



A LITTLE LESS OUTSIDER, A LITTLE MORE TO THE WEST

1. Elusive relations between Russia and the EU

The works of the Russia-EU Council, which met in Rostov-na-Donu on 31st May-1st June, have been judged differently in the press. Substantially negative is the opinion of the analysts of the officious *Rossiiskaya gazeta* and the pro-European *Nezavisimaya gazeta*: no progress on the road to the renewal of the fundamental bilateral agreement (PCA), which expired two years before; the European refusal to abolish the reciprocal visas between Russia and the 27 (which has deeply disappointed the establishment and the Russian public opinion) (1); the European obstinacy in demand that, even in the new bilateral collaboration programme for Russia's 'modernisation,' there should be precise commitments for democratisation and the judicial reform in that country (an issue also raised by the President of the European Parliament, Buzek, in his meeting with Medvedev, on 23rd June in Moscow) (2). The German A. Rahr also fears that, with a true and proper European President at the semester meetings of the Council, strongly bound to the mandate of all the Member Countries, this new figure will be reduced to that of being a straightforward pen-pusher between Brussels and Moscow, with no negotiating autonomy. (3) Instead, a Russian expert judges positively the existence of a permanent European President, institutionally equal to Medvedev, and is pleased with the articulation of the Russo-European relations that have taken shape at Rostov: the economic bilateral ones between each one of the 27 and Moscow; the economic sectoral ones, at the level of the European Commission; and lastly, the direct ones between the two Presidents. (4) Well pleased is well served, evidently.... Under such circumstances, it is quite likely that, as the main opposition newspaper states with some degree of satisfaction, Ashton's report to the European Parliament on the Rostov summit was listened to with a lack of interest and a sense of boredom, as has happened for years now. (5) If then we move on to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the Euro-Russian relationship in the past two month period even becomes soporific. Russia here is reduced to being content that at the head of the monitoring committee for the Caucasus,

the openly anti-Russian M. A. Yansen was not designated to replace M. Yorshi whose mandate had expired. (6)

The Russo-European relationship actually seems to have been surrogated by the Russo-German one. At the important Berlin meeting between Medvedev and Merkel, on 4th – 5th June, the latter courteously informed her guest that, on the question of visas, her country also intends to proceed with great caution: but she offered to intercede in Brussels to set up a Euro-Russian Committee for safety and concerted resolution of international conflicts, which seems to be heading towards the new system for European security aired, for the first time, one year ago by Medvedev to the Chancellor herself. The latter has also put forward the “frozen conflict” between Transdnistria and Moldova (in which for years Russia has tried to mediate fruitlessly) as the first bench test for the new body. On his part, Medvedev has stated (for the first time in wholly explicit terms and unusually “pro-European,” from the Russian standpoint) that his country is strongly interested in the stability of the Euro and in supporting the package of financial measures sustained by his hostess. (7) As is well-known the German financial line has been renewed by Medvedev also on the occasion of the recent Canadian economic summits. In an interview granted to Wall Street Journal on the eve of his departure for North America, the President added that Russia is also interested in Europe’s “stability” and that the European consortium should not take political steps backwards in respect to its current make-up and degree of unity. (8)

In order to substantiate Euro-Russian political relations even Poland has interposed its good offices (and this is a very significant thing). This country’s “distancing” from its “traditional Atlanticist orientation,” (9) occurred after the Russo-Polish ceremony for the Katyn massacre (7th April) and the display of spontaneous popular condolence in Russia after the fatal airplane accident in Smolensk, three days later. (10) And so it happened that on 24th May, at the Paris meeting of the so-called “Weimar Triangle” (France, Germany, Poland: it has been meeting for 15 years), the Polish Foreign Minister, Sikorskii, also invited minister Lavrov; and that the day after, on the occasion of a meeting of the EU Foreign Ministers, in Poland, Sikorskii himself had, once more, invited Russia to take part in the European programme called Eastern Partnership: which Russia, however, let drop, perhaps suspicious of European dynamism towards some post-Soviet countries. (11) And in effect, it is unlikely that Russia would

not be concerned over the feistiness shown towards it, shown in recent time by the Byelorussian President Lukashenko, among the addressees of the Eastern Partnership (a short "gas war" between the two countries has just ended). (12) Probably, Moscow is also waiting to see how the West will move towards Bulgaria, Romania (NATO members) and Moldova, which have just started to show it hostility, probably, unseen in many years. (13) However, a verbal sign of opening from the Russian side has been given. Early in May the person in charge of international policy for the DUMA, Kozachev, made some self-criticism for his country's having snubbed the "new" Europeans (such as the former Eastern Europe countries), preferring dialogue with the "old" countries. (14)

2. Medvedev: finally an integrationist Russia?

The publication of some passages from the document that lays down the new Doctrine for Russian Foreign policy has generated talk of this country's new availability to fit organically into the West. In actual fact, in the 1990s it was rather the West to be reluctant to see Russia's integration and now, as minister Lavrov has also explained, we are simply witnessing the Russian attempt to see recognised by every other country (in particular by the United States, whose rating with Russian public opinion is, after the signing of START 3, at an unprecedented level) (15), his right to pursue his own legitimate national interest. (16) In that way, Russian public opinion has been warned and, at the same time, reassured by the press essentially on the meaning of a single event: the Russian vote at the UN Security Council in favour of new sanctions against Iran, on 9th June, which breaks with a long tradition of reluctance on the part of Russia in showing solidarity with the West against the more or less "rogue" States, in the wake of the old-style Soviet imperialism. Russia (and China) have also seen to it that Iran should be refused membership (something that this country has been requesting for some time) of the important Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (Russia and China, plus Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan e Tadjikistan), with the motivation that countries affected by international sanctions cannot be a part of this organisation. (17)

However, it still seems premature to speculate on the true bearing of Russia's Western turnaround. In the first place, Medvedev himself, in his interview to the Wall Street Journal, declared that the mild sanctions adopted at the Security Council are the utmost form of punishment which his country can

allow, since it would be unfair to hit the whole of the Iranian population. (18) Also, the question as to whether, after the Security Council vote, Russia had, or had not, honoured the agreement that for time had committed it to supplying the S-300 weapons system (anti-aircraft rockets) to Iran, according to a possible interpretation of the UN resolution that includes it in the sanctions package, has remained open for several long hours. On 9th June, Kozachev stated that the Russian vote on the sanctions did not include the fulfilment of the contract, even if he was soon contradicted by a rather unspecified "higher chief for technical and military cooperation" of the Russian administration. (19) The day after the intrigue thickened: not only did another Russian "representative of technical military cooperation declare that the rockets would be supplied to Iran in any case but the same Russian Foreign Minister let it be understood that this is what would happen. (20) Lastly, to take the bull by the horns, Putin in person had to step in: on his visit to Paris he said that the Russian S-300 weapons system would not be handed over to Iran. The untimely Kozachev rapidly contradicted himself and adapted unwillingly to the Prime Minister's statement, grumbling that the implementation of the agreement would have put Russia "on a collision course with its current partners" (21) At the end of the last two-month period, another problem of the international positioning of present-day Russian remains even more obscure. At the recent meeting between Medvedev and Obama in Washington, the former managed to persuade the latter to set a precise deadline for the negotiations addressed to taking Russia into the WTO, ongoing for some 17 years. (22) This is an important event: at the end of last April, a statement of one of the Russian vice-Prime Ministers, Shuvalov, had pointed to a sudden rise in Russian interest in joining the organisation. Russia was ready to join individually as well: without that is requesting the simultaneous membership of Belarus and Kazakhstan, countries with which for a long time it had undertaken negotiations to form a three-country customs union (23) (which the West continues to suspect of having protectionist intentions). Shuvalov's statement contradicted some striking stances taken by V. Putin in the past according to which Russia was indifferent, or even reluctant to reach the Organisation; and this was substantially confirmed by the opinion expressed by Medvedev in his interview on 10th June to the Wall Street Journal, that it is was tired of being "taken for a ride," with all sorts of pretexts, for not being welcomed into the Organisation and its membership of the WTO would be a good

thing not only for itself, but also for the world market. (24) Now, on 5th July Russia ended up signing, along with Belarus and Kazhstan, the Customs Union project: and it still is not clear whether this event will affect the WTO decision to accept it or not among its ranks. (25)

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