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NORTHERN DIMENSION AND RUSSIA

A policy project, known today as the Northern Dimension, was launched almost ten years ago.

We in Russia are quite happy with evolution of the Northern Dimension in a sound integration mechanism for a large group of EU countries and the Russian Federation.

It has been long recognised that Russia is not just the biggest European nation, but it is also the world's biggest Northern country. Siberia and the Russian Far East as well as eight constituent regions of the Russian Federation in the European part of Russia that lie to the North of the latitude of Helsinki have a population of over ten million people. This area is five times bigger than that of our hospitable host country Finland, which we have the privilege to visit today.

If one draws an imaginary line along the latitude between Vilnius and Warsaw, the Northern Dimension may include Saint-Petersburg and Moscow as well as other vast regions of European Russia. Notwithstanding severe conditions dozens of millions of our people live and work there.

I was born in the Perm region in the Western Urals. The territory, constituting 20 percent of this region, belongs to the High North of Russia. The people there know only too well how difficult it is to live and work in a place where most of the year the temperature drops below 0 degrees Centigrade.

These severe conditions have an adverse affect on agriculture as well as industry and transport, hospitals and schools. This environment necessitates specific solutions and approaches. Therefore we thank our Finnish neighbours for making the EU aware of the special conditions of the North of Europe, and launching a EU policy, known today as the Northern Dimension.

I hope that the forthcoming Russia-EU summit would enable us to make another important step towards partnership and cooperation in the Northern dimension. We look forward to a new stage in our cooperation starting from January 1, 2007 on the basis of a framework document that may be signed in the near future.

At the same time one should not forget that this represents just one of the many aspects of the cooperation between Russia and EU. I would like to recall that the Northern Dimension was launched in 1997, when the EU-Russia Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) entered into force. The PCA, which was designed for the term of ten years, expires exactly in a year from now.

Both Moscow and Brussels pose questions about the way ahead. The PCA provides for a formal tacit prolongation unless the EU or Russia would denounce it. And neither has done that so far. But does it mean that we have no grounds for concern?

Most serious politicians on both sides of the Old World consider that the PCA has stood the test of time and paved the way for a new phase of cooperation between Russia and EU member-states.

The positive achievements of the PCA have been established at the highest levels. This is not just a sign of political courtesy, but a demonstration of really successful efforts in numerous areas.

Here in hospitable Finland and our good Northern neighbour, I would like recall that the PCA has provided a framework for Northern Dimension projects with a geographical coverage a third of the EU and Russian territory. The Northern Dimension today offers numerous examples of successful activities that are well known both in Russia and the EU.

In spring 2005 Russia and the EU signed four roadmaps, identifying current and future objectives in the common economic space, external and internal security space, and the humanitarian area. Last year we achieved tangible results in implementing those roadmaps.

This can be illustrated by a dossier currently considered by Russian parliamentarians regarding ratification of documents on simplified visa procedures for citizens of our countries.

Russia and EU work closer together on urgent international problems in different parts of the world. We have gained positive experience in joint efforts against terrorism and disaster mitigation.

An EU-Russia Parliamentary cooperation committee has been formed to seek solutions in a wide range of issues. This permanent interparliamentary body set up on the basis of the PCA by parliamentarians from the European Parliament and Russia held its 9th meeting in Strasbourg on 24th of October.

A year ago the International Affairs Committee of the Russian State Duma formed a subcommittee on European cooperation, which I have the honour to preside. The future of EU-Russia relations is one of the major areas our subcommittee's activities.

This list of PCA achievements is far from being complete.

Considering this, may be instead of inventing the wheel all we have to do is to prolong the current PCA? Indeed, we do not even have a preliminary agreed draft of a new PCA anyway. Besides, once it has been drawn-up and signed, it will take some time to ratify the new agreement by the Russian State Duma and the Council of Federation, and by the European Parliament and the national parliaments of the EU countries.

We all know that not all MPs in 25 EU countries are ready to offer their support to a new agreement between Russia and European Union. There are politicians both in the West and in the East, who say openly that there is no need for a new agreement. For them even the current PCA is superfluous. These politicians felt much more at home in the times of the Cold War, when divided by the Iron Curtain they kept guessing who would be the first to press a button on the nuclear briefcase.

Thank God, there are very few such politicians in Russia and in Europe. The majority of serious politicians in the West and in the East of Europe realise that due to our common history and geography Russia and EU are bound to cooperate.

Indeed, this cooperation should not only be mutually beneficial, it should also evolve in a strategic partnership. Unfortunately, some of our partners view Russia simply as a treasure chest of natural resources, a place, where there are pipelines and a convenient airspace for over-flights from Europe to Asia. This strictly consumer approach has little in common with the idea of developing a common European space from the Atlantic to the Urals.

I do not want to deny the significance of an energy dialogue or air transit issues. However, this is not just about energy supplies that Russia can provide to meet the growing demand in Europe and which cause a lot of controversy today. And it is not just about the capacity of the growing Russian market or emerging external threats.

A careful analysis will show that there is not a single area, where Russia and EU would not have good opportunities for strategic cooperation. And I mean cooperation that would be beneficial for both Russia and Europe.

Against this background attempts by some individuals to use as bargaining chips not just the text of the new Agreement, but even its early drafting and negotiations are, to say the least, surprising.

I can say that most of my colleagues in Russian Parliament believe that any semblance of political blackmail in a dialogue between Russia and Europe is inadmissible. I hope that clumsy attempts to use the language of barely concealed ultimatum with Russia can be attributed either to fatigue caused by internal political strife or a lack of experience in dealing with serious European issues.

By the way, some experts in Russia interpret the hysterical attempts by some individuals to undermine preparation of a new PCA as an attempt to split Europe in favour of a third 'force' whose focus is somewhere far away beyond the ocean.

History teaches us that politicians come and go, while Europe, which can and should be our common home, will remain. This new common Europe deserves that the EU-Russia relations in the 21st century be brought to a new qualitative level.

Could this new level be ensured by the current PCA? I think not, as the PCA was drawn up at the time when Russia and the EU were different from today.

My country had just become independent from the Soviet Union. Yes, and I mean it. Russia and its citizens had been suffering from its totalitarian regime not less, but

sometimes even more than the other republics of the former Soviet Union. It was the new Russia that boldly embarked on the path of economic and political reforms, which had been very painful for our people. This new Russia was among the first to recognise the independence of the Baltic States, which subsequently became members of the EU.

I'd like to underscore that Russia is not the Soviet Union, and the Soviet Union was not Russia. But it was Russia that paid in full the debts of the Soviet Union to the Western countries, this being not just a financial transaction but an act of good will, a move to free our nations from the burden of our past.

Over the past decade Russia repaid the debts of the former Soviet regime and the loans received in early 1990's. It has also achieved a real economic growth and raised the living standard of its people.

Instead of blindly replicating foreign experience, which was sometimes inapplicable, we embarked upon building a new and powerful state, based on the foundation of the Russian Constitution and Federal Laws, adopted by legitimately elected Parliament and President.

There have been profound changes to the west of the Russian borders. The EU will soon have 27 member-states. In a certain sense the EU today is different from what it was in 1994 when the existing Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with a young Russian state was signed.

The world has changed, too. Today we live in the world of the 21st century, the world of globalisation and information technologies, the world of new political systems and alliances. Both parts of our common continent face today new challenges and threats. Their list is unfortunately too long – from the threat of uncontrolled nuclear proliferation and terrorism to environmental protection and combating illegal migration.

We could obviously try to counter those threats on our own according to the principle “every man for himself”. However, it would be so much more effective and efficient to join our efforts on the basis of a strategic partnership. This partnership should extend to all levels of our relations, including such proven formats as the Northern Dimension which is the topic of today's session.

Frankly speaking, it is easier for Russia to prepare the draft of a new Agreement than for the EU. Russia has one President, one Parliament and one Government. The EU agreement mechanism is far more complicated and lengthy. We have observed this, and not just in case of the European Constitution.

EU still lacks a single currency for all its members. The Schengen Agreement does not cover the entire EU. EU does not have a common view of many European and international issues. We understand this European specificity, which Russia does not encounter in its relations with the USA, Japan, India or China. We realise that to create a Europe without dividing lines you have to go a long way. However, it one thing to move forward, be it a slow movement, but still a movement forward. Being

stuck in one place, while imitating movement, or moving backwards is a totally different story.

I want you to understand me correctly – Russia cannot wait endlessly for good signals from Brussels and not seek other possible solutions for urgent present-day issues. I know that some in Europe are supersensitive to our strengthening of relations, for example, vis-à-vis Asia. But what would you do if Asia today is showing greater willingness than Europe to strengthen relations with Russia on many issues. I reckon there is only one reasonable solution—to speed up our movement towards strategic partnership here, within the European continent.

Russia is prepared to follow this way together with you. Whether the European Union is equally ready will be seen in the coming few days here in Finland at the EU-Russia summit, which could give a good impetus to the preparation of a new partnership and cooperation agreement.

We are often told that a strategic partnership requires common values. No one says it's not true. The point is that values should be genuinely common, and not just those of one of the parties. Had my country applied to join the EU, then it probably would have to pass an entrance test according to your rules. But Russia will not, as you might guess, willing to become a member of the EU in the foreseeable future.

In this sense Russia is not alone. Indeed, neither USA, nor Japan or India or China are planning to join the EU. However, all of them, just as the EU, are our close neighbours. It is legitimate for us to strengthen our relations with all neighbours of our vast country, and we will do this even though some of our neighbours have not yet realised that it's better to be Russia's friend than foe.

It is so difficult to be strategic partners without understanding and trust. Would the visas we have to obtain, when travelling to EU, really help build understanding or contribute to our common spaces?

I remember too well in late 1970's when I was a kid at school I would secretly listen to western radio broadcast. I had to listen secretly, because one could be prosecuted for that. I remember that those broadcasts urged us to destroy the Iron Curtain, topple the Communist regime and to join the family of European people. By the way, sometimes I would listen to those "radio voices" from the West together with my friends in the Baltic countries where I used to travel then for my winter vacations without having to obtain any visas.

Today, the Soviet Union is no more, and the Communist Party is not in power. Russia is building a market economy and developing a multiparty political system. But to visit my old friends in the Baltic countries, I have to apply for visa. In fact, the Berlin Wall has been replaced by a new wall – the Schengen visa system.

I realise that Western Europe is scared of the so-called Russian mafia and mythical crowds of unemployed Russians ready to flood the EU countries.

First, these problems are rather a figment of imagination created by some journalists and politicians than the actual reality.

Second, those who really wish to get into EU, enter it without much difficulty. Bureaucratic obstacles hit those who would like to visit your countries, for example, as tourists and spend their money in hotels, shops and restaurants. Third, as far as I know, there are very few Russians among those who squeeze out the French, German, British and other EU citizens from their labour markets. Neither there are Russians among those who bomb railway stations, trains and planes in Europe or burn cars in the centre of the European civilisation, or sail in hundreds to the Old World across the seas and oceans.

However, it is Russia that is flooded by drugs from Afghanistan, where law and order today is maintained not by the Soviet troops, but by those of the Western nations.

I think the only real obstacle on the way to a visa free travel among our countries is created by remnants of the Cold War psychology and attempts to score points in domestic politics exploiting the old myths from the times of the Soviet Union.

Obviously, there are a lot of technical issues to be resolved in a transition to a visa free regime, just as in other specific areas of our cooperation, which still need to be addressed.

A new PCA text may and should serve as a good basis for this work. We can cope with virtually any issue if we abandon double standards and attempts to gain unilateral benefits, and focus on the solution of the problem rather than ways to create a yet another new obstacle between us.

I am convinced that parliamentarians could play a major role in developing relations between the EU and Russia in general and within the framework of the Northern Dimension, in particular.

First, many documents will have to be ratified. This is the responsibility of our Parliaments and their members. I believe it will be useful to launch a discussion of the new draft PCA by the European and Russian parliamentarians prior to the signature of the new Agreement.

By the way, in the Russian Duma we call this kind of preliminary hearing “a pre-reading”, that is a discussion preceding the official first hearing and subsequent adoption.

We could, for example, meet in Russia next year and hold a roundtable with the European committees of all EU national parliaments to discuss in detail the main provisions of the new PCA. This would help us to avoid additional problems when ratifying the new agreement.

Besides, both Russian and European MPs could help to accelerate the drafting process by influencing those responsible for drafting of the documents.

I think, the parliamentarians should not follow blindly those political forces and groupings, which thrive on the myths of the past. By the way, not everybody in my country is convinced that rapprochement with the EU countries is good for Russia.

Less than a third of Russians believe that the West would give us a helping hand when in need.

A similar situation exists in my own constituency. But my colleagues and I use all means available to make the Russian public understand the need for a strategic partnership with you. Unfortunately, this has become a more difficult after some pronouncement from new EU members.

I do not argue that everything is well in Russia. I know very well that a lot has to be changed. But one should not forget that my country changed its political system twice in the last century, went through a bloody civil war, Stalin's terror that affected all ethnic groups in Russia, and a severe crisis of late 1990's.

Russia was on the brink of a new civil war just ten years ago. Russia could disintegrate into a dozen unstable quasi-states, having access to most advanced weapons.

We, the citizens of Russia, overthrew the Soviet regime by ourselves, we managed to avoid a new civil war and disintegration of Russia that threatened the entire world.

Russia is a huge country with a great diversity of regions, different in the level of development, ethnic composition and culture. For example, in my constituency a majority (62%) belong to Komi-Permyaks, a Finno-Ugric people, whereas ethnic Russians make up less than 30 percent of the local population. In another part of the Perm region over 90 percent of the local people are ethnic Tatars and Bashkirs. All these peoples maintain their traditional culture, language and have their own attitude towards the so-called western values. We have to take this diversity into account.

Nobody can see our internal problems better than us. I am sure that we will resolve them all, but not for the purpose of reporting to Washington or Strasbourg or Brussels. We need to have independent courts of justice, to overcome corruption and create an advanced political system, a free and responsible press and an active civil society.

We will work to achieve this goal, irrespective of the progress of work on the new agreement with EU or any other party.

An apple tree needs time to grow from a seed and start bearing fruit. Not everybody is prepared and able to wait. The Bolsheviks led by Lenin were also in a hurry to bring about the so-called bright communist future in Russia. They were so much in a hurry that they started killing anybody who did not want to build Communism. Those who try to hastily implant a western form of democracy through all means available including military force remind me of Lenin, Stalin, Trotsky and chairman Mao.

The sad experience of 'Iraqi democratisation' is just another proof that a quick and radical result is not always and not everywhere a good result.

In conclusion I call upon all of us to bear in mind that politics is the art of possible. If we do not create artificial obstacles, the EU and Russia can be good strategic partners able to draft and ratify a new partnership and cooperation agreement in the near future, to add a new content to the Northern Dimension.

The challenge for politicians both in the governments and parliaments is to make use of what is realistically possible in the best interests of our countries and peoples, for the benefit of the entire European continent.