

We can only go upwards

For the European Union there is no alternative but to work with Russia as it is, not trying to pretend it is something different.

*An interview with **Fraser Cameron**, Director of the EU-Russia Center, Brussels, by **Victor Makarov***



Where do you think the EU-Russia relations are today?

They are emerging from a very bad period. I think that now they can only go upwards. There have been a series of bilateral problems and there has been a backward trend in Russia towards authoritarian system. But now, with Poland and Lithuania having agreed on a common mandate, and with the new president of Russia, we have an opportunity to start moving forwards again. And the basic fundamental fact is that both sides are very dependent on each other and cannot escape from having a relationship. You can call it strategic or whatever you want, but a relationship has to exist between the EU and Russia, for all sorts of reasons.

But, today, is it not much more focused on specific interests? We negotiate the thing we need and we leave out the big questions, such as how do we conceptualize these relations?

We do that with nearly all our partners. We do not have a conceptual framework for the United States. We do not even have a legal framework for the US; we simply have sectoral agreements like air transport and open skies. So what we are trying to do with Russia, and, indeed, with China, is negotiate the most comprehensive agreement that EU has with any third country.

Is a comprehensive agreement going to work? You mentioned the US, which has no comprehensive agreement, and still the relationship looks pretty smooth if you look away from certain political differences.

There is a lot of trade differences: on Doha, on genetically modified foodstuffs, etc. So no one should have the illusion that that the trade relationship with US is easy. It is not.

Nevertheless, there is a fundamental agreement in many areas. With Russia, it seems that the reason you want an agreement is that there will be so many questions about 'how' and 'what' that you want to have a particular paragraph on each detail saying, well, we agreed on this and that.

The relationship with US is stabilized because of the very high business intercourse and the fact that there is a common understanding of the rule of law. That is the difficulty with the EU-Russia relationship; there is no agreement on how to resolve many disputes. And that is the key to the future relationship: can Russia develop a genuine rule of law and personal freedom? What the EU wants to see from Russia is a partner that is strong, stable, democratic and follows a market economy.

Strong, stable and market economy, yes, but democracy... This is the area of shared values. What is the role of values in the EU-Russia relations? There is a talk about values on both sides and each side tries to exploit or interpret this issue to its own advantage, to criticize the other side, while not accepting the critique coming the other way.

True, but at least when we are talking about it, which is an improvement. The Russians engage with the EU in regular human rights consultations where they criticize the situation of [ethnic] Russians in the Baltic states, for example. They have set up a new institute for human rights and democracy in Paris and in New York. But we are still looking at it from very different viewpoints. Firstly, because of the very different interpretations of history, with regard to the Baltic states and Poland and the most recent history of the Soviet occupation. Secondly, the Russians are claiming a model of democracy, a sovereign democracy or a managed democracy, which we do not accept. When you start putting adjectives in front of 'democracy' you know you do not really have a democracy. Thirdly, we have different views on what really happened in the last presidential elections and Duma elections, whether they were fair or not. The European view is they were certainly not. Now we come to the next stage: what leverage does the EU have to change things? What influence does it have? And the answer is: not very much, because the EU-27 are not going to put economic interests a hostage to attempts to bring about domestic change in Russia. The balancing act would be to protect your interests - and the overwhelming interest is in the energy relationship, because Europe is dependent on Russian energy - and bring the maximum pressure you can put on Russia to live up to international commitments, particularly its commitments under the Council of Europe and the OSCE, which they have signed up to. We are not asking Russia to do any more, we are simply saying, "Look, this is what you signed up to, fulfill your commitments."

How much pressure can you bring on Russia to make them live up these commitments?

The European Court of Human Rights is having an impact in Russia, on Russian lawyers, judges and NGOs. Russia normally respects the rulings, they pay compensations, usually. What we would like Russia to do is ratify the Protocol 14, which would allow the Court to speed up its procedures. But it would be wrong to kick Russia out of the Council of Europe. It would be wrong to kick Russia out of the G8, as senator [John] McCain suggested. You need to engage Russia. You need recognize it as a long-term challenge; there are no short-term solutions here. Ultimately, the pressure for change will come from within Russia.

But the argument of those who suggest that Russia should be asked to leave these clubs would be: Russia does not comply and it makes the whole club meaningless.

But they do comply with the Council of Europe. They do not ignore the judgments; they sometimes take time to implement them, but they generally do, so it is a positive experience, on the whole. In terms of the OSCE, they have not walked out of the OSCE, but it has never been a particularly fruitful relationship. OECD is not very effective unless the major powers in it agree, and they often disagree on these issues. So, for the EU there is no alternative but to work with Russia as it is, not trying to pretend it is something different. It is important not to give up the importance of values, because ultimately there are a lot of NGOs and human rights activists and others in Russia who cling to this EU support to keep them going. It would be wrong to give in on that. But you also have to realize the realities, and the realities are that major business lobby groups often dominate external relations.

The civic society in Russia, that part of it which is politically active and pro-democratic, is something the EU wants to support. How much does the EU actually do to support these groups? And how much support does Russia prevent from happening? When you look at the EU budget for democracy promotion in Russia, it is tiny.

Yes, it is small. You cannot do things against the will of the government. You cannot go in and just fund anyone you want. By the nature of the Tacis Programme and the European Neighbourhood Programme funding, you need to have the agreement of the government before you can actually carry out any project. That is one of the major difficulties.

So the Russian government can say: "Thank you very much for your support, but, please, limit it to harmless NGOs, the ones that are not in disagreement with our policies." Does it make any sense to donate money within such a framework?

The European Commission has criteria that have to be fulfilled. It will not give any money to a gongoo, to a governmental NGO. It is going to, and does, give money to NGOs like Memorial, or the Russian branches of Greenpeace or Amnesty International.

Turning now to the issue of common EU policy to Russia. There seems to be a vicious circle, as you once said, namely, everyone agrees that we should agree on a common policy. At the same time everyone disagrees on what exactly we should agree on. Is this the state of things now?

There is a very simple procedure, which the member states do not want to accept, and that would be the qualified majority voting on foreign policy issues. Then you would obviously get agreements much quicker. But when you push a member state to act against its will, particularly in some sensitive area of foreign or security policy, then you can have a problem later on. So, traditionally, the EU had tried to go for consensus in this field. And that slows down the decision-making; there is no question about it. But it also makes the EU quite a reliable actor, when it does agree it moves forward with the support of 27 countries and then it can negotiate as one. But it has been quite difficult to even agree on the mandate to negotiate with Russia.

The Estonian 'bronze Soldier problem' last year, did it somehow influence the way the EU does its Russia policy?

Not significantly. I think it was another sign to the EU that Russia was throwing its weight around. Overall it led to a tougher EU approach.

How much detail and specifics would you like to see in the EU-Russia Treaty?

There are certain things you cannot put in a treaty. You cannot put the resolution of the dispute over Abkhazia there, for example. From the European perspective, I think the more issues you put on the table the better deal you get. And you would not sign anything until everything is agreed. That is going to be difficult, but it is the way to go. So we are talking about negotiations lasting probably a minimum of three years, then another two years to ratify it. So, it is probably five years before the agreement comes into force.

Recently, The Economist published an article where they tried to project the future of the EU. They see Russia joining the EU fifty years from now. Do you think it is realistic? Or, to put it differently, in, say, thirty years, will we still need your EU-Russia center?

It is very difficult to predict how things will develop. The one thing you can expect, based on what happened in the world in the last 25 years, is that many things will happen we do not even think about today. My basic point is, you have to have an open mind and you have to remain flexible. It may well be that we will actually want Russia in NATO quickly because of some external threat we face together. It may be that we will want an FTA more than the Russians do because we need access to their market or need some highly qualified Russian workers. There are different issues that could come up. I say that one should not exclude a potential Russian membership of the EU, but it would be easier to work towards Russian membership of NATO. And should Russia change in a fairly fundamental way and meets the criteria for joining NATO, some of which are the same as for the EU, and then you would not have a big problem, because you would be dealing with a very different Russia.