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Russia: Quo Vadis?

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The aim of this conference was to take a sounding, at the start of Putin's second presidency and on the eve of enlargement, of the range of opinion among Russian experts on the state of affairs inside Russia and on broader trends in Europe and international affairs. The conference brought together Russian experts from across the spectrum of political affiliation, as well as officials from the EU and member states.

Given the sharpened tone of Russian and EU policy towards the other in the last six months, the question of *Russia – quo vadis* has particular salience. The wider context for this discussion is that of change – change inside Russia, change in the European landscape, and change in international affairs. The world has moved on dramatically from 1999, the year in which the EU agreed its *Common Strategy* on Russia and declared the objective of building a 'strategic partnership.' Five years on, the partnership lacks in substance, and the relationship seems mired more often in crises than purposeful cooperation.

Neither the tone nor the substance of the conference can offer comfort for Russia and the EU; all of the work remains ahead in terms of filling with substance the empty concept of a 'strategic partnership.'

1) Russian Domestic Trends

The first session of the conference addressed the questions raised by Russian internal trends: what is the nature of the political regime now in place in Russia? Where is it heading? What are the prospects for sustainable modernisation? Two answers were proposed to these questions:

- 1) *Skeptical view.* One Russian participant declared that the 'transition is over!' The parliamentary and presidential elections of 2003-2004 marked the culmination of Putin's establishment of a new political system. This new system is based on two pillars. First, there is the absence of checks and balances to predominant presidential power. This Russian participant compared Putin's regime to the Soviet 'administrative command system,' where the 'vertical of power' reigned unchallenged. The second pillar consists of Putin's reformist agenda to modernise Russia. The combination of these two led this Russian expert to posit the emergence of 'authoritarian liberalism' in Russia.

In his view, while this system may provide for stability and order, it is unlikely to lay the basis for sustainable development over the long term, as the current regime lacks

adequate feedback mechanisms with Russian society, lacks transparency and accountability, and is basking in the luxury of high energy prices. The 'depluralisation' of politics (in the words of another Russian participant) places into question Russia's modernisation rather than advancing it. The danger facing Russia is that of authoritarian stagnation.

- 2) *Sanguine View*. Another Russian expert accepted the broad lines of the analysis above (which was also supported by many of the other Russian participants) but drew different conclusions. This expert posited that Russia is following a path common to all states that have undergone a revolution to seek, after years of heady chaos, the consolidation of the state.

This Russian participant painted a more optimistic view of the prospects for a Russian 'authoritarian modernising' path, arguing that the new system drew on a very solid base of popular support as well as elite convergence. In his view, Putin's success is based on his ability to act a 'great moderator' (or a 'great integrator') in Russian politics, taking on the moderate ideas of the Russian liberals, the moderate beliefs of the patriots and the moderate ideas of communists. He noted also that the new elites around Putin came from three sources – the power ministries, liberal economist reformers, and former Yeltsin insiders. In his view, none of these groups was wholly dominant.

Despite different analyses, both drew similar conclusions about their impact on Russia's foreign policy. For both, Moscow's overwhelming focus now falls on internal affairs. A '*Russia First*' policy leads Russia to adopt a minimalist and reactive policy on the international stage. As such, Russia seeks to become engaged abroad only if absolutely necessary in terms of defending Russian interests (the likelihood of Russia pursuing active policies in the so-called 'near abroad' was raised several times) and to secure support for the country's internal revitalisation.

2) *Russia and the 'Greater Middle East'*

A second session addressed Russian views of the concept of the Greater Middle East. The consensus among Russian experts was that the American concept was 'pure ideology, worthless in analytical terms, and useless conceptually' - to use the words of a pre-eminent Russian expert on Middle East and Islam. The concept is perceived as a political vehicle for justifying greater American intervention and the use of pressure for change in a region whose borders remain unclear.

A number of points may be noted from the discussion:

- 1) Russian participants evinced concern about US intentions in Central Asia and the South Caucasus, regions which may or may not be included in Greater Middle East, and where vital Russian interests are seen to reside.
- 2) While Putin has started to develop something of an Islamic dimension to his foreign policy (viz. his visit to Malaysia in 2003), the current Russian government has little strategy to the Middle East, few notions of active interests and pursues contradictory approaches to the region (enduring ties to Arab states, close relations with Iran and overlapping interests with Israel).

- 3) The UN was notable by its absence in Russian views of the region. The usual emphasis on the primacy of the UN was not raised, nor even was the Quartet stressed as a potential model for Russia's engagement with the EU, the UN and US.

3) Russia in a New Europe

The third question concerned Russian views of developments in Europe and specifically Russia-EU relations. One Russian expert examined the emergence of 'two Europes' – the first EU-led and the second circling the Russian centre of gravity.

Three points emerged from the discussion:

- 1) The EU is an irritating partner for Russia, particularly in terms of its emphasis on promoting common values. Partly as a result, the EU has become a new bugbear in Russian political opinion, as it seen as offering only one-sided cooperation and is insistent that Russia adopt the EU model as the basis for partnership. To the contrary, Russia seeks equality in relations with the EU, and remains insistent on retaining full freedom of choice regarding domestic policies;
- 2) Brussels and Moscow look on Europe from two different angles. Much emphasis fell on the new borderland between the two – referred to as the 'common near abroad,' that is Moldova, Ukraine and Belarus. As events in Moldova demonstrated in late 2003, there are profound differences of views of this region as well as divergent approaches. One Russian expert declared that it was a telephone call from Solana himself that derailed the Kozak memorandum at the last minute, while EU officials noted their 'astonishment' at Russian (mis)interpretations of European intentions.
- 3) In the words of a Russian expert, from the Konrad-Adenauer Foundation (Moscow), the balance sheet of Russia-EU relations was 'devastating'; he argued that no large cooperation programme had produced success. Although another Russian participant noted a number of small-scale successes, all agreed that Russia-EU relations had to become more sober and pragmatic. The consensus was that the level of rhetoric and profile of relations had to be reduced, and ambitions to be shrunk.

4) Russian Views on the International Order

In the view of a Russian expert, there are four long-term trends in the international order. The first is the continued erosion of the concept and practise of national sovereignty. A second trend is the increasing likelihood of pre-emption in international affairs. A third trend was seen to consist of the revisiting of development assistance, with the emergence of new modernisation programmes, such as that implicit in the concept of the 'Great Middle East.' Finally, US hegemony in world affairs is seen to be a long-term reality.

In the face of these trends, Russian aims were presented as three-fold:

- 1) To retain as much sovereignty as possible, by making Russia 'immune' from outside interference;
- 2) To avoid confrontation with the Euro-Atlantic community and to secure its support to Russian modernisation;
- 3) To draw on the notion of pre-emption in the pursuit of Russian interest, particularly in the former Soviet Union.

Again, Russian discussions of the international order conspicuously failed to note the supremacy of the UN system, discarding in fact the idea of UN reform, and failed to attribute importance to international law as the centre of gravity in world affairs.

5) *Initial Conclusions*

Several conclusions may be drawn from the conference.

- 1) The question of Russia – quo vadis? remains unanswered. Where is Putin taking Russia? What are the chances for the success of his modernisation programme? How will greater authoritarian trends inside Russia impact on its external policy? Russia's future remains uncertain.
- 2) While Putin has imposed stability inside Russia, there is a consensus that all the work lies ahead for Putin in terms of revitalising the country – Russia remains weak, and this pushes her to adopt a reactive, sometimes even inactive, foreign policy.
- 3) In Russian expert opinion, there is an inevitability about the political system that Putin has put in place – neither temporary nor fragile, it is based on a solid foundation of popular and elite support. Change is likely to occur to the system either from within the system itself or from the external pressure, but not from alternative domestic sources.
- 4) Russian-EU relations remain a building site. In the words of one EU official, relations should be driven by a '*new realism*,' with purposeful cooperation on down-to-earth and very practical dossiers. The era of grand statements and ambitions must be replaced by one of low profile and realistic aims.
- 5) The framework of Russia-EU relations requires rethinking. In some respects, the relationship is overly bureaucratised, with too many mechanisms of interaction and not enough to discuss. At the same time, the notion of developing the Permanent Partnership Council as a framework for discussion on a range of questions at different levels may hold promise.
- 6) Whatever the difficulties in the current dialogue, the importance of Russia for the EU was reiterated. Neither the EU nor Russia can ignore each other or the problems that have emerged. Particularly in the new common borderland – the wider Europe area – serious attention must be given to working through common understandings of situations in order to demystify misunderstandings. From Russia's side, zero-sum thinking remains predominant; while the EU may not have made enough of an effort to explain its intentions in Wider Europe.

The conference provided an interesting forum for taking measure of Russian views of themselves and the world. From this starting point, it may be interesting to consider further expert exchanges on more specific questions of relevance to the EU.

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