

Nothing to See Here: The 2012 EU-Russia Summit

Written by Maxine David

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MAXINE DAVID, JUN 26 2012

In March 2010, Catherine Ashton, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, drew attention to Europe's declining share of world population figures and of global GDP. She also spoke of the shift in global power from the West to the East and South where: "Economic weight is translating into political clout and self-confidence. You feel it everywhere: from negotiations on climate change to Iran, to big energy deals in Africa or Central Asia"[i]. She called for the EU to focus on actions, on the basis that "the answer to a problem cannot be a paper or a meeting"[ii]. There is little evidence that the EU has internalised these arguments. What is clear is that Russia has. So, what does this mean for EU-Russia relations?

In the EU-Russia summit held in St Petersburg from 3-4 June, it was difficult to discern evidence that either side has moved beyond paper or meetings to concrete actions. Indeed, there was little to suggest that even the paperwork needs much updating from summit to summit. Van Rompuy began his speech to the press conference by commenting with the diplomat's optimism on how fruitful the previous two summits have been, leading to Russia's WTO membership, visa liberalisation and the Partnership for Modernisation. In fact two of these have yet to be fully realised and the third has had, as yet, little tangible effect. The 29th Summit is likely to enjoy the same rate of success, particularly in respect of (EU) hopes for "an ambitious and comprehensive bilateral new agreement"[iii], a successor to the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA).

Assuming the Duma's ratification is achieved, Russia should join the WTO shortly, admittedly with quite a bit of help from the EU. Whether Russia will turn out to be a good WTO citizen remains debatable. There have been some advances on visa liberalisation but given the EU's wider problems, including some backtracking on Schengen[iv], and the fact that it will be the member states that will decide, this is likely to remain a point of discussion for many years to come. As for the Partnership for Modernisation (PfM)[v], differing interpretations of this divide the EU and Russia to the extent that what originally looked like a pragmatic attempt to bridge differences has served the Russian interpretation rather better than the EU's. For the EU, the PfM entails Russia's liberalisation and adherence to rule of law. For Russia it is about know-how and increasing its competitiveness and it has so far managed to shrug off the strings of conditionality.

Judging by this latest summit, it seems likely we will see many more before a new bilateral agreement will be forthcoming. The differences revolve around varying ideas about the extent and depth of their "strategic partnership". As Van Rompuy said, there remains much "untapped potential" but it is not at all clear that the EU is in a position to muster the "strong political will and hard work"[vi] necessary to release it, nor that Russia cares sufficiently to do so. The EU's continued emphasis on Russian WTO membership suggests that the EU believes it has come to the limits of what it can achieve alone with Russia.

Indeed, you didn't have to listen too hard to Barroso[vii] or Van Rompuy to get the impression of an EU on the back foot. Their speeches seemed designed to persuade the audience that the EU was suffering a touch of flu and not a terminal disease, particularly in the case of Van Rompuy when he stressed the importance of understanding that the EU is not responsible for the global economic crisis; that the crisis is not as bad as in 2008; and that the crisis will be overcome eventually and will result in more integration and not less[viii]. The EU is not a lady but it was definitely protesting too much.

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You could not help but think that if you were Putin, you'd walk further down that eastwards path. Because wisely or not, that is evidently where Russia is going and there was little or nothing in this summit to convince that a change in direction would be in order. Putin's international schedule since his return to the Presidency in May has been a busy one and the signals could not be stronger that the "Go East" rhetoric is being translated into action. Putin's first visit was to Belarus, hardly a state in the western mould. He snubbed the G8 and met with much pomp and ceremony with China and then the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Russia has also hosted talks with Iran and has been a major player in ongoing efforts to resolve the Syrian crisis. Not only has Russia realised that attention is moving to the East and South, it is positioning itself to ensure that some routes go through its territory.

None of this precludes a relationship with the EU, of course. Yet, it sends a clear message that the EU is one of many strategic partnerships, not the privileged one. EU press releases prior to the summit were correct in emphasising the importance of the EU to Russia, in both import and export terms. Nevertheless, Russia is seeking to reduce its level of dependence on the European market. The real question is whether Russia's deepening relationship with China, which extends beyond economics to politics and even military cooperation, will eventually come at the expense of the EU. Few would doubt that in the wider scheme of things, China represents a greater threat to Russia than the EU. And there are many gaps where instead there should be tangible evidence of a deepening relationship with China, notwithstanding recent joint naval training exercises and talk of resolution of border disputes. But, perception is also important. Both China and Russia have been at pains recently to project an image of unity. And there is some substance to their discourse. Russia and China look closer to each other on the question of state sovereignty and the principle of non-interference. It has become commonplace very quickly to blame Russia for failure to resolve the crisis in Syria. Far too few commentators remember that Russia's position is not an isolated one. In meeting the Chinese, Russia found common voice on the Syrian question. And it will not be the EU that brings Russia around on this point. Even on what should be stronger ground, as the EU stresses the benefits of the PfM, China is simultaneously emphasising its willingness to help Russia in its further modernisation. What makes the Chinese offer attractive is the lack of an attached human rights discourse.

In the context of all the summity of the present time, this, the 29th EU-Russia summit, was of little significance. Russia is intent now on pursuing those foreign policy opportunities that render it most relevant on the global stage. Mired as the EU is in its own internal crises, it is hardly surprising that Russia should need to be convinced that the EU is of continuing relevance. It is hardly ideal, but it seems that the next best hope for this relationship lies with Russia encountering major problems with China or an economic crisis of its own.

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[i] Ashton, Catherine (2010) Joint Debate on Foreign and Security Policy

[ii] Ashton, Catherine (2010) Joint Debate on Foreign and Security Policy

[iii] Van Rompuy, Herman (2012) Press Conference: Van Rompuy, European Council TV Newsroom

[iv] European Parliament (2012) Schengen: MEPs Raise Concerns over Threat to Freedom of Movement

[v] EU Delegation (2010) Joint Statement on the Partnership for Modernisation

[vi] Van Rompuy, Herman (2012) Press Conference: Van Rompuy, European Council TV Newsroom

[vii] Barroso, Jose Manuel (2012) Statement by President Barroso following the EU-Russia Summit

[viii] Van Rompuy, Herman (2012) Press Conference: Extract on World Economic Crisis, European Council TV

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