

Russia's Relations with Europe – impressions from a small EU member state

The EU-Russia summit in Stockholm will constitute a good time to take stock of how Russia's relations with Europe have developed over the past couple of years and where they are heading. Among the topics on the agenda are negotiations about a new agreement to replace the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) between the EU and Russia, and President Dmitrii Medvedev's initiative for a new security architecture in Europe. However, the war in Georgia in August 2008 united the EU member states in the decision to put relations with Russia on hold and opened a discussion on how far the EU and Russia had parted company on basic values. Even before the Five-Day War, the EU-Russia summit conclusions tended to be rather empty, and although the Commission was granted a mandate to negotiate a new agreement this was done without notable enthusiasm among a fair number of the member states. On the eve of the EU-Russia summit in Stockholm in November 2009, the prospects for radically improved relations thus appear bleak.

Russian politicians and commentators often refer to common values as a 'fuzzy' EU way of applying double standards to its relations to Russia, but these values frame a number of principles that are essential for deepening relations (e.g. the rule of law and human rights). Furthermore, departing from these values would undermine cohesion inside the Union – the last thing the EU needs in its relations with Russia. The idea that it would be possible to build a stronger EU-Russia relationship by focusing on common interests rather than common values rings hollow when the practical implications of disregarding these values are considered.

It is easy to agree with the reform agenda put forward by Medvedev in his recent annual address to Parliament and in previous speeches and articles, but so far Russia has not moved forward substantially along this road. Russian accession to the WTO and acceptance of the conditions connected to membership would be an essential condition of a free trade agreement and a radically improved overall agreement between the EU and Russia being concluded. For example, Russia will not be able to offer a better investment climate for EU investors as long as fundamental principles of the rule of law are not adhered to. To take another example, it is difficult to envisage deeper military cooperation in crisis management without a common standpoint on what constitutes acceptable collateral damage. From an EU perspective, it is the ability to combine military and civilian components in a crisis management mission that is fundamental. Russia does not share this position at this point in time. The fact that Russia and the EU do not share common values results in concrete practical difficulties in developing the relationship.

It is natural that Russia seeks to build bilateral relations with the larger EU member states and that Moscow notes with irritation that small members, like Estonia or Sweden, can block decisions inside the EU. However, for the smaller member states, Russia's vision of a new security arrangement in Europe gives cause for concern. It builds on Russia's vision of a multipolar world, where it is one of the main poles in Europe together with states such as France and Germany. It is a slightly updated version of the Concert of Great Powers of the 19th century. The fact that Russia has launched Medvedev's suggestion for a new security treaty in Europe using a rhetoric that emphasizes equality and international law does not change this. What Russia envisages is rather

equality among equals, and in its view international law boils down to decisions in the UN Security Council, where Russia has the power to veto activities it is against.

The political leadership in Russia today has a strong belief in legalistic solutions, but the very idea that a new European security treaty could do away with the basic differences that exist today is difficult to buy. The fact that Russia and the EU can refer to the very same basic principles in international law – most commonly the principle of a state's national integrity as opposed to the principles of protecting the rights of minorities – and arrive at radically different conclusions demonstrates how hollow this idea is.

There is, moreover, a contradiction between the right of more powerful states to advance their security concerns and that of a small state to choose its security arrangements. Russia has repeatedly used the formulation in the Istanbul Summit Declaration in 1999 – that states undertook not 'to strengthen their security at the expense of the security of other States'. However, Russia has emphasized that *alliances* should not be allowed to increase their security to the detriment of the security of others – a way of saying that NATO should not be allowed to enlarge into what Russia regards as its sphere of influence. Russia has conveniently not used the section of the text that underlines the right of each state to choose its security arrangements, including treaties of alliance.

There are fundamental differences in interests between larger and small states. To sell out the fundamental right of a state to choose its security arrangements would be a first step down a slippery slope of selling out the basic values that the EU and Europe have united around. Furthermore, Russia has tried to divorce the issue of hard security from that of economic relations and human rights, the so-called second and third basket of the Helsinki Treaty. Again, the West would be unwise to compromise on this issue. Values are not fuzzy. They constitute the glue that binds states together and the lubricant for working constructively on a wide range of issues.

Although the conversation is notably frostier today than it ever was in the 1990s, there is a much better understanding both in Moscow and in Brussels as to what are the main objectives on the other side. Furthermore, the degree of practical exchange between the EU and Russia is far greater today than it ever was in the 1990s, and if Medvedev's modernization programme for Russia becomes a reality there should be ample scope for constructive economic relations. All of this harbours promises for the future of EU-Russia relations – at least in a medium- to long-term perspective. For now, the chances of arriving at an improved agreement to replace the PCA or a European security treaty appear bleak, but there is every reason to engage in negotiations to keep the channels of communication open. Brussels has no reason to hurry in this process; replacing the PCA should not be a goal in itself; rather the goal should be an improved agreement. The same applies to the future European security arrangements.

Carolina Vendil Pallin, head of the RUFs project at FOI