energy cut-offs, bellicose rhetoric and saber rattling, prison torture and judicial abuses, trade and investment scandals, outrage of the pro-Kremlin youth - all this could not help but generate for many in Europe durable distrust of Russia as a partner.

It is appropriate to recall that the stated intention to borrow European technical standards and regulations is a vivid evidence of failure of one of the most important reforms – of technical regulation. That Russia has recently experienced a sharp increase in the withdrawal of foreign capital, and the share of foreign direct investment against this background has reached a record low. That the EU actually has always showed support for Russia's WTO accession, despite permanent erratic behavior on the Russian side - from imposition of prohibitive export duties on timber to sudden government decision which astonished the whole world to stop negotiations

on WTO accession in favor of building the Customs Union (which, as recently became apparent, is unlikely to ever materialize).

Not expecting to win laurels in earnest on the main directions of cooperation, Russian negotiators have decided to resort at the forthcoming summit with the European Union to their favorite trump card - a demand to introduce of visa-free regime soon. This slogan is simply doomed to popularity among Russian citizens who are sick and tired of nit-picking by consular services of different European countries (in fairness it should be noted that it is no simpler for the Europeans to get a Russian visa).

The EU is not in principle opposed to visa-free regime, but expresses concern at the transparency of the Russian borders to illegal immigration and requires to introduce additional safeguards. Unfortunately, today the problem cannot be fixed even by the most massive cash infusions into the high-tech border equipment and passport technology. Even unthinkable today and not only in Europe, but in any normal country, police measures - the regime of registration of foreigners arriving to Russia and the unconstitutional procedure of 'propiska' (registration permit), for the Russians themselves - do not help. The one reason for this is pervasive corruption of power structures, and the Russian authorities, despite their militant rhetoric, lack real determination to overcome it. On the contrary, by all measurements, the situation in this area is deteriorating, that the Kremlin is forced to reluctantly admit.

It is impossible to combat corruption effectively without real and not simulated political competition, without a genuine freedom of media and public scrutiny of the government. But these factors, without which life is unthinkable in EU member states, are absent in Russia today. They are not even mentioned in all sorts of modernization programs, which turn out to be regular hopeless attempt to pour new wine into old wineskins.

Here lies the main reason for contradictory positions of the parties. Article 2 of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between Russia and the EU (1994) says that "adherence to democratic principles and human rights ... underpins the domestic and foreign policies of the Parties and constitutes an essential element of the partnership." As in recent years Russian authorities did their best to deprive this wording of any content, the EU now faces a difficult dilemma: to continue to insist that Russia should respect generally accepted democratic norms, or try to "reset" the relationship, that is to close eyes to the gaping chasm between Russian and Western understanding of these basic values.

And if in the first case, the EU runs the risk not to obtain lucrative contracts for the supply of high-tech equipment for half-hearted Kremlin 'modernization', alternatively the EU just loses face and once again strengthens the Russian leaders in their sincere belief that money runs the world and values do not mean anything. This is only alienate Russia from Europe and marginalize even further the prospects of its European development.

A truly effective and mutually beneficial cooperation is possible only on the basis of common values. The strategic partnership between Russia and the EU can not be built without the restoration of their normal base.

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