

Baltic Forum Conference, Jurmala
The EU and Russia in 2008: In Search of New Approaches
23-24 May 2008

Pēteris VINKĒLIS, consultant

Yesterday there was a lot of talk about politics being a condensation of economy, about the contradictions between the economy, business pragmatism and political values. I think that the relations between Russia and the CEECs, between Russia and some particular CEECs are not that much determined by their economic interdependence, trade and investment volumes, but also very much by the history, political and business configuration in the respective countries and the ethnic composition. Mr. Král already started interesting inroads into comparative politics of the [post] Vishegrad and Baltic countries vis-à-vis Russia, and I may try to continue this thinking as well.

Last year the European Council of the Foreign Relations issued a report, which was called 'The Power Audit of the EU-Russia Relations' and it carefully categorized the European countries into four groups: 'The Trojan horses', 'New Cold War warriors', 'The Strategic partners' and 'Frosty and Friendly pragmatists'. Obviously not all of the CEECs did fall in the same category; quite opposite, the spread was quite wide. And then it might be interesting from the academic person of a journalist to ask himself or herself, what are the causes or correlations with that. And I have few hypotheses that I have had chance to prove, but that might of relations between, let's say, Latvia and Bulgaria with Russia, and I signed some figures similarly to what the Council of the Foreign Relations has done, and then try to correlate with other aspects, then I would probably be very interested into establishing samples with the gravity of the historic grievances, whatever way you can measure them. But obviously the Poles, The Balts (the Estonians, the Latvians and the Lithuanians) and the Czechs are somewhat frostier towards Russia, than the Slovaks, the Slovenians and the Hungarians. Mr. Simes today mentioned that the CEECs have colored the EU and the NATO relations with Russia with some anti-Russian or non-friendly sentiments. Yes, they have indeed, and there is a good reason for that. Let's be clear about that! That is very simple - Spain and Italy did not have cut in after all. And it is going to last for a while, and I fully agree with Mr. Dinkin that you have managed systems of the historic perceptions. Apart from Russia I cannot see any country in the region that can establish such a system of managing the historic perceptions, and I think it is not easy.

The second factor to correlate with is the ethnic homogeneity. The more ethnically or linguistically homogenous is a CEEC the tougher it is with Russia, or the frostier are the relations between them. Take the Poles and the Lithuanians for the 'Cold War Worriers' and the Slovaks and the Latvians, I think, as the 'Friendly Pragmatists'.

Then the American factor, of course, the Russian policy, not the Russian policy, but the perception is quite wide spread. To quote Dmitry Trenin, that 'Russia is up, the United States are down and Europe is out'. Few years after the invasion into Iraq the world has been debating about America losing its influence on Russia through its energy resources. My friend, the Russian-speaking journalist here in Riga put it well: 'We use to call the American embassy here in Riga OBCOM', it is located in Raina blvd. One day he comes to me and says: 'Wow, there is something going on, the OBCOM is moving from Raina blvd. to Antonijas st.,' where the Russian embassy is situated. He was very worried, because he used to work with an assumption that the OBCOM, the consultative body to the Latvian government, is the American embassy. Suddenly he felt himself a little bit lost, because, well, the times are changing. I am slightly exaggerating, but if you could measure the level of this 'pro-Americanism' in those societies, they will correlate with the frosty relations with Russia. Or at least this is hypothesis.

Similar things, but so extent as the American friendliness would go for Euro-skepticism and the sense of belonging to Europe. That would be actually more interesting to see. Weather the, generally speaking, sense of belonging to Europe and the Euro-optimism is correlating with the general sense of being friendly to Russia or not. I have not a clear idea about that, but I think in Latvia, to some extent is there; either you are pro-European, either you are pro-Russian.

The next factor is the elite, the relations between the political and the business security elite. There is again quite widespread perception that the Russian policies, but not only the Russian policies, also the European interests have been split between the political interests and the business interests. The hypothesis would be, the closer integrated and united is the business and the political elite, the more pragmatic and friendly are the relations with Russia. The ultimate symbol could be Silvio Berlusconi that embodies the most powerful politician and businessman in a country. We do not have Silvio Berlusconi yet, but it would be interesting to see how that would work in the CEECs.

Next aspect, which is not that easy to measure, is the style, the tactics and the approach that Russia has taken in relations with individual countries. I think the major change in the Latvian-Russian relations has started, when Russia decided to work with those parties and politicians who are in power here in Latvia. And as the previous ambassador say: Yes, I have a mandate to work with those who are the real masters of the political process here, nor primarily with the opposition. And I think the results are there, they started to systematically engage, and indeed I have to congratulate in that sense the Baltic Forum because hardly anybody few years ago would believe that the most powerful politician in this country would address this session with a key-note speech, Mr. Slesers today. He is obviously number one today, not to speak about the nationalist parties' minister of economy to come here.